

STARING DOWN THE BARREL OF A SHOTGUN

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by

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## STARING DOWN THE BARREL OF A SHOTGUN

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A woman is more than just her body, more than just her own heart and soul. She is the culmination of her experiences, she is her parents and siblings, her former lovers, her husband and children. A woman can be known, but not truly understood, until one gets to know the parts that make her. Like this collection of short stories, a woman is the product of years of work, love, labor, and many others who contribute to who she is and who she wants to be. She is strong and determined in the face of the dangers that stand before her. These stories tell the story of one woman through her childhood, her experiences, her lovers, her husband, and her child. All the characters in this collection are inspired by someone specific, except for our main character. She is the woman I imagine we all are at some point in our lives: at times a fool, at times wise, confused, in love, happy sad, seeking happiness and peace with her present and her past. The link between each of the stories is the woman, our main character, and each story tells a piece of her story. Each one, however, can be read individually.

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## STARING DOWN THE BARREL OF A SHOTGUN

### Her Childhood

The clearest memory I have of childhood is watching my older brother pull an old shotgun out of my grandfather's gleaming mahogany gun cabinet and point it straight at me. He was seven and I was five so he should have known better but who can blame a seven-year-old boy with a penchant for danger for being curious? The problem was that it was Christmas Eve and the rest of the family was in the family room while my brother and I were sneaking around our grandparents' bedroom looking for... I don't remember what we were looking for. It was probably just an excuse to sneak around, not really to find anything. I was a tiny kid, short and so skinny you could see nearly every bone in my body, so no one ever noticed when I went missing, and people were generally relieved whenever my older brother left a room. I was a klutz and he was a nuisance; our popularity at parties dwindled with the amount of time we spent there. So, our absence really didn't bother any of the eight adults gathered in the adjoining living room, four men and four women hunched over their holiday cocktails pretending to enjoy each other's company. This was before people got divorced as regularly as they ate Cheerios – so although nearly every husband and wife in my family should have parted ways long ago, they chose to suffer instead.

Down the carpeted hallway and past the fake wood paneling, the bedroom door stood - tall and imposing to our childhood selves. The heavy oak and rusted joints creaked when we pushed the door open, making us hush each other and whip our heads back, praying that no one had heard the telltale sound. My grandparents' bedroom was a great place to sneak around because it was that typical grandparent bedroom - smaller than most people's walk-in closets and crammed full of gigantic wooden furniture and a hundred years worth of stuff.

The windows had long lace curtains hanging from heavy metal rods and the dressers and nightstands were covered with antique doilies that had gone slightly brown around the edges, protecting the wood from being scratched by the porcelain lamps and alarm clock on my grandpa's side of the bed. Everything was patterned, giving the room a cluttered feel even though technically everything was in its place and not so much cluttered as crowded. There were ornate gold picture frames everywhere, filled with old pictures of my grandparents' life together – pictures of their wedding and the christenings of their children. The family's winter coats were stacked high on the bed, along with purses, scarves, and gloves. In the absence of a hall closet, my grandmother always stacked coats and bags on her bed – to be retrieved later as everyone bundled up to head outside and return to their own homes where they could retreat from each other without having to hide their disdain.

I always hated Christmas in my family because I never got to keep my gloves and scarves - they always ended up going home with one of my cousins and I would end up with one of their less fashionable items - usually smelling like a combination of their dog and smoked turkey. We didn't have a lot of money, so I had to do without most of the pretty lacy dresses that I longed for. I resented the many cheap items my cousins flaunted, and my heart ached to think of the coats and scarves and hats I had lost to their careless grabbing, and the way my mother hushed me when I complained, pleading with me to not make a fuss.

My mother cared about appearances more than she cared about reality – her life was a constant journey towards looking like a Rockwell painting. I once fell in our backyard when I was playing with my cousins, Dale and Ginny – who were staying for the afternoon while their mother ran errands. Trying to show off, I climbed a tall pile of firewood and promptly lost my footing, sliding down the rough edges and leaving scraps of clothing and hair along

the way. The other kids had laughed and kept on playing, ignoring the deep gash on my leg and the blood that ran like a small river down my leg and pooled at the top of my white bobby sock. Hurt and confused by their lack of interest or concern, I had run inside and cried to Mother, “They didn’t even caaaaare!” I wailed, tears running down my dirt-streaked cheeks. I had wanted Mother to march outside and tell those kids just what she thought of them. They were older, they should know better, this is your cousin for goodness sakes... all that good stuff. Instead, she had wiped my face and leg with a towel, cleaned and bandaged my cut, and sent me to my room to “calm down”. Dale and Ginny stayed outside, happily playing, for the rest of the afternoon. When their mother, my Aunt Sophia, picked them up and asked how they had been, I waited with anticipation to hear my mother tell her about their careless behavior. Instead, mother smiled and said “Oh Sophia, you know they’re always so well-behaved” and offered her a slice of pie. She wanted to live the sort of calm and easy life that she imagined the stay-at-home mothers in the wealthy neighborhoods, who could afford nannies and maids and cooks, enjoyed. But more importantly, she wanted others to believe she lived that life. So no matter the problem, my mother found a way to smooth it over and apply a high gloss, ensuring her world presented a polished gleam to everyone outside.

That Christmas, I was given a beautiful deep-red velvet dress with a lace collar to wear to my family's holiday party. The dress was the prettiest gift anyone had ever given me in my five years of living and I cherished wearing it with a pair of white tights and black patent leather mary-janes. For months after that Christmas, I would refuse to wear anything but that dress to church; that's how much I loved it. My mother, slightly embarrassed at my fervor over one article of clothing, would shake her head and murmur something to my father about “find

something else for her to wear so they don't think we're totally dirt poor..." I would stand in front of a mirror and admire my beautiful soft dress and how my long dark hair looked against the lush fabric.

My brother, on the other hand, couldn't have cared less what he looked like. His dirty blonde hair shot out in all directions most of the time, until our mother would make him get a haircut. Half of the time, I'm not even sure he brushed his teeth, let alone washed behind his ears as we were instructed to do each night. His clothes were a monstrosity - they smelled of milk going bad combined with freshly turned soil and they were normally stained with the remnants of whatever meal he had last consumed. White shirts generally looked as if he had simply overturned his plate and smeared it across his chest. What he lacked in vanity, he made up for in bravery. My brother feared nothing. He had all the bad traits of a grown man that has given up on life - he was careless, surly, and inattentive; seven going on fifty-eight with lung cancer and a drinking problem.

That night, as we poked around our grandparents' bedroom, I was staring longingly at some shiny gold jewelry hanging too far out of my reach from the heavy wooden bureau while my brother searched for... whatever it was we were looking for. Perhaps some last hidden Christmas presents. Distracted by a sense of danger and adventure, he opened the heavy glass door of my grandpa's gun cabinet and pulled down a shotgun, staring at it with a sense of wonder that he normally reserved for my father's fishing reels. The sound of the rusted latch caught my attention and I turned to look. He sighed, audibly, with excitement and I watched from across the room as he began to turn it upside down and sideways, examining it inch by inch. He was clumsy and rough with the instrument, jostling it about and paying little attention to where he put his grimy fingers and hands.

I had an uneasy feeling and silently wished that he would set it down on the beige shag carpet and run out of the room without a backwards glance. He seemed to sense my discomfort and eyed me for a moment before slowly raising the gun and squinting his left eye at me. In an instant, the barrel of the shotgun was pointed at me and I was frozen in its crosshairs - not sure what to do.

"Make my day" I heard my brother murmur softly, as if he were acting in a movie. He grinned at me, but it was not a playful grin and I felt pinned there by his cold gaze. I could see his left index finger on the trigger and I was frightened. I shivered in my maroon velvet party dress and black mary janes, unsure what to do next. The soft hairs on the back of my neck were standing straight up and I could feel my arms and legs prick up with goosebumps. I was sweating, my dark hair felt heavy and wild, my mouth and lips were as dry as sandpaper.

"Hey Tana..." he whispered in a sing-song voice, sweet as can be, "better behave or I'm gonna get you..." Before I knew it, he was pulling the trigger and I was frozen in time - watching a silver bullet sail through the air headed straight for my head. I didn't hear the shot at first; it took a minute to catch up to my ear. Instead I saw my brother's eyes as he watched the bullet escape from its holding cell and rush toward his baby sister. I watched the powder jump off the tip of the barrel and dissipate into the air. I peered into the column of the gun and saw emptiness. I saw my brother drop his arm, holding the gun steady at his side and I saw his face turn from eagerness to disbelief.

I forgave my brother, then, before the bullet even hit me. I forgave him because he didn't know what he was doing - I had to believe that he didn't know what he was doing. His



mouth dropped open, just slightly, and he squinched his eyes shut – waiting for the moment of impact.

The bullet didn't hit me. It grazed my right cheek and lodged into the wall behind my ear, shattering the jewelry stand behind me as it went. I turned my face just slightly as it passed by me and I saw the glinting gold jewelry I had longed for so badly just moments before out of the corner of my eye. I remember thinking sadly that I had never been able to wear any of those beautiful necklaces. I remember wondering if there really were any more hidden presents in the room that we hadn't found. I felt strands of my thick hair lift and then settle, I could smell them burning after they were touched by the hot metal. I could hear the wall behind me sizzle as the bullet cooled down and settled into the drywall - leaving ripples of cracked yellow paint fanned out in a circle around the bullet. I watched the necklaces shudder in the air and then collapse into a pile on the dresser.

Then, chaos. Screaming from the other room, the thunderous sound of feet running down the hallway toward the sound of the shot. The family, crowded around me to make sure I was alive, crowded around my brother screaming and crying. Everyone crying. Hands were all over me - as if they felt that touching me would keep me alive. Women's hands, men's hands - all groping at me and grabbing my face and hair and beautiful maroon velvet dress - searching for a wound, for blood. Fingers wiped at my face and smeared tears down my cheeks. It was never clear whose tears were rolling down my face, mine or theirs. For a small room filled with furniture and winter clothes, the space became crowded with people and noise. Tears gave way to questions and accusations, fingers pointed accusingly at other fingers - "You were supposed to be watching them!",

"No *you* were supposed to be watching them!". Accusations gave way to silence.

And then, a quiet drive home in the dark, the snow blocking out the moon in the sky and muting the deafening sounds of anxiety and shame.

Jason couldn't look me in the eye for months. My mother's Rockwell painting of a life had been slashed and burned that evening – she was furious and terrified. My father didn't understand what had come over his son. My brother was terrified of the consequences of his actions and ashamed of how careless he had been. Instead of hugging me, kissing me, telling me he loved me, my brother left money on my dresser every few mornings – it was his misguided attempt at an apology. A dollar one day, sixty four cents the next. It seemed that whatever he could find throughout a period of two or three days he would hoard and then leave in my room. No note, no mention of what he was doing. He was literally and figuratively paying for his mistake. For years afterward, my brother couldn't come to terms with how he had hurt me, with how he had almost killed me. He never apologized and never expressed any sincere regret. He didn't know how... no one had ever showed us how to express our feelings before. So, he dealt with it the best way he knew how. With each passing month, his guilt grew little by little and took up a room inside his heart, filling him with self-hatred and dread so strong that he could barely look at himself in the mirror without cringing and looking away.

Folks around town heard stories of what had happened – how Jason Deerborn had tried to kill his little sister on Christmas Day. The New Year was ushered in like any other, only that year there were a lot of long-necked glass bottles for my parents and a slurred "good night kids" before the New Years Ball had even dropped from its glittering stand in Times Square.

Mother and Dad slept on separate couches in the den that night, while Jason and I eyed each other nervously from opposite sides of the room and then padded off to our bedrooms quietly.

Meanwhile, after a month or so of receiving trinkets and cash in my room, I was over the entire situation. I was five after all. My attentions had turned, rather rapidly, to ponies and Disney movies. I wanted to be Princess Jasmine from *Aladdin*, who I believed was the most beautiful woman in the world. I wanted a horse named Daisy and a rabbit named Crockett. I wanted to dress just like my mother and marry my father. I turned six on August sixteenth and my parents gave me a tiny gold signet ring with my initials engraved on it in tiny beautiful script.

“Tana, I want you to be careful with this ring, it’s special” Mom said as she watched me try it on and admire its gleam on my slim ring finger. From the corner of my eye, I could see my brother waiting for the moment to end so that he could give me his present.

“Here Tana” he said quietly, handing me a small envelope. In the envelope I found a crudely drawn card that said *Happy Birthday*, under which he had drawn two horses running through a field. Inside the card was a hand-made coupon that read “*Good for 1 time cleaning your room*”. I smiled, and looked at Jason, gratefully.

“Thank you Jason” I said shyly. We were nervous around each other then, tentative.

“You’re welcome” he said, a tiny smile playing on his lips as he stared at his shoes. My mother and father exchanged glances and looked relieved. We would survive this.

## THE DIVINE HOUSE

### Her Education

The day after her eighth birthday party, Tana Deerborn fell off a brand-new swing set, lost her favorite piece of jewelry, and broke her collarbone. It hurt like hell, but the worst part was losing that sterling silver bracelet - a gift from her great aunt from Ireland. It had a beautiful never-ending knot engraved in the thick silver and it always felt cool to the touch. It soothed her when she felt nervous and made her feel like she had something special that no one else had or understood. The day she fell, she was all alone in the backyard, the way kids used to be able to play alone in their backyards before people started snatching them up into obscure vans and driving away. She hadn't been paying attention to what she was doing - instead she had been staring at the murky green water in front of her and trying to forget the latest parental screaming match she had just escaped from.

The Deerborns lived on a swampy little pond; it fed a tributary of a much bigger lake that emptied out into the vast Atlantic Ocean and usually smelled of algae and something else hiding deep under the surface and slowly dying. Tana used to sit and stare at that pond for hours, trying to imagine the possibilities. To be somewhat small, and yet connected to something so unimaginably huge was unfathomable to her. She would stare into the depths of the pond, which was not that far because you could see the muddy bottom from the shoreline, and wonder at the little minnows and frogs that seemed to hop and jump in the water. They were unaware of her - this great big thing on the outside of their ecosystem. Either they were unaware or they didn't care. She had no bearing on their lives, which seemed to be the way most other people felt about her too. They ignored her completely, except for when she stuck her great big human hand into the water and swished it around a

little, trying to feel the minnows as they flickered between her fingers and swam away – fighting the tiny current she was creating. Sometimes she would lie on her stomach and stare down into the water, looking into her eyes to see if she could see the way she looked to other people. Deep green eyes stared back at her, framed by thick brown eyebrows and light brown eyelashes. She had a pug nose that most kids made fun of and a bottom lip that she wished she could make about fifty percent smaller to match her upper lip. Sometimes she would stare at herself and just think about how she could be better looking; sometimes she would stare into the water and find herself beautiful. She would make faces at the water and watch the way her skin contorted, fascinated with the idea that she looked different to herself than she did to other people. Terrified that when she saw beautiful, other people saw hideous.

Her new swing set faced the pond and had a nice panoramic view of the whole neighborhood. It was peaceful outside on the lawn, facing the water and the neighborhood's quiet homes. The inside of her house reeked of anxiety – her parents weren't getting along and her brother, Jason, was becoming the sort of ten-year-old that parents dread having to raise. He wore all black clothes and had somehow gotten hold of a black eyeliner pencil that he used to line his eyes and lips. His hair was greasy and his fingernails were painted a navy blue that looked dirty and unfamiliar. When he looked at Tana, she squirmed.

The outside of her parents' house was neat and clean, she always felt most comfortable before she crossed the threshold of the front door. The lawn was carefully landscaped and the sage green siding matched the shrubs and trees that shaded the front porch. Their circular neighborhood had about thirty houses and they all looked pretty much the same - a big brick and siding front with a chimney on the right hand side and about five windows facing the street. They had a large front entry door that was painted a bold red and matched the

neighbors', who had painted theirs red first. Some large oak trees lined a neat stone walkway up to the front door, surrounded by a lawn that was always green, even in a drought. It always smelled like mulch and freshly cut grass outside, mostly because all the houses had contracts with a local landscaping company so someone in the neighborhood was always having their lawn cut or their flowerbeds fixed up. No matter the things she would learn later in life - that cutting your grass that short stifles its growth and that surrounding your trees with mulch and rock chokes the tree to death, Tana would always believe that a happy life requires a manicured lawn. Landscapers came weekly with their mowers and their rock beds, all the while knowing better and still collecting their hefty sums, looking forward to the business they would win when new trees needed to be planted - when the grass wouldn't grow.

The gentle rocking of the swing set made Tana daydream. Teachers called her "different" – maybe some even used the words "odd" or "abnormal". She loved to make up stories where the characters had accents so she had to speak the stories out loud. She would sit on her swing set or walk around the playground at school, making up stories with characters and dialogues and all sorts of interesting plotlines. She knew some people thought it was weird, but she liked to imagine the stories of glamorous models and their love lives and happily married wealthy couples arguing over the care of their spoiled children.

As she rocked back and forth on the swing set the day after her eighth birthday, she was telling herself a fantastic story about a man and woman who could not decide whether or not to move to London (she had an unnatural obsession with London and desperately wanted to move there). She was pumping her legs with an anxious fervor and then, as if by magic, her body was moving faster than the seat of the swing, inching forward as the swing dropped

back down to earth. She slipped over the front edge of the swing and let go of the chains she was holding, unable to keep herself from slipping off further. She felt herself rushing toward the green grass below, panicking and screaming as her body connected with the ground, shoulder first. The pain was unimaginable, fire ripping through her back and neck and taking her breath away. After a few seconds, Tana's parents appeared at the door and rushed to her side, alarmed at her panicked screams. Her father gathered her up in his strong arms and carried her to the car, yelling at his wife to get the car keys. Tana saw Jason watching from his bedroom window, more interested than concerned. He hadn't broken a bone yet, though she knew he was interested in self-mutilation. She had seen cut marks on his wrists just weeks ago, before he had remembered to pull down the sleeve of his pullover, scowling at her in warning over his supper.

At the hospital, Tana got a neck brace and cast-like contraption – the doctor tried to be gentle but it hurt so bad as he fastened it around her body and showed her how to hold her arm so that she didn't injure herself further. She couldn't help but cry out in pain and frustration, pulling and twisting her body out of the doctor's reach.

“Just relax Tana.” her mother snapped as the doctor struggled to adjust the cast. Tana's father held her hand and glared at his wife, then smiled and said,

“Princess, the doctor's just trying to help... let him help you.” Gratefully, she relaxed as she looked into her father's eyes.

Tana had to wear the cast and sling contraption, along with the neck brace, for two months, which put her well into the fall of the school year. She was fiercely embarrassed. There was nothing like a neck brace to make kids mean, except maybe head gear. Despite her desperate

shyness and reputation for being weird, Tana went to school determined to make friends. She couldn't admit it to anyone for the embarrassment, but she was lonely. It sometimes made her wonder that people didn't realize it; kids don't just talk to themselves for no reason she thought angrily, on the days when the silence got the best of her and she wondered why her mom couldn't just help her be cool. On the first day of Third Grade, she put on her favorite red skirt and purple sweater. Her mom let her wear white Keds sneakers and purple socks with it. It was hard to pull anything over the neck brace but she managed. She pulled her hair into a high ponytail, the way she had seen other girls at the movies over the summer, and fastened it with a scrunchie. She put on her plain backpack and posed for a picture for her mother, who insisted on taking pictures on the first day of school every year. She waited at the end of the block for the school bus with the rest of the kids, who all seemed to have formed great friendships over the summer. Standing off to the side and hoping to look very interested in a dead beetle lying on the concrete, she could hear them whisper.

“What does she have on her neck?”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Is she retarded?”

Fighting back hot tears, Tana pretended not to hear. Her brother didn't stand beside her. She knew he was watching her, though, as brothers will, even for the most hateful little sisters. But the fact that he knew what other kids said about her made her feel worse, and the tears stung more as she sucked in her lip and tried not to betray her true feelings. As the bus pulled up, she waited for the other kids to get on and then climbed the three metal stairs,



concentrating on not falling backwards. When she looked up to find a seat, most of them were full. All eyes were on her, waiting. The bus driver watched impatiently.

“Come on sweetheart, find a seat now, hurry up” she said. Her voice was sugary sweet but had a tinge of sour to it, as if she was close to snapping and shoving Tana into the nearest seat. Cold eyes stared her down as she shuffled down the aisle, wishing desperately that someone would smile or even make eye contact so that she would know it was okay to sit down. She stopped halfway down the aisle and froze, paralyzed with shyness and the shame of having no friends. Her heart was pounding and she could feel the tears pricking at her eyes again, her lips beginning to tremble.

“Hey girl” someone said from her left. Tana’s eyes shifted over and met the chocolate brown eyes of the most beautiful girl she had ever seen. She had smooth dark skin and full red lips, stained slightly from a cherry popsicle the girl was sucking on. The kind of breakfast that Tana's mother would never allow.

“Hi” Tana murmured shyly, unable to meet her eyes again.

“Sit down, you’re gonna get in trouble” the girl snapped. Tana sat automatically, as if she had no choice, exhaling deeply with relief. “What’s your name?” the girl asked insistently, watching Tana curiously.

“Tana Deerborn, what’s yours?” she responded softly.

“Divine LaCroix. I live at Fourteen Lafollette Street.” Tana nodded, without knowing what that meant or even where it was. “By the Baptist Church, my house has a backyard with a

fence and we have a German Shepherd named Colby.” Divine sucked loudly on her popsicle, making sure no drops fell on her faded jeans and white t-shirt.

“I live at the house right there on the corner. With the swing set in the back.” Divine peered over her shoulder and stared, appraising the house for a moment before nodding her approval and turning to Tana.

“So what happened to your neck?” she asked, with the sort of demanding directness that implies there is no choice but to answer with honesty. As she asked, she wrapped her empty popsicle stick in a napkin and stuck it into her backpack, being careful not to make a mess on the floor of the bus.

“I fell off the swing and broke my collarbone.” Tana said.

“Wow...” she breathed, her eyes widening to form the shape of the moon. Tana looked into her eyes then and saw compassion and understanding. “Once I broke my arm, it hurt so bad.” She stated with finality, turning to the nail file she had fished out of her bag and beginning to file her nails. Tana watched in silence for what seemed like hours, desperately trying to think of something to say. How could she interest a girl who filed her nails, who ate popsicles for breakfast and wasn't too shy to invite a stranger to sit next to her?

When the bus pulled up to the sprawling brick elementary school, Tana walked down the long aisle of the bus, avoiding the other kids' eyes, and climbed carefully down the stairs before turning to say good-bye to her new friend, but Divine was standing behind her, waiting expectantly. “Come on, let's walk in together and I'll help you with your locker” she said, again so directly that Tana had no choice but to follow.

Divine asked Tana over to her house after school two or three times a week - she lived with her mom and her mom's boyfriend Quincy who was the biggest man Tana had ever seen. He must have been six and a half feet tall and two hundred pounds and his voice sounded like the rumble of thunder in the distance. Tana looked forward to seeing Divine's dog Colby every time she went there. He was full of the wild abandon sort of love that dogs are famous for. She was too shy to ask Divine to come to her house, but preferred Divine's anyway.

Lafayette Street was not a bad neighborhood but it made Tana's mom uncomfortable. Instead of well-manicured lawns studding a wide asphalt street that wound in a circular pattern around a large pond, it was one ruddy road that alternated between gravel and old pavement. Small homes were set back on unpaved driveways behind large rotting trees that blocked out the sun. Cars parked on the grass alongside the main road and the men called out to one another as they passed each other's homes, making plans to meet at the bowling alley after supper and warning the children to get out of the street. Kids wandered around the neighborhood with their dogs off the leash.

Divine's house was a long walk from the road if you kept to the winding driveway, but Tana always felt relieved to reach the front door and find that it wasn't far from the main road at all - you could see the kids playing from the front stoop with no trouble at all. The house always smelled like dinner and just-washed laundry; there was always someone sitting in the kitchen talking. Divine was allowed to sit on the step outside and watch the teenagers play basketball in the driveway across the street after school; she was never nagged to do her homework right away while the sun was still out, the way Tana was. Her room was messy in a wild way that implied she danced around using clothes as decoration, throwing them off whenever and wherever she felt like it. Her bed was never made and she had covered her

windows in some sort of shiny green fabric that shimmered and glowed in the afternoon sunshine. Brightly colored candles were always strewn about the room, even on the carpeted floor. Divine knew how to braid her hair and she had pierced ears and a smart mouth. She was music and laughter, dancing and disco lights.

Quincy hung around a lot when Divine was around and she didn't seem to mind, so Tana didn't mind either. She was fascinated with this big burly man who hung around and treated Divine like his own daughter even when she wasn't. She imagined that he must have been the best kind of man to do something like that, like one of the heroes in her made-up stories. Quincy always had on a white t-shirt and cargo pants, no matter what day of the week it was. He never looked like he had just gotten home from work, the way Tana's dad often looked when she would come downstairs from doing homework after school. Her father always had a tie that was pulled to the side and down, as if he had been pulling at it when he walked in the door. His eyes were always tired and his voice scratchy from an afternoon filled with meetings and phone calls. Quincy, on the other hand, seemed to have a life that centered largely around waiting on Divine to get home so that he could tease her about her colored socks or her bright metal earrings. He asked Tana to call him Mr. Q. Divine called him Daddy Q, and he called her his little girl. Tana wondered if she could imitate his thick southern-Delaware drawl in one of her stories, practicing it at night when no one would hear her.

One day, the girls came in from the school bus and tossed their bags on the rusty linoleum floor, accepting grape popsicles from Divine's mother as they headed back outside to watch the older kids ride their bikes up and down the street. Mr. Q leaned lazily against the door frame, watching them from behind the screen door, picking his fingernails with a pocket

knife and whistling softly a tune Tana had never heard. Divine licked her popsicle and watched him from the corner of her eye, occasionally poking Tana with the toe of her shoe and whispering,

"Hey that's one's cute, ain't he?" as one of the teenagers raced by.

Tana hadn't even thought of boys yet; Divine's questions made her feel like she was behind. Besides, if she was interested in any boys at all, she knew enough to know that she couldn't be interested in the boys in Divine's neighborhood. The Rockwell family image never had that many different colors.

Tana shrugged off Divine's remarks and wiped her shorts where the sneaker had left a dusty mark, like a reminder of her inexperience and discomfort. After awhile, Mr. Q got bored and wandered away. Tana noticed that Divine's body relaxed when he walked away, like she could feel him watching her. Tana imagined this is how she would feel if her dad were around enough to pay much attention to what she did after school. She was uncomfortable enough when her father hung around on the weekends, watching her color or swing on the swing set, a faraway look in his eyes and a sharp tongue ready for his wife. The girls could hear Mr. Q talking to Divine's mother in the kitchen through the screened window, asking questions about dinner and the weekend, casually making reference to a sisters trip that she had planned and wondering aloud who would watch Divine while she was gone. Divine must have heard it too, because she audibly grunted and looked at Tana nervously.

"Does your momma ever go out of town and leave you alone?" she asked.

"No." Tana replied; unable to think of a single time her mother had left her alone and feeling jealous all of the sudden.

“Mine’s going to New York City next week.” Divine said.

“Who’s gonna watch you?” Tana asked, sucking the last of her grape popsicle off the stick and watching droplets of purple ice hit the pavement.

“Daddy Q I guess. Or... I could come stay with you...” she suggested.

“Oh. My mom doesn’t really like people staying over.” The real reason was that her mom and dad looked at Divine the way they looked at snakes. She was ashamed of her parents for the way they saw her only friend, or didn’t see her really, and angry that her loneliness was most acute at home. Besides, she was too embarrassed of Jason to let Divine spend much time around her family anyway; she figured Divine wasn’t missing much by not meeting him. He got worse and worse by the day - the black on his fingernails seemed to get darker every time she looked at him.

“Oh. Okay then.” Divine sighed, seeming depressed.

When Mr. Q came back to the door, he stood watching the two girls for another few moments and then came outside and sat down behind Divine, stretching his long thick legs out on either side of her tiny frame. She shifted forward slightly, moving just out of reach of his body but before she could get too far from him he reached forward and put his large hands on her shoulder, squeezing rhythmically. He listened to the girls talk about the boys in the yard for a few minutes and then asked how come they never played with dolls like normal girls. Then, he reached behind his back and handed over two big stuffed bears - one for each of them. The animals were stuffed with foam; the cheap kind of toy you get at the fair when you can shoot all the glass bottles in a pyramid down with a water gun.

Being at that just-wrong age where they weren't out of stuffed animals yet, but they weren't quite still into them - neither of the girls was all that interested in the toys. Divine took hers and immediately put it down on the step, refusing to even look at it. Tana thanked Mr. Q and kept hers on her lap, stroking its soft hair absentmindedly. After a few minutes, he stood up and patted Divine on the head, then the screen door shut softly as he went back inside and they listened as his footsteps retreated down the hallway, fading away as he disappeared. Divine turned to Tana, looking at her sideways.

"Have you ever kissed a boy?" she asked shyly, as if she was afraid to hear the answer.

"No, have you?" Tana asked, embarrassed that she hadn't even though she knew that third grade wasn't that old.

"Yeah.... Ever wonder what it feels like?"

"Sure, I guess. What does it feel like?"

"I can't tell you - you have to find out for yourself. You can do it with this doll." She pushed the giant stuffed bear against Tana and waited expectantly, tapping her shoe against the crumbling step.

"I can't kiss some stuffed animal, Divine. That's just weird!"

"It's how I learned. Just do it." She sat waiting, impatiently - almost desperately - for Tana to do it. "You have to learn somehow."

So Tana pressed her lips against the blank face on the stuffed animal and shoved it back at Divine quickly, feeling ashamed of herself and not really sure why. Tana heard something

shuffling from the side of the house, and turned quickly toward the garage but no one was there. Suddenly she felt like a thousand eyes were on her; the hair on the back of her neck was standing up.

"What did you think?" Divine asked, curiously.

"It wasn't real. That's not what it really feels like." Divine nodded, acknowledging that Tana was right.

"You ever let a boy touch you?" she asked, insistently now, like something depended on the answer. She caressed the doll absentmindedly, running her hands up and down the sides of the bear and raising the stiff hairs.

"Do you mean down there? No!" Tana cried, very ashamed then.

"You can see what that feels like too." Divine offered. Tana shook her head emphatically.

"No way."

"Why? You just gotta make this bear do it the way that he does.." She trailed off, nervously – toying with the arm of the bear. Her face got red all of the sudden, realizing her mistake.

"The way who does?" Tana asked.

"Huh? Oh, you know.... Like any guy."

"What guy though?" Tana asked again, sensing something. She had had too many mother-daughter talks she thought, feeling ashamed for even being able to think what she was thinking.



"Just any guy!" Divine snapped. She pushed the stuffed animal towards her friend.

"Divine, I am not doing that with an animal." Tana said, pushing it back.

"That's how you learn though." Divine looked confused, unsure of herself all of the sudden.

"No it is not! If that's how you learn, I would rather not know!" Tana stood up and backed away and saw tears forming in Divine's eyes, uncertain, anxious tears. Her face was turning red under her color and she was shifting her body back and forth, as if she couldn't find a comfortable spot.

"But, I thought..." Divine started, and then stopped, looking suddenly behind her at the corner of the house, where Tana had heard a noise just minutes before. Quincy was leaning against the door of the garage, watching them and swigging from a caramel-colored beer bottle. He was staring at Divine, and Tana had the sense that he didn't even notice she was there anymore. He was smiling proudly, intent on his daughter and her doll - intent on the lesson his little girl was teaching. His free hand was stroking his smooth, muscled stomach, his soiled white t-shirt pulled up enough so that Tana could see the hairs around his bellybutton and his pants pulled down to just below the hip bone. All of the sudden his pants were too tight and his eyes too intense. His voice too smooth and his attention too much.

"I have to go." Tana whispered.

"Just go then!" Divine snapped angrily. Tana was too uncomfortable to ask any questions. She could see Divine's mother watching from the little kitchen window. She grabbed her backpack and ran down the driveway, anxious to get away from that house. Long after she

rounded the bend in the road, her white sneakers kicking up dust as she ran, Tana couldn't get the image of Daddy Q staring hungrily at Divine out of her mind.

After that, Tana found ways to avoid sitting with Divine on the bus. Divine's mother moved them across town, to a different house where the neighbors minded their own business, where a different bus picked her up from school. Tana tried to talk to her mother about it one day. She asked if her mom thought it was weird that a man would be very interested in his girlfriend's daughter. Her mother was busy, writing checks and licking stamps to put on envelopes, and just shrugged absentmindedly.

"Tana, is this really important honey? I have a lot of work to catch up on." She murmured, barely taking the time to look up at her daughter. Tana wandered away, figuring that if her mom didn't have time to worry about it, she shouldn't have to either.

Tana saw Divine one day, many years later, in the local Wal-Mart wandering down the corridors looking lost and spaced out, like she had just woken up from a very long nap. Her arms had bruises on the insides and she was very skinny. Tana turned quickly down another aisle, hoping that her old friend wouldn't see her, and felt guilty about her own fears.

## **THE FIRST THREE**

### **Her Experience**

I hated high school, mostly because I wasn't good at being in high school. I was sixteen going on forty - I hated the cheerleaders whose arms seemed to be only extensions of their glittering pompoms and whose laughs resonated through the hallways like wind chimes on a blustery winter night. I hated the boys and their tunnel-visioned focus on sex and boobs. Most of all, I hated the teachers who so blatantly picked favorites and isolated the weirdoes, the outcasts, the losers. I was an underdog and had never learned to embrace it the way the goths and the drama kids had.

For four years, everyone in school called me Chewy. This started after the second week of the ninth grade when I was getting undressed for gym class. Some of the other girls were sharing body lotion and giggling about each other's gym clothes. I was seated on a bench in the next row of lockers over, close to the door. The gym teacher was waiting outside at the baseball field. The girls started talking about shaving their legs and getting their periods - things I hadn't started to do yet. I was a late bloomer and I knew it; I was always trying to conceal my inexperience... the fact that I hadn't started my period yet and that my mother didn't want me shaving my legs. She thought I was too young. She bought me razors and told me to focus on my underarms. It hadn't occurred to me to just go ahead and shave my legs, and ask for forgiveness later. I had been stalling in the locker room, preferring to wait until everyone else had changed and left before I began to undress.

"Marcia, your legs are so stubbly!" I heard one of the girls squeal and I squeezed my eyes shut nervously. Hurry, Tana... I thought, realizing that if the girls saw me with my school clothes on, they might hang around and wait for me. Sweatpants on, hurry.....

"Yours aren't exactly smooth Liz!" someone else shouted, laughing. I ripped my jeans off and rushed to pull my sweats from the gym bag. I could hear them rounding the corner.

"Tana, what are you still doing here?" It was Marcia Reemer, one of the most popular pom-pom arms in the school. She was staring down at me with a look of pure accusation, as if I had the nerve to eavesdrop on their conversation.

"Oh, I just... I haven't changed yet." I murmured... my sweat pants were pulled halfway up, I was sitting on the cold metal bench in my underwear.

"Do you shave, Tana?" Marcia asked, sugary sweet.

"What? Why?" I asked.

"Just wondering. You never wear shorts. Are you afraid someone will see your legs aren't shaved?" she asked, smiling down at me as if I was her subject and she was a royal queen.

"Oh, no that's not why." I stood up fast and pulled my sweats up, now eye to eye with the rest of the girls, all were staring at me.

"We were just showing each other how we shave our legs; let me see yours?" she bent down quickly and before I could back away pulled my pant leg up and ran her hand up my calf.

"Ew!!" she squealed as she pulled her hand away. "You're all hairy!" she shouted, as the other girls dissolved into a round of giggles.

"My mom doesn't like me to shave.." I murmured, in agony that I had been found out. The other girls didn't hear me. Marcia looked disgusted, like she wanted to wash her hands. The girls ran out of the locker room laughing hysterically as I stayed behind to finish changing. When I walked out of the locker room and towards the ball field, I could see Marcia and her friends standing with three of the most popular guys in school - all in my gym class. They were animated, laughing and talking. When I approached, the girls laughed harder.

"Hey look, it's Chewbacca." said Tyler Sorenson, smirking and pointing lazily at me. My face turned bright red as the rest of the group laughed openly and loudly. Marcia was gazing at me with cold eyes.

From then on, most people called me Chewy. I had a few friends of course; even the weirdest high school kid can find one or two like-minded people to pass the time with. I found my like minds in Christel and, later, Jan - a trumpet player and a foreign exchange student from Germany who joined our group in senior year. It was my opinion that Jan had been unfairly paired with Christel as his host student. Jan was tall and handsome and played soccer; he should have been placed with one of the cool kids. Unfortunately for him, none of the cool kids took in a foreign exchange student that year. Instead, Christel's family agreed to take one and she was overwhelmed with excitement over the fact that he was a handsome teenage boy. Christel had yet to kiss a boy or even attract one's attention. She cared more about her trumpet than about boys; she hadn't mastered the art of flirting. She was even more awkward than I was. Jan and Christel and I spent a lot of Saturday nights together, watching movies in Christel's basement and drinking whiskey stolen from her parents. One night we watched *Boogie Nights* together, with the sound turned down low so that her parents couldn't

hear what we were watching. As Christel lay on the floor and focused on the movie, Jan and I shared the couch and focused on each other.

As Mark Wahlberg showed off on-screen, I thanked the heavens that the lights were out so that Jan couldn't see the real me underneath the harsh basement lights. He kissed my neck and lips and whispered something in German; I never did figure out what it meant and soon forgot it all together. He pressed me down into the itchy cushions of the retro couch - a throwback to the days when couches were supposed to have texture and color. It was my first time and it hurt. Jan was enthusiastic, which was nice except that his enthusiasm meant he was eager and hurried; he pushed in too fast and too hard and ejaculated too soon.

Christel found out about it the next day when she saw the discarded condom in the downstairs bathroom wastebasket. She wouldn't talk to me after that, and without her, the tie that brought me and Jan together was severed. He sent me a postcard from Germany after he returned home, it said, "*Danka Tana, it was gut time with you. Sincere, Jan*".

By that time, I had been accepted to West Chester University in Pennsylvania and was eager to accept.

Going to college was like getting an invitation to join a club that I had always wanted to be in. I didn't have to be Chewy anymore, I didn't have to be the weird girl. I got matched up with a roommate named Darla who had literally no inhibitions and great big wild blonde hair. She had grown up with a few of the other girls in our dorm and so a clique was born - and I was allowed to be in it! Darla wore size 0 jeans and had a drinking problem. She skipped every meal except for lunch and slept with all sorts of guys - any guys she could get her hands on it seemed. And she did it while I was in the room. Aside from my hasty and

painful experience with Jan, this was the most sex I had ever seen, and I wasn't even part of it. Darla wasn't very nice, but she was willing to be my friend so I attached myself to her, desperate to make friends and have connections in this town that was so far away (but really just a few hours) from home.

Slowly, surely, I adjusted. I learned to borrow items of clothing without asking. I learned that making out with a guy in public was actually sort of a status symbol among the other girls. Who could get the hottest guy? Who could get the most guys? Who could steal someone else's guy? There were a hundred status symbols that hadn't existed in my sheltered high school life. I was just trying to keep up. Body issues followed me to college, as they would continue to follow me through the rest of my life. I couldn't block out Darla's voice, proudly proclaiming that if you can't see someone's collarbone they're "fat". Years later I would starve myself for weeks on end – subsisting on coffee and cigarettes and searching each night in the mirror for bone protrusions at my collarbone and hipbone areas.

I fell in love for the first time. David. A guy so perfect, so utterly the exact replica of the kind of guy I fantasized about, that I couldn't keep my eyes off of him. In the dark, dank corner of a basement during an impossibly loud party, as I tried desperately to drink enough to feel comfortable in the tight black mini-dress my roommate had made me wear, David turned to me and said, with the pearly white smile I would come to desire,

"Hey, aren't you roommates with Darla?" I was, in fact, roommates with Darla - a girl David probably knew very well since she showed up at his house at least twice a week completely plastered looking for her boyfriend - who, unfortunately for his unsuspecting roommates (of which there were seven), was more often than not still out trying to find a drunk girl to come

home and sleep with him. I looked at the floor and nodded my head, then took another swig of beer and prayed to be cool.

"Yeah" I said. "And you're David, right?" He smiled and nodded, his teeth gleaming under the black light, casting an eerie glow around his pale face and hair. David taught me a little bit about love, but it was short-lived and one-sided. I was his first so we had a connection that I dreamily, but mistakenly, considered to be in some way cosmic. Unfortunately, men don't see their first as much more than just the first of many - not the way that most girls see their first as the opportunity to share true love with another person.

The first time we did it, he showed up at my room when Darla was out getting wasted somewhere. I had stayed home because I was exhausted from too many nights of partying and had a Spanish test the next day. I was already almost failing Spanish class, and really needed to get an A on the test. When David knocked on the door and called out his name through the thin wood, though, I put down the book and answered the door. He was irresistible to me.

"David, I have this test tomorrow." I said when I opened the door. We had been very casually dating for about a month, since the night he introduced himself at the basement party. We had gone to see a movie once, and gone out to dinner once, but both with groups of people. We had shared one tentative kiss after the dinner date, when he dropped me off at my room before he walked back across campus to his house.

"That's alright. I can just hang out and wait while you study, if that's alright." he smiled his dreamy smile and ambled into the room, clearing a space for himself on my bed and plopping himself down with the T.V. remote.



"David, really, you're going to distract me. I have to get an A." I said, pleading. I had no backbone when it came to him.

"Okay then, why don't you take a little break and then I'll leave you alone. Take an hour break, ok? Then I'll go." He motioned for me to join him to watch T.V. and I figured, well, that didn't sound so bad. So I sat down next to him on the bed. And I laid my head on his strong shoulder. And I allowed him to intertwine his fingers with mine, and to gently stroke my back with his free hand. He unlaced his other hand and ran it along my thigh and then my inner thigh, and gently kissed my mouth and then my neck, making me sigh with anticipation and arch my back with pleasure. He pulled gently on my hair and lifted my shirt enough to stroke my belly and send tingles up and down my spine. He was gentle when he unbuttoned my jeans, but rough when he pulled them over my butt and down over my knees, letting them drop to the floor. He pulled my shirt over my arms and then did the same with his. When he stood to pull down his pants, his eyes met mine and he smiled.

"Tana, I've been thinking of this for a long time." he whispered, and I knew he had. When he pushed me back on the bed and entered me, it hurt but not the way that Jan had hurt me. David pressed in but watched my eyes, and when I winced he pulled back and slowed down. He was new to the business but he was a fast learner. It was memorable in all the right ways, it was slow and sweet and gentle - the way I had wanted it to be with Jan. David was urgent and enthusiastic, but he was caring and generous too.

David had me once that night, and a few more times afterwards after a long night of partying and too many beers, and then promptly stopped taking my phone calls. The last time we slept together was a particularly boozy night when I could barely stay awake long enough to see it

through to completion. When he was done, David went to the bathroom to take the condom off, returned to bed, and fell asleep without a word. Two days later, as I sat on the toilet seat at my grandmother's house on Easter Sunday, a condom fell out of me and into the robins-egg-blue toilet bowl and scared the living shit out of me. Shaking, I fished the condom out of the bowl and wrapped it up in the entire contents of one roll of toilet paper, burrowing to the bottom of her small wicker wastebasket with its plastic liner and tucking it underneath the rest of the trash. One terrified pregnancy test and a morning-after pill later, I confronted David and our relationship ended just as it began - surrounded by drunk college kids in the corner of a dark basement during an impossibly loud party. For many days after that Sunday, I felt dirty for reasons I could never quite put my finger on.

I met Miles in the school cafeteria. He was skinny - skinnier than me even, and by this time I had reduced myself to a pitiful size 0 due to a combination of my already low self-esteem and my supermodel-esque roommate whose own body issues made me look like the poster child for Positive Body Image. Despite his skinny frame and glasses, Miles caught my eye from day one. Like David, once I noticed Miles, I couldn't stop noticing him. He was everywhere. We locked eyes in the cafeteria, the library, in the hallway of the academic building, at parties. He was smart and funny; he was paying his own way through college and took his classes seriously. He made me believe that he really wanted to be something one day. My experiences with men had been pretty negative up to this point, so Miles got the brunt of my insecurity. I could not believe that a man could love me. I could not believe that I was worthy of the kind of love that he was trying to give me.

Miles said "I love you" for the first time on Christmas Day, almost six months after we started dating. We were sitting in his room, which smelled sickeningly of feet, incense, and

pot. He lazily pulled on a joint and then set it down in a ceramic ashtray shaped like an alligator before opening my gift to him - a *Beatles* boxed set and a collection of *Simpsons* DVDs.

"Tana, this is great!" he exclaimed and hugged me, then settled back down into the folds of his futon and examining the albums in the boxed set.

Then he looked up at me. I was looking at him expectantly, smiling. I was wearing my favorite purple sweater with a cowl neck and black leather pants; a combination of the holiday season and the outfit made me feel exuberant. He handed me a small box wrapped in gold paper. I tore it open and inside a black jewelry box found a heart-shaped gold necklace with a tiny diamond in the middle.

"Oh Miles!" I cried, happily. It was beautiful - the first present I had ever received that seemed to mean so much.

"Tana - I want you to know something." he said, clasping my hands in his and looking into my eyes. "I love you" he said, softly and with meaning. "I want to marry you someday." he said. I stared back at him in disbelief; I had been waiting for this moment.

"I love you too, Miles." I whispered. And I meant it. We both did.

On the Saint Patrick's Day after the Christmas that Miles told me he loved me, his housemates threw a huge party complete with green beer. I was late getting there because I had been stuck working late at the restaurant where I waitressed two or three nights a week for extra money. I finally got off work around 10 o'clock and hurried home where I changed into tight jeans and a t-shirt that said "*Everyone Loves a Drunk Girl!*" and used shamrocks in

the place of 'o's. I tied my hair up in a ponytail that was fastened with green ribbons and examined myself in the mirror, applying a bit of glitter to the apples of my cheeks and using some green eye shadow to be more festive. Darla had left for the party without me, sticking a note to the door that said "*See you There! XOXOXO Love ya!*" After one last appraisal, I grabbed my room key and headed out into the cold March night, hurrying through the 3-block walk across campus to get to the off-campus housing area where Miles shared a house with some friends.

By the time I got to the party, it was in full-swing. Green lights in the shape of shamrocks hung from the porch and traditional Irish drinking songs were blaring from a stereo somewhere inside the Victorian house. The floorboards creaked from the pressure of so many people jumping and dancing around the rooms. I saw Darla almost right away when I walked in the door, and waved to her. She shouted something at me when I walked in but I couldn't hear what she said over the music. She was waving at me frantically, trying not to burn the people around her with her cigarette and attempting to cut across the crowd to get to me. The stairs to get to Miles' room were just to my left. I caught her attention and pointed at the stairs, started to climb them.

"WAIT!" I heard Darla shout and I turned back. "WAIT TANA, WAIT!" she shouted again, just as she reached the bottom of the stairway.

"What?" I asked, exasperated. I wanted to find Miles and then get a beer.

"Tana, don't go up there." she said.

"Why?"

"You just, you don't want to go up there yet, okay? Just wait down here with me for awhile."  
she said, smiling.

"Darla, I will, just let me say hi to Miles and get a beer and I'll be back down." I said this as I finished my climb to the top of the stairs and turned the corner just enough to see into my boyfriend's room, which was partially obstructed by the half-closed door. There, in the corner of the room that I could see from this angle, was Miles pressed tight against another girl - a brunette. I couldn't tell who it was exactly but from my angle it looked like one of the girls down the street who regularly showed up at Miles' house, drunk and uninvited. Over the past several months she had become more and more of an irritant for me because I had noticed the way her eyes stopped searching a room every time she saw Miles. Her name was Kathryn and she had shiny hair and big beautiful green eyes. She was loud and obnoxious and, as is often the case with these types of girls, everyone loved her. Next to her, with my mousy brown hair and small green eyes, my flat chest and big size 9 feet, I always felt like a troll. It was the ultimate blow to my self-esteem - the last girl on earth that I would have picked for Miles, he chose for himself, and she was the exact opposite of me. His hands were all over her big breasts and round ass, and her arms were locked tight around his neck. They never knew I saw them. I turned around and walked back down the stairs, pushing past Darla who clearly knew what was going on and hadn't stopped it.

I ran home, Darla not far behind me calling to me. Her voice cut through the cold air and reached my ears just before it faded out into nothing. I stopped halfway home, out of breath and energy, and collapsed on the campus courtyard in a fit of angry tears.

"Why didn't you do something?" I shouted at her, unsure who I was madder at - him for cheating on me or her for knowing about it before I did, for making me feel even more foolish than I already did.

"I tried to interrupt them, he didn't seem to care. He's really drunk Tana. Like, REALLY drunk," Darla said, cradling my head in her arms. "I really did try to stop them. She's such a total bitch. She called me a whore and told me I had no right to get involved."

"You are not a whore!" I cried, even though she was. "That fucking bitch."

We hugged each other in solidarity and walked home from the party together, arm in arm. Miles' roommates saw me run out and knew why and told him about it the next morning, after he awoke and was confused to find a woman in his bed who was not me. He tried to apologize several times, but I wouldn't take his phone calls and eventually he gave up. Years later, I heard Miles got married to a dark-haired sorority girl from college. By then I had moved on and was more worried about my future than my past so I didn't really care. But for some reason, it still stung.

## HELLO, DUST

### Her Marriage

There is a sweater that I only let myself wear on Saturdays. It is a wonderfully soft baby blue cable sweater with gigantic sleeves – at least two sizes too big. I have had it since I was a freshman in college and I was self-conscious about my body weight. My roommate, Darla, was borderline anorexic and made me feel like a bumbling elephant in comparison. Now, the sweater is like an old friend. It is more blanket than sweater, and has ten years worth of tomato sauce stains from Saturday afternoon chili-making sessions – a habit I have acquired and stuck with since I was in my early twenties and just starting to learn my way around a kitchen.

Saturday mornings I wake up and run around the block twice, admiring the modest but well-kept homes in our suburban Texas neighborhood – the green lawns and bricked mailboxes dotting the wide streets which are quiet and empty in the early hours of the weekend. I run slowly, allowing my muscles to adjust to the activity and breathing in the sounds of songbirds from the mature oak trees that adorn my neighbors' yards. I run down my driveway and turn right, past the Wilsons and the Tremonts and then left down Woodlawn Street, gaining speed as I pass the Pratt house which is situated on two lots, should really be called a mansion, and is out of place in our neighborhood of middle class homes. I have never liked the Pratt family, though they have always been cordial. Their children are rude and the husband is snide – he is a surgeon at the local hospital. Mrs. Pratt has always been quietly polite, but she seems to never leave the house without Mr. Pratt and I have the feeling this is the way he prefers it.

I run my route twice and slow down as I round the bend back on Jennings Avenue and turn back into my driveway. I check my watch each morning as I cool down in the driveway, and watch as my neighbors begin their morning routines, emerging from their homes to pick the newspapers up off their lawns and wave to one another with cups of coffee in their hands. It is a Norman Rockwell picture and my mother would be so proud.

I shower and change, wrapping my blue sweater around my body and settling in for a relaxing day with my husband Darren. I will eat breakfast and then begin making my Saturday chili – a recipe that I have perfected and makes Darren drool every week. We eat it on Saturday night and then again Sunday afternoon, savoring the spicy jalapenos and tangy onions. I have found comfort in my kitchen and my Saturday routine for so long now that it is hard to break; when we go on vacation I get twitchy once I realize that my habit will be interrupted – I get nervous at the idea of leaving my home for too long.

Darren and I have been married for two years. We met in Delaware – at a conference I was attending for my company – an environmental consulting firm. Darren was working for a competing firm and our booths were set up opposite one another. We made eye contact throughout the week and when the conference was over, he introduced himself.

“Hi – so, you work for Landry, Inc., huh?” he said, approaching my booth with confidence.

“Yeah, and you work for CTR. Big competitors.” I smiled, and he chuckled.

“Guess you could say that... what office are you out of?”

“This one... their Delaware one. I live just up the street. Convenient, huh?”



“Oh... lucky. I’m out of Austin. I couldn’t get a flight out tonight because of the weather. Do you want to go get something to eat? I love that microbrewery downtown.” His eyes were kind, and he had a nice smile. He was funny and smart – an engineer and sales manager for my biggest competitor. We had dinner that night and laughed for most of the evening, sharing our wildest stories and telling secrets about our co-workers’ intercompany dating.

We dated long-distance for about four months, until I couldn’t stand it any longer and he started talking about moving in together. I moved to Texas and we relocated his furniture and his dog, Lady, to the suburbs where we could spread out and start a family. I was starry-eyed and in passionate lust with my shiny new boyfriend. He was everything I had been wanting – he was charming and successful and funny and most of all, he loved me. I was a little bit ashamed to admit that part of his allure, at first at least, was how into me he was. It was the first time a guy I was dating liked me more than I liked him.

Now, two years later, I am still very much in love with my husband. The shine has worn off and has been replaced with the comfortable glow of familiarity and stability. Our conversations revolve around children and veterinary appointments.

“Who gave Lady her last heartworm pill?”

“Have you heard the latest information on prenatal vitamins – they have ones now that don’t give you heartburn.”

He is my best friend and he is comfortable and familiar; I can see our life together written on his face the same way I can map the past hundred Saturdays in droplets of stubborn sauce and grease stains on my sweater.

Darren greets me in the kitchen and I hand him a cup of coffee, in the same way that I have handed him a cup of coffee every morning for the past two years. He gives me a light kiss on the cheek, downs his coffee, and then puts on his coat – which is a change in our weekend routine that raises my eyebrows.

“Where are you going?” I ask.

“The library. There’s some stuff going on at work and I don’t know quite how to handle it – some scientific stuff. Boring. Anyway, I thought I’d go look up some information. Okay?”

He looks at me and I detect a shadow of defensiveness to his tone but I just smile and say,

“Whatever. Have fun at the library nerd.”

And he is gone before I can say “*I love you.*” It has been slightly like this for a month or two.

He comes home just a little bit later than usual, or leaves on Sunday mornings to run errands that we normally run together. I have been ignoring it to this point because I don’t want to hover. But this is strange, and I know this is strange because Darren hates libraries and hates the idea of touching books that countless other people have touched because he is almost as germaphobic as I am. And who goes to a library anymore, anyway, with all the information that is available on the internet? Especially on a Saturday.

So I toss seasoned ground beef and beans and tomatoes, green peppers, and onions into a crock pot and turn it on Low. I feed Lady and kiss her soft fur, inhaling her stinky dog scent. Then I grab my Nine West bag and leave the house, driving impatiently and nervously to the library and feeling sick for no reason at all.

When I get there, I don't quite know what to do because my inner adult is telling me to turn around and drive home as fast as I can. But the wife in me is telling me that something is wrong and that husbands who hate libraries and their jobs don't just go to libraries on a weekend to do work. So I park in the back parking lot in a corner and walk into the library using a door that is clearly labeled *Employees Only* hoping that it will deposit me in some dark corner of the library that is hidden. Instead, I walk into the back of the *Reference Librarian* section and have to abruptly explain myself to the stern-faced woman sitting behind the counter who eyes me up and down with a look that can only mean "You disgust me beyond belief."

"I'm so sorry, I didn't realize what door I used!" I exclaim, hoping to fool her and doing a miserable job.

"You missed the sign that says *Employees Only*?" she asks drily.

"So sorry, I'll just..." I trail off and point toward the swingy door that separates her desk from the rest of the library and I inch through it, trying not to attract any more attention.

And then I see them. Darren and *some woman* huddled at a table directly in front of me, but far enough away that they are oblivious to the scene I have nearly just caused. She is blonde with big boobs, *such a cliché*, I think angrily, completely passing by the denial stage and jumping right toward indignant anger and bitterness. She looks like she got up this morning and decided to dress up like a snow bunny whore – she is wearing a tight white cable knit turtleneck sweater with very tight jeans and obnoxiously fuzzy white boots. Her hair is pulled back into one of those intentionally messy ponytails that are infuriating when they

look hot on hot women and unkempt on regular women. She looks like she just got done fucking my husband on the library floor. *I hate her.*

Darren is holding her hand and they are talking, and they are perusing a book but it is probably not a book about his work. There is no way for me to tell. And I can't do anything standing here like an idiot in the *Reference* section of the library, while the hateful librarian is keeping watch over me with her beady rat-like eyes. I turn to her, as if to go out the door from whence I came, but she stares me down with such disdain that I turn and run for the bathroom where I throw up twice in the toilet. Then I sit on the toilet and think for about twenty minutes, wiping my tears with the oversized sleeve of my dingy blue sweater and berating myself for leaving the house in such a rag.

When I leave the bathroom, Darren and the woman are gone. I leave the library from the front door and walk around to the back, feeling shamed and foolish. I have been married for only two years and already my husband is cheating on me. I try to remember the last time we had sex and, although we are trying to conceive a child, I cannot come up with a date. We haven't reached the point where I am timing my cycles and taking my temperature every morning, so I haven't been paying much attention. Then I realize, the last time we did it was about two months ago. I remember because it was our anniversary and first we went out for dinner at this Italian place down the street and when we got home, we drank a bottle of wine and then had sex on the living room couch. It lasted about twenty minutes which was longer than usual for Darren and afterwards I joked with him that I must have done something right to keep him going that long. And he seemed depressed after that, although I couldn't put my finger on why.

Now I wonder if I made him feel bad about himself for not normally lasting very long. Or if he was feeling guilty about cheating on me. Or if it was nothing. And then I wonder if I will over-analyze everything for the rest of my life now, because my asshole husband can't keep his dick in his pants.

When I get home, I take Lady for a walk and stir the chili. I put on some makeup and change out of my blue sweater that I love, and replace it with a slinky black turtleneck that I usually save for a night out on the town. I put on jeans instead of comfy sweatpants. Even though he is cheating on me, I feel like I need to look good for him; maybe *especially because* he is cheating on me. When he gets home, I don't speak for an hour or so, other than saying "I'm fine," every time he asks.

We have sex that night - frantic sex that I initiate out of fear and anger. Some people might call it hate sex. It's hard for me to look at him while he's on top of me, staring down at me urgently and grunting as he nears his climax. The urge to push him off of me is almost too great.

"Let's change positions" I whisper, forcing myself to look in his eyes. "Get behind me."

He eagerly pulls out and helps me flip over on the bed, the sheets get tangled in my legs and the movement is awkward. He doesn't notice that the mood is spoiled, pushes himself inside of me and keeps pumping, his thrusts getting more and more urgent until he comes inside of me and collapses, breathing heavily into my hair.

I lie on my stomach with my head turned to the left, my cheek and eye pressed into the soft pillow beneath me. It is hard for me to breathe with my husband on top of me the way he is, and I gently move my elbow and begin to turn myself on to my back, prompting him to

move. He lies down next to me, on his side, and falls asleep quickly. I stay up for a long time, staring at the dark ceiling and wondering what to do next. The next morning, Darren is awake before I am and he is lying in bed staring at me and gently stroking my hair.

"I saw you yesterday." I whisper after a long time.

"What do you mean?" he asks casually, without skipping a beat.

"I saw you with her. In the library."

"With who?" his voice is nervous now, a little tentative, as if he knows he has been caught and doesn't quite know what to do about it.

"Oh don't be an idiot, Darren!" I raise my voice - the freedom of a childless house is that you can yell whenever you want, you can throw dishes at each other if you want. I am exasperated and tired. I just want him to admit it so that we can move on. "Just admit it!" I screech. "I saw her! And I want to know who she is!"

He won't look at me, he is staring at the china lamp behind my head, on the mahogany night table.

"I met her at Petco. I was getting Lady some more vitamins and toys and stuff. There was a puppy adoption thing going on and she was looking at Chihuahuas. I said something about what useless dogs Chihuahuas are. She thought I was funny." He is fiddling with the comforter and looks incredibly uncomfortable. I feel sick to my stomach all of the sudden and realize, after all, that I don't want to know about this woman.

"Have you fucked her?"

"Tana -"

"Have you!" I shout. I don't want excuses. I don't want his pity or his explanations about being lonely or neglected. I just want to know.

"Yes. Once. It didn't mean anything."

I stare at him for a long time and then I unfold myself from the tangle of bed sheets and leave the room. I go to the laundry room and take a dirty pair of jeans and a t-shirt from the hamper and put them on, slipping my feet into flip flops before I open the front door and leave the house. I want to leave forever but I didn't take my purse or my keys with me, so I just walk. I walk in circles around the neighborhood, seeing everything and nothing at once. I see the cul de sacs and the SUVs in driveways, the men watering the lawns and the women playing in the backyards with their dogs and children. Mr. and Mrs. Pratt wave to me from their front porch, smiling smugly as if they can tell from my face that their lower-class neighbors are struggling. I don't see how I fit into this world of families and children and smiles. I don't belong here. I walk and walk, for what seems like forever, rounding turns and corners in the neighborhood that I have never seen before. I see weeds in the gardens and old brick facing that desperately needs to be repointed. Cars that are dusty with months of neglect and dogs running meaningless but frantic circles in empty backyards.

As I round the last curve of my walk and see my quaint little home just over the slight hill, I feel myself relax and I look back - surveying the neighborhood in all its happy family completeness, despite the wear and tear that is visible on its surface. We will get through this together, I think with resolve. I love my husband, I really do. I will not let this *bitch* tear us apart.

I stare at the house for a few minutes, taking deep breaths and gathering resolve. When I open the front door and walk inside the house, Darren is waiting there - nervously watching me and pleading with me desperately. It will never happen again, it didn't mean anything, it only happened the one time. He was lonely, he was scared, he was having a hard time getting used to marriage. I go to him and he wraps me in his arms, dipping his face into my hair and breathing in deeply as if he believes it will be his last chance to smell me, to inhale me. It takes me a long time, but eventually I reach up and I put my arms around him and squeeze, ever so slightly so that he knows I am there and that I want to feel him too.

Eight weeks later, I find out that I am two months pregnant. The occasional talk of separation and divorce stops. Darren and I are going to be parents now - I stop thinking that I would be better off without him and start thinking of the strange swimming guppy feeling that I have in my stomach. My comfy blue chili-making sweater is now my comfy blue baby-making sweater. When Darren sees me wearing it one night as I pan fry pork chops for dinner, he smirks and then wraps his arms around me from behind, stroking my belly where I now have a slightly larger bulge than I had two months ago.

"How's my baby?" he murmurs in my ear. I can feel myself tense up when he touches me and speaks to me in that loving, whispery kind of way. It feels forced and fake, but I can't tell who the one is faking it - him or me.

"I'm good." I say, turning my head and grinning at him as he squeezes me gently.

"And my other baby?" he asks.

"He She is good too." I say, laughing lightly at the pet name we have given our unborn child. He She .... because we don't know the sex and I refuse to call the baby "it". And I hate



always saying "the baby". So we say He She. Some people, like my mother, think it's weird - that it presumes the child is some sort of a freak, or sexless. If my child is sexless, it won't be any different than my marriage. We haven't had sex since the day I conceived, the day I found out about Darren's affair. We haven't spoken of his affair since - I thought I could forget about it and move on. Instead, I have days where my anger rises up and simmers just below the surface, making me cringe and grit my teeth - I have to force myself not to lash out at him. I want to get back at him so bad. I want to fuck a million other guys and then tell him about each and every one, in detail.

"I have to work late tomorrow." he murmurs into my ear, and I instantly feel the anger begin to boil.

"Why?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"New client." he says, without expanding. All I can think of is that this time tomorrow he will be pushing his cock into another woman and she will be scratching his back and pulling his hair. Instinctively, I touch my stomach and rub gently. The reminder of a living being growing inside of me calms me. I have to work hard to keep my blood pressure from rising. The soothing effect of connecting with my baby through a thin layer of skin and body fluid helps.

The months pass and He She and my stomach grow healthy and large. It is a Tuesday evening, around 6:30, when I go into labor. I have been feeling shooting pains all morning and afternoon, but when I called my doctor she assured me that it was nothing to be worried about and reminded me to time the pain in case I started having contractions. After hours of intermittent pain, I noticed that it was happening every ten minutes or so. After another hour,

the pain was coming every eight minutes. I call the doctor and let her know I am going into labor. Then I call my neighbor, Jennifer, and ask her to take me to the hospital. As I wait for her to come over and get me, I call Darren.

"It's happening. Where are you?"

"What? Right now?! But we have another 2 weeks!"

"Yes, I know that Darren. But it's happening. Where are you?"

"I'm at work, I ... "

"Just get to the hospital Darren." I say as I hear Jennifer bang on the door, and I hang up the phone.

The labor takes seven hours. It is excruciatingly painful because I elected for a natural birth instead of having painkillers. Darren gets there around hour two. I don't ask him why it took him so long, I just take his hand and squeeze. By hour four I am exhausted, by hour six I am delirious. When she comes out, she is slippery and messy and beautiful. We name her Valerie. Darren and I hug and cry and for a moment I remember why we got married in the first place.

We bring Valerie home on Friday; she is wrapped in a fuzzy pink blanket and is wearing tiny pink mittens and a white cap. Her lips are bow-shaped and her hands are the size of Darren's ear. She has his eyes and my button nose. The neighbors come by with casseroles and the promise of help anytime we need it. My mother descends on the house with two suitcases and stays for three weeks.

Valerie grows fast - faster than I could have imagined a baby ever would. Darren gets a promotion at work and spends more and more time at the office. One night, after weeks of being left alone until nearly nine o'clock every night, I confront him.

"Hey sweetie, I'm home." he whispers, poking his head into the nursery as I sit in the rocking chair, exhausted after another night of dealing with our daughter's colicky cries.

"Where have you been?" I ask, irritated at his fresh face, clean hair, and neatly ironed shirt. I am dressed in yesterday's sweatpants and I haven't shaved my legs in six weeks.

"Work." he says, matter-of-factly, with a tone of surprise.

"No. I mean *where have you been* asshole." I snap. "It's been six months since your daughter was born and you have barely spent six hours with her!"

"What are you talking about? I'm here right now aren't I?"

"Yeah, you get home after she falls asleep and leave before she wakes up. When you aren't working, you're finding things to do in the yard or reasons to go run errands. Where the HELL are you going; what the HELL are you doing? You are missing everything - and for what? "

"I don't understand - I...I've been working!" his eyes are open wide and he looks genuinely confused. I have to resist the urge to pull the ornately framed mirror off the wall and throw it at him. "I need to work don't I? How else are we supposed to pay for this house?" His voice is raised now and I detect a hint of anger in his words.

"I don't know what more you want from me, Tana. You won't let me come near you, you're constantly carrying the baby or holding her or changing her or feeding her. You won't let me do anything for her. So what the hell am I supposed to besides go to fucking work." He looks exasperated and tired as he shuts the nursery door. I can hear his footsteps as he walks down the stairs and goes into the kitchen; I already know he will find his dinner on the kitchen table, where I intentionally left it so it would get cold and congeal, and he will dump it into the trashcan. He will opt, instead, for a handful of chips and a soda which he will consume standing up by the kitchen counter. Then, as he has done for the past few weeks, he will go into the guest bedroom downstairs and lie down on the bed, exhausted. There he will sleep, all night long, until he awakes before sunrise to begin his daily routine again.

I put the baby back in her crib and cross the hall to our bedroom. From our large walk-in closet I remove a blue shirt and striped gold tie and set to ironing them for Darren.

Tomorrow he will find his outfit neatly laid out for him and, no matter what happens between us, he will know that I do still care about him.

## BEING THIRTEEN

### Her Daughter

Today I am thirteen years old and my mother is supposed to take me out for Delvecchio's pizza after school to celebrate. Daddy is away on business again and mom thought it would be a fun thing to have a girls-only birthday party. What I really want is a big white cake with pink icing that spells out "Happy Birthday Valerie" and my Uncle Jason to come over and show me pictures from when he and my mom were kids and used to play together underneath a huge oak tree in my grandparents' yard. But when I told Momma this, she shook her head and looked confused for a minute before mumbling something about Uncle Jason being away on business. Except that I know he doesn't go away on business because he used to be a cop and now he doesn't do anything but sit at home and smoke cigarettes. I hate how she thinks I don't know what is going on just because I'm only twelve. I mean thirteen.

Uncle Jason used to be a Delaware State police officer. He started out as a local town cop and worked his way into the state police in four years which according to Momma is really fast. She always says he was really good at all the police stuff - he was smart and a good athlete and, most importantly, was good with people and knew how to make them feel better and take care of them. I can see that because when Uncle Jason first moved to Texas, he used to come over all the time whenever I was sick and read me stories and feed me chicken soup. I have been sick a lot, so I know how important that is, but if I was a bad guy I don't know if I would care that much. But Momma says it's not just the bad guys that Uncle Jason had to work with.

He moved to Texas when I was five so I almost can't remember a time when he wasn't around, but Momma says that before that I only saw him once a year at Christmas. When he moved to Texas he worked for the next town over from our house, so then we got to see him all the time. He moved here to help my parents after they found out I had cancer.

When I was four years old I was diagnosed with leukemia. That's why I have so many friends - because for two years after that I lived mostly in a hospital just for kids and I made lots of friends who live in Texas. Some of them are far away and those are pen pals, but some of them are close enough that I can see them at pizza parties in the summer. Momma and Daddy had to take turns taking time off of work and going back and forth to the hospital and everything. Uncle Jason made it easier on them by moving to Texas and taking over some of the driving and doctor appointments and even some of the doctor bills. I know that because one time I heard Momma asking Daddy why he was so mad and he said,

"Because *Tana*, I can't *goddamn* pay for my own *goddamn* daughter's healthcare. And it's *unfuckingsfair!* It's not right that Jason is paying the bills for the doctors working on our daughter. And I can't do one *goddamn* thing about it. It should be me!" And then he threw an ashtray at the wall and I ran upstairs.

Uncle Jason came to the hospital all the time, and when I was at home, he came there too, and he brought me teddy bears - which I still have - and fed me chicken soup and read me books like "Are You There God, It's Me Margaret" and "Flubber". Sometimes he would show me cool card tricks or tell me jokes, and other times he held a bucket in front of me while I threw up so that I wouldn't have to get out of bed and run to the bathroom.

Most importantly, Uncle Jason cried in front of me. Momma and Daddy always ran away and hid before they would cry and I hated it because I was supposed to pretend that I didn't know, like I didn't have enough to be miserable about already without worrying about making them uncomfortable. But sometimes Uncle Jason would come over for no reason and sit at the foot of my bed and hold on to my foot and cry for a long time. Or he would hold me in his arms and let me cry and cry with me. It made me feel better. Like what was happening to me was okay - like he was telling me that I shouldn't be ashamed of it.

When school lets out at half past three, I walk out the heavy steel front doors and instantly see my mother's car parked out front. I can see her behind the steering wheel, talking on her cell phone as she cranes her neck and her eyes search the sea of students for my bright purple jacket that I forgot to take out of my backpack and put on before I came outside. It's too late, she sees me and starts motioning for me to come over to the car and I can see her rings and fingernails glinting in the early afternoon sunlight.

I say bye to my friends Jessy and Leah and run over to the car, prepared for the lecture I am about to get on not wearing my coat outside. She has been overprotective for as long as I can remember, but her reliance on the purple coat is so weird - like she is worried she won't recognize *me* without it. I wonder when she will let me have a real grown-up party, with girls and boys at the house together. There is a boy named Bryce that I have a crush on, and Leah told me yesterday that he likes me too. But I will never have a chance with him if Momma won't let me have friends over. She won't even let me for my birthday. I think the sight of all those kids touching her scrubbed countertops and sitting on her freshly cleaned toilet makes her panicky. You would think she was the one who had cancer.

I hop into the car and buckle my seat belt and wait for her to get off the phone. She is arguing with my dad. I can tell.

"Well, I told her that you thought it would be alright to just get a half service this time and she said that it was a mistake to do that so I went ahead and got the full service -"

"Well, I am soooo sorry that you weren't there to answer her questions-"

"I don't know how I am supposed to know that! Well you didn't tell me that part! Well it'll be fine, alright, just drop it -"

"Forget it. I said drop it. I said drop it! Alright, yeah, okay, I'll talk to you later. Um hum. Okay I'll tell her. Yeah. Okay, bye." She hangs up the phone and turns to look at me, a big plastic smile glued to her face.

"Hi Sweetie!" she says, so brightly that it's like she has been infused with a rainbow full of skittles all of a sudden. "Happy Birthday!"

"Hi Momma." I say shyly, leaning forward to accept her hug and kiss.

"Do you feel thirteen?"

"Not really."

"Really? What would make you feel thirteen?"

"Getting my ears pierced." I have wanted my ears pierced for two years. She refuses but won't tell me why. Uncle Jason says it's because she is terrified I'll get sick again. Ever since my cancer went into remission three years ago she has been super weird about everything. Pizza on my birthday is special because normally we only eat organic vegetables, free range



eggs, and soy milk. She is scared of everything. When she sees people smoking on the sidewalk, she crosses the street. Thank god they banned smoking in restaurants or we'd never go anywhere. I am the only kid in my grade who can't have hot dogs after softball practice with the boys' baseball team.

Bryce is on the baseball team, and there are plenty of other girls on the softball team who want to be his girlfriend. It makes me so mad that she thinks she knows what is best for me when she doesn't even know what it is like to be me! How can she know, she has never had cancer! She has never had to wear a wig to school and then have it blow off during gym class when it's too windy to be outside. Everyone laughed at me except Leah, who chased the wig across the football field and pulled the bits of grass off before she handed it to me. The gym teacher called my mom to tell her what happened that afternoon, in case I came home crying. Momma felt so weird about it that she made me a big spaghetti dinner (my favorite) that night and then kept hinting at how windy it was until I finally told her what happened. Then she cried and told me not to be ashamed, but the thing was that I wasn't ashamed until she told me not to be! It's like she doesn't even get it!

"Oh no, uh uh. I already answered that question Valerie. What else?" She is shaking her head dismissively as she pulls the car out onto the street and turns left down Miller Avenue towards Delvecchios.

"All I want is my ears pierced!" I raise my voice.

"Well than I guess you'll go one more year without feeling thirteen. Because it's not happening, Honey, I'm sorry but it's not. We have had this discussion."

"Uncle Jason said my cancer made you paranoid." I say quietly. It is the first time I have said it out loud, and I hear a sharp intake of breath from the drivers' side when I say it. "He couldn't take being around you anymore. He says you can't relax. I never see him anymore!"

"Uncle Jason has no right to be opening his mouth when his opinion isn't wanted or needed." she says, with finality. And the conversation is over.

We eat a pepperoni pizza with wild abandon in a back booth of the restaurant, practically mopping up the grease with our crusts. Daddy will be so jealous that he missed this rare opportunity for real food. Momma gives up trying to have a conversation until we are finished with our food. When she has finished her third piece and I am on my fourth, she wipes her mouth and leans back in her seat, slowly sipping on her water with lemon. She is watching me intently, which usually means she is about to have a serious conversation. I *sooo* hope she doesn't try to talk about sex again. The last time was so embarrassing that I felt like my face was going to catch fire. She thinks that I don't know anything about sex yet because I am only thirteen. What a riot! If she let me hang out with friends at home, she would realize that most of them already know what French-kissing and fingering means. I haven't done it, but I know what that stuff is, and I think it's gross. But she thinks she needs to tell me about what is okay and what is not okay and I am like *Geezus, Momma, you can't be serious* – Leah and Jessy's moms just gave them a book called *A Girls' Guide to Sex* and that was it. I wish she would just do that so I could look at the pictures and look up any words I don't know yet on the internet. Of course I know that if someone older touches me I should feel uncomfortable. *DUH.*

"Do you know why Uncle Jason doesn't come over as much anymore, Sweetie?" she asks.

"Sure. I'm not sick anymore." I say, shrugging my shoulders and pretending not to care. *I miss him so much.* I am relieved we are not talking about sex, so I will entertain this conversation for awhile.

"Oh Valerie. That's not it at all."

"What? It's okay. You and Daddy said that's why he moved here - to help take care of me. Now that I'm better, he can have his own life. Maybe he'll move back to Delaware and be with Gran and Pa." *Please don't move away. Please don't move away.*

"No Honeypot. He's not going to move away. Your Uncle Jason has a lot of stuff going on right now in his own life. He needs to be with himself and not worry about other people. That doesn't mean he doesn't love you, or that he doesn't worry about you. But he needs to focus on himself."

"Why?"

"Because - sometimes police officers see bad things, Honey, and he saw some bad things. And now he needs to learn to forget those things and move on with his life."

"But what about Aunt Jeannie?" I ask... Uncle Jason's wife - a sweet woman who always hovers around my uncle like he is the Greek God Zeus. "He isn't going to forget about her is he?"

"Oh no, Honey, no, of course not."

"What did he see?" I ask quietly, not sure I want to know.

My mother shakes her hand and looks down at the table, rolling up a paper napkin between her fingers anxiously, over and over again.

"I don't think you would understand it, Sweetheart." Momma says flatly.

"I want to know." I insist. "I'm thirteen now. You can tell me."

"Darling, just believe me, okay? You don't want to hear about it."

"I understand Momma. Let's just go home okay?" I am pissed at my mom who, in typical fashion, doesn't think I can handle hearing the truth. She did the same thing every time we went to the doctor and got the bad news that my leukemia hadn't been killed by the chemo. She would make the doctor tell her first and then take me out for ice cream and try to soften the blow by telling me we would just have to keep trying for a little longer. I always knew the truth before she did. I could tell, in my bones. I was the one with the disease after all. It always made me so mad that she seemed to forget that so easily whenever the bad news came.

Momma looks relieved and we get up and leave the restaurant. As we drive home, we pass Uncle Jason's house - his once well-manicured yard is now dry and brittle, overgrown in some spots and completely barren in others. The porch steps are caving in and a shutter on the second floor is loose.

"Just tell me, why doesn't he work anymore?" I ask.

"Oh well, when you experience something like what he did, the bosses don't like you to go right back to work. So they offered him a job in the administrative office of the police force and he wouldn't accept it. You know what he does now. " Momma stared straight ahead,

both of her hands on the steering wheel. For a woman who generally talks with her hands and makes a lot of eye contact when she is having a conversation, even while driving, she was being awfully strict about keeping her eyes on the road.

"He just sits there. In his chair. Smoking."

"It's understandable, Honey. He's getting help. Jeannie said he's getting help." She nods with some sense of authority and looks over at me, forcing a smile. "It's going to be alright Valerie."

"I miss him." I say, finally.

"I do too, Sweetie." She squeezes my hand and pulls the car into the driveway of our house. Daddy's car is in the drive, which means he came home early just for my birthday. I almost forget about everything I have learned and I leap out of the car and run toward the front door, where he is waiting with outstretched arms. He pulls me up into his strong arms and gives me a bear hug.

"Happy birthday Val-Bear!" he cries.

"Hi Daddy!" I shout. Momma slips past us in the entry way of the house and begins to fix Daddy's dinner - she doesn't say hello or that she has missed him. Later that night, Daddy dances me around the living room the way he used to do when I was a kid - me standing on his feet and him moving in rhythm with the music. He brings out a huge white sheet cake with pink icing that spells out "Happy Birthday Valerie" and the number "13" below it. I blow out the candles and wish for my family to be the way it used to be - when Uncle Jason came over all the time and Momma and Daddy held hands.

## GOODBYE, DUST

### Her Husband's Girlfriend

I can hear him humming a tune, one that is unfamiliar to me, but I hum along with him anyway. Pushing back the realization that the afternoon is coming to an end, I roll over and watch the ceiling, envying it for all its unchanging glory. The humming noise of the bathroom fan ends and I snap back to reality - aware enough of the rhythm of the apartment to know that next will come the soft click of the door's lock (why he locked the door, I'll never know) and then the gentle swooshing sound of the carpet as the flimsy wooden door scrapes over it. He pads over to me in his bare feet with a damp towel wrapped around his waist and stands there smiling, a toothbrush hanging languidly out of the side of his mouth. He watches me until I become uncomfortable - and then resumes his brushing - pacing back and forth around the room, seemingly nervous but actually bored.

I have come to know Darren well enough to know that his nervous behavior is a signal of unrest; that he is the type of man that will never be happy for more than a few months at a time. After only twelve short months, our affair has lost its luster for him, the bright shiny glow of excitement has become dull with the dust of familiarity. It is why he cannot remain faithful to his wife, to his daughter - it is how I know that he and I are ending our time together. His daughter turns thirteen tomorrow and he is already planning his trip back to Texas to be with her. And his wife.

Darren and I met a year ago. He was in Nashville for a conference, staying at the Opryland Hotel. I was there for the same conference, and my room was just down the hall from his. He didn't waste any time in saying hello, in helping me carry my bags up to my room. He

was tall and lean, he obviously worked out. He had salt and pepper hair and wore a neatly ironed suit and tie. His smile was contagious and his laugh was addicting. He asked me to join him for before-dinner drinks that evening. I accepted, feeling a tinge of guilt because I couldn't pretend that I hadn't noticed the sliver of white gold around his left ring finger. The same sliver of gold that was conspicuously absent later that evening when I met him in the hotel's Irish bar. Before-dinner drinks became dinner, which became after-dinner drinks. He was charming and handsome, I was lonely.

We went back to his room after dinner, drunk and giddy with the promise of new experiences. I pretended not to notice that I could hear his muffled telephone conversation behind the bathroom door when he said he needed to "just quickly freshen up". The phone conversation took too long. His raised voice told me that there were already problems in his marriage. I should have left the first time I noticed it. But I didn't. He was sexy and alluring and funny.

It was the first of many times Darren and I found reasons to meet - after that we would arrange to go to the same conferences or set up fake meetings in far-away places so that we could play-act at being a real couple without the danger of being caught by either of our spouses.

"Leslie. I need to see you." he would whisper when he called me late at night on my cell phone.

"When?" I would answer.

"I'll be in Denver on the week of the 13th. The Marriott."

"Okay. Darren. I can't wait."

"Me too." and then he would hang up.

Today we are in Nevada, at the apartment of one of my college girlfriends who spends most of her time in Canada with her boyfriend. She gave me a key many years ago, when she first moved to the city and was nervous about being murdered and left alone to rot. She told me that if I didn't hear from her every other day I should fly out and check on her. She was afraid her cat would eat her if someone didn't find her early. I secretly thought she was watching too many Stephen King movies but accepted the key and promised I wouldn't let her down. Once she met Jean and started flying back and forth from Canada every other week, she told me that I was free to show up in Nevada whenever I wanted to use her place for free. The apartment is ten minutes from the Las Vegas Strip and has a hell of a view of the bright lights of Sin City. It is the perfect place to spend the night with my married boyfriend.

I got there first - on Tuesday night - and cleaned the place up. Shannon is a slob and leaves her apartment a mess every time she leaves it. She doesn't even take the garbage out first. I cleaned the kitchen and bathrooms and changed the sheets in the bedroom, shuddering to think what happened on these dirty sheets before she left. She's a great person, but faithful she is not. I took a hot shower and got ready slowly, putting lotion all over my body and picking out the sexiest outfit to wear when I met him at the Palm bar later that night.

When I got there, he was already waiting for me. His flight was early and he was waiting anxiously, gulping a beer and inhaling nachos faster than I could count them coming off the plate. I wore a tight blue dress and a silver necklace with intertwined hearts. My dark hair



was swept up into a deliberately messy ponytail bun. Black chandelier earrings hung from my earlobes. I selected the four inch black stilettos that hurt my feet but that make Darren want to fuck me right there on the dance floor. When I walked in, his appraising glance betrayed what he feels - that he hasn't had sex since the last time we saw each other.

"Hey Babe" he murmured, burying his head into my hair and breathing in deeply, discreetly grabbing my ass as I kissed him.

"Hi! I've missed you! It's been two months!" I said, instantly regretting my tone. Like a needy girlfriend. Not at all like a cool mistress. He looked a little tired, but I tried not to worry about it too much - as long as he is still turned on by me than we don't have a problem.

"I know. Sorry, it's been so hard to get away lately." He offered no further explanation and I knew better than to ask.

"Why?" I asked anyway.

"Oh, you know Les... just the usual stuff. Valerie's been acting a little funny recently - I'm a little worried about her." he shrugged and took a long swig of beer. That is his signal. I am not to ask any more. His family is private. I have no place there. We have been doing this for a year - I know the rules.

"Funny how?" I pressed, and ordered a raspberry martini from the bartender.

"Leslie." his voice was firm.

"Sorry. I just - well, I feel like I know her sometimes. I know about her illness and her softball games. I want her to be okay."

"She'll be fine." and he dismissed the subject, and somehow without realizing it, I solved my worst problem of the night. He was no longer interested in worrying about his family. He was positively one hundred percent disinterested in discussing his family. We could move on and be ourselves now. Our own twisted version of a couple.

The evening stretched on in a whirlwind of drinks and dancing and laughter. Darren was his usual charming self. He ordered my drinks and paid for them in cash; he took my hand and twirled me out onto the dance floor. When the karaoke floor opened up, Darren jumped onstage and sang U2's "Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For". It was another in a long line of perfect Darren dates. As we began to wind down and the bar was taken over by 22-year-old kids with tattoos and wild hair, we took each other's hands and ran breathlessly out of the club into the fresh night air, where a misty rain had begun to fall. Darren lit a cigarette and, though I can't stand the smell of smoke, I said nothing. His wife is the queen of crushing vices and with her, he has none left. She has eliminated all chances at fun in their household. When he is with me, he can do whatever he wants.

We snagged a cab and made out in the backseat on the way back to Shannon's apartment, our hands sliding in and out of each other's clothing as the car glided fast along the slick city streets. When we got to the apartment, I let us in the door and he pushed me onto the bed with a force I did not recognize. His teeth scraped at my skin as he pulled my dress down without bothering to undo the zipper first.

"Darren, ow, you're hurting me" I began, but he put his hand over my mouth and pushed me back against the bed, so that I was lying flat. He pulled my dress the rest of the way off. He left the stilettos on. We had frantic sex on the bed, with the lights on and the curtains open. I

protested once about the curtains and he quieted me in the same way, and then left his hand over my mouth as he pushed into me, almost angrily. When he finished, I was surprised, out of breath... taken aback. I lay on the bed for a long time, next to him, quietly going over in my head what just happened. It wasn't rape. But it wasn't making love either.

"Darren.... what got into you?" I asked finally.

"What do you mean?" he mumbled, rolling over lazily so that he was facing me on the bed. The light blue sheets were pulled up to his chin and he looked child-like in the soft glow of the street lamps outside.

"That was... kind of rough. Different." I said.

"Oh... I thought you might... I thought you might like it. They say girls like that sometimes. Didn't you?" he asked. His tone was matter-of-fact, not apologetic the way it should have been.

"Not really." I said quietly, aware of my mistake before I could stop myself. He would see this as a sign of protest from me. I would no longer be the cool mistress with the 'do-anything' attitude.

"Oh. Well. I'm sorry Sweetie." He stroked my chin with the back of his fingers and smiled gently at me. "I won't do it again, okay?"

"Okay." I said.

"Can we go to sleep now?"

"Okay."

He spooned me in the bed and fell asleep quickly, snoring into the back of my neck.

The next morning, he is in the bathroom humming the tune I cannot recognize and I am waiting for him to end the relationship. He finishes brushing his teeth and stands in the doorway of the bedroom staring at me.

"What?" I ask shyly.

"You are so so beautiful." he murmurs. I brace myself for the inevitable.

"Thank you."

"You know you deserve better than me."

"Is that a statement or a question?"

"It's both."

"Then my answer is no." I shake my head defiantly, hoping that my cheeks are flushing and that I am becoming beautifully angry as opposed to sloppily, grossly upset.

"Leslie. You do."

"Probably." I admit. He is right. I deserve ten times better than him. So do his wife and daughter.

"I can't do this anymore."

"Why?"

"It's too much. My daughter. She needs me."

"She's healthy though. You said it yourself."

"Health doesn't equal love. She needs her dad. I can't keep running away like this. If I keep it up my wife will divorce me. I know she knows what's going on. I can't keep this up." his eyes look scared, something I have never seen in him.

I am angry but not surprised.

"Alright Darren." I look away from him and hope he will leave.

"Leslie."

"Just go dammit."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too." And I listen as I hear his duffel bag zip and the front door click. I knew it was going to happen. I heard him buy his plane ticket this morning over the phone. Only this time he's actually going home.

I wait for Darren for six months, hoping he can't find reconciliation with his wife. I call his cell phone a couple of times. I send him a letter to his work address. I email his work email a few times. All go unanswered. Eventually, I call Darren's office, which I am never supposed to do unless it is an absolute emergency, like that I am lying on the side of the road dying and there is literally no one else left to call because all of my friends and family have been murdered. It is one year to the day that Darren left me alone in Shannon's apartment, one year since I spent the entire day drinking tequila mixed with orange juice and admonishing myself for ever getting involved with a married man.

His secretary picks up.

"TTG Company, Darren Worl's office."

"Oh hello ma'am, may I please speak with Dar - I mean, Mr. Worl, please?"

"May I tell him who is calling?" Her voice is stern but friendly. She is efficient.

"This is Mrs. Leslie Knox."

"Oh. Ms. Knox." She emphasizes the Ms. "I'm sorry but Mr. Worl is not in at the moment."

"Oh, but ... I'm sorry I thought he was in."

"No." I detect a hint of disdain.

"May I ask when he might be back?"

"*Ms.* Knox," there's the emphasis on the Ms. again. "Mr. Worl has gone out to lunch with his *wife* and *child*. And when he returns he has meetings all afternoon. And tomorrow, he is leaving to go on a *family* vacation. I suggest you stop calling." Her voice says it all. She knows exactly who I am. And she loves Darren's wife.

"Excuse me, miss, but -" I begin, but she cuts me off.

"My name is Mrs. Gentry. And I am Mr. Worl's executive assistant. Should you have any questions concerning Mr. Worl, I would be happy to answer them. But you, Ms. Knox, will not ever be put through to Mr. Worl. His wife and child are far too important to him to allow such an indiscretion to occur twice. I assure you." Her voice is clipped and filled with disdain.

I hang up the phone astonished. His wife has done the unthinkable – she has won her husband back from the Anything Goes Mistress. The rules have changed and I don't know how to play this game. But for a fleeting moment, I feel relief. I am released.

## BACK TO THE BEGINNING

### Her Brother

He was small but fearless - a dangerous combination in a boy of only seven. When he pulled the gun out of his grandfather's gun closet, he didn't mean to pull the trigger, he was only trying to scare his little sister. When he pointed the barrel of the shotgun at her, he meant only to scare her not to hurt her. His finger twitched. He couldn't stop it. He hadn't meant to do it. These were the excuses he told his parents late that night, after they had put the little girl to bed in her pale pink room and tucked her tight into her purple bed sheets. When they sat him down on the rough tweed sofa and asked him, frantically, over and over why he had done it. The only words he could make leave his mouth were the ones that absolved him of guilt.

"I didn't mean to."

"My finger moved, I didn't move it."

"I wasn't aiming at her; the gun twitched when it fired."

"I was only playing around, I didn't know it was loaded."

The parents questioned him for what felt like hours and then sent him to his room, his belly empty because he hadn't eaten much of the supper his grandmother had prepared for Christmas dinner. He never liked her chicken and dumplings - made of something resembling a wide, flat spaghetti noodle. He preferred his mother's soft and doughy biscuit-like dumplings. He had picked at the dinner and then hurried off to the grandparents'



bedroom to play with his little sister who bothered him but was his only companion at the family reunions.

When he awoke the next morning, they pretended that nothing had happened at all. His sister was sitting at the kitchen table spooning Cheerios into her mouth as if she had not almost been killed the night before. His mother was quietly flipping through the Sunday coupon ads and his father was idly flipping channels on the tiny TV they were allowed to keep in the kitchen for quiet weekend breakfasts.

"Good morning" he whispered, unable to believe the serenity before him. The family raised their eyes and saw him and each of them acknowledged him in some way. His mother stood and began preparing a bowl of cold cereal and milk. His sister looked up from her food and nodded slightly - never a big talker to begin with. He noticed a red mark on her otherwise perfectly smooth and white cheek, just beside her tiny ear, which had been pierced earlier that summer, and winced. He had caused that. His father grunted without looking over from the morning talk show. The breakfast was really no different from any other he had experienced in his short life, and if not for the red mark on his sister's cheek, he might wonder if the events of the night before had all been a dream.

After breakfast, he went outside to play and wandered down to the pond behind their house - Old Mill Pond he had once heard it called. There he played with the crickets and caterpillars that bounced and crawled along the water's edge. He called to a neighbor's dog - Champ - and allowed the dog to nestle his wet nose deep within the crevice of his neck where sweat and dirt created a haven for an animal's senses. His sister joined him after an hour or so. She had a small green tennis ball with her and she threw it at him while he wasn't looking and hit

him in the back. The ball bounced on the ground once and then stopped in the grass. Grass doesn't do much for a bouncing ball. "Wanna play?" she asked. Her question sounded more like a statement. He wasn't sure that he was allowed to say no, although he wanted to.

"Alright"

He turned and threw the ball back at her. She looked angry. She caught it and threw it back, harder than before. He caught it and tossed it to her lightly, hoping to make a point. When she threw again, it was harder than the last.

"Stop." he said.

"Why?"

"Because you're throwing too hard. You'll hurt me if you aim wrong."

The irony of the words weren't lost on him, even as he said them. She looked disgusted and walked away, kicking divots of grass up as she walked.

"Tana..." the apology died in his mouth.

Ten years later - senior prom. He asked Jennyth Lufkin, the prettiest girl in his homeroom and she said yes. He was as excited as he was surprised. She wore a sea foam green dress. He picked her up at her parents' house and gave her a white gardenia corsage to wear on her wrist, so that the pin wouldn't stick through her dress and leave a hole. They took pictures at her parents' house and then returned to his mom and dad's house to get pictures taken there. His mom cried as they snapped picture after endless picture.

"Jennyth, dear, do you mind just leaning in a little closer? Just a little to the left sweetie.

Jason smile bigger honey, you look a nervous wreck."

"Moom.. They'll take pictures at the dance."

"Oh hush. Tana! Get down here and see your brother off to the dance!" his mother called up the stairs of the house.

Tana arrived at the top of the stairs. At 15, Tana could have been prettier than most of the girls in school. let alone her grade. She was petite and hadn't developed much of her figure yet. She could still wear kids' clothes and size five and a half shoes. She had thick eyelashes and skinny thighs. But Mom didn't let her look the way she wanted to look. Instead of letting her long hair flow and emphasizing her eyelashes, Tana had to wear her hair in a braid and was forbidden to wear makeup. She never wore shorts because she wasn't allowed to shave yet. Mom was too overprotective. He felt Jennyth tense up when Tana arrived at the top of the stairs. She smirked a little and squeezed his arm. Most of the kids at school made fun of Tana pretty regularly already - he was nervous that now they would start making fun of him too. He looked at the floor, wishing time would move faster so that they could get out of there and he could hurry up and get his date drunk so that she would forget about the whole mess.

"Let's take a picture, the three of you!" his mom called out excitedly. His dad stood off to the side, smiling proudly. He had given Jason a condom earlier and told him to have fun but be careful. Jason had chuckled as he slipped it into his pocket, alongside the one that was already there. He had lost his virginity three years ago but could never tell his dad that.

When they were finally permitted to leave the house, he ushered his date out of the door as

quickly as he could and opened the passenger side door of the Chevrolet for her. When he was settled into the driver's side next to her, she exploded into a rush of giggles, a sound that annoyed him because he knew what she was laughing about.

"*Oh my god*, like, *what* was your sister *wearing*?!" she cried out hysterically. He didn't answer, choosing instead to turn the key in the ignition and push the "On" button on the radio.

"I mean, Jason, did you *see* her?" she cried.

"Yeah. It was just her pajamas."

"It's like seven at night, Jason. Doesn't she have a life?"

He turned the volume up on the radio and tried to tune his date's voice out. He reached into the middle console of the vehicle and pulled out a small bottle of rum. "Here. Want some?"

"Mmmmm. Thanks!" she smiled. If there was one thing he knew about Jennyth, it was that there was nothing like a half a bottle of rum to shut her mouth and open her legs. Every guy at Caulfield Senior High School knew it.

By the time they got to the dance, she was half lit and he was on his way. They danced and ate until around ten and then went out to the parking lot where other couples were hiding behind their cars making out. There, he let her into the backseat of the car and climbed in on top of her, pushing her dress up as he went. As he expected, she didn't object, and it wasn't long before he was pumping inside of her, steaming up the windows of the car and grunting with pleasure. She wasn't a virgin but she was tight and enthusiastic. Every once in awhile she would bite into the flesh on his neck lightly and pull his hair. He liked the feeling of pain during sex and moaned when she did it. There was no time to get the condom out of his

wallet before he came, and instead he shot his fluid inside of her, crying out as he did so. At first she was into it, but when she realized what he had done, she was pissed.

"Jason you asshole! What the hell?!" she pushed him off of her body with force and sat up, realizing too late that his fluid would leak out and ruin the delicate fabric of her dress.

Frantically, she searched for her panties and used them to minimize the damage as much as she could. "What the HELL?!" she repeated, glaring at him.

"I'm sorry, I... I just wasn't ready." he stammered.

"You couldn't have pulled out, you... you... you dick!?"

"I wasn't thinking, Jennyth. I'm sorry."

"You prick. Just forget it. Just take me home Jason."

Sullen, he climbed into the driver's seat and drove Jennyth back to the large colonial home she lived in with her lawyer father and dentist mother. When she got out of the car, she leaned over the open window and ripped the gardenia corsage off of her wrist. "Thanks for a great night Jason. Don't you ever fucking speak to me again, do you understand me?" she threw the flower at him and stalked up the wide white steps to the double doors of the house, where her parents were standing waiting to hear how her night had been. He only hoped that they wouldn't notice the light stain on the seat of her dress and how she smelled ever so slightly of metal and salt.

Ten years later - Jason was living in Texas with his fiancé Jeannie, just down the road from his sister Tana, who had turned into quite the young lady and had married a fine man that Jason thought highly of. He hadn't heard from Jennyth since that last year in high school.

Soon after the prom, her father was transferred to Oklahoma and before anyone knew it, the big colonial house was empty and for sale. Even the girls that Jason would have considered Jennyth's close friends didn't hear from her again. After three years, he gave up asking around about her whenever he saw someone from high school and figured she had just disappeared.

When he first moved, Tana was deliriously happy. She thought he had done it for her.

"Oh Jason, I can't tell you how much this means to us." she had gushed when he moved into the small townhouse he was renting while he looked for a home to buy. "With Valerie being sick and everything, well, I just can't express our appreciation. She's going to be so excited."

Valerie - his niece. The one with leukemia. The only one he had. After that, he could not let it be known that he moved to Texas because he was drowning in Delaware, because the people there were suffocating him and because Jeannie had recently found out about an affair with a co-worker at the force. The only thing he could do was move away, and the only place he knew of that had any connection to him was Texas. So he went there, as if he was pointed by a lighthouse beacon. The realization that Valerie was dying didn't come to him until he got there. Sure he had known that she was sick - Tana had called him in hysterics one day, weeping about the loss of her little girl's innocence.

"She'll never be able to play field hockey with the other girls!" she had wailed over the phone. He had been uncomfortable with her emotion and had envisioned Valerie with the flu, not the way he saw her when he arrived in Texas and visited her in the hospital, where she was recovering from a particularly wicked round of chemo. Her hair was nearly gone, save for a few clumps on the top and sides of her head. She had maybe fifty strands of hair total.

Her eyes were ringed with dark blue circles, so dark they were almost black. The whites of her eyes were gray, as were her fingernails. Her lips were a pale pink, almost devoid of color. Her collarbone was jutting out in an alarmingly angular fashion and the veins in her neck were poking out so clearly that he imagined a heroin addict sneaking in during the night and pulling them from her body in long strands. Every few moments she leaned over the side of the bed and vomited into a silver basin in the shape of a kidney bean. When she threw up, her entire body surged forward and her lips shook with the force of the sickness. An orderly appeared after every fourth or fifth upheaval and rinsed the basin. Jason sat by Valerie's bed and wiped her clammy forehead with a damp washcloth. He rubbed her lips with ice cubes, allowing her to suckle the bits of water that melting upon connecting with her flushed skin. After the first time he visited her, Jason swore he would do everything he could to make her short life happy.

Although the doctors gave her only a few more years, Valerie fought the disease with fervor and went into remission when she was nine years old. He and Jeannie got married right around the same time and the celebration seemed like it would never end. There were too many things going right in life. The newlyweds began working on conceiving a child, and succeeded. After six weeks, the fetus aborted and Jeannie woke up in the middle of the night with cramps worse than she had ever felt before and blood trickling between her thighs. She sat on the toilet for two hours as he brought her damp washcloths to wipe away her tears.

"Jeannie, oh Jeannie, tell me what I can do." he begged her as she doubled over the toilet in pain, sobbing both from the cramps and the disappointment.

"Just go away Jason, please. " she whispered. He did as he was told, leaving the house that morning at six to get breakfast and be alone with his grief. When he came back at five that night she was still in the bathroom sobbing. When he gently pushed the door open, he found her lying on her side in the fetal position, shaking. The tiled floor beneath her was wet with tears.

"Oh baby...." he breathed. He scooped her up and gently lowered her into the tub. He ran warm water over her body and between her legs, erasing the reminder of what had happened there that day. He kissed her eyelids as he washed her face and hair. When he told her to stand so he could dry her off, she did so reluctantly. Her eyes stared lifelessly ahead as he rubbed a plush towel along her body and through her hair. She slept for two days after that first miscarriage.

The second time, he was more prepared and she was less. It was six months later and she came barreling out of the bathroom waving a pregnancy test in her hand excitedly and shouting,

"Jason! Jason! Look!!" They had Tana, Darren and Valerie over for a barbeque and she announced the early pregnancy to everyone this time with wild abandon. The first time, only they had known.

"Sweetie. Are you sure you want everyone to know?" he murmured as he hugged her and lowered her arm, which was still waving around in the air with the test as if it was an entity all its own.

"Of course! Why not!" The look in her eyes warned Jason not to argue. Making it real would make it last. He nodded lightly and let her have her fun, watching from the sidelines



as Tana rubbed Jeannie's belly and exclaimed about how much she hoped it would be a girl, ticking items off on her fingers that she could loan the new parents. Three weeks later, Jeannie called Jason at work, while he was on patrol.

"Come home." she demanded, sounding emotionless. He turned the patrol car around and looked at his partner Dale, apologetically.

"Sorry man. It'll just be a minute." he said. When they pulled up to the house, Dale stayed in the car and waited, assuming it would be something quick, like a light bulb that had burned out and needed changing. Dale was glad he had no wife, though his three year old daughter Mya certainly took enough of his time. After about thirty minutes of waiting, Dale got up and went in the house, cautiously opening the door and calling inside.

"Yo, dude! We gotta go!"

Jason appeared in the entryway, his hands filled with rags that were soaked in a red liquid. Dale didn't know about the first miscarriage, didn't even know about the latest pregnancy yet. "What the hell is that?" From a room behind them, Dale heard the unmistakable cries of a woman experiencing labor pains. "What's going on?" he asked, pushing past Jason, who looked confused and disoriented. When Dale got to the back of the house, he found Jeannie in the downstairs claw footed bathtub, surrounded in a pool of her own blood and crying out in pain. "Holy shit.." he breathed, and then ran for the telephone.

The second miscarriage did Jeannie in. The doctors said she wouldn't be able to have more babies anyway, and that to try would be irresponsible. She could die the next time, Dr. Warbus told them. She almost didn't survive the last one.

Jason could hardly stand to be around Tana and her family after that. Since moving to Texas he had learned a lot of things - things he never wanted to know about his sister's marriage and home life. Her husband was a cheater, plain and simple. Most likely a sex addict, he had a girlfriend among numerous other conquests that lasted only a night or two. Jason followed him some nights when his shift was quiet. Their town wasn't his jurisdiction, but he found excuses to venture the thirty minutes west and sit outside of the library, waiting for Darren to leave his girlfriend and drive down to the seedier part of town, where girls could be bought for little more than a couple of shots and chaser beers. The thought of Darren being able to produce and raise a child made Jason's stomach turn. When Tana invited them over, Jason and Jeannie always found an excuse not to come over. For a few years, they would go only to Valerie's birthday parties. Then they stopped going anywhere at all.

It was May when it happened. Jason was working his usual late-night shift with Dale and they were cruising through the parking lots of some of the bigger stores in town, trying to catch would-be thieves at work by the windows and doors of the big box buildings. As they drove, they made idle chatter, as they usually did. Dale talked about his six-year-old Mya and her adventures in first grade. Jason talked about Jeannie's recent promotion at work and their upcoming vacation to Cabo San Lucas in July. Dale knew better than to ask after Tana and Valerie. Jason had changed over the years - had gotten angry and bitter. The mere mention of his sister's family could send him into a tirade about the benefits of castration and how cheaters should be locked up and forbidden to procreate. They came upon a guy who looked suspicious. He was stumbling down the side of the street and seemed to be mumbling to himself.

"Do you think we should pull over and see what's going on?" Dale asked as they slowed to a near stop just behind the old man, who seemed not to notice.

"Nah... let him walk it off." Jason decided after a minute. They sped up in the patrol car and continued to drive around town looking for criminals in back alleys and drunk drivers. About an hour later, they received a call over the radio that assistance was needed at the Wal-Mart on the east side of town. It was one of the bigger stores in town and seemed always to be filled with low-lives every time Dale and Jason had to go in there. They turned the car down Monroe Street and started east toward the store, instinctively adjusting their radios and weapons as they went. Before they got out of the car, Jason did what he usually did - he looked at Dale and said, "Alright dude. See you in a minute." It was their customary way of dealing with the danger of their jobs. "See you soon." Dale replied, and they put their hats on and headed into the store.

The problem was a man who was walking around the store carrying a gun. He didn't seem drunk or even disoriented. Jason noticed that the man seemed to be perfectly together in every way except that he had a gun. They tracked him for a few minutes through the arts and crafts aisle, then confronted him, one officer on either side of the gray-haired man.

"Excuse me, sir, can I ask you why you're carrying a gun through a public store?" Jason asked, trying to be as professional as possible. It did no good to start off accusatory right away.

"Huh? What's that son?" The old man asked.

"Your gun. Why do you have a gun?"

"Oh this. Well for protection." The man answered, seeming confused.

"Do you know it's illegal to carry a weapon around like that, sir?" Dale interjected.

"No. I thought I could if I had a permit." The man reached into his leather jacket and extracted a gun permit and concealed handgun license. "Is that not right?" His confusion seemed genuine. Jason made eye contact with Dale and had a silent conversation with him. There were better things they could be doing than dealing with this old coot. Tell him he has to go put the gun away and let's get out of here and find some real crime. Dale nodded imperceptibly.

"Sir, we'll need you to take the gun outside to your car or leave the premises and take it back to your home. Okay? You can't carry it around like this, even if it's not loaded." Jason patted the man on the shoulder and began to lead him to the exit doors.

Dale followed close behind, smiling at a pretty lady as they passed the jewelry aisle. She had very blonde hair and big earrings. He wondered if he could sneak back in before Jason was ready to leave and get her phone number. But he knew it was illegal to conduct such personal business on the job, so he just nodded and kept walking.

The next day, Jason waited for almost an hour at the local diner, The Georgia House, for Dale to show up for their usual lunch date. It was a custom for them and he was almost never late. Jason was worried something had happened to Mya. As many times as Jason had called Dale's cell phone and house phone, no one was answering. After forty five minutes of waiting, Jason put down his napkin and headed for the door, stopping to tip his waitress before leaving. As he drove to Dale's house, he called Jeannie.

"Jeannie, have you heard from Dale at all this morning?" he asked when she answered, sounding like she just woke up.

"No, Sweetie. I thought he was with you."

"Shit." he said, a cold feeling running down his spine.

When he got to Dale's small townhouse, his heart stopped. The front door was thrown open. Not in a friendly 'come on in' way, but in a violent and angry way. When he walked into the house, he didn't have to go far before he found what he was looking for. Falling to his knees, he gasped as he surveyed the damage. Floor and table lamps were lying on their sides. Couch cushions were thrown about the room. The television had a gaping black hole in the middle where a few flowers from a vase stuck out at odd angles. Dale lay on the floor, his body crossing the threshold from the kitchen to the dining room and leaving a bloody trail where he must have tried to drag himself toward the living room. Jason followed the direction of Dale's body and looked into the living room, where Mya lay peacefully on her stomach in the middle of the living room, her body thrown over an ottoman like a rag doll. Jason could hear the ragged breathing of a person who was being choked by their own blood.

"Dale!" he ran to him, just realizing that his friend was alive. "I'll help you. Hang in there buddy. I'm here."

"Mya." Dale whispered, droplets of blood forming bubbles on his lips as he spoke.

Jason didn't have the heart to tell Dale that he could tell from her body that Mya hadn't made it. Blunt force trauma to the back of her head was visual even from where he had stood several feet away. "Just stay alive buddy. I need you to stay alive."

After the funeral, Dale moved to Miami and never called Jason again. He blamed Jason for letting the old man in the Wal-Mart go. Later, that old man would come to Dale's door and knock and, upon being let inside, he would knock Dale unconscious with a baseball bat and drag the sleeping girl from her room. Dale couldn't bear to be in the same state with his old partner; couldn't drive down his street without breaking down into a fit of angry tears.

Jason and Jeannie stopped talking. Jason stopped working. Stopped eating. Stopped coping. Tana showed up on his doorstep every few days, and Jeannie would quietly let her inside, staring down at the floor as she accepted whatever casserole or dessert Tana had brought with her that time.

"It's really very kind of you Tana, but.... he's not eating or anything." Jeannie said, brushing strands of greasy hair out of her eyes and forcing herself to meet her sister-in-law's urgent gaze.

"It's not just for him, Jeannie. You're not eating either. I can tell."

"There's just not that much that's appetizing right now. You understand." Jeannie whispered.

"No I don't. One of you has to keep it together." Tana demanded, angry with her sister-in-law for allowing her brother to self-destruct.

"Why." Jeannie said, her voice monotone, her expression dead.

Tana didn't know how to convince her that life would get better. That the worst times had to be past. That maybe something good would happen for them, finally.

So she left, and she stopped bringing the casseroles and desserts. Although she thought about her brother often, she didn't allow herself the pain of rejection from him again, and often reflected on the irony that his first brush with his future career had amounted to the attempted murder of his own sister. If this was God's punishment, she was convinced that he had had enough. They all had.