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THE MEN BEHIND: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

Jennifer Lynne Parkes

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Jennifer Lynne Parkes. THE MEN BEHIND: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS. (Under the direction of Mary Carroll-Hackett) Department of English and Modern Languages, June 2010.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the impact different people, specifically men, life situations and choices have had on developing a feminine, or not so feminine, outlook on the woman I have become. In order to analyze myself, it became necessary to recall some of the major incidences that have helped to define me; this analysis then created a need to embrace honest truth. I say honest truth because I had developed a version of truth that allowed me to be comfortable and accepting of myself, but honest truth required me to dig deeper than the glossy version of me that I presented to the world. Many of the essays in this collection directly and indirectly point to my father as a key character. I struggled with capturing an accurate version of him without making excuses or allowances for him. By focusing on both his attributes as well as his flaws, I was able to assess the powerful influence he had on my life outlook, some of the standards I still hold dear, in addition to the ones I now reject. I think the contrast between the lessons my father taught me and the choices he made in his own life represent the struggle many women have between admiring, loving, hating, disapproving of and accepting the men in their lives. In other essays, I examined how the complications of my father-daughter relationship have spilled over into my personal relationships or lack thereof. I looked to two main authors, Mary Karr and Nuala O'Faolain, to develop my craft because my struggle with capturing scene verses summary proved the most arduous task I encountered. My writing process became a process of blurting out the basic storyline on to paper-- the rehearsed, safe, glossy version, followed then by a painful, detail-recalling search for how the individuals – my

family, friends, and co-workers – interacted with me and impacted me in order to make my history. My essays are about a mid-life look at the woman I am, in order to be able to work toward becoming a more complete woman -- one who is able to accept love. The questions I asked myself are universal, so I hope these essays will serve as a jumping off point for readers to question their own lives and embrace the truth of their histories.

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by

Jennifer Lynne Parkes

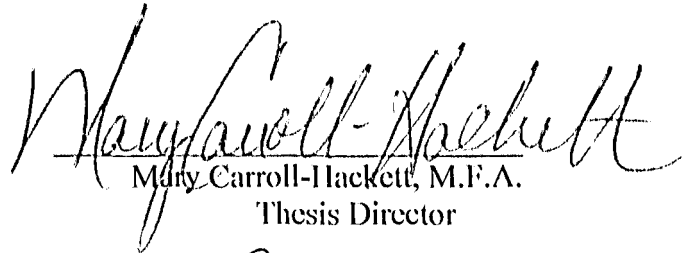
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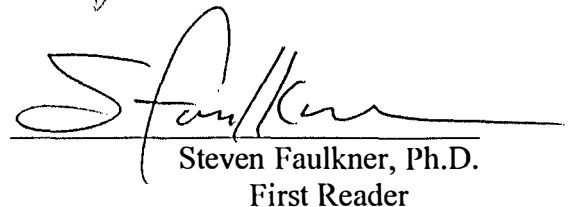
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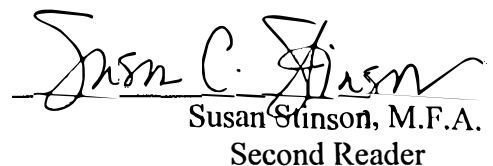
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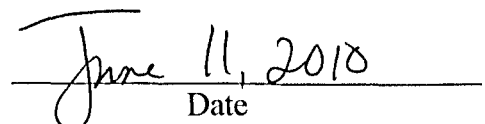
Department of English and Modern Languages

June 2010


Mary Carroll-Hackett, M.F.A.
Thesis Director


Steven Faulkner, Ph.D.
First Reader


Susan Stinson, M.F.A.
Second Reader


Date

THE MEN BEHIND: A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS

BY

JENNIFER LYNNE PARKES

Longwood University

June 2010

Dedication

To my parents, Alvin Earl Parkes and Eleanor Roth Parkes, who always cheered on my interest in writing. Your love has supported me; your drive has educated me; your honesty has encouraged me.

Dad, as you once asked, "So, it's all my fault?"

"Yep."

Mom, I hope to one day radiate your class.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Steve Faulkner and Susan “Scout” Stinson for helping to guide me in my whirlwind dash through the writing program. Their honesty and insight into the world of writing and the grit it takes to become a writer who has something to say are a treasure. Thank you for pushing me to learn. Writers will tell you that workshops are where all of the real work happens; therefore, I would be remiss if I did not thank my peers – Alex, Austin, Lia, Alicia, and Melissa - for their feedback and friendships. Most importantly, I need to thank Mary Carroll-Hackett, my thesis director and friend, for seeing the writer in me before I even knew her. She is a kindred spirit and I am blessed to have found her. Mary knows the struggles we both encountered since the summer of 2008, and I thank her for her understanding. Without her insight, I would not see as clearly.

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Visiting Earl

Meet Earl, sixty-two, recently convicted of a felony because he is incapable of asking for help or admitting to weaknesses, so he decided to self-medicate while working in the operating room. Because he is well-respected for his professional excellence, his compassion, his competence as a nurse anesthetist, he felt he could handle a little Fentanyl narcotic to take the edge off his chronic hip and shoulder pain. He is physically fit for his age, balding, and handsome with his green-gray eyes and quick smile. He is handy, intelligent, and vengeful of anyone who lacks the ability to match his high standards. The joke for years has been that he is the only medical professional for a hundred miles with grease-ridden skin, blackened nails from being hit with a hammer, and calluses on his palms. His hands are the hands of a mechanic, not a caregiver. But since he is proud to be a coalminer's son from Pennsylvania, he presents the markings as homage to his upbringing.

Almost a year ago Earl's boss and Pulaski Hospital's pharmacist confronted him with their findings. They had unlocked his anesthesia cart on his day off and tested the medication in the vials he left in the drawer. The vials marked Fentanyl were actually saline, so after a visit to the federal court in Roanoke, Virginia and his sentencing, Earl's main preoccupation is hoping he will receive a call from his parole officer telling him he doesn't have to report to the Federal Institute of Corrections in Beaver, West Virginia, next Thursday afternoon and that his six-month sentence was all a mistake. Even though he is a pessimist, which he claims as realism because *if you see things for what they are and expect a little worse you will never be disappointed*, he is now a born again optimist.

Earl's family, especially his wife Ellie, re-learned the lesson to not attempt to pacify him with positive sentiment. Any kind words or comments about his impending time away, he meets with a suck of his teeth and a shut-the-fuck-up-you-don't-know-anything stare. Earl doesn't like to be out of control. He is a man of action, one who doesn't back down to anyone and can manipulate – no impose – his will on most people. So, he waits for the judicial system to recognize its error. Realize who they are dealing with.

But Earl isn't in control; he is trapped. When he was a child living in the mountains of Pennsylvania, he hunted to help feed his family of seven since his father was always on the road driving trucks. He didn't get to go to veterinarian school because the family didn't have money. Instead he attended nursing school in Philadelphia since the state was paying for people to become nurses. When the Army tried to draft him to fight in Vietnam, he joined the Air Force and served for four years. But the prison system doesn't care that he served his country or about the sacrifices he made for his family or that he compromised his dreams in order to get an education. Earl dealt with being called a homosexual just because he became a male nurse even though he hated the label. In the end, the Air Force led to his anesthesia training, and Earl graduated at the head of his class. For thirty-eight years he offered perfect performance as a nurse anesthetist, but the judge didn't care about that either; he only cared about the offense – the eight-month mistake Earl made – and how allowing Earl to go unpunished would look to the public.

Screw the public. When they wrecked their cars, Earl got up in the middle of the night to help put them back together. When women birthed their babies, he eased their

pain. He taped money to kids' arms so they saw it instead of the IV when they awoke from surgery. He was the one his co-workers deferred to when the case was difficult, the one they requested when it was their family member needing surgery. Now the court couldn't trust him when he said he was done with it all. Bull. They didn't want to trust him. He has been in charge of virtually all situations, but now he's stuck and soon will be limited to a minimum security prison camp. Camp, hell. Earl will be told what to do, what to eat, where he can go, who he can call, and who he will live with for the first time since his military service. Six months is a damn long time for Earl to not be in control of his daily routine, but a gift when he considers his sentence could have been eight years. That damn prosecutor tried to equate him with the Tylenol tamperer, but the bitch couldn't even pronounce nurse anesthetist correctly. An-ez-THE-tist. Right. Anyone who knows him, knows Earl would never put a patient at risk. But, now there was doubt and that killed him.

"Did you call to see what time you need to arrive?" Mom stood washing dishes at the other side of the kitchen. She spoke with her back to Dad. I watched Dad's face to see his reaction, but he acted like Mom never spoke. He continued to flip through a farming magazine.

"So, Dad, what do you think you will have to do?" He closed the magazine and added it to the pile to his left without looking at me.

"It's pretty obvious that I'll have to do what they say." His eyes settled on mine for a brief second before he picked up the harness-racing magazine. He always was more likely to talk to me than to Mom, which she hates.

“Have they told you if you will have to go to counseling?” I pressed the conversation because he needed to talk about the situation.

“Sis, I will play the game. Attend counseling. Hold hands with the other inmates. Sing Kumbaya if I have to. My only plan is to be home by Thanksgiving, so if that’s what it takes, that’s what it takes.” Since he didn’t look up from the magazine again, I knew to drop the conversation. Pushing him further would just irritate him.

The day to report arrived and still no phone call, no miracle, no reprieve. Earl finally called the prison to see what he was allowed to bring with him – only his reading glasses and his wedding ring. Everything else will be mailed home. The reality that they might not release him early crept over him. He’d never been away from his family for more than a week -- when he went to an anesthesia conference. No, wait, there were three months when Jennifer was first born and the Air Force shipped him to Utah. Six months. Damn. The car ride to Beckley was silent. His wife remained silent. Forty years of marriage condition a partner. Hope and sentiment seemed pointless as Earl drove toward the prison.

The first visit was the worst. I drove my mom over the mountain from Draper, Virginia, to Beckley, West Virginia – Interstate 77 North to 64 East toward Lewisburg, West Virginia -- my hometown. Lewisburg was where my sister and I grew up, where my dad built our first house, where we went to church, made our childhood friends, learned to drive, raised animals, dated, graduated, and left to move out on our own. The

quiet little town was a great place to grow up. It was a place where everyone knew my parents. A place our family was respected.

We wound our way through the mountains of Beaver, the actual town just outside Beckley that housed the prison. Aside from the industrial buildings peppered beside the winding roads, the area hosted nothing more than a single hotel, presumably for families visiting inmates at the prison, and a gas station/Biscuit World restaurant. People only came here to work and return to more desirable towns. No homes were around which only reinforced the barren feeling that greeted us as we wound along the edge of the mountainside. Dad was assigned to the minimum security satellite camp that sits about a half mile away from the medium security version that looms over the prisoners as a constant reminder of where they will go if they fail to recognize and respect the luxury minimum security life. Chain-link fencing topped with cyclone barbed wire encloses the grounds of the medium security facility, yet as we turned left off the main road onto the camp road, several deer and wild turkeys greeted us. They didn't scamper off like their cousins from more populated areas; instead, they merely raised their heads to acknowledge our arrival. The setting was oddly tranquil for the purpose of our visit.

We assumed we wouldn't be able to bring in our cell phones and purses, so Mom and I left them in the trunk of the car taking only our wallets. The entrance to the prison was barren, just a wooden bench beside a table with pens and admission forms. I had to return to the car once to get the license number from the Cadillac's tags, only to return once again to return the wallets after the guard informed us no items other than keys and money for the vending machines were allowed. We entered the visitation room past the guard's office and heard, "Inmate Parkes report to visitation. Parkes. Visitation." I

flinched at the phrase *Inmate Parkes*. It struck me as harsh. At least we didn't have to undergo a physical search.

Everything in the visitation room was gray. Dingy, dirty gray. The furnishing was bare; it only offered plastic deck chairs with shin-height mini tables between them. It wasn't like the movies. There weren't any tables or dividing glass to talk over. Maybe all of those dramatics are saved for the serious criminals. The room was arranged in four rows with the single chairs – the inmates' chairs – lined up and two, three or four chairs positioned in opposing rows. Signs directed us that the furniture was not to be moved. A physical reminder of separation from our loved ones. The room hummed with white noise. Families scattered throughout the room; a child ran toward a game room that was manned by an inmate to check out a different toy.

Another visitor directed us to the log book located on the podium; forms were placed in the plastic bin after we signed in for the visit. The air seemed stale and old, like the government wouldn't authorize fresh air for those who visit the human zoo. The room was full, so a different inmate who was in charge of putting out extra chairs settled us in near the toy room; he pointed to a door at the corner of the room and indicated Dad would enter from there. It was obvious that we were green about the process. Mom mumbled *thank you* and offered a quick smile to the other inmate, unsure if addressing him was allowed.

For being a prison, it didn't seem like anyone was overly concerned about monitoring the activity of the room. The two corrections officers remained behind the darkened windows of their room. The television showing a football game was turned toward them, which eliminated ninety percent of the room's view of the game. Mom and

I faced the inmates' restroom and the toy room; the vending machines were to our right and proved to be a popular distraction for everyone visiting. Families poured money into the machines so they could share a pseudo-meal together. Behind us were the visitor bathrooms and more vending machines that housed big-selling items like hot wings, hamburgers, and chicken sandwiches. To our far left there was an outside area, but it was locked due to the cold weather.

After about ten minutes, one of the officers, who checked our identification against Dad's approved visitor list, came from the office and opened the door in the corner closest to us. He slipped inside to pat down Dad and remove his commissary card; finally, we were face to face. He looked the same as always. I expected him to look worn and tired, distressed from his plight, but instead, Dad was dressed like Mr. Green Jeans from Captain Kangaroo, my favorite show as a child. Mom and I approached him but were nervous to even hug him since we didn't know the rules. I looked to my feet as I attempted to say, "Hello." He looked good. He was tan, like normal. He smiled, like normal. He rubbed his hands together, like normal. We sat across from one another as he asked us how the drive was and thanked us for coming like he had scheduled a meeting with us or something.

"How have you been? You look good." Mom looked genuinely happy to see Dad.

"Good. I have the top bunk so it's just like it was on the mountain growing up. Top bunk. One drawer for my clothes. Tight room." He seemed pleased with his analogy.

"How are you, Sis?"

I met his gaze, but couldn't return the happiness I saw in his eyes. "Okay. Just busy." I looked back at the toe of my right shoe and studied the faded leather. I couldn't do anything but sit there and nod as my parents continued to attempt a normal conversation. They were both smiling. Mom even chuckled. She never chuckles. I had trouble focusing. The background noise was distracting, and I struggled to keep from watching other families and wondering what their father, son, husband did to earn his green Dickies.

"What's your roommate like? Is he nice?" Mom's question brought me back to their conversation.

"Yeah. Dennis is a four-hundred-and-fifty-pound biker who is in on a gun charge."

Mom and I look at each other. This was ironic since Dad hates obese people.

"His wife is doing time in Texas for the same offense. The gun was an unregistered semi-automatic machine gun a biker friend asked Dennis to hold for him, but his wife tried to sell it. The guy ended up being a fed."

"So, how's it working out with you and him being in the same room?"

Dad knew what Mom was really asking. "I'm just doing time, not trying to make friends. He's an obese diabetic who has sleep apnea and snores like a freight train. His farts are like being out with the horses and they echo off those cement walls like bullets. He's up at 4:30 a.m. so he can get in his first breakfast before the meal line opens. I can only pray he doesn't code while I'm here because I'm not giving the fat bastard CPR."

Dad's face looked like it did when he finished lecturing one of us about our weight and diabetes. Eyebrows raised, straight gaze, lips a bit tight.

“So who else have you met?” Mom wanted to change the subject.

Dad continued with stories about the men he had met. Blinky was in for running moonshine, as was his cousin, who was aptly nicknamed Moonshine. An ex-sergeant in the Army who was caught with \$300,000 of cocaine, and the list went on. He explained how some of the men got doctors’ notes to be able to wear tennis shoes (Dennis did this) instead of the issued black boots, how stamps are used as currency and the cost of one cigarette is six dollars, how some of the inmates think he’s a snitch because his time is so short, and how he’s not eligible for drug counseling because he would have to be in a year before he could even go on the list.

Every time he asked me a question about work or grad school, I began to cry, unable to speak. Mom put her hand on my leg as I looked from the floor to Dad’s face and back again.

“Jenny’s having a tough time with this.”

I felt bad to be so emotional. *Who is this man? How can he be so casual? Jennifer, play along, detach yourself, you’re going to make him feel bad. Wait, he should feel bad. Play the game he taught you. Cut the crap. Stop the tears.* I could see how my emotion impacted Dad—he couldn’t look at me and wrung his hands more than normal, but I couldn’t help it. Dad and I have always been close, with me as one of the few people who understood him and served as his never born son. I am the one who helped him in the fields while my sister watched cartoons on Saturday mornings. The one he trusted and taught to fix things. I never hesitated to proudly proclaim him as my father even when he was an ass, but now, I felt ashamed of his weakness and humanity. I wanted to scream at him and tell him he sucked and negated everything I respected about

him, yet I was angry at myself for revealing my thoughts through my actions. I felt like I was betraying him. Who was I to pass judgment? As his daughter, I should remain loyal.

I compared the families around us to ours. Thank God I'm not the age of the ten-year-old boy who was sitting on his father's lap attempting a normal father-son experience minus the fishing trip or ride in the truck. If Dad had done this earlier, who would have taught me to drive the tractor, or ride my bike, or plant a garden? At least I'm not a teen like the girl to my left and my nephew Joseph, the first grandchild, at four-to-ten months old won't be old enough to realize he was leaving his Pap when they come to visit; we won't have to deal with a screaming child like the people on the other side of the room who had to peel the four-year-old from his grandfather's neck as he screamed, "I want my Pop Pop!" Dad seemed overly animated while telling his tales as if he was trying to offset the situations that surrounded us.

"Sis," with a quick smile, "just think; this will make some great writing material when I get out. You could write a book."

I looked from my lap to meet his gaze back to my lap. "It's your story." Tears again.

Mom patted my knee. "Maybe you could write down the details and bring it home with you," she said to him. "I'm sure Jen could do something with it."

"Oh, I can't write. You know I'm bad with words." To me, "I was just thinking it might be something you could do." I couldn't answer him. He wanted to bond over the possibility of me turning his tales into something positive.

The clock neared 2:30 p.m.; the room began to empty as people said their good-byes. Dad stood, uttering his typical, “Well.” He always says this when he wants to wrap things up.

“I guess it’s that time.” Mom always states the obvious. I had been watching the clock for an hour. She hugged and kissed Dad.

“Sis, thanks for coming to visit.” He hugged me, too.

“Sorry for crying.” That earned me an extra squeeze.

“Sorry for being so much trouble.” I kissed his cheek when I pulled away, still unable to make eye contact. I was afraid he could read my betraying and critical thoughts; he always said that I could tell a story with my eyes.

Mom spoke first. “We’ll see you next Saturday. Love you.” Mom and Dad hugged and kissed for the third time. I never had to leave Dad anywhere before, but the feelings were similar to when I watched them pull away from me at college, except it sucked more.

I hate to describe the visitor’s room as cozy, but the warmth of the heat had seeped into our bones. The cold air welcomed us back to the real world like a slap. Our world was a free world, but it didn’t comfort us.

“I don’t know how those women do this for years.” Mom’s voice came from behind me, but I continued to walk a few steps ahead of her. I didn’t indicate that I heard her. I popped the trunk with the key’s remote. I handed Mom her purse when she reached the car.

“I don’t know how they do it.”

“Who?” I couldn’t let on I knew what she was referring to.

“Those women. I just couldn’t do this for more than six months.” I clicked the doors open and looked at Mom’s head over the car as she got into the passenger side. I rolled my eyes and got behind the wheel.

“Look: Michigan. Kentucky. South Carolina. They come from all over.”

“So we are lucky to only have to drive an hour and a half. If we lived further away, we would just come when we could.” I pulled out of the lot and headed back toward the gates.

“I don’t think I would handle that very well.”

“Well, then be glad we get to see him once a week.”

Mom was quiet during the hour and a half back home, as if she had used up all of her energy being upbeat for Dad. When she did speak, she kept coming back to the same phrase, “It feels like he’s been gone for years. I can’t imagine doing this for years.”

Dad entered with a smile, just like he had for the past two months. He walked slightly hunched over. His hair was unwashed. The weekly hugs exchanged, we sat across from each other. Dad’s eyes followed the correction officer as he walked past us and out the door back to the office.

“Watch what you say around that fat fuck.” Dad sat rigid and straight in his chair. His eyes darted around the room and he strained to barely turn his head to check to make sure the officer continued his rounds. Mom fidgeted in her green plastic seat and leaned forward.

“Say around who?”

“That piece of shit that just walked out.” His eyes went to Mom’s and she sat up a little to distance herself a bit. “He thinks he’s cute calling me Old Man. I’m just telling you. If I don’t slow down for a pedestrian in the Wal-Mart parking lot, you’ll know I’m running one of these bastards down.”

Mom sat back. *Okay, so Dad has settled in*, I thought.

“You have no idea what it’s like in here. The guys say they put the ones who can’t hack it over the wall over here so they don’t get beaten up again by the real prisoners.”

“What’s ‘the wall?’” Mom asked.

“It’s the medium security part, Ellie, where the real shit happens. If you mess up here, then you go behind the wall. Most of these asshole C.O.s have already gotten beaten up over there because they can’t keep their smart comments to themselves, so they get moved over here where we won’t smack them because we don’t want to go over the wall for ninety damn days.” Dad wrung his hands; his lips were white; his eyes had changed from blue to gray-green like they did when he was pissed.

“Earl, don’t do anything to get in trouble. Please. I can’t take it. You only have four more months to go. Cool it.” Mom was pitched forward in her plastic chair; her eyes pleading.

He stared at her, then looked at his hands. He looked to me.

“So, how’s the writing?”

“Okay, I guess. School’s busy and the kids are crazy, so it’s just okay.” He nodded, looked at Mom, then his hands. He rubbed his hands together and pulled at each of his fingers unaware of his routine. Dad had always twiddled his thumbs or cupped his

hands and rotated them around on another, but this was more urgent. More distressed. His hands never stopped moving as if they moved independent of the rest of his body representing the tension and nervousness and irritation that hung between us and within him.

“So, Jody’s ready to mail Joseph to you in a box.” Mom’s shoulders relaxed. Dad shook his head and chuckled. Jody, my sister, had her hands full with my nephew since the more he developed and grew, the more like the bratty child-version of her he became. The movement of Dad’s hands stopped for a moment.

“She did say she was going to put holes in the box so Joseph can breathe. He’s started to bite her now. But only Jody.” Mom rattled on a bit. Joseph was always a good tension breaker. Thank God my sister had that kid.

His hands don’t look like they go with his body. There is no blackened nail. No cut. No gouge. No grease-stained fingerprint lines. They are stark white. His arms are tan. His hands are white. He has nice hands – I never noticed before. The finger tips are squared off, like mine. Broad, like mine. The nail beds are wider, like mine. They actually look bleached. I can’t look at them. These are not the hands that buttered my corn-on-the-cob or gave me my spankings or bottle-fed the calves or held the hymnal or taught me how to shift gears. They are foreign. Four short months in prison and it’s as if he has been cleansed. Dipped in bleach; washed sin free, just like the old hymnals taught.

“Your father wants me to come over Monday night and stay in a hotel since they are now going to let him out at 6:30.”

“So go. Get a hotel.”

“I don’t think I want to waste the money. Things are tight now.”

God, it kills her that she has to watch spending now. Money wasn’t a consideration when she bought three leather purses from QVC because she couldn’t sleep without Dad or me in the house. “Mom, you know Dad doesn’t want you driving over that mountain in the fog and darkness. What are you going to prove if you wreck and don’t get there to pick him up? Or worse, you’re late. You want to listen to him if you’re late?”

“No. You’re right.” Life, my life, would be so much simpler if my mother would recognize this from the get-go.

“So you say.” *Often.* “You excited?”

She hesitates. “Ycah.”

For the past six months, she has talked about this day and how Dad will be when he gets home, and what she will and will not put up with. “If your father thinks he’s going to blame all this on me. I’m outta here. I’m not going to put up with it.” I want to scream that she’s put up with it for over forty years and she isn’t going anywhere, but I keep my mouth shut. She continues, “I just pray that he will be different, less angry, when he gets out.”

“Mom, prison is *not* the place people go to to become less of who they are. He’s not going to be different. He is still going to have a temper. You will still be you. He will still be him. Let’s deal with reality, please.”

She sighs. "I guess."

No adult child should have to spend maximum time, all but taking the missing spouse's place in a marriage, like I have had to do. What is she bitching about? They picked each other, made their choices along the way, and stayed with each other. It's time for Dad to be home and time for them to deal with each other. It's time for me to be alone.

Driving

Dad finished our house in six short months, and I began my second grade year in what became known throughout town as the “blue house on the hill” when giving directions for Houffenaggle Road in Lewisburg, West Virginia. Seven years of age meant that it was time for me to learn how to drive the tractor even though I couldn’t touch the pedals and sit on the seat, so I had to hang from the steering wheel while pushing in the clutch. My leg would start to shake from the strain of pulling in two different directions. “I can’t get it to go in.” I’d shout. The gear ground in resistance to the slot into which I attempted to shove it. My father’s voice came from over my left shoulder. He was balancing on the rear hitch with his hands on the back of the tractor’s seat. The low, calm register of his commands were soothing. “Push the clutch in completely, then select the gear. That’s it.” The gear cooperated at once as if Dad’s voice had willed it into place instead of my awkward coordination.

I let the clutch out and Dad reached over my right shoulder to nudge the throttle ahead a bit. “We don’t have all day. Got to get something done.” The engine responded and my pulse quickened. “Go ahead and sit down.” I could just hook my rear on the edge of the seat and still keep my hands on the steering wheel. We bounced across the back yard toward the blue barn Dad built to match our house. It was the biggest and oldest I had ever felt; Mom and my sister Jody waved from the French doors in the living room, but I didn’t dare take my hand from the wheel. I just grinned. It was a red International Cub, which seemed like a huge piece of equipment when I was young, but now I realize it was a cute mini-tractor compared to the monsters my Uncle Roger uses

on his dairy farm. He has combines – grain harvesters -- that sport tires taller than the Cub.

I loved my special time with Dad and being the one chosen to help him. We would bounce through the front field Saturday after Saturday and practice backing up and pulling tight to the fence. Eventually, I was helping to put up hay by slowly pulling the wagon around the field as Dad loaded the bails. The lessons extended to learning how to pull a wagon with the pickup --“You have to swing wide when you have a wagon on the back. Always look behind you. Are you paying attention?”-- back a trailer – “Use your mirrors. Watch where the trailer is going; it’s backward, so don’t look at the steering wheel. Pull ahead. Try again. If you can’t see using the mirror, then hang your head out the side window. That’s it; straighten up.” – and back a hay wagon – “Pay attention. This isn’t like the trailers; the tongue moves, so it will jack-knife on you. Look out the window; this is tricky. Almost. Try again. Again.” I thought I would never get the hang of those damn wagons.

Within a few years, the privilege of driving the tractor and truck became a punishment when I was pulled from morning cartoons to help Dad outside while Jody continued inside with Mom. But with assisting Dad came reward, so the task wasn’t always so daunting. To this day, one of my favorite pictures is of me driving the International Cub while my Pop-Pop, my mom’s dad, rides on the fender and my dad stands on the rear tow-bar leaning over to give instructions. Somehow the times I got cussed for not reacting when Dad thought I should or not anticipating his next move didn’t translate to the photo of us, nor the feeling of getting hit upside the head when my

foot slipped off the clutch and the tractor lurched forward. I learned to pay attention. I learned to speak Dad's language of facial twitches, grunts, and gestures.

From the fields, I graduated to shifting the gears in the truck while Dad drove and learning to drive the truck on my own around the house. Soon I was backing hay wagons between the barn and the fence with only an inch to spare on each side (a high skill for farm kids everywhere). Driving was a special connection between Dad and me because his father, uncle and brother drove professionally, and Dad had driven a gravel dump truck to pay for his nursing school. I was the one who stayed awake on long trips to talk to Dad and make sure he didn't get lonely while Mom and Jody slept. He would tell stories about Pappy, his father, and Uncle David who still drove tractor-trailer even though he was in his sixties. He would quiz me on which way we should turn since I knew the trip to my maternal grandparents' apartment in Irwin, Pennsylvania by landmarks rather than routes. He would educate me on how to be a defensive driver and how to respect the truckers, who were trying to make a living, by passing them quickly and getting out of their ways. All of this pre-instruction came in handy once Dad decided I should pass a pre-driving test prior to getting my license from the state of West Virginia.

"Okay, change the radio now." Dad nodded from me to the front console of the car. I put my burger in my left hand, hooked the steering wheel with my left pinky, and leaned over to turn the manual knob of the old truck. "Good. Pass this car. Are you comfortable going eighty?"

“Yeah. I’ve done it before.” I maneuvered the truck to the far left line of the passing lane to give the other car ample room.

“If you’re going to pass someone, do it. Don’t drag your ass.”

“I know. I’m not.” I stared straight ahead preparing for an upcoming curve. Over the years, I had grown used to the constant probing from my father about what to do in every situation. This little trip down the interstate was yet another one of his pre-tests prior to letting me take my driver’s exam. He felt it was important for me to know how to drive eighty miles per hour and pass a car while eating a burger and changing the radio station. Not necessarily a normal routine while traveling, but I had to prove I could do it successfully just like the time I had to drive from Lewisburg to Ronceverte, the neighboring town, without touching my brakes -- stopping the Bronco II by down shifting and using the emergency break. Apparently this is an important skill to know in case I one day decide to become a professional truck driver or lose my brakes and decide to drive myself to the repair facility instead of calling a tow truck.

Dad also required me to take my driver’s test using a standard shift vehicle because he wanted me to be able to drive whatever was available if I happened to be stuck somewhere. To reinforce my skills, he once knocked the truck out of gear when I was going up a steep hill so I knew how to down shift quickly and recuperate my speed; he taught me to double shift and how to stop and start on a hill without drifting back. In fact, that was another part of my pre-driving-test test.

“I want you to drive to the bottom of the driveway. Do a three-point turn without touching the grass. Start up the hill, stop halfway up, continue without drifting back. When you get to the top, do another three-point turn without touching the grass. Pull

down the drive again, but this time stop halfway down, then back-up without coasting forward. After you finish that we will practice parallel parking between these two brooms.”

No small task and much more difficult than what the West Virginia state police required in order to earn a driver’s license. But that was my dad. He was never one to turn out a crappy product, and he considered my sister and me his products. He always said that he would put us up against any kid in the county and half the adults, and sometimes I thought he actually had me in training.

While I found this annoying when I was living through it, the skills I learned gave me confidence and the ability to drive in any situation. Later, when I went to work for Piedmont Airlines in Lewisburg and then later in Charlottesville, Virginia, I had no difficulty getting signed off to drive the tugs, Cushman, jet way, conveyer belt, and deicer machines. I even learned how to tow aircraft. Of course, many of the people who drove these same pieces of equipment never attended the Earl Parkes Driver’s Education Course, but I believe I was better equipped to handle the task because I did.

“Closer. Come on, closer.” Shawn leaned over the top of the cherry-picker bucket hanging from the extended arm of the deicer I drove.

“I can’t see the damn wing, Shawn. Are we going to hit?” The snow was still coming down in the darkness of the morning around us. The ice was so thick on the wings and fuselage of the aircraft that Shawn was attempting to drill holes in the ice with the hot glycol so the glycol could get onto the metal. The idea was to work from the inside out; another of Shawn’s non-standard ideas.

“No. Just a few more inches.” He was waving me on from above.

“Dude, if we hit, it’s my ass.” I lifted my foot off the brake and didn’t bother to hit the gas. Before we moved, he yelled for me to stop. His voice echoed in the headsets that connected us. Shaking my head, I leaned forward on the steering wheel to watch Shawn maneuver the black hoses. We would be together all day, heating glycol, spraying glycol, refilling the deicing machines, refueling, and repeating. Once an aircraft was cleared, the other ground personnel would scurry around to battle the clock and the slick, dripping chemical to load the baggage and passengers before the snow encapsulated the plane again. I would drive Shawn around the aircraft after it moved to the edge of the ramp, to spray it down prior to taxiing to the end of the runway. Talking to Shawn for twelve and fourteen-hour shifts that winter developed into a similar non-verbal interaction to the routine my dad and I had developed. Shawn and I fell into a routine, just like the one my dad and I shared. Few words were needed, and I felt like all of the chiding I experienced as a child was paying off. Shawn liked working with me because I anticipated his next move and didn’t bitch about being outside and dirty all day.

The novelty of driving large equipment wore off and I needed to be challenged. I needed a change. I moved on within Piedmont Airlines to its headquarters in Salisbury, Maryland, to dispatch aircraft. I no longer got to drive the equipment but, rather, told it where to fly, how much fuel to take, the route to fly to avoid bad weather, and which aircraft to operate. Along with maintenance control, flight control, crew scheduling, and the daily shift supervisor, we mapped out the day and dealt with the fallout when

mechanical problems and bad weather occurred. Sometimes the puzzle pieces fit, and sometimes we had to force them.

One of the annual renewal requirements for my airman's dispatcher license was to log over twenty hours of cockpit observation. This was an uncomfortable assignment because even though the flight crew knew to expect us throughout the year, we had to invade their small area. The jump-seat is located within the doorway of the cockpit with a retractable ledge to sit on using the door as the backrest. If I knew the crew, the trip was full of joking and free-flowing conversation through the headsets we all wore. But, if the crew was unfamiliar, the vibe could be tense and uncomfortable as I sat stiffly in order to ensure my knees didn't hit their shoulders.

Usually, I would choose flights that would take me back to Charlottesville so I could sneak in an overnight visit with my friends. A few times my schedule was tight, and I had to get in as many flights each day as possible, so I booked jump-seat based on flight time rather than destination. The weather wasn't cooperating my last day out; severe thunderstorms and winds made several of the landings interesting at best. When I was still a customer service supervisor in Charlottesville, prior to having this position, I was known to joke with some of the pilots about them being nothing but glorified bus drivers, but this day in particular proved the depth of their training.

We were en-route to Baltimore, our last stop before our final leg home to Salisbury, Maryland. I wasn't overly familiar with the crew; I just knew the captain's name from seeing it on the releases we had shared and had seen him a few times when he was in on maintenance. He was a senior captain in Salisbury and since that was Piedmont's headquarters, he was senior for the company, as well. The winds bounced

the plane about as he attempted to line up for approach; the crosswinds for the runway the tower was using mandated a sideways approach once the tower cleared us to land. It was the first and final time I ever witnessed an approach like this, and I'm not even sure the passengers were aware of the work their crew had to do. A typical landing was head-on and routine, like pulling a car into a parking spot or merging into traffic. But, this approach was more like white water rafting in a hail storm with the captain attempting to navigate the raft to shore without capsizing. The tension in the cockpit was thick, but professional. I didn't want the crew to know how nervous I was, so I pressed myself against the door, my backrest, and held my breath. I wanted to melt into the metal that surrounded me. I wanted to be home on my couch.

Our left wing lined up with the centerline of the runway, and the captain adjusted the yoke to counteract the winds that were trying to push us off course. The descent seemed to take forever. If I looked straight ahead, I saw only sideways rain and gray-black skies. In order to see the runway I had to lean forward, turn my head to the left, and peek between the wall and the captain's headrest. The wing dipped forward to reveal the runway below. As the ground drew closer, the captain straightened the plane at the final moment and touched down without incident. I exhaled slowly, trying to release the stale breath I had been holding without drawing any attention to myself.

"Is that a typical landing?" I tried to steady my voice so I sounded natural. Light.

"That was a great landing. What are you trying to say?" The co-pilot acted like I just told the captain he sucked ass. His aggression took me by surprise.

“No. No. I know it was an awesome landing. I was just wondering, on a sphincter factor, how would you rate that landing?” I looked to the captain, so the co-pilot understood I wasn’t interested in his opinion.

The captain chuckled, “Oh, I had that removed long ago, so I couldn’t tell you. This is nothing compared to moving planes out of Florida during a hurricane.” He went on taxiing the aircraft to the gate, and I knew the conversation was over.

After September 11th, the airline industry began to decline and the glamour of dispatching airplanes began to thin. So, I switched professions again, but this time I left the familiarity of the airline industry for a classroom. My father was thrilled I was ready to use the bachelor’s degree in English I earned on his dime more than a decade before. I was out of my element – no equipment to drive, limited men to cajole with, and a new set of jargon and bylaws to learn – but educators referred to these terms as teaching strategies and methodology. I sat back, observed, and learned. Once I began to feel comfortable delivering the information my students needed to learn, my confidence found voice. Now I’m known to be harsh, blunt, even cutting, which doesn’t seem right. When I worked in industry alongside men, I was considered feminine and competent – superior in some situations. My ability to argue the solution to a problem was respected; now when I voice concerns or offer solutions, I am told not to go around the chain-of-command.

I wonder how many women share my frustration. How many times a day do they feel like screaming, “Listen to me. I know what I’m talking about”? Maybe my perception of not being heard is as relative as me feeling fat. If thin, beautiful women

surround me, I am a beast and attempt to keep the hump on my back toward the wall. However, if size sixteens or higher join me, beautiful or not, I'm just short of being Miss America. My step even quickens. The best offer I ever received was when my sister, Jody, called me, ecstatic, "Jen, I just figured out who we are going to marry. You're going to marry the Big Show and I'm going to marry Triple H from the World Wrestling Federation. That way we will always be petite."

It might be the profession. Educators do not seem to like being told they are wrong or that something wasn't troubleshot correctly or that the system is failing a student or that a student isn't worth saving because he doesn't want to be saved or that the new program the school mandated is ineffectual. In contrast, industry doesn't like to waste money and would thank me for my attention to detail, for paying attention as Dad taught me. But so-called intellectuals do not like having their flaws pointed out and they aren't overly concerned with money until it runs out. I wish I could function more like the women who are able to maneuver through the work force without drawing any attention to themselves. The ones who are content to comply with the rules and complete the endless paperwork required by administrators without asking why it is necessary, or inquiring whose doctoral dissertation they are helping to prove by completing the questionnaires. Maybe I should be more ladylike and comply, even though I know this is not a female issue since many men choose to coast by as well.

Political correctness tells us that we are not supposed to view life in a black and white, clear-cut manner. We are supposed to consider every last person's feelings and allow for every possible exception. In some situations, I agree, but I tire of being told I shouldn't tell a high school junior he or she is headed for failure if better choices aren't

made. Life is not forgiving, and we are creating a new generation of people with excuses and limited action. Even though I don't fit into the picture, there is something refreshing about men being manly and women being demure. I long for the Katherine Hepburns of the world who could be strong, independent women who dared to wear pants, yet swooned for the Spenser Traceys who knew how to make them feel secure and respected. Some of my friends might argue that I am that person just waiting for my Spenser to arrive, yet I don't feel their confidence. I feel more comfortable on a tractor proving my worth and skill; unfortunately, that doesn't appeal to a large number of people and serves a limited purpose in this world.

It would be nice to think that people are treated and accepted equally and all opinions are valued. They are not. But there seems to be a small sign of contentment offered when people, fulfill traditional roles. Dad gives instruction, daughter follows. Daughter does well, Dad compliments. Now I question if the instructions are valid – dependable. If I were traditional, I could relax. I could stop fighting. I could love.

Imperfect Son

Through the oversized garage doors, I could see the two flights that had just landed. The spring day hosted beautiful, clear weather, and everything was running ahead of schedule. The sun glinted off the windows of the cockpit as Daryl – one of my co-workers who was working the ramp-- marshaled the Pittsburgh flight onto the gate; her blonde hair looked transparent in the sunlight. I envied her outside ramp position since I was chained to the operation's room answering phones, clearing the bag belt when it jammed, and printing weather reports for the outbound pilots. My only relief from the gray interior was the large ops window that looked out over the tarmac toward the Shenandoah Mountains.

The phone rang, drawing my attention back inside. I stared at the digital time and date – 14:24 APR 09 1994 – as I delivered the company's customary greeting.

“Piedmont Airlines; Charlottesville Airport; Jennifer speaking, how may I help you?” I waited for the typical, “Have you found my bag yet?” or “Is flight 3145 on time?” but, instead, I was greeted by a strained male voice.

“Jennifer, this is Dr. Hossman. Do you remember me? I work with your dad. I came to Thanksgiving dinner last year...”

“Oh yeah, hi,” I assumed my dad had offered my airline services to another one of his co-workers, so I picked up a pen to copy down where Dr. Hossman wanted to travel. *For a man who doesn't like to take advantage of my flight benefits, Dad sure liked to offer my benefits to his friends.*

Dr. Hossman didn't continue with the expected conversation. “I have some bad news, and I need you to remain calm.”

My heart stopped. My mind raced to the infinite number of things that could have gone wrong.

“Okay,” I replied.

“Your dad was just taken to surgery and we don’t know if he’s going to make it; Jamie stabbed him. Right now a police officer is waiting with Jamie in the doctor’s lounge. We don’t know which direction the knife went in, yet -- we’ll know more after they open your dad up.”

“I’m going to kill Jamie,” was all I could think to say. I could see the scenario playing out in my mind: me hitting his concave chest, unanswered questions of *why*, my hands around his neck, his eyes bulging from the strain to breathe.

Dr. Hossman continued, ignoring my statement. “Listen to me. Your mother was working in Harrisonburg, Virginia, today and is in no condition to drive home, so you need to go over there, pick up her and your sister, and then get home as soon as possible.” He spoke in a calm and direct manner which reminded me of my dad in emergency situations – it must be due to years of high-stress situations in the operating room. Dr. Hossman was a traveling anesthesiologist who came to Lewisburg to cover vacation for the regular one; Dad liked Hossman better.

“Okay. I’m on my way.” I stood up and took an instant inventory of the flight paperwork that hung on the clipboards. I needed to get organized so someone could cover my position while working another.

“Jennifer?” Dr. Hossman’s voice startled me back to the conversation.

“Yes?”

“Be careful. We don’t need any more accidents. Are you okay to drive?” The concern in his voice reminded me of last Thanksgiving; he had fit right in with the family, just like he had been coming to dinner for years instead of being the hesitant guest Dad pestered until he agreed to come. Dr. Hossman was a short, rounded man with brown hair and soft features. He liked to laugh once he got over his shy nervousness.

“Yeah, I’m okay, Dr. H; I gotta go.” I tried to match my voice with his calmness.

I hung up the phone and spun around the radio room three times – I wasn’t sure what to do first. A pilot came in for his release and weather; I just pointed to the wall and yelled for Daryl, my one friend who could handle a crisis with the most finesse. She came around the corner with two large clear plastic ice bags in her hands.

“What’s up? I gotta get this catering back out to the plane so I can board.” She stated all of this on her way into operations, but as soon as she saw my face, her countenance changed.

“I need you to cover ops. Jamie stabbed my Dad, and I’ve got to go.” I was already headed toward the door before she could register that I was leaving her with my job as well as hers.

“Wait. What?” Daryl stepped out of my way, and grabbed my arm as I passed her and spun me around. I glanced at her as the realization of my statement washed over her.

“I gotta go.” I avoided making eye contact with her because I didn’t want to start to cry. *This is no time for hysteria*, I thought.

My co-workers offered their support as they hurried by to complete their job responsibilities. Someone even volunteered to drive me, but I assured them I'd be fine, and promised to call as I hurried out the door.

I broke many laws getting to my apartment to pack; I threw several things into a suitcase, not sure if anything matched. Before I knew it, I was headed out of town on Rt. 29 North when I realized I didn't know where to pick up my mom and sister; did my mom go to Jody at Bridgewater College or did Jody meet mom at American Home Patient? I stopped at a 7-11 and called the hospital; Dr. Hossman relayed that they were at Jody's college, so down 29 I flew.

"Girls. We are going to have a two brothers stay with us this weekend. They have a bad home life and we might look at adopting one of them." Mom seemed happy with her statement. Dad nodded in agreement.

"What do you mean by bad home life?" I spoke. Jody, my sister, just listened.

"Well, the preacher called and told us about this family. There are three brothers by two different fathers. The mother has the mental stability of a fourteen-year-old and can't take care of them anymore. Apparently, she has brought many 'uncles' to the house who are now abusing the boys." She raised her eyebrows when she said "uncles" so we would know what she meant.

"If there are three boys, then why are we only bringing two home?" Jody joined the conversation.

“Because the older boy has already been taken in by people from his church, so it’s just the younger two. Freddie and Jamie are a year apart and share a father.” Dad didn’t look as pleased as Mom; he looked more like he was resolved to complete a task.

The next weekend Freddie and Jamie arrived. Freddie was skinny and pale with shocking red hair. Jamie was a year younger, the cuter of the two, with a round freckled face and auburn hair.

“Sis, put the dog in the house.” Dad came around the house with our horse Belle on the lead rope. Jody stood at the corner of the house with Freddie and Jamie. Mom and Dad were trying to give both of the boys an enjoyable weekend filled with experiences they weren’t likely to have anywhere else.

“Okay boys, riding a horse is fun, but you can get hurt if you don’t pay attention. Don’t walk behind her because you could get kicked and don’t move too quickly around her. She’s not used to small kids.” There was no way Belle was going to hurt anyone, but Dad always liked to give safety precautions so everyone was aware of behavior expectations.

“Are we really going to get to ride her?” Jamie was all but ready to explode.

“Yep. Stand here, so I can lift you up.” Dad bent to grab the little boy’s fiftyish pounds around the waist. He hoisted him onto the saddle and started walking Jamie around the front yard on Belle’s back when Kasey, our yellow lab, came around the corner from the back of the house.

“Who let the dog out?” The tone of Dad’s voice sent those of us who were already trained into motion. Jody grabbed the dog’s collar and headed toward the back

door. I grabbed Belle's halter to steady her even though she wasn't doing anything.

Mom called for Freddie who was on the back porch.

"Freddie, did you let the dog out?"

"Yep."

"Did you hear Mr. Parkes tell you boys that the dog needed to be put up while the horse was being ridden?"

"Yes."

"Then why did you let Kasey out of the house?" Mom was beginning to show her irritation.

"I wanted to play with her." The lack of remorse from Freddie or acknowledgment of doing anything wrong was annoying. Dad reacted first.

"Well, if you can't follow directions then we will put the horse up." Jamie got to ride the horse while Dad led her to the barn while Freddie followed behind.

When they returned from the barn, we all got ready to attend Seneca Trail Christian Academy's graduation ceremony being held in the church's auditorium. The auditorium seemed warm, intimate, and welcoming with its dark, wood-planked ceiling, despite being able to seat four hundred plus people. After our choir performed, we returned to our seats with Mom, Dad, and the boys. As a junior I had attended several graduation ceremonies. Jamie, at six, seemed amazed at the performance, but Freddy, only a year older, seemed bored by the process. I sat on the aisle next to Freddie with Dad on his other side. Jamie sat between Jody and Mom and sang along with the congregation smiling at everyone who looked his way.

“Let us pray.” Everyone leaned forward to bow their heads, except Freddie. Jamie sat with his hands folded; his eyes squeezed together tight.

“Bow your head, son.” My dad whispered to the irreverent boy. Instead he turned around to look at the people behind him. Dad grabbed Freddie’s neck, turned the boy forward, and started to bow Freddie’s head for him. I closed my eyes so I could set a good example.

“Amen.” I opened my eyes to see Freddie sitting with his head bowed between his knees and knew Jamie would be my brother.

Soon I was off to college, and the changes in my family became more and more evident every time I traveled home. The changes were slight enough that they would have gone unnoticed if I was still living at home, but since I only visited, it was like viewing a movie in flashes. Silence became the new norm at home, and when there wasn’t silence, there was yelling. Who were these people? My mom would say that Jamie was “sneaky” and “evil”. The boy wasn’t evil per say; he just wasn’t her natural child. So when he told stories about “his mother” not feeding him or washing his clothes without specifying his birth mother, Mom was offended. In the evenings, after Jamie had gone to bed and my dad was still outside in the barn, my mom would attempt to show Dad the evidence – the unfinished chores and homework or account the “looks” he had given her -- she had gathered against Jamie, but Dad rarely listened.

“Jamie is sneaky. That’s the only way I can describe him – sneaky,” Mom said in a harsh whisper.

“Mom, what do you mean by sneaky? Is he taking money? Kicking the dog? What?” The tone in my voice bordered on being disrespectful, so I tried to rein back my frustration. It seemed like every time I came home, my visit was spent playing Switzerland to my family. I’d listen to this side, and then listen to the other side, all the while trying to plead the other’s case.

“He just lies. He gets that little devil look in his eyes. He knows what he’s doing; he’s just playing a game.” The fact that my mom was so passionate about her point-of-view made me believe her to a certain extent, but I had lived with Jamie for two years before I left for school and he wasn’t a great mastermind. He had his good days and his bad days – sometimes he would remember to do all of his chores, and other times you would have to feed him the routine step-by-step, as if he had never preformed them before.

Jamie could be frustrating. When I was home, I did try to look out for him and talk to him about being more consistent in how he did things, but the affect of the talks only lasted a day or so. For the most part, he was a good brother. He was cute and eager to please us, but I got a sense he was working hard to just tread water. Maybe we expected too much from a kid with his background. I felt sorry for him.

“Boy, if you don’t hand me that hammer, I’m going to come down from this ladder and hit you with it.” Dad would issue these harsh threats to get Jamie’s attention. They became the norm. Dad would say that Mom wasn’t giving the boy a chance. Dad felt Jamie was capable; he just needed a lot of help and attacking him all the time didn’t help Jamie to learn. My dad tried every tactic. When Jamie ran away from home, Dad would explain that he was running away from his home and go through all that that

means. To “get Jamie’s attention,” my dad would give Jamie extra chores, then no chores; he got spanked, then nothing; each an attempt to figure out what worked with the child since he just didn’t seem to gain any sense of consistency with his actions.

Despite the drama, Jamie was exposed to more than he ever would have been if he had continued to live with his birth mother. He was a member of the Boy Scouts and hiked the better part of the Appalachian Mountains; he was a member of 4H and raised livestock and crops; he was learning to drive the farm trucks and tractors; and he sang in the choir at school. He even played the piano every once in awhile. Not a bad life by anyone’s standards, yet there were problems. He seemed to carry demons around with him, never able to completely shake the past that followed him. He probably would have shared more about his past if Dad didn’t react so severely. Jamie once asked Dad if it was wrong that Mike his older brother tried to put his penis in Jamie’s mouth. Stuff like that just sent Dad into a rage, so Jamie stopped sharing.

I pulled into the parking lot at Jody’s dorm building and hurried up the stairs to her room. I was met by my hysterical mother, who was inconsolable. We quickly packed the car and headed over the mountain, back home to Lewisburg, West Virginia, via Interstate 64.

“God, please let him live. I don’t want my last words to be hateful ones.” Mom rocked back and forth in the passenger’s seat, while Jody and I took turns trying to comfort her.

“God isn’t going to let anything happen to him,” I stated with as much authority as I could muster.

“I just knew it was going to come to something like this. Jamie has been lying more than ever; I caught him in a lie just the other day. He falsified his report card, changed a D to a B and thought I wouldn’t notice. That’s what your dad and I were yelling about this morning. Sometimes I think Jamie does this stuff just to watch us go at it.” I doubted the spring scenery was much comfort to her as it whizzed by.

I couldn’t help but notice the superiority that had seeped into my mom’s voice. Was she really playing one-ups-ees with a thirteen-year-old? I tried to remain focused on the drive ahead of me; the two-and-a-half hours seemed to be crawling to a halt even though I was barreling down the road at over eighty miles an hour.

We got to the hospital and rushed straight to the operating room. The privileges of having a father who worked there for the past twenty years were evident, and the usual rules of conduct and restrictions simply didn’t apply to us. Gracie, the OR receptionist, met us.

“Ellie, he’s going to be okay.” She reached out to steady Mom.

“Thank God. Can I see him?”

“They just brought him out of the room and he’s in recovery. I’ll sneak you back. Girls, you can wait in the doctor’s lounge.” Jody and I knew the room well since Dad would bring us to work with him when he was on-call and Mom was out of town. Dr. Hossman came into the lounge a few minutes later.

“Your dad is going to be okay. We had to do an exploratory incision, but the blade went up instead of down.” He removed the booties from his shoes as he spoke.

“Okay, so what does that mean?”

“If the blade had gone down, it could have nicked his liver and he could have died, but with the blade going up, we just had to perform an appendectomy and repair his spleen. So aside from a scar from his sternum to his pelvis, he will be okay after some healing.” Mom joined us in the lounge just as Dr. Hossman finished his update.

“Your father looks good,” she said, “but he’s still out of it. They’ll let us know when they take him upstairs to a room.”

“Dr. Hossman, where is Jamie?” Since Dad was okay, I wanted to know some more details.

“If I’m not mistaken, he is with your pastor at his house. Since your dad brought himself into the OR, we had to keep Jamie here and have a police officer wait with him until we could reach your pastor and arrangements were made. Your dad was adamant that Jamie was not to go to juvie.”

The next day in Dad’s hospital room, we learned what happened. Mom had already told us that Jamie altered a grade on his report card.

“When I called the junior high to talk to that idiot assistant principal, he proceeded to tell me Jamie forged my signature on a discipline slip. The only reason he discovered it was because I called and he pulled Jamie’s file. That school is crap.” Dad winced when he started to get excited. Staples ran up his stomach around his bellybutton and ended below mid-chest.

“Earl, how does talking to the principal equal Jamie stabbing you? That doesn’t make sense,” Mom said.

“It does when the principal warns Jamie that I’m mad and I know what he did. Hell, I had decided to just let him fail the 7th grade. If he doesn’t care, why should I? But we never got to have that conversation.”

According to what my father shared with us, these were the events of the day. He was tired – tired of trying to figure out this mysterious boy and tired of fighting with his wife over it. In the past year, Jamie ran away twice, lied repeatedly, and intercepted mail for so long it filled half of the couches’ underbelly. Now, Jamie had lied once again, and Dad wasn’t about to react this time. Dad had gotten paid, needed to deposit his check, and thought that it would be nice to take Jamie to McDonald's while they talked the situation out.

“Jamie, get your shoes on, we gotta get to the bank.” Dad’s hand was on the kitchen door, but he didn’t have a chance to turn the knob.

Jamie pushed the door open, yelling “I gotta kill you!” while he thrust his buck knife toward Dad and stabbed him in the abdomen.

Dad instinctively knocked the knife out of Jamie’s hand and shoved him back into the kitchen and watched as Jamie stumbled to the floor after hitting the lower cabinets that were directly behind him, across from the door. Dad bent to pick up the knife from the floor, noticing Jamie’s glasses on the kitchen table, carefully folded so they wouldn’t get scratched. The hundreds of times Dad had lectured Jamie about taking care of his glasses flashed through his head. As he straightened, Dad noticed the spittle that had formed on the corners of Jamie’s mouth, and then noticed the blood that oozed onto his shirt.

“Jamie, what are you doing? Why did you do this?” Dad looked from Jamie to the knife to his stab wound.

“You were going to beat me for my report card. I have to kill you before you kill me.” The words that Jamie uttered were delivered in a detached, matter-of-a-fact manner. Jamie’s over-reaction to the situation didn’t register with Dad at first. What Jamie was referring to as beatings were merely disciplinary spankings in Dad’s world.

Jamie started to come toward Dad once again, but this time when Dad hit Jamie it shook Jamie out of his trance. Dad knew he needed to get back to the hospital, yet he couldn’t leave Jamie alone.

“Get your shoes on. I’ll be waiting in the truck.” Dad held his left side as he maneuvered through the freezer/mud room and back into the driver’s seat of his GMC. He laid on the horn, hoping to hurry Jamie up. Jamie finally emerged from the house about ten minutes later with his barn shoes on and his glasses placed neatly -- safely in their traditional place.

“Where are your school shoes?” Dad asked out of reflex.

“Oh.” Jamie started to back out of the truck, but was urged to get on in.

“We don’t have time for you to change your shoes; we have to get to the hospital. What were you thinking? What did I ever do to deserve this?” Jamie had to shift the gears of the manual transmission, since Dad was busy attempting to keep his momentum – the fatty abdominal lining -- from coming any further out of his abdomen.

“You were going to beat me. Mr. Taylor said that you were really mad,” Jamie muttered.

“Beat you? Boy, you don’t know what a beating is. My dad beat me, and believe me when I tell you that you have *never* been beaten. And, even if I did beat you, I don’t deserve this. Do you realize what you have done? Now you can’t go on your choir trip tomorrow. Jody and Jenny were going to take off from school and work and come down to see your competition. Did you forget that?” They were nearing the stop sign, so Jamie shifted the truck down a gear.

Jamie started hitting his head and saying, “I’m so stupid. I’m so stupid.”

The truck turned into the hospital emergency room parking lot like it was on autopilot. Dad went directly to the OR and told them that they needed to call the police because he had been stabbed. He had been gone for such a short period of time that the nurses behind the counter thought he had forgotten his paycheck. In a matter of minutes, they had their friend on a table and were prepping him for surgery.

Jamie never slept in our home again. It was too much for our family to process, and he had too many demons to conquer. Later we discovered there was a history of schizophrenia in his family; his foster grandparents hadn’t thought that was important news to share when the adoption was being processed. Jamie spent several years within the state’s mental services, with my parents paying for his diagnosis and treatment while the court case surrounding the stabbing took place. Once Jamie was found mentally unstable and diagnosed with juvenile schizophrenia, he became a ward of the state and eventually signed himself out of their services once he turned eighteen. In response to Jamie becoming free, Dad insisted Mom and he kept guns in their cars and searched the house for a possible break-in each time they came home in case Jamie returned. Instead,

since Jamie left his mother at such a young age, he had developed a romanticized version of his birth mother's home. He returned to her home only to realize there was nothing romantic about a broken down woman who could barely take care of herself.

After no contact with the family for eight years, Jamie returned to our home in West Virginia expecting to see my father once more in order to finally apologize. He ended up having to leave a note with our old neighbors in West Virginia.

Dear mom and dad,

I tried to stop by to see you, but you have moved. Mr. and Mrs. Meadows said they would give this to you when they see you the next time. I'm married now. You may have heard that I signed myself out from the state. At first I went to North Carolina to work. I actually got complimented on my work ethic and my attention to detail. I have you to thank for that, Dad. I never realized why you were so strict on me, but I now know that you were trying to make me a man. I thought that you just wanted a farm hand and that's why I came to live with you. I never understood why I was taken away from my mom and brothers and not allowed to see them. Now I know. They are really sad. I owe Mom an apology because I always resented her trying to take my mom's place.

I started attending church and stopped taking my medicine. I married Lisa and things are going good. Her dad died recently in an electrical accident and that made me want to try to fix things with you. Before it's too late. I would like to see you, so I could apologize in person, but I understand if you don't want to see me. We are moving to Tennessee so Lisa can get a job as a dental hygienist while I go to seminary like her uncle.

I'll follow your lead and will understand if you don't contact me. I'm sorry.

Your son, James Joseph Parkes

It took my parents several months to share that letter with my sister Jody and me. My dad would have shared it right away, but my mom feared it would be upsetting to us.

“So, are you going to contact him?” I asked as nonchalantly as I could.

“No. We thought about writing him, but then he would know where we live and if the visit doesn't go the way he imagines it will....well, it just doesn't seem like a good idea.” Dad put his head down.

I could tell that he wasn't wholly behind this decision, but I let it go until we were alone to talk. It had been at least ten years since any of us saw Jamie. He was a man now.

“So, if Mom wasn't involved, would you contact Jamie?” We were up at the barn getting the evening horse feed bucket ready.

“At first I thought I would, but your Mom makes some good points. We don't want to have to go back to carrying guns in the vehicles just in case he is waiting for us after work like we used to. That wasn't any fun.” I noticed the strain on my father's face as he processed all the visions of how they had lived in fear.

“Remember, Sis, you didn't have to live through all of that. You and Jody went back to your lives.” The resolve in his voice was evident now.

“I agree. I don't really want to sit across from him at Thanksgiving dinner, but it would be interesting to see what he looks like and meet his wife.” I placed the last bucket in the back of the cart.

“Yeah, but it’s good just knowing that all that hard work paid off too. He turned out to be alright after all.” As we backed the truck out of the barn and headed to the back pasture to feed the mares, I couldn’t help but notice that my dad sat a little higher.

When my sister married, I thought of the sister-in-law I never met, and when my nephew Joseph was born, I wondered if he was indeed the first grandchild to my parents. But, more often, at least for me, I thought about Jamie when asked how many siblings I have. There is an instantaneous back-and-forth debate that occurs; do I say two and explain why I never talk about my brother or do I just say one sister, which feels like a lie? If I mention Jamie then that almost dictates the telling of *the story* and most people just don’t care enough or even want to know that much. I know I don’t expect to get some odd tale of adolescent outcry when I ask someone about their basic family status and head count. So I lie.

Last semester a skinny, pale, bright-redheaded boy entered my eleventh grade English class and memories of Jamie flooded my mind. I hadn’t thought of my adopted brother for years. Shadows of the boy I once cared for, ran intersession for, followed me for days. It’s not normal to eliminate people from your life. Right? There should have been more angst. More sorrow. Yet there wasn’t. His absence from our family brought peace. Oddity and awkwardness at first, but an end to the tension, the parental fighting, the suspicion, the lies. We became a united front just like we always did when tragedy confronted our family.

But I was curious. My God, it’s been sixteen years since the incident. Families are supposed to work through difficult times – betrayal, harm. If he had been blood, we

would have welcomed him home by now, wouldn't we? I never did understand families who are able to cut members from their communities like a physician cuts away diseased flesh. Maybe it has to happen in extreme situations. Situations when the questions and fears outweigh the previous bond. Jamie was the son everyone wanted. Or at least the son Mom thought Dad wanted. Maybe we should try to fit him back into our family somehow. But, when?

Procrastination

The evils of procrastination mean I never get around to doing anything in an unhurried manner. Every night I re-resolve to get up early the next morning so I can write or grade papers or exercise before I attempt to go to work by 6:30 instead of the required 7:30. The alarm is set for 4:00 – Yes. 4:00 a.m. – I double-check the red digital numbers several times before the bedside light is turned off. I tabulate the number of hours I will be able to sleep – *okay, it's 10:00, getting up at 4:00, six hours is plenty of time to rest.* One final push to the alarm button confirms everything is set, so I pull the blankets up to my chin as I turn my back to the alarm clock, settle into the fetal position, and will myself to go to sleep.

By midnight or one, I usually awaken to use the bathroom; through blurred vision I am surprised only a few hours have passed and calculate I have several more hours to sleep even though I feel so rested. *Should I do some work now?* The few hours I napped seem to have rejuvenated me. The internal debate lasts as long as it takes me to get back into bed, recheck the alarm, and return to my previous position between the warmth of the sheets. *It's better I get a full night's rest so I can function throughout the next day.* I sleep for a few more hours until my internal alarm goes off a few minutes prior to the black, plastic, electric version staring back at me from the bedside table. *Four a.m. is just too early for anyone. What do I really have to do today? It's too cold to exercise. Who am I kidding? The extra weight will help to keep me warm. If I had moved to Alaska I wouldn't be exercising in the winter.* I lean over to reset my alarm to rise at 5:00, then flip the pillow to the cool side and force my conscience to quiet as I drift back off to sleep.

Brank. Brank. Brank. *Damn.* The alarm echoes its annoying electronic sound throughout the bedroom. I click the switch, roll to my back, and begin to recalculate my plans. *I can grade the papers during my planning. If I do them now, it's going to piss me off which will ruin the rest of the day.* The time reads 5:03; I click the alarm key and hold it down with my pointer finger while I click the minute button with my ring finger until the clock reads 5:30. *Just a half hour more, then I'll get up.* This time I don't turn my back to the clock; I'm serious about rising this time. So serious that I open my right eye every few minutes to calculate how much time I have until the alarm rings again. 5:07...5:18...5:24. *This is dumb. Why can't I just get out of bed? I used to get up at 3:15 when I worked for the airline. Man, I've gotten lazy over the years. I need to either get up or reset the alarm for the normal time.* 5:27. *Screw it.* My hand emerges from the covers as if it has a mind of its own. Click. Click. Click. The alarm time reads 6:15. *I can exercise tonight when I get home. I'll do grading and grad work then, too.*

The insanity continues throughout the work week -- every day I promise to plan my lessons better and further in advance, so I don't wind up feeling like a monkey throwing poo at the wall to see what sticks; and every afternoon I swear I am going to actually do the work, grade the papers, work on my thesis rather than sit in front of the television and zone out. I wonder how much of this ritual is an effort to save my sanity from the high school students I tangle with every day while forcing English literature upon them and how much of it is procrastination. I like to think that I am a more productive member of society and I earn the right to veg out every evening because I'm not hurting anyone but myself.

Why isn't there a support group for procrastinators? There is Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, Students Against Drunk Drivers, Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, Adult Children of Alcoholics, counseling for sex offenders, smoking support groups, cancer support groups, but nothing for procrastinators. The obvious joke is that there was a meeting time, but everyone procrastinated and failed to show up. Ha. Ha. And maybe it's true that the person who would have the wherewithal to organize it would be considered an outsider because he didn't procrastinate the task, and the rest of us are too busy running like mice on our procrastination tread mills to do anything about it.

"Go see if Mom is coming." My sister pitched forward when I kicked the back of the front seat of the car where we were waiting.

"No. You go sec." God, Jody could be a snot. Ever since she reached the fourth grade, she wouldn't do my bidding anymore.

"Just go."

"You go. Dad's in the garage." We both knew that neither of us was willing to risk getting yelled at by Dad for going inside to check on Mom's preparation status. Daring to do that would risk staying home from Amy Myers, my best friend's birthday party completely.

While I am almost never physically late to work, a meeting, or a festivity, to be honest, procrastination has affected more than just the inner workings of my job; it has impacted my personal life. My mom likes to dramatize my single status and attribute it

to either my unmarketable traits of being overweight, a whopping size sixteen, or my “sailor mouth,” but fat, foul-mouthed girls get married all the time. During my adolescent years, Dad offered to pay me to lose weight. He had no tolerance for obesity or the precursors to it since he remained the same weight and size as he was in high school. If he started to gain weight, then he simply stopped eating until his pants were no longer tight. I figured Dad had a right to say something since he was so disciplined and I valued his opinion; unfortunately, I assumed his opinion was that of all men, which didn’t help when it came time to date.

One time a hundred dollars was the prize if I lost twenty pounds in a month. For twenty-eight days, I ignored the offer and continued with my normal eating and non-exercise routine. On the twenty-ninth day, I decided to starve myself and ride the stationary bike while wearing three sweat suits. Of course, I failed to lose the weight, but in my mind, I tried.

Mom was more subtle. She would make comments, like “You would be so pretty if you would just lose some weight,” while patting my cheek, or “You’re getting your shelf back,” with her hand on the thick upper-portion of my hip. Mom had her own weight issues-- something she struggled with after she got married-- so it was difficult to bite back comments of my own. Anyway, the funny thing is I’m still a size 16, which accounts for the average woman in today’s society, so I’m not grotesque by most people’s standards, and I was even smaller growing up which makes the entire situation insane. Vanity aside, I do need to lose weight for health reasons, but my commitment to dieting lasts about as long as Jell-O nailed to a tree.

I never did embrace my mother's theory that my foul language had anything to do with my lack of a man. There are women all around me who present themselves in a less flattering manner; hell, they even have their own T.V. show on the WE Network -- it's called Bridezillas -- so that theory is crap. Her other theory is that I have no tolerance for romance because I have been privy to the underbelly of her marriage for so long that I'm jaded. *Yes, Mom, I know he's an ass; he'll admit it. I know he cheated, but you chose him, and you've stayed with him. I'm a product of your love, remember? Yes, Dad, she's cold and bitchy. QVC is the devil. You're right, I don't want to hear it.* There may be some truth to this, but since I can't re-learn my impression of marriage without returning to the womb, I fail to see the benefit in laying blame. I'm beginning to think that my procrastination has just saved me from having to deal with much of the marital drama my friends have experienced.

In the last year, I have also accepted that virtually everyone has committed a mortal sin at some point; it's just that some are better at hiding it than others. Among my friends and family, there are adulterers, thieves, abortionists, bullies, drug addicts, felons, liars, and gluttons. Of the men who approach me, I can avoid the gross ones on my own, and the younger ones have been former students so far, and the temptation fades once they call me Miss Parkes. However, the married men who proposition me are proving harder to resist now that my morals aren't as lofty and I'm facing old age as a loner. It might seem immature and justifying, but I figure what's the big deal -- everyone else has confessed their sins and retained status among the family. I think what keeps me from acting on anything is my fear of being rejected and condemned for choosing to falter.

I long for the ideal of an arranged marriage, to be told from my earliest memory that I would be wed on a pre-determined date at a pre-determined age and live at a pre-determined location. There would be no marketing of my personality, adjustment to my looks, critique of my goals and education. Oh, I would still take pride in the person I am, but the pressure to compete against other more dainty, agreeable, and ladylike women would be erased. It would be nice to not have to search the mass of men I am told exist on dating websites. My friends could stop threatening to enroll me behind my back. The need to fumble through first dates, assuming I went on any, would be negated. The man chosen for me would be ordered to learn to love me or at the very least learn to deal with me.

My Aunt Jinny says that a man must feel needed and that my Dad, her brother, has made me too independent for my own good. I am ready to give up some responsibility, at least in my head. I'm just so used to being independent it has become a part of who I am. Based on advice from the same aunt, I thought I approached the idea of love with realistic and high expectations of what I would accept and what I would offer.

The summer of my sixteenth year, my sister and I spent a week with Aunt Jinny and her family at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and one night Aunt Jinny and I stayed up all night talking. She lived within a marriage she chased after when she was eighteen. It was the escape route she thought would make her happy, but in turn, it offered her a cheating, abusive husband and two wonderful daughters she vowed to prevent from making the same choices she made.

“Jenny, do you have a boyfriend?” Aunt Jinny sat on the other side of the island in her kitchen on a stool.

“No. I did have one. Tony. He liked me a year ago, but Dad wouldn’t let me date until I was sixteen. Now, no body wants to date me.” I felt she might side with me about Dad being too strict.

“Well, honey, I think your Dad was just looking out for you.”

“But, everyone is hooked up now, and the ones who aren’t I don’t like.” She didn’t understand after all.

“Listen to me. You are beautiful and have a lot to offer some guy, but don’t be too eager to, as you say, hook up with someone.” She shifted on the stool she had been sitting on for the past four hours. “Jenny, I’m going to give you some advice I wish someone had been able to get me to listen to when I was your age. Boys, men are going to come to you and offer you many things. Some will have the best of intentions, and some will not. Some boys are going to bring you a bowl of shit tied with a big red bow.”

I looked at her hard to see if she was serious. She was.

“They are going to try and tell you what they offer you is love. They will tell you that what they have to offer is the best there is, but you need to know that what they offer isn’t love. It’s shit in a bowl and you always need to know the difference.”

Her words shocked me a bit, but something within her analogy rang true, and I have passed it on to many women along the way.

I used to be more optimistic about love and relationships. I would develop a crush, work out entire scenarios in my mind about what our lives would be like together;

I'd be pleasant and positive, hell, I'd even shave my legs, just in case. Now, after dates who take me to Wal-Mart as part of the "big night out," I don't shave my legs anymore because the hope of me taking someone home is dim. I wonder how many other women are fed up with, limited by and disgusted with the men they meet. On no continent is a trip to Wal-Mart, within of the first six months of dating, necessary. If I pull out a razor, it's like I am giving myself permission to hope. But, my bullshit tolerance level is low now and the process takes a lot of time. Maybe I have given up to not proceed with the ritual of shearing in hopes of finding intimacy, but to be blunt, I know when I'm going to take advantage of myself, so why bother?

My friend Debbie was on the other end of my cell, waiting for my reaction.

"Did you open the e-invite yet? Open it."

"I'm opening it. What's the big deal?" The electronic invitation opened. *Carrie invites you to a Slumber Party.*

"A slumber party? Is Carrie crazy? Who wants to do that?" I couldn't imagine Carrie's motivation for wanting a bunch of twenty to forty-year-olds spending the night.

"Girlfriend, look at the catalogue. It's a toy party."

"Oh. *Ohhh*. Wow, Carrie has a side to her I didn't expect." The vibrators, dildos, how-to videos, and such splayed across the pages as I clicked to turn the page. "Okay, I'm game." I wondered what Mr. Totten, my Christian school principal, would say.

The night of the party arrived, and fifteen or so of us arrived at Carrie's house acting like we were waiting to be busted for skipping school. Dixie, the party presenter, asked us to take our seats.

“Okay ladies, are you ready to have some fun? Our first toy of the evening is our most popular. The Blue Butterfly.” She held the vibrator above her head so the ladies in the back of the room could see. *Whurrr*. “The Butterfly offers five different vibration speeds, three different rotation routines for the shaft, and see these silver beads? They rotate at the base for added sensation.” I kept waiting for the ohhs and ahhs to begin. Dixie continued with her presentation as each of the toys made its way around the room after being stroked and admired by each of the women. The unspoken question was *who was going to be brave enough to order*.

The end of the evening and the supply of alcohol removed all hesitancy. *I’m getting the Hummingbird, I know that for sure*. The claims for other items were made and laughter filled the room. I was on to a new phase of my life; I finally was going to have a steady boyfriend, B.O.B. – my battery operated boyfriend.

It is quite possible that I have procrastinated myself into a corner where I will be alone until I die. I panic about this about once a year; family and friends panic about it more often. I used to want kids, now I don’t; I used to want a husband, now I’m not sure; I used to know what I believe, now I question everything. Maybe I am having a mid-life crisis; however, I don’t feel like I am in crisis mode. I put off exercise, education, intimacy, adventure; I’m pragmatic, stubbornly independent, yet content. I have no interest in having someone else to pick up after or clean for or in-laws to deal with or factor into my time off. I do miss companionship and it would be nice to have someone to turn to or to take care of me, but men, and people in general, get on my nerves after awhile, so I either need to find and marry a trucker, a pilot, a traveling salesman (do they

exist anymore?), or a pirate, because I don't see anyone else lasting on a day-in-day-out routine with me.

According to the documentary I saw on *Sunday Morning* a few weeks ago, the number of women who remain alone into their late thirties and forties is still on the rise. The difference is that these women are not content to fade out of the dating pool or to the back of the extended family photo. Instead, these brave women are choosing to create families of their own through artificial insemination. The two women interviewed stated they always wanted a husband and children, but when the husband didn't happen, they decided that was not a good enough reason to miss out on motherhood. If women made these choices even four decades ago, the decision would have bordered on heresy; now, the high rates of single parent families due to divorce and death negates the need to sound an alarm when women chose to have children without the assistance of a traditional father figure.

It seems so dismal to think that I have even waited too long to decide to have children on my own, and I know I should probably be more concerned, but I just can't bring myself to worry about it. I respect other women having the gumption to parent alone. I marvel at the women who are able to deal with any human, adult or child, after a long day at work. I know I should probably look for what is wrong with me that I don't mourn the loss of anniversaries and Mother's Days. Maybe tomorrow. Right now I have to get to bed because I need to get up early.

Second Wife

“Hey Jen, I had an interesting conversation with Michelle this weekend about you.” A grin formed beneath John’s graying goatee; there was a twinkle in his eye as he sat next to me at the lunch table. The twinkle meant he was about to tell a story that he found humorous because he knew I wouldn’t find any humor in it at all.

“Oh yeah. This should be good.” I took a bite of my meatball sub to emphasize my mild disinterest. John and I have taught together for the past six years so he knew I wasn’t big on surprises or hook-ups with his friends.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way or think that Michelle and I sit around and talk like this, but I just have to tell you.” He was so giddy I half expected him to start clapping. I wasn’t sure whether to be scared or intrigued, so I just raised my eyebrows to indicate he should continue while I chewed.

“Somehow we got on the topic of what each of us should do if the other one dies. I know, not a nice conversation, but you got to have them at some point.”

I nodded.

“Well, Michelle really surprised me when she announced that she’s decided I should marry you if she dies because she knows you will take good care of me and the boys.” He smiled as a nervous chuckle punctuated his statement.

I wasn’t sure how to reply. “Huh. Do I get a vote in this?” was what ended up coming out.

“No. I don’t think so. Michelle seemed pretty sure.”

“Okay, well, thanks for letting me in on the plans.” I concentrated harder on consuming my lunch. Fortunately, Kate, a new teacher to the high school English department, was there to comment.

“Jen, see, you’ll get married. You just have to wait for John’s wife to die.”

This was not the first time I was offered the position of second wife; however, it was the first time the wife chose me and death was involved. In previous situations, I was recruited by the husband and relocation to Utah with a conversion to the Mormon faith was proposed. Maybe there would be some benefits to becoming a second wife. I assume I wouldn’t be held to the same standard as the first wife, so I could travel and socialize with my friends and avoid the demands of motherhood. Sharing a house with another woman would probably prove more difficult than sharing a man. Maybe my job would be to entertain him when the first wife tires of him then I wouldn’t have to worry with the day-to-day issues of a long-term relationship.

I can’t imagine my parents would be overly proud, but it would silence my mother’s mantra about getting married. In a society that affords so many choices for women and a limited supply of men, it seems like a logical solution. Offers to become the second wife, I guess, are meant to be a compliment, but all I hear is that I’m not interesting or captivating enough to elicit full time love. I’m a walking consolation prize.

When I was fourteen I attended Seneca Trail Christian Academy, the educational home of a hundred or so students K-12, and I was madly in love with Tony Morgan, a senior. My crush began the year before. Mesmerized by his sandy-blond hair, his

height, his casual demeanor, I would stare and sigh and obsess about him and analyze his every move with my friends, always looking for some meaning in every glance. For nine months I obsessed before I was assigned the desk next to him.

The desks at STCA were not traditional school desks; instead, they were three areas to sit divided by chipboard partitions. We would pull our hard plastic seats up to the desk area in order to complete our work independently, only asking for help from the principal when we needed assistance with algebra or chemistry or such. My desk was against the far wall and Tony's was right next to mine. I would contort myself by crossing my legs, carefully placing my foot so that it hooked behind the adjoining desk leg in an effort to encounter his leg. What started out as accidental brushes developed into flirtation and deliberate physical contact. Once I earned his attention, all my hard work was in vain because I was forbidden to date until I turned sixteen; however, since Tony and I attended the same church, we ended up seeing each other six to seven times a week.

It was a perfect first love -- love notes, youth group trips, hand-holding, long gazes -- until it didn't progress any further. Even though none of us was ever far beyond an adult's eye, the other couples became physical. Phillip, one of the other seniors, finally asked Tony if he had ever kissed me, and Tony later confessed that he replied, "Are you crazy man? Earl Parkes would rip my lips off." I laughed when he told me because I thought he was perceptive, but in hindsight that was probably what shifted my gilded vision of him. Why not be willing to lose his lips for me? Weren't young boys supposed to meet a challenge for true love? Maybe I expected too much, but young girls are taught to

expect a prince-like charmer who battles dragons and witches and trolls to obtain his prize. Tony didn't battle for me.

From an adult perspective, I realize I expected too much from my young love. I desired salvation when I wasn't in need of saving. If I was as self-reliant then as I am now, I would have basked in the attention Tony showered on me instead of wishing him to be someone he wasn't. We would have gotten to the physical aspect of our relationship. That's logical. I just don't know at what point a woman stops comparing her life and loves to those around her and develops the maturity to have a good relationship without wishing for more.

Eric was different. He was dangerous. Had an opinion. Traveled with carnivals and fairs like a gypsy up and down the cast coast. He was fun. I met Eric the summer before my senior year while I was working as a gate keeper at the West Virginia State Fair, which lasted for ten days in the month of August. Eric was tall, handsome, and cocky.

"Hey. You're not the girl who worked here last year." He stared down at me from behind his sunglasses. I looked up at the reflection of myself in the lens.

"No. No, I'm not." I smiled and shifted my weight from one side to the other. Another boy was to his right grinning wide and looking too timid to introduce himself.

"My name is Eric, and this is my cousin Billy." I greeted both, but kept my smile trained on Eric. They were up from Florida to run the second of his parent's two lemonade stands. My friend Tammy and I were to come by for our break. We did, but

Eric wasn't as friendly. Billy was, which only irritated me. Eric came to visit the gate during his break and explained that he had promised the "girl at the gate" to Billy when he thought the same girl would be there from last year.

"Are you interested in him?" Eric grinned already knowing my answer.

"No. Not in the least." He grabbed my hand and squeezed.

"Great. He's not going to be happy, but you're worth the fight."

I could hardly process his words. *Worth the fight*. I'd never been told that before. I felt special somehow, and I was young enough to believe the fight was for me. Over me. Later that week he came to my house to meet my parents. A ritual that had to be fulfilled prior to us going to the movies. Eric was charming and funny. I couldn't believe he was mine. He held the passenger door to his red Fiesta open for me, leaning in for a kiss before he shut the door. He emptied his jeans pocket prior to settling behind the steering wheel.

"What are you doing?" I watched as he replaced the earrings I failed to notice he had removed.

"I make a better first impression without them. Cuts down on parent resistance." He seemed proud of himself. I wondered how many times he had completed this routine, only to realize I didn't care. His experience had headed off comments from my father later, and I was in love. We went out to the movies and went parking. He promised to return north to escort me to the prom -- an empty promise that kept me from attending my senior prom -- and I told myself I was too mature for high school rituals. Eric possessed two of my summers, separated by a year of letters. He's the first of the bad boys; the last of the young loves.

In the Bible, Paul states that single people are actually the more God-centered individuals, and those who choose to marry are the ones who aren't strong enough to serve God alone. But I don't want to become a missionary and move overseas or convert from the Baptist faith to Catholicism in order to add meaning to my singleness. Nuns never seem to get heckled about not being married – they're married to God -- for God's sake. This is not my answer.

Since I began teaching, people seem to accept my isolation as part of dedicating my life to bettering the lives of America's youth. The humorous thing is that I can't even type those words without gagging a little. It's so not true. I have zero desire to become the aging spinster teacher like Miss Beatle from *Little House on the Prairie* who one day retires and finds herself all alone yet fulfilled by her sacrifice. Pishah. I don't even think most of my students will remember how to spell my last name correctly in ten years. And public education is nowhere to establish dependable retirement, so even though teaching has been a long-accepted profession for unwed women, it no longer offers the security and respect it did before.

“Jason says he's moving you to first wife if you land this position at CSX.” The text from my best friend Heather made me chuckle. She married Jason four years ago in Houston, Texas, which is still their home. Lexie, their seven-month-old daughter, hasn't met me yet, but I'm sure she has already heard about the joke.

About a year after Jason and Heather married, they watched the show *Big Love* with her parents who were visiting from Virginia. Jason and Mr. Willis theorized at

length about the benefits of multiple wives. The hypothesis -- men should be able to have as many wives as they can afford.

“Dad, that’s ridiculous. You’re lucky to have found one woman to marry you.”

Heather told me the story a few weeks later. I pictured her standing with her hand on her hip with her long, dark, curly hair flying.

“Men are so stupid. I told Dad his premise would only work if women can do multiple marriages too.”

“What? What woman wants more than one husband?” The Texas heat must be getting to Heather.

“Listen to my logic. Dad was sitting there acting like all these women would just kill to be married to him. Jason was smart and kept his mouth shut for the most part. I just explained to them that the problem with the theory was that all women like to be the alpha wife. Say you marry Jason and become his second wife, then he gets a third. When you marry your true love, then I would become his second or third and so forth. That way each woman gets to run a house the way they want. And each gets the support of the others.”

“Heather, that may sound logical, but you will never find people who would be able to live like that. It’s crazy.”

“What crazy? I love you. Jason now loves you. I wouldn’t care if you slept with him. He’s good.”

“Wow. Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think so.”

I am Jason's second wife in name only. I never bring it up. Heather does when she's joking about trading Jason in for a newer model. I just think the whole thing is off-putting, yet Heather is not my only female friend to joke about me dating her husband. Tamara and Debbie, both fellow teachers, refer to their husbands as my boyfriends. Each has said they would want their husbands to settle down with me or at least someone like me if they die. Strange. At really low moments, when I'm feeling unloved, undesirable, and unmarriageable, I wonder if this is my future. I don't date well or often, so there is a good chance I may never marry. If I was forced to explain why dating is such a challenge, I can honestly say that there has been a huge lack of dating opportunities, and the ones that have presented themselves have scared me. I become awkward and self-conscious, like I'm stuck at thirteen-years-old.

In truth, I don't mind being alone (or have convinced myself, I don't) and would never betray the trust of my friends, so pursuing their husbands now or after their deaths would not happen. Do they think I would? Would they really want me to do such a thing? If I ever do marry, I do know that I will not be offering my friends any second wife positions.

Married Men

My cell phone rang from the end table next to the recliner. *PITA. What could he want?* This was the second time he called today, and the second time I let voicemail answer. I told him I was spending spring break at my mom's so he shouldn't be calling at all. The *chime* indicated he left a message this time. *Okay. Maybe something is wrong.* Mom was getting ready to leave for cardiac rehab, so I could call him back in a minute. His message was playful – *Not answering the phone is why you don't have any friends, punk.* – statements like this were what make PITA, pain in the ass, an accurate nickname. I returned his call as soon as Mom reached the end of the driveway. Voicemail. Whatever. I left my own smart message.

“Smart ass messages like that are why people don't answer the phone when you call.”

A few moments later, he called. I knew he would. Even though we had worked together for five years, this friendship didn't start until six months ago. PITA explained that we should be together because he had liked me for three years and finally mustered up the courage to approach me. His claim that I was intimidating seemed ridiculous, to me, in contrast to his African-American player persona.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” he returned in a mocking tone. I smiled at his obnoxiousness.

“What're you up to?”

“Driving back from Florida.”

“Alone?” I knew the answer before he replied because he wouldn't be calling me with someone else in the car.

“Yeah. No one wanted to go with me.” His voice changed into the version I only hear when no one else was around. Mellow and relaxed. He can talk about absolutely nothing for hours -- work, beliefs, and irritations. He likes to hover over the things that irritate me as an immature flirtation of getting to know each other. We have been exchanging verbal foreplay for six months, but the frequency of his calls has decreased recently so I know something is up. I have been here before. The conversation continues -- more playful, like the talks we had at first.

“Oh yeah, that reminds me. Why did you give away my bottle?” His voice became serious for a moment. I purchased him a bottle of Jack Daniels, his favorite, a few months ago with the understanding he would come to my house to collect the gift. When he originally suggested the visit, I troubleshot the idea – What if someone sees your car? You know I live on the main road, right? – but, once he dispelled my concerns, I hoped it would be just a matter of time before he came over. The weeks turned into months, and now his older daughter lives with him and rides to and from school with him every day.

“I told you. I gave it to Christina for her birthday since you haven’t made it over. And won’t be making it over.” My voice became tight.

“That’s not it. I haven’t been over because I’ve decided we aren’t doing that.”

“What do you mean, ‘We aren’t doing that’? When was that decided?”

“I decided it when you became my friend. If we have sex, then one of us... you...will get emotional and the friendship will end. And, I don’t want that to happen. You’ve come to mean a lot to me. I don’t talk like this with everyone.” The sincerity in his voice almost took the sting out of the words.

Some might argue that men choosing me to be their friend and confidant is a compliment, and I guess it is, but it's not very flattering. I know I am not setting myself up for the fairy tale as long as I allow myself to become attracted to married men, but what the fuck? What is it about me that is so damn un-stimulating and screams platonic friend? And, why am I unable to identify the crisis point in a relationship? Other women don't seem to have this problem. Some exude sex even if they are unwashed for three days and wearing shit-covered sweats, yet no man would proclaim to them, "Let's be friends." Me? I could wrap myself in ham and cheese sandwiches and a starving man would say, "I'd love to eat my fill, but I just had ham and cheese last year."

Most women my age are well into the second decade of marriage or working on finding the next "Mr. Okay-for-now," yet I cannot work my way toward the need to get married, develop a casual sexual relationship, nor invest true feelings. The truth is that Pita was a local version of a long-distance problem.

My first encounter with Jerry was the night of Heather Willis' Halloween party in 1997. Heather and I worked together at Piedmont Airlines as ground personnel in Charlottesville, Virginia: she as an agent and me as one of her supervisors. Jerry was a pilot for Piedmont who crashed at the apartment Heather shared with Brynlee, a flight attendant and high school friend, and Bryan, another ground agent who slept on the couch temporarily. Heather loved Halloween and had developed friendships with many of the flight crew members stationed out of Charlottesville. I wasn't as social as she, so many

of these people were just people I greeted as they walked through the office to board the planes for work.

The turnout for the party was great, and the costumes were even better. Heather had rented the apartment complex's activity room and was dressed as Fred Flintstone who hosted Mr. Potato Head, two nuns, the Devil, a pirate, a saloon girl and a guy dressed in a nightie along with several who showed up without costume, like me. It wasn't that I didn't want to be festive, but the skull cap I purchased split when I tried to apply the long ponytail for my Tibetan monk outfit, so I came as me. Heather's only damper for the evening was the absence of Jerry who lived in Pittsburgh with his wife and couldn't make the party.

I spent most of the evening talking with a few of the crew members in the kitchen in order to avoid Dana who was dressed as the Devil and the fight she was attempting to pick with the two nuns who were lifelong friends of Angie, another flight attendant who lived outside of Norfolk.

"Jenny, why are you in the kitchen?" Heather was the only person in Charlottesville allowed to call me Jenny.

"I'm avoiding Dana and her melodrama." I looked at the flight attendant whose name I don't remember, but who had entered the kitchen for the same reason.

"She just left. Come here. I need you to help me figure out who's in the Chewbaka costume." I looked out the kitchen door and sure enough there was someone in a full Chewbaka costume straight from the Star Wars movies.

“Huh. Have you talked to him?” I looked down at Heather whose Flintstone costume was now covered with a throw from one of the couches against the cool autumn night air.

“Yeah. But he just does the Chewie sound and walks away. It’s kinda creepy. I’m going to see if Angie and Greg can get him to take his head off.” With that Heather’s short, stocky Fred Flintstone self was headed toward the saloon girl and Mr. Potato Head across the room.

About a half hour later, the group from the kitchen joined the party to find Chewie’s head off and Jerry standing in a brown, fur-covered suit with beer in hand. His desire to drink won over his desire to surprise and freak out Heather. Jerry looked good; his tall stature and broad shoulders filled the costume nicely, and his still-tanned skin almost matched the brown of the fur around his neck. By the end of the evening, he was out of the costume completely because the costume got too hot over his jeans and t-shirt, so Heather decided to put it on to be warm resulting in more of a little Iwok than a mini Chewbaka.

I didn’t claim Jerry as a personal friend after that night, but I did develop an appreciation for his efforts to please Heather, one of my close friends. It would be Spring before Jerry and I spent any real time together. Heather convinced me to go to Nelson County, Virginia, with her to camp out at John Sutton’s house for his annual Memorial Day weekend three-day party. John was one of the captains stationed in Charlottesville who I rarely spoke to unless I needed to get paperwork for him or ask him to turn a flight quickly. She had been invited because she was friends with several of the crew members,

and she invited me. Jerry was going to supply the tents and we were going to have fun. I typically worked all the time in order to make sure the station ran smoothly, which was my job as a supervisor. Heather talked me into spending my only night off at the party and promised we would return to cover our shifts the next night.

Heather and I rode to John's house at the top of one of Nelson County's mountains in her Jeep. The event was complete with a huge bonfire, John's wife shaving his head with horse clippers, which turned out to be his annual hair cut, camping in the woods behind the house, and rides on John Sutton's and John Monroe's Harleys. By early afternoon the second day, Heather had arranged for someone else to cover her shift and for Jerry to give me a ride back to Charlottesville. I could have killed her.

The ride home was awkward and quiet with Jerry showing me his favorite fishing spots and stopping off at another pilot's house to shower while I stayed outside. Thank God I did because the pilot came home before Jerry finished, and the pilot seemed really surprised to see that either of us was there. I would have crapped my pants if he had found me in his house with Jerry all wet in the shower.

Fast forward to the next August. Jerry and Joe, another older pilot who served as a mentor to Jerry, asked me to go out drinking with them after work. I had to close the station at eleven, but they said they would wait for me. The offer seemed odd to me since most pilots liked to drink and two hours to wait on me was a long time, but they did. I met them at Heather's apartment and we left from there to go to downtown Charlottesville, home of the University of Virginia. Despite it being a college town, most of the bars closed at midnight, so we grabbed a few quick beers before Joe decided we

and she invited me. Jerry was going to supply the tents and we were going to have fun. I typically worked all the time in order to make sure the station ran smoothly, which was my job as a supervisor. Heather talked me into spending my only night off at the party and promised we would return to cover our shifts the next night.

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should buy a case at the store and drink in the back of Jerry's truck. We drank for hours outside of Joe's crash pad. We couldn't go inside because the crew members he lived with had an early morning show. Instead, I sat on the curb behind the truck while Jerry and Joe alternated standing and leaning on the tailgate we were using as a table.

I have no recollection of our conversation except that Jerry liked for Joe to teach him new words. Joe looked the scholarly type with his silver gray hair and soft-jowled cheeks. The beer was gone by four a.m. Joe went inside to his couch and Jerry drove me back to Heather's to get my car. Heather was out of town visiting her family in Richmond, which is the only reason I was invited out instead of her.

"I am so mad. I'm going to kill Jerry." Heather entered my office in a flurry and plopped herself into the chair across from my desk. I was working on covering overtime shifts, which had become problematic. I looked up at Heather and attempted to seem interested.

"Why? What'd he do?"

"You know how I went home last week?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Bryan told me that Jerry brought some hooker back to the apartment and they stayed in my damn bed. Bryan said he wasn't sure if he should tell me, but finally decided to. When Jerry gets off that plane, I'm gonna ask him what the hell his problem is. I thought we were friends." Heather's anger was understandable, but I started to laugh.

“What are you laughing at? This isn’t funny. Jerry brought some co-ed back to my bed.”

“Heather. Heather. Calm down. I’m the one who stayed with Jerry that night. We went out drinking and crashed at your place.” She jumped up before I could finish the sentence, relief all over her face.

“Thank God. I don’t care if it was you. You could wear my underwear and I wouldn’t care. So, did you do anything?” She leaned forward so I could whisper my answer.

“No, nothing. We just cuddled. It was really strange.”

Heather snarled her lip at me. “That better not be the truth. How could you just lay next to that body without jumping all over him? I gotta meet this flight. We’re going to talk about this.” And, with that she disappeared out to the ramp.

In truth, she was going to be disappointed with what I had to report because nothing happened. Jerry convinced me to stay at Heather’s instead of driving home. I convinced him to stay awake with me so I could call Dean, one of my workers who promised to do a closing shift and then an opening shift as long as I called to wake him up. We had to remain awake for another hour to make the call, so we talked. Jerry grabbed at me, and I tried to avoid him. By the time the call was made to Dean, Jerry was convinced that in order for me to stay he needed to behave himself. The night resulted in a long nap with Jerry pretzeled around me, and I barely slept from the guilt of lying with a married man.

The internal debate of whether this single act made me a whore echoed in my head. Cheating of any sort was bad. Right? According to Heather, Jerry was in a loveless marriage, and he only stayed because his wife got pregnant. But, that didn't justify his behavior. At least not to me. Heather told me of Jerry's affairs, something I still don't know if he knows. I couldn't enjoy the warmth of his arms around me or his breath on my neck or the moan of his voice because I kept wondering about the stories my father and my uncles must have told others. They were presumably in loveless marriages as well.

My cell phone rang from the end table next to the couch. *Jerry's Cell*. A warmth flashed over my entire body.

"Hey. What are you up to?"

"Nothing. Talkin' to you. Did I interrupt you? Do I need to wait for you to excuse yourself from your man?" Jerry had opened every single one of our conversations the same way for the past decade plus.

"There's nobody here, Jerry, and you know it." I wanted to be angry with him, but my voice betrayed me by being coy.

"Nobody there? Impossible. What's wrong with the men down there?" His voice was teasing, but there's a bit of relief in it as well.

"I don't know. Guess they're just not interested." *And, not you*. I always wanted to utter those words, but never dared for fear the phone calls would end. My friendship with Jerry was a cautious dance between what we wanted to say and what was actually said and released into the universe, never to be taken back again. I feared going beyond

our flirtation, our talks about a future together in a cabin in Alaska far away from any of the demands of this life, our plans for a life other than the ones we led, would end. Maybe I interpreted the conversations as I wanted them to be. Maybe there was no real attraction between the two of us. Heather says that I am the girl Jerry wishes he had waited for instead of marrying the high school girlfriend everyone expected him to marry. But, that girlfriend, his wife, now offered him three children and a continuing loveless marriage. At least loveless according to Jerry.

At what point do I wise up? Our conversations are months apart now and only when he calls me. I would never pursue him; that would be wrong. And every time I seem to resolve to live my life without him and move beyond the dream of one day being together, he calls and I don't not answer. We talk about nothing, yet everything. After each conversation, I beat myself up for being so stupid. I need to stop comparing Jerry to every guy I meet. So what if he is the closest version of Dad I have met. He isn't going to leave his wife and kids hell, I have convinced him not to over the years. I never wanted to be the other woman. Not when he crashed at my house and slept in my bed. Not when I met him on overnight stays in Richmond. In all that time I have blocked his advances and compensated my guilty conscience by pleading her case to him. Just like I have for years in my parents' marriage.

I never slept with him. Never even kissed him, so why do I feel like a cheat? Heather's advice has always been to "go for it" the next time the chance presents itself, but I think Jerry and I have shifted into friendship mode. I don't know when the change happened. It just happened. He hasn't said the words, but I can tell that he won't risk losing the last cheerleader in his life to sex. I can now admit to myself that even if we did

get together our time would be overshadowed by his ex-wife and children. I wish I was wired to have wild, guiltless sex, but my moral, inner voice won't allow it.

Justification

“No, there isn’t a problem.” Dad shifted his weight from one leg to the other as he straightened the items in the basket next to the phone: pens, pencils, paper, nuts and bolts, washers. The truth was that my parents had decided to try another church across town to see if they liked the feel of the spirit in that church.

“Pastor, we were out of town visiting family. My brothers wanted to meet in Winchester for lunch.”

My head shot up from the homework I was attempting to complete at the kitchen table. Our extended family lived in Pennsylvania – Dad’s side in center P.A., as the natives call it, near State College, and Mom’s lived outside of Pittsburgh – and, we did go to visit them quite often, but we weren’t out of town on Sunday – how could Dad lie to a man of God? My mind began whirling about the eternal consequences my dad would face.

“Well, thanks for checking on us, Pastor. Yeah, see you next Sunday.” Dad hung up the phone and in two steps reached the door to the garage.

“Dad, are we going back to church?” My voice hesitated, exposing my nervousness. Without turning to look at me, he said, “I don’t think so.” He exited before I could ask for clarification.

When I was around eight-years-old, my mother started to teach me how to iron clothes by allowing me to iron my dad’s hankies. The little balled masses would eventually stretch out into squares of thin, see-through linen; then I would fold, iron, fold again, and iron the final crease. Once perfected, I worked my way up to pants and shirts.

Along with this minor task was the duty of putting the clothes, folded and hanging, away in his dresser and closet. I loved putting his folded clothes into the drawers of his dresser because it afforded me an opportunity to look through his top drawer. This was the drawer where he kept his watches, tie tacks, cufflinks, name tags from the different hospitals he worked throughout the years. The only hospital he worked in once we moved to West Virginia was Greenbrier Valley Medical Center, but there were tags from hospitals in Pennsylvania, Texas and Ohio. And, there were his dog tags. The cool metal was faded and scratched; in order to read the type I tilted them to create a shadow. The story was that he joined the Air Force after he received his draft notice from the Army. He had no desire to go to Vietnam, and his choice saved him from having to do so. The military was the reason he became a nurse anesthetist – recruited due to his attention to detail as a nurse.

Under the sliding jewelry shelf there were old photos of his mother, who had died when I was one and a half, and odd little trinkets that meant nothing to anyone but him. Toward the back of the drawer -- always just beyond my short grasp -- were some papers, boxes of checks, and miscellaneous other documents that I knew better than to go through even if I could reach them. The cedar smell from the top drawer seemed stronger than the others that contained his socks, underwear, undershirts, and shorts; maybe because he didn't open this drawer as often as the rest. I was always careful not to disturb his belongings, thus notifying him of my snooping. Despite the rebuke I risked if caught, I could never forgo the urge to look at these rare treasures – each a glimpse into the man my father was: a captain, a groom, a worker, a caregiver, a father, a provider, a son. The man beyond the dad I knew and loved.

Bam. Bam. The kitchen door shuttered against the foot that kicked it.

“Jennifer, get the door,” Mom yelled. I jumped up from my homework to open the door to the freezer room. Mom stepped back once the door started to swing open; her arms filled with the bushel basket of green beans she picked.

“Clear the table so I can dump these, and you can help me snap the ends.”

“Ok.” I put my papers into the textbooks and stacked them.

“Lord, these beans just seem to keep coming and coming. I wish your father would let me pull the plants. She dumped the beans onto the table, then turned to get the bowls we used to hold the cleaned beans. “I hate canning beans. It has got to be the worst chore ever.”

I never minded the process myself, but Mom complained every year about it. If I were her, I would bitch about canning pickles or tomatoes or corn since there were several more steps to them than the beans, but she hated beans. We soon fell into a rhythm. *Snap. Snap. Clink. Snap. Snap. Clink.* The clinks of the beans hitting the metal bowl became less tinny as the beans rose.

“Mom?”

“Hmmm.”

“The preacher called while you were in the garden.” I kept snapping beans so I didn’t have to make eye contact.

“Did you answer?” She didn’t even seem interested.

“No. Dad was in here. He got it.” I wanted her to ask what they talked about so she couldn’t say I was eavesdropping, but she didn’t. Several moments passed before I couldn’t take the questions rolling around in my head anymore.

“Mom?”

“Yes?” She reminded me of Pop Pop, her father, when she answered like this. He would always say, “Yes,” when my sister or I called him. Jody once asked him how he could answer, “Yes,” when he didn’t know the question yet. He just shook his head and waited for one of us to continue. Mom raised her head from her pile of beans and looked at me, eyebrow raised.

“Dad told the preacher that we met Uncle Mel and Uncle Roger for lunch Sunday.” She listened to my words, then looked at her stationary hands. They began working the pile of beans again.

“Your father and I have some decisions to make.”

“I asked Dad if we were going back to church and he said, ‘No.’” I glanced over. *Did her expression change?* Mom didn’t seem to like Dad’s direct answer to my question.

“Like I said, we have some decisions to make.”

“But why did he tell the preacher we would see him next Sunday?” I kept my gaze upon her, willing her to open up to me.

“I don’t know. Ask your father.” With that, she closed off the conversation with more certainty than slapping my face. She knew I would never ask Dad such a question. There was no way I was that brave; no more than she was.

Mom's jewelry box was covered in white fake leather and faded gold embossing around the edge with scrolls at each corner; the interior with a cream satin. The lid had golden hooks from which necklaces hung, gathered in an elasticized satin pocket that ran the width of the box. In the corner was tucked a square picture of someone draped in a beach towel and a big straw hat pulled down over one eye. The hat was odd-looking, not quite what a hat should look like, but maybe it was a popular fashion from the time. When I asked who the person in the photo was my mom told me she was an old aunt of hers; later I learned it was my dad dressed up and acting stupid. Not something he was known to do.

There was a strand of pearls and numerous gold chains, no longer worn after mom switched to wearing silver. A pearl ring she bought in nursing school with pennies she collected; a blue starburst ring given to her by her first fiancé. I thought it odd to think of Dad not being her first love. There were pins and broaches, items given to her from her own mother and sister and friends. Dad didn't believe in jewelry, so very few pieces were purchased by him. Dad felt money should be put to better use than buying jewelry. She didn't even have an engagement ring until their fifteenth anniversary, but that was never in the box; however, her original band could be found there once the new set was purchased. The plain silver band was a permanent resident in one of the satin squares on the upper tier.

Some pieces she allowed to be used for dress-up; others were strictly off limits so I would sneak in and wear them while Mom was napping on Saturday afternoons. I didn't understand her need to hold on to jewelry she didn't wear any longer.

“Dad, Mr. Totten asked me if we were going to be at church next Sunday cause he wanted the Trumpeters to play.” Dad was back in his bedroom changing clothes after work in order to go outside and feed animals, mow grass, fix the tractor, or whatever he had planned for the afternoon. I stood two rooms away on the other end of the laundry room which created the needed void between us because I could never ask Dad this question face-to-face. I didn’t want Dad to think I was trying to be cute by asking him about his intentions, but Mr. Totten was the principal of Seneca Trail Christian Academy which my sister Jody and I attended. The school only had approximately a hundred students enrolled kindergarten through twelfth grade, so in order to have any type of activities, sports teams, or performances students had to participate in multiple areas. Aside from playing volleyball and cheerleading, I sang in the choir, the girls’ ensemble, a trio, and played the trumpet. Mr. Totten was our choir director and trumpet teacher. If the Trumpeters were supposed to play at church, I didn’t want to let Mr. Totten down since Jody and I were two of his five players.

Dad opened the door from his bedroom and came through the laundry room toward me. He looked irritated by my question – his eyes narrowed to reveal the deep vertical crease all Parkeses possess, and his lips went white -- when he looked at me, I looked at the floor. Several moments had passed since I implied my question, and when Dad passed by me in the doorway without responding, I wondered if he didn’t hear me. I followed him to the kitchen to watch him make a mug of coffee in the microwave. Dad never had time to wait for a kettle to boil – just hot water from the tap and one minute on high prior to adding his Folgers instant.

“And what did you tell Mr. Totten?” Dad turned after placing his teaspoon on the edge of the sink for the next cup.

“I told him I didn’t know. That I would have to ask.” I knew this answer would irritate Dad, but I couldn’t very well lie. I didn’t know if we would be there. We used to attend church twice on Sunday, including Sunday school and youth groups prior to the morning and evening services, as well as Wednesday night service, but anymore Jody and I just hung around waiting to see if Mom or Dad began to get ready. More often than not, they didn’t.

“Well. You just tell Mr. Totten that we may be out of town this Sunday.” I knew by the way Dad slid the word “well” out of his mouth and extended it to make it three syllables that we wouldn’t be going to church and we wouldn’t be out of town either. I nodded my understanding as Dad went outside. I wished I hadn’t asked because now I would have to lie to Mr. Totten, and Dad was sure to follow up to make sure I did.

Lying is probably the one of the Ten Commandments that takes the biggest beating. The students I teach seem to lie with the same ease as drawing oxygen from the atmosphere around them. Their deceit ranges from white lies, little fibs, to saving the feelings of their friends or attempting to get out of trouble for not completing their homework, to blatant bold-faced lies that escalate to blaming everyone else around them, including me, for the offense when they are confronted. I become uncomfortable and angered by their defiant manner; they have no shame about lying, which bothers me the most. I am not attempting to claim that I have never lied because that would be ridiculous. Everyone lies, and for someone to claim that they don’t lie would in itself be

a lie. It seems impossible to not lie, or at least bend the truth, if I want to avoid hurting people's feelings or maintain any hint of privacy.

I have found that I can avoid most lies, fibs, falsehoods through humor. A dear friend of mine showed me how to use humor to be honest without being too offensive. Claudia tells the truth by turning it on its side and delivering it through jokes, pokes, and sarcasm. At times her comments can seem a bit harsh, especially when they are too true, but since she has a good heart, people accept her biting humor. I have adopted some of Claudia's ways as my own in order to work with difficult co-workers rather than avoiding them. The process has been liberating in some ways. Instead of side-stepping a teacher who likes to critique others and swallowing my tongue when she complained about her newlywed spouse's spending, I simply smiled and stated, "Yep, my mom has spent quite a bit over the forty-one years she's been married, but she considers it okay since my dad can be a real ass at times. Just ask him." Everyone around us chuckled along with me, either from discomfort or amazement, but either way she stopped talking which to me was the goal.

If I am sparing someone's feelings, then I think a lie can be justified. I think it might be okay to support a friend rather than being hurtful and honest. It would be rude to tell someone her newborn was unfortunate looking, or harsh to strip a young girl's joy by telling her the gown she chose for prom is atrocious, or sinful to crush a sweet boy's heart by rejecting the tacky necklace he worked so hard to buy you. Sometimes lying is expected, the right and just thing to do. All of us have faced these situations and broken the commandment without hesitation, without fear of the consequences. Maybe lying out of goodness isn't quite the sin as lying with the intention to do harm. But, there is no

outline for justified and unjustified lying in the Bible, yet I find it hard to believe the punishments should be the same.

“Ms. Parkes, will we have you for Senior Project next year?” The ever-noisy classroom seemed to come to a hush with Jasmine’s question.

“I don’t know. Mr. Dingeldein hasn’t shown us the schedule yet. I don’t know any of my classes.” The statement was true. The principal hadn’t shared the schedule, but I already knew I wasn’t planning to return next year, so I felt like a liar.

“I hope you are. You are the only one who can help us the right way.” Several of the students echoed Jasmine’s opinion, which only helped to make me feel worse, so I changed the subject.

“Now you know that’s not true. Plenty of teachers have helped you get to this point, and we have lots of work to do so you can become seniors. Turn to page 1269.” I waited for my juniors to open their literature textbooks and get set for the lesson; my mind spun in several directions. *These kids always have teachers walking out on them, maybe I should suck it up for one more year, but I can’t let this job hold me back from my life. I am so burned out. They are going to hate me. I’m a big fat liar.*

On my dresser sits two jewelry boxes. The navy stackable squares I bought for myself; the brown-and-turquoise leatherette, traditional version purchased for me by my sister. In the blue squares are my old Piedmont Airline nametags, five-year and ten-year service pins, and hair clips from when I had longer tresses. The second tier holds junk jewelry like the John Travolta earrings my college pal JoEllen gave me to commemorate

our love of all things seventies, as well as several cherry-themed earrings and necklaces from JoEllen and Katie based on a decade-plus joke started when Jen Chapel always told us to visit her in Michigan for the cherry festival, but never told us when it was held.

A heart-shaped tin holds fur cut from my dog Zoe, my best friend for the past fifteen years who had to be put down due to cancer. It sits in front of the newer jewelry box which is filled with jewelry and other random trinkets. There are several two-dollar bills mailed to me in birthday cards from Uncle Mel and Aunt Carol. A pastel-rainbow, plastic bead necklace, which sports Jennifer in white and black beads, made by my god-daughter Madison. Two memory ribbons; one in maroon and orange worn to honor Virginia Tech's loss, the other in John Deere green and yellow to remember Ryan Marion who died his senior year in high school a few years ago. There are rings from my grandma Edna, my Aunt Bunny, and Uncle Harry. Gold necklaces, earrings, and bracelets set aside because like my mom I only wear silver now since it's the metal I can use to make my own jewelry. And, in the far back a purple rock painted for me by Kevin Anderson, a beau from my years in Christian school. I'm not sure why I keep it since he wasn't even my favorite.

I wonder what someone else would make of my treasures. Do my treasures speak about me as clearly as my parents' items spoke about them? The items my parents held onto are directly linked to the choices they have made in life and the people who have impacted them. I know this because I know their stories, but it took looking through their treasures to recognize the roles they play prior to becoming my parents.

I think that someone who knows me would understand and interpret the importance of what I have kept, but to a stranger I might seem fragmented and odd. I

haven't experienced the layers of life my parents have lived. I haven't moved from individual to partner to parent. Maybe our treasures, the items we hold dear or at least can't bring ourselves to throw away, are the truth of who we are rather than the lives we live from day to day. I doubt many of the people I work with would describe me as sentimental, yet I am. I fail to present myself as compassionate most days, yet again, I am. I tell myself it is okay for people to see me as strong, unyielding, proud, even gruff, as long as I am compassionate when necessary. I like to believe that at least a handful of people in this world know the "real me," but maybe I'm lying to myself. Do the items in my jewelry box reveal anything about me? Instead of layering my life story, I have shifted from career to career, state to state, group of friends to group of friends. I remain singular; so, to me, my items seem more like bookmarks than archives. I guess value is assessed by the owner, and as long as my keepsakes have meaning to me, what they mean to others doesn't really matter.

Going Home

Start loading the car with the dog in tow; dog should be last but insists on being first – she doesn't want to be left behind; *fine, stay in the hot car and lose brain cells*; start the car with the a/c on high; finish loading the car without the dog in tow; *gotta hurry the dog is already panting*; car is taking too long to cool down; car finally packed with nearly everything I own; sit in the driver's seat; elbow hits a puddle of slobber; push dog off the console to get napkins from within; dog is annoyed I have interrupted her stance; wipe the dog's slobber from the console; *do you mind? you're not in charge, you know*; dog is a pain and sulks from the backseat; car in reverse; seat belt hooked; take a deep breath; *come here*; back standing on console; grab dog's muzzle; *I'm sorry to yell, but you slobber too much*; kiss and make up; car in drive; look to the left; *move your head*; look to the right; back to the left; pull on to 45; *finally, we are on our way*; dog moves to the back seat after only three miles; three more hours on the road -- past Lynchburg, past Roanoke; dog only stirs when food appears; more drooling – *at least not on me this time*; one more hour down Interstate 81; exit 89A; turn right on Kirby Drive; dog pops up; bounds to the front seat; sniffs the air vents; *where are we?*; up the driveway; dog begins to whine; *hello horses, glad to see you're well*; car in park; dog on lap, insists on being first; door open; dog bounds out; home sweet home.

For almost fifteen years, Zoe was by my side; my travel companion, my security guard, my best friend, my child. I chose her because I thought she would be a lazy, lay-around kind of dog. She was the fattest puppy in the box filled with her brothers and sisters. Too lazy to stand up to eat, she just flopped her head over into the bowl and took

in a few of the dry pellets. She grunted when I picked her up to nuzzle her against my cheek, and I was hooked. As soon as I got her home, she transformed into a hyper, bossy little puff of fur who barked unless she was allowed on the bed with me to sleep and who made it to the top of the stairs only to yip her commands to be carried back downstairs until she learned to navigate the stairs in both directions. As she grew, her attitude and assumption that she was in charge grew as well. Even when we went home to visit my parents, she made sure she had all the toys even those that didn't belong to her. She stole raw hides, sticks, and horse poop from Nan and Nell, my parents' two chocolate labs.

“Zoe. Get over here now.” Zoe was a long-haired mutt with crooked ears and a fluffy tail; rumored to be a German Sheppard and Doberman mix, so her markings were black and brown. She popped her head around the corner of the door, ears back.

“What is this?” I stood over my Peace Lily potted plant and the dirt on the floor. Zoe sank to the floor without moving forward.

“Get over here.” She slinked toward me as if she was gliding across the floor. The brown dots of her eyebrows moved up and down as she tried to keep her head down while watching me to see if she was going to get hit. She stopped just short of the dirt pile she had created.

“I have told you and told you. My plants are not here for you to bury your bones.” Zoe watched as I leaned over to pull her two bones out of the dirt and shake them in her face. She was smart enough not to try to take them from me. I grabbed her collar and smacked her butt a few times.

Her fur was so thick that I got pissed when she smiled at me after being smacked and I would hit her harder. I doubt she felt many of my blows, but she soon learned how to act like she was sorry by hiding under the table after I yelled at her. Now we had a routine.

“Get under the table until I clean this mess up.” Off to the kitchen table she went. Once again I put the dirt-covered bones to the side and swept up the pile of dirt she had tossed out during her adventure. By the time I finished the process; I calmed down and walked into the kitchen.

I leaned down to meet her gaze. She lay as she always did with her head on her front paws. Only her eyes and the brown dots rose to meet me.

“Come on. Let’s make up.” I sat down next to the table with my legs spread wide like I was preparing to play a game of jacks. At first she didn’t move. I patted the floor in front of me which elicited a grin. She emerged from under the table and curled herself in front of me with her head on my thigh.

“I don’t like to discipline you, but you have got to stop burying your bones in my plants.” I ran my fingers through her thick black fur, then scratched the soft puppy-like hair behind her ears. My favorite part of her coat.

“Friends again?” With that she jumped up and began licking my face.

I lived in some crappy places until I learned to omit her believed breeding and claimed her genealogy as Collie or unknown. Several times over the years I owned her, my Dad suggested I give her away since I had such a hard time finding an apartment each time I moved, but I never could. Now I face moving to Baltimore, Maryland – the first

location I will live without her – and the prospect makes me sad and afraid. I no longer have the security of owning a big, black dog to warn people away. I no longer have an instant friend and someone to come home to. I have to face city life alone.

“Hey, Zoe-Bear, we’re almost home. Do you smell the horses?” I looked at my old friend through the rear-view mirror. She panted like she was happy, but made no move to the front seat to smell the vents like she had every time we neared home before. I knew she wouldn’t be able to stand since it took my friends, Debbie and Mike, to help me carry Zoe to the car for her final ride home. Since she was diagnosed with cancer, her decline came fast. I took the past few days off from work to be with her and change the padding under her limp hindquarters every time she messed. God answered my prayers by allowing me to make it home to put Zoe down and bury her alongside Nan and Nell on the hill. Throughout my childhood, I felt guilty for Dad having to be the one to put our pets to sleep. I guess he tired of the task because he asked the horse vet he used to come to the house to do the job this time. I couldn’t blame him. I was just glad to be home for the task.

The debate over whether or not I was doing the right thing and when to put Zoe down had monopolized phone calls home for several weeks. Her deterioration was quick and she was now immobilized, but her spirit was strong. We topped the driveway, and I put the car in park. Dad and Mom came out of the house to meet us. When they opened the back door, Zoe didn’t even try to get up. My brother-in-law Jon came out to help Dad carry Zoe into the house since the vet was running late. Zoe grunted and hung her head over the side of the blanket as if to direct the men. For the next few hours, Zoe lay in the

kitchen in her traditional spot, the only difference was her eyes seemed to dull as if she knew she would never run the hills again.

Mom kept saying, “It’s time, Jennifer. She’s really in sad shape.” But, her proclamation just irritated me each time she said it even though I knew she was trying to be reassuring. My sister and I roomed together for several years when Zoe was a puppy, so she was just as sad as I was. She had just returned to work after her maternity leave, and since her new placement was in Virginia and their home was in Kentucky, she, Jon, and the baby were living with our parents for awhile. Jody seemed taken aback by Zoe’s deteriorated condition which lessened the guilt of my decision. I was doing the right thing by Zoe.

Dad called the vet’s office to see what was detaining him. He was at a dairy farm performing a C-section on a cow; his tech wasn’t sure he would make it to us tonight.

“I don’t think you understand. Doc wasn’t just coming to float the mare’s teeth. That can wait until tomorrow, but my daughter drove over with her dog and he is supposed to put her down. It needs to be done tonight.” Dad hung up the phone, looking a bit concerned.

“Doc won’t leave you hanging. It might be late, but he’ll come out.”

“Is that what the tech said?” I sat beside Zoe, rubbing her ears. I had placed her head on my lap, but she put it back on the blanket as if trying to tell me it was okay.

“No. But he’ll come. I reminded her you were here.” True to Dad’s words, Doc Tom — who appeared to be in his late forties, with graying head and chest hair -- arrived after seven that evening. Jon and Dad carried Zoe out to the side of the house. Jody stayed inside with the baby, while Mom walked around the front yard. Zoe’s breathing

was shallow, and despite her nosey nature, she didn't even lift her head when the vet came to her side. He shaved her forearm and administered a drug to relax her. Almost instantly, her breathing changed which caused the vet to run over to his truck for the second vial. Later Dad explained that Zoe's reaction was so quick that if the vet hadn't gotten the second drug into her she could have started to convulse. Doc Tom didn't even get half of the narcotic into her before Zoe stopped breathing. I had made the right decision. She was ready to go.

I didn't have time to react. I expected a dramatic good-bye complete with me stroking her face and talking her to sleep. But, there was no time for that. She was gone before I had time to react to the process. Within seconds, the vet departed and Dad began pulling tarps to wrap Zoe in. I left her on her blanket and placed her collar and favorite baby with her. Dad wrapped her tight in several layers of plastic, tying her off with binder twine. Mom, Dad and I rode to the back field with Zoe on the back of the golf cart. It seemed so inappropriate, but I couldn't help thinking about her looking like a burrito. The backhoe rested with its huge bucket on the ground in a reverent manner, bowed as if in prayer. Dad had dug a six-foot hole next to where Nan, Nell and Tuesday – Mom's favorite horse – lay. I handed Zoe down to Dad and he made sure she faced East before he climbed out of the trench. I picked a few wild flowers and tossed them in before Mom and I departed prior to Dad covering her up.

Zoe died in September and I haven't vacuumed since, which equals eight months of dirt. I can't bring myself to suck up her hair for a final time. Her toys lie where she left them, so I guess I'm still in mourning even though I haven't cried. Oh, I shed a tear

here and there, but I haven't sobbed. I don't expect her to meet me at the door. I don't hear her nails clicking on the linoleum at night. I wouldn't even say that I miss our daily routine. Yet, there is a loss. A loneliness that, I think, will deepen when I move to my first home without her. A sense of exposure I have never experienced since she was my built-in roommate and friend. I expect to mourn her more as I move away from the familiar. I expect the need to fill the void she left will present itself as I eventually become uncomfortable with my own company.