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# Truth or Dare

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# Truth or Dare


A Senior Thesis for the Honors Program

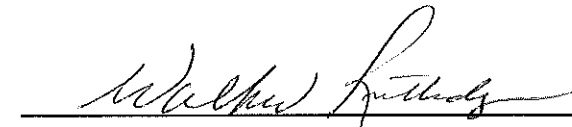
Cle'shea Crain

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Approved by

 4/6/05







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# Truth or Dare

A Novella

## One

As a girl, I was a tomboy. I wasn't the "no holds barred" type who could run, jump, and spit better than any boy on the block. I was the other kind—the type who wore boys' clothes because girls' clothes fit in the wrong places. My mom said she knew it from the very second she saw me, dangling from the doctor's hand. He held me upside down by one ankle and slapped my behind. This position left my left leg free, and I kicked him in the eye. At this point, when Mom was trying to stifle laughing at the "dumb ass doctor," she also realized that I wasn't going to be a prissy girl. I wasn't going to wear my heart on my sleeve or cry at every broken fingernail. She'd been see-sawing between naming me Samantha and Cassandra, but when she saw Dr. Dumb-Ass stumbling and holding his eye, she knew she had to go with Sam.

Most mothers would wait to see if the child looked more like a Samantha or a Cassandra. Mom said she couldn't tell because I didn't look much like a girl at all. She and my grandmother looked me over when I popped out and they both cringed.

"You were one ugly baby," Grandma told me. "You had your father's eyes—big bug eyes like a fly. And you looked like you'd been roasted black."

"That's your father's complexion," Momma said. "So black, he's blue."

"But you had a head full of hair, and you got to thank him for that because none of us Henderson women ever popped out with hair. You've got the softest hair I've ever felt,"

Grandma said, pulling a small decorative comb from her salt and pepper hair. As she worked the small fine teeth through my hair, I leaned into the tickling touch of her fingers following the comb through my scalp. Grandma combed my hair back to match hers.

Mom continued the story, “But your eyes got smaller and your color evened out, so we thought we’d keep you.” Then she shooed me away and told me to go play with my new presents. I knew what they wanted to talk about, or rather whom—Jack Davis, my father.

I’d heard the rest of the story before. Right after I had kicked the doctor, Mom started on the birth certificate. She wrote Samantha Henderson in the first and third spaces, but I still needed a middle name. She and Grandma couldn’t agree on anything. Grandma liked Ethel or Harriet, which was Grandma’s name. I would have liked being named after my grandmother, but my mom wasn’t having that. Grandma got fed up and left to get some coffee. Mom was tired from labor and the Vicodin she took when Dr. Dumb-Ass wasn’t looking and after I was born. When she fell asleep, Grandma swears that my “no-good, dead-beat” father came in and wrote on the birth certificate in the black space. When the papers came back, my middle name was Egyptis. I guess my father wanted me to be tough, too, since he gave me a name like that. He also toughened me up by leaving, by not even trying to get to know me. Of course, it’s not like I miss him. I don’t even know what he looks like; I could pass him on the street and never know it. I was content not having a father, but my mom wasn’t okay without having a husband/boyfriend/lover.

From the time I started school, I went over to my grandmother’s house every morning. I would go to school from Grandma’s and she would pick me up because my mom worked from early in the mornings to late in the evenings. When Mom got off work, she would come get me. My eighth birthday was no different. Being born in September, during the school year, I had to

go to school on my birthday and celebrate after. Mom came over to pick me up after work, and we had my birthday party at Grandma's, just the three of us.

In the car Mom would say, "I've met someone." That was her way of saying "Go play in your room, Sam, and don't bother me tonight." And I would. I'd play with my Barbies in their house, which was falling apart. I played with nothing else. Then I would get tired and climb into bed. I would tuck myself in, kiss myself goodnight, and try to block the noises floating across the otherwise silent house.

Most mornings of my childhood I would wake up in some guy's arms. Mom was always right there introducing him to me as he picked me up and carried me to the car. If I'd been more of a morning person, I'd have kicked him as I had Dr. Dumb-Ass. The guy would place me in the front seat with the comforter tucked around me. I'd glare at him as best I could, although it was so early in the morning that I'm sure I just ended up blinking and drooling a lot. Mom would shut the car door and I would see them kiss. I think she would make sure I saw this so that she could ask later if I approved, which I never did. I may have lied to her, but never to God. Being alone in the car, I would clasp my hands together under the comforter and start my prayer: *Dear God, I don't like this one either, whatever his name is. Please send him away. Amen.*

More men passed through this way. They stayed the night, picked me up and smiled into my face the next morning. I'd pray they'd be gone by the next day, and usually they were. I believed in what God could do. I learned that He existed from my mom when she told me a story about my real father—Jack Davis: how she almost killed him.

My mother and father lived together in the dodgy part of Nashville when she was pregnant. They stayed in a one-story, one-bedroom duplex. One night when my mom was eight months pregnant with me, Jack was drunk—which was a common occurrence, if you asked my

grandmother—and ranting about how the baby probably wasn't even his. "You'd fuck anything," he said.

My mother sat on the couch and yelled from there, "You got another woman pregnant before me and you think it can't happen again."

"This kid ain't my fault."

"Suddenly sex doesn't require a dick?" My mom stood up.

Then Jack took three long strides across the room and stood in front of my mother. She didn't back down. The bottle of Jack Daniels swung loosely in his left hand as he balled up his right fist and hit my mom in the stomach—hit me. She fell to the floor, panted, and stayed there until he walked away, saying, "Watch your mouth, woman."

When he had gone into the bedroom of the small apartment, she crawled to the couch and dragged herself up to sit on it. She looked around the apartment and knew she didn't want this for her life or for mine. She pushed herself up from the couch, as extremely pregnant women must do, and waddled to the kitchen. In the sink was the steak knife she had used to prepare the chicken for dinner. Mom clutched it in her right hand and held her stomach with her left.

My father was lying across the bed on his back snoring heavily when she entered the bedroom. The room was dimly lit with a nightlight in the corner, but enough light for Mom to see his neck. She went around the bed, stood above him, and touched the knife to his Adam's apple. That's when she heard it.

"Cindy!"

Her name. Someone was calling her name. She looked at my father's eyes. They were closed. His breathing was even. He was still asleep. She pushed on the knife.

"CINDY!"

This time she pulled the knife back and looked around the room. No one else was there. She left the bedroom and went back out to the living area. She sat on the couch, still grasping the knife and thinking she was going crazy until she heard it again.

“Who’s going to take care of your child if you go to jail?” the voice asked.

“My mother. I thought of that,” she responded aloud.

“What would it take for you to raise this child?” the voice asked.

“A good job. I need to move out of here.”

“Don’t kill him, Cindy. Don’t.”

She didn’t, but she slept on the couch with the knife nearby in case Jack had the same idea. A week later Grandma put a down payment on a starter home ten minutes from her house. I was born two weeks after that, and Mom had a job lined up at the phone company with health and dental benefits.

That’s how I came to believe in God. Momma believed in Him, too, but she never went to church because, she said, “Church folks are only good for two things: pretending to care about you and talking about you behind your back.” Grandma convinced me otherwise, though, and when I was eight, I asked Mom to start taking me to Grandma’s on Sundays for church.

Sunday mornings at 9:30 was Church School where the age groups were separated into different rooms to learn about Jesus. It was a small church with only three kids, including me, in my class. Grandma taught us. My first lesson was on the Fifth Commandment: Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother. I remembered this lesson because it was my first one. They had already covered Commandments one through four. I took it to heart that God would punish me if I didn’t obey my mother and grandmother. Also, I remembered that lesson because I wouldn’t have to worry about God in the next life: *Grandma* would punish me if I didn’t obey her. She was over seventy,



but she could still outrun me, as she did when I got into something I shouldn't have.

Usually after Grandma would whip me for something stupid I did, she'd pick me up. I wasn't a crier, though, so I'd just sit still on her lap and contemplate revenge. Until I would remember how evil it was for me to think that. Then I'd clasp my hands together and close my eyes and pray. Grandma would look down at me and say, "Oh, thank you, Lord, for sending an angel." She didn't know I was praying for forgiveness for my evil thoughts, but she'd just rock me and start a prayer of her own.

I started praying as often as I could remember because I wanted to be like Grandma and she prayed all the time: when she woke up, before breakfast, before lunch, before dinner, before bed, and even when she went to the bathroom and was able to have a bowel movement. I once asked my grandmother why she prayed so much. She said, "I pray so much so the Lord won't forget how much I need Him." So I prayed, too, whenever a new boyfriend stuck around too long or Mom would stay out too late.

However, my faith faltered when I couldn't get rid of one boyfriend in particular. His name was Paul Richardson. He was taller than any of the others, and he was the fourth white one. Grandma never approved of Mom's sleeping around or of Mom dating white men. I wondered which she disliked more. Grandma said, "White men are okay, but black men know black women. No sense in screwing up the natural order of things." She never explained more than that, and the way she said it, like it was written in the Bible somewhere, told me never to ask her. I asked God in my prayers, but He wasn't fond of conversations, so I stuck with praying for Mom and Grandma and for the latest boyfriend Paul to leave.

The new guy came in like all the rest. He spent the night with Mom and woke up early the next morning to help her get ready for work. The morning I met him, Mom came in with him

as usual to wake me. She shook me awake and kissed my cheek. She smelled funny, sweet and smoky, different from the normal smell of Salem Lights. The smell made me sneeze into her ear when she hugged me.

“Gesundheit,” the new boyfriend said. I couldn’t really see him or Mom because my eyelids were matted together.

Mom took special care when introducing him to me, pronouncing his name distinctly. “This is Paul Richardson,” she said. “I met him at work.”

I turned all the way over to get a good look at him. She rarely met guys at work. It was usually, “I met him at a party” or “I met him at the store,” which usually meant he was “some bum off the street corner,” Grandma said. I thought maybe Grandma would be impressed that this one had a job. I blinked the matter out of my eyes, but I was determined not to fully awaken since I had two hours until I had to be up for school.

Paul was about six feet tall with black hair and a black beard. He reached his right hand out toward me. I was cordial, mimicked the action, and shook his hand. Then his left hand joined the right and he picked me up out of the bed to carry me to the car. I noticed he was stronger than most of the other boyfriends had been. He could hold me with one arm and support my back with one broad hand. When he stepped outside, I saw he had huge pores like craters. I pretended his face was the moon and giggled inwardly. I called him Crater Face in my head, and then I prayed for forgiveness because in Church School that was lesson number two: the Golden Rule. Grandma said God would punish me ten times worse for something bad I did to someone else. I was convinced that God was punishing me by keeping Paul around.

On the fourteenth morning Paul came to my room to get me, Mom wasn’t with him. He shook me awake, tucked the sheet around me, and picked me up. He used two hands to hold me

even though he didn't need to do so. One forearm and hand under my legs and bottom, the other around my back. It felt nice being held that way. Mom couldn't pick me up with that kind of grace. She had tried a few times, but her back would hurt and she'd put me down and make me walk. I was especially tired this Saturday morning because I had been up late watching *All Dogs Go To Heaven*, which Grandma had bought me, so I rested my head on Paul's shoulder. I noticed the smell on him--smoky like cigarettes, sweeter like cigar smoke, but thicker than that, too. Once he put me in the car, I went about my routine. I prayed as they kissed: *Dear God. I want Mom to be happy, but I don't like this one either. He smells and he makes Momma smell. Could you make him go away, too, please? Amen.*

Two months passed and Paul Richardson was still around. I was in the habit of throwing fits around him and acting displeased at whatever he did. "He didn't flush the toilet!" or "He ate the last of this!" were my favorite complaints.

At first, my mom would just grin at me and light a cigarette. After awhile, and I'm sure he had something to do with it, she'd look me over and say, "Paul didn't do anything wrong. You just want my undivided attention, Sam."

She'd taken his side. He'd won her and I wasn't sure how to get her back, or if I could. My plan was to show his dark side. Perhaps he was an atheist, a serial killer, or a mob boss. Something was wrong with him, and I was going to find it and tell my mom all about it.

Little did I know, Paul would throw in a diversion. Something big and shiny to keep an eight-year-old girl occupied—an older brother figure. After he had been living with us for nearly eight months, he asked us both (but mostly Mom) if his two sons, Terry and Chad, could come stay with us for awhile. Paul said something about how their mother was driving drunk and would be in jail for a few weeks. His sons were coming from Texas, where Paul was from

originally. He didn't indicate how long "awhile" would be. Of course, once the boys arrived and I found that they were willing to play with me, I didn't mind if "awhile" meant forever.

While Terry and Chad stayed with us, I began to warm up to Paul. I gave in to laughing when he tickled me and sat on his lap when he offered, and sometimes even when he didn't. Mom seemed happy with him and with how the two of us were getting along. I had forgotten all about my plot to reveal his dark side. I accepted Paul because of Chad, the younger son. He was willing to play with me even though he was much older, or he'd give me something to do so that I'd leave him alone, which is the same thing to an eight-year-old. Terry was eighteen with blonde hair and dark brown eyes. He was 5'9", a little taller than my mom. He was nice but rarely ever around to play.

One rainy Sunday afternoon, Chad was babysitting me while Mom and Paul went to the grocery store. Chad was lying in front of the television in the living room. Terry had locked himself in the bathroom. He had said earlier he needed to take a shower, but no water was running. Chad, on his way to the kitchen, teased Terry about still being in the bathroom, but I didn't understand why.

Chad was big for a sixteen-year-old, already six feet tall, like his father. I stepped into the short hallway from my bedroom with Barbie dolls in hand (I said I was a type B tomboy) and kneeled next to him. I pulled a small comb and brush set from the pocket of my shorts. I played with the dolls on his tanned, bare back. They danced and sat, then walked and sat again.

Chad turned on his side to look at me, blinking some of his light brown hair out of his dark eyes. "What are you doing?" he asked with a grin.

"Playing Barbies. You want to play?"

"Yeah. I'll play," he said.

I was beyond happy. Chad was going to play Barbies with me. This was the one thing he refused every time I brought them out. "You can be Kevin, Skipper's boyfriend," I said, "since you're a boy."

"Thanks," he said. "So what are Skipper and Kevin going to do?"

"They're going to the prom."

I mostly moved the dolls myself and narrated the story to Chad as I went along. I had him hold Kevin periodically as I smoothed Skipper's hair or replaced a lost shoe. One time I wanted to take off her jacket and when I looked back up at Chad, he was taking off Kevin's clothes.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm just seeing what he's got under here," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean." I stared at him. I had no idea what he meant. "You know. What he's got down there," Chad pointed to Kevin's shorts. I felt my eyes widen. "Down here," Chad touched himself in the same place.

My eyes followed his hand. I knew my mouth was hanging open, but I couldn't think to close it.

Chad grinned and licked his lips. Then he looked away and took his hand away as well. "You know what teenagers do after the prom?"

"No. What?" I asked. Chad was the source of all knowledge after all.

"They play Truth or Dare. You ever played?" I shook my head. "Of course not. You're too young." He turned over to watch television again.

Curiosity bit me. "Will you teach me to play?" I asked.

"What'll you give me?" he asked.

I had to think. "I'll get you a Dr. Pepper," I said, knowing he liked those.

"Okay, get me one."

I went to the kitchen and grabbed one from the icebox. I returned to Chad's side and set the can beside him on the carpet. He turned the television off and rolled to his side to face me. He popped the can open and drank some before he spoke to me. I watched his gulps with anticipation.

"The game starts like this. One person asks the other, 'Truth or dare?' So pick one."

"Truth."

"Now you have to answer the truth to my question: Have you ever kissed a boy on the lips?"

"No!" I giggled and squirmed at the thought. At eight, I had thought of dating, love, and marriage, but not of kissing or sex.

"Now you ask me, 'Truth or dare.'"

"Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

"Have you ever kissed a girl on the lips?" I could hardly get the question out.

"Of course, lots of times. Different girls, too. Now say, 'dare.' Truth or dare?"

"Dare," I hesitated.

"I dare you to let me kiss you." He didn't let me answer; he just pushed me back into the carpet and pushed his mouth into mine. His frame was a weight between my legs. I yelled into his mouth for him to stop and flailed my arms. He pulled back and I screamed out loud then. He put his wiry fingers over my mouth and looked into my face. He said, "Stop it. This is how you play Truth or Dare. You asked me to teach you."

His dark eyes went blurry then as my eyes got wet. I *had* asked. He put something into my hand. It was Skipper. I stopped screaming and just clutched my doll. I roughly turned my head from under Chad's hand. I tried to get out from under him, but he was too heavy. I looked toward the bathroom where Terry was.

Chad got in my face again and all I saw were his lips coming toward me. Then I felt him, shoving his tongue in my mouth. Since I was crying and breathing through my mouth, I had to hold my breath. One of his hands with the wiry fingers went to my shorts. He unzipped them with one hand. I opened my mouth but didn't say anything. He pushed down on my chest and shoulders with one arm, and pulled off my shorts and panties with the other hand. When my legs were free of both his weight and my clothes, I kicked him in the stomach. He exhaled sharply but didn't say anything.

He didn't relinquish the weight on my upper body but pushed his knees between my legs, spreading them apart. I curled Skipper into my side. Chad licked his own forefinger and then pushed it between my legs. I cried out then. It hurt and I couldn't deny that. I wondered where my mom was, how long she and Paul had been gone, why she wasn't here to stop this.

Chad brought the finger out. I couldn't feel anything other than pain and the tears on my face. He straddled my body—my arms trapped under his legs—and unzipped his own jean shorts. He tugged them and his boxers down enough--until I could see it, smell it, feel it hovering close to my face.

"Open your mouth," Chad ordered.

I was scared, but even through my fear I challenged him with a look through swollen eyes that said, "Yeah, right."

Chad grabbed me around the throat and made the command again with the same

calmness. This time I did it. "Pucker your lips and don't bite down," he said as he shoved it in.

I couldn't breathe. He kept pushing in farther, even when I *did* bite down accidentally because he was hurting me so badly. I kept my eyes open, focused on his puppy dog boxers because I wanted to remember. I wanted to be able to describe everything in case anyone ever asked. (No one ever did.) A few minutes or maybe an hour later, he tensed and stopped pushing and for a split second I thought that was the end. And then I was choking on something thick and ropy in the back of my throat.

Chad tucked himself back into his boxers with one hand and put the other over my mouth. "Swallow it," he said. But I couldn't swallow it. It felt wrong in my throat. So I made the face like I swallowed something I didn't want to and he took his hand away from my mouth. When he started for his zipper, I spat onto his denim shorts. It was my intention to wriggle out from underneath him as well, but he was still asserting too much pressure on my middle and lower body. I expected Chad to be angry, to start the game over again to get back at me. Instead he looked between the spit and my face and said, "It's just like a bitch not to swallow."

He stood and pulled me up. He tried to pick me up, but I wouldn't let him carry me. By then the tears on my face had dried and I was more angry than hurt. He pushed me toward the bathroom and beat on the door. "Terry," he called, "open the door."

"I'm busy," Terry said. From the position of the voice, I could tell that Terry was lying on the floor.

"Quit jerking off and open the damn door."

I could hear Terry get up and the door unlock. His eyes went wide when he saw me.

"Give her a bubble bath," Chad told his brother and shoved me through the door.

"What the hell happened?" Terry asked.



“Don’t worry about it. Just do what I said. Run the water and throw some toys in there. That’s not too hard for you, is it?” Chad had always been the leader even though he was the younger of the two.

“What did you do, Chad?” Terry wouldn’t let it go.

Chad looked at his brother and grinned. “I found something better than my hand,” Chad said and reached for me.

I kicked him in the leg, but I wasn’t wearing shoes, so he just chuckled. “Get out!” I yelled and pushed Terry into Chad. Chad still laughed, but Terry walked out and closed the door. I turned the lock and pressed my whole body against the wood, while listening to their conversation on the other side.

Terry said, “She’s eight, Chad.”

“Yeah, and? The girl you did in Waco was twelve.” Chad whispered, “Nobody’s going to find out. I need her shirt.”

Terry tried to turn the knob. “Sam?” he called. I almost ripped the shirt I pulled it off so angrily. I opened the door and threw it out at them. Then I slammed and quickly locked the door again.

“It’s raining outside. I’m going to say we played in the rain and she fell in mud so she needed a bath,” Chad explained.

The bathroom door sat too high on its hinges. Mom said the house was put together carelessly, "like a Habitat house." The door was too short for the frame and it left a crack under the door. I got down on the floor, pressed my cheek to the white and blue linoleum, and peered out into the hall where the boys were. Through one eye, I could see two pairs of naked feet pressed into the brown carpet right outside the door. Terry's blue sweat pants and Chad's hammer

toes made it easy to tell them apart.

“What if Sam tells the truth?” Terry asked.

“They’re not going to believe her. And she wouldn’t do that,” Chad said.

Chad's feet came closer to the door. He spoke to me. “It would hurt your mom’s feelings to think that I did anything to hurt you. Besides, it’s just a game and you wanted to play.” That was it--I wanted to play. I *had* asked him to teach me. It was my fault. I stayed on the floor.

Then both pairs of feet left. I unlocked the door and went to my room to get clean clothes. I ran water in the tub and lay back, scissoring my legs, letting the warm water wash Chad’s fingerprints from my skin. Then my mom came into the bathroom.

“Sam, I bought you some Popsicles,” she said.

“Thanks, Momma.”

“Chad told me what happened. Are you okay? Where did you fall?”

I didn’t like to lie because each time I would do it I'd get a lie bump on my tongue. I needed a really good reason for lying before I did it. “Mom, do you love Paul?”

Mom cocked her head to one side, as if asking, “Where did that come from?” Then she answered, “Yes, Sam, I do. Is that all right with you?”

“Yeah, Mom, it’s fine. I fell at the end of the driveway where the big rock is,” I answered. “I went like this--WHOOP!” I animated as best I could, sitting in the tub, and she laughed at my false reenactment.

“I’m going to make dinner,” she said and kissed my forehead.

I cringed at the kiss, and as soon as she left, I rinsed the spot. Then I knew what I had to do: *Dear God. I’m sorry for lying to Mom, but I just want her to be happy. She loves Paul and I don’t want to mess that up. Chad said if I told her the truth, that I didn’t fall, that she would be*

*sad. I'm sorry for asking Chad to teach me Truth or Dare. Please forgive me. And please send Terry and Chad away. I want things to go back to the way they were before they got here. Amen.*

Four days later, I had survived Chad's winks and demands that I get him this and that. I had survived sitting on Chad's lap and letting him touch my legs. And although I had lied and broken the Fifth Commandment, God had saved me, and Terry and Chad were on their way back to Texas. I didn't have to pretend or hide anymore. Neither Paul or Mom seemed to notice anything unusual about the loose hugs I gave Terry and Chad. I made sure to stand to their sides and leaned into their hips instead of their fronts. I was happy to see them go because one brought the other, and both brought sex.

I, for the most part, went on with childhood. However, I had developed an affinity for Truth or Dare, the dares especially. Growing up in northern Tennessee, probably the most uneventful place to be raised, I had to find something for us neighborhood kids to do. If we had just been vandalizing, we might not have gotten into so much trouble. Instead, I taught them to play Truth or Dare as I was taught it.

Most notably, in fifth grade, I dared Nathan Fleming to walk into the girls' locker room during gym class when the rest of the class was outside.

"Easy," he said and followed me in. We went to the very back row of lockers. "My turn." He hesitated, but eventually stammered out that he dared me to put my hand down his gym shorts.

I didn't think twice. I pulled his shorts down and grabbed it. I'd seen bigger. I'd played this game before. Nathan hadn't been the first to dare me, Chad had been. Nathan hadn't been the second either, Paul had been.

## Two

Two weeks after Chad and Terry had left, I was finally doing okay. The first week I didn't sleep. The second week I cried myself to sleep. After that, I could play Barbies again. The first night that I could sleep peacefully without crying was the night Paul came to my room. It was late, after eleven. He woke me up by rubbing my back and offering to tell me a bedtime story. I accepted with a yawn. He climbed into the queen-sized bed with me and pulled me on top of him. I rested my head on his bare chest, my legs straddling his hips, my arms draping over his biceps.

I was already tired, so when he started the story, I couldn't make out the words. I just knew he was talking from the rumble in his chest, which kept me from falling asleep completely. I think he called my name because I felt him lift his head to look at me. My eyes were closed and they were too heavy to open. I knew if he wanted to leave, he would pick me up and move me.

Paul stopped talking and brought one of his broad hands to my back and started rubbing. I couldn't acknowledge that he was doing this because I was so tired, but I felt it and the randomness of his strokes kept me from falling asleep. Then the rubbing slowed to a stop and he whispered my name. I heard it clearly but couldn't answer because my mouth was dry. Paul's hand gripped the cotton of my nightshirt and pulled it up. He spread his fingers out on my back and started rubbing again.

Slowly his hand moved lower until his fingers breached the elastic band of my panties.

He stopped then to see if I would respond, I think, but I couldn't find a reason not to trust him. This man had lived with me for nine months. He was the closest thing I had ever had to a father. He'd seen me naked, given me a bath, and slept with me like this countless times. Fathers are supposed to be trusted, and I wanted to trust mine. So when he moved his hand the rest of the way into my panties, I didn't flinch. I made myself think that this was what fathers did. I'd never had one before so I just didn't know. It didn't feel unpleasant, like what Chad had done, just strange.

He rubbed a little and then took his hand out. He rolled over and pushed me on my back. I felt him get out of the bed, heard his large feet pad across the room and shut the door. Then, in two strides, he was back to the bed, but not getting into it. Paul turned the lamp off and I opened my eyes. I wasn't afraid of the dark, but I wanted to see what he was doing. He kissed my cheek, which I rubbed off into the pillow, and I noticed that light from the street lamp came in through the horizontal blinds and I could make out most of his features in the darkness.

I waited for him to tuck me in because that naturally followed the goodnight kiss, but he didn't. He touched my legs and his hands moved up farther until they reached the nightshirt again. He gripped my hips and pulled my whole body down to the edge of the bed. He ran his hands under my shirt and over my panties.

"Don't be scared," he said, as he pulled off my underwear.

But I *was* scared. I didn't want him to do what Chad had done. I didn't want to scream into Paul's mouth, cry into his hand, or choke around stickiness in my throat. I shook and I was sure that he felt it.

"I don't want to hurt you, Sam. I *won't* hurt you. This'll feel good. It's a game we'll play at night. You and me, so you can't tell your mom, okay." Paul said.

A game? That didn't ease my fears. Neither did Paul's pulling down his boxers. But then Paul did something Chad hadn't: he dropped to his knees between my legs. He put his face there and put my right thigh on his shoulder. He kept his promise, it didn't hurt. It actually felt good.

After a week, it started to hurt. He would still drop to his knees, but he wouldn't put his face between my legs any more. Paul started coming to my room every night. I wasn't afraid of him, just how much it hurt for him to press what was between his legs between mine--just that something inside me might be broken. I hated myself because I actually liked what he did that first night. Before the pushing, and the soft moaning, and the sweaty hand over my mouth, there was gentle touching and holding, like a father would hold a daughter and rock her to sleep. Sometimes during the game he would say, "I love you, Sam. I want to be your Daddy. I want to marry your mom. How do you feel about that?"

I'd think back to the conversation I had with Mom in the bathroom. Who was I to stand in the way if she loved him? "Okay," I'd say.

As the weeks turned into months and the months into a year, I wondered if my mother knew, if she ever woke up in the night and realized he wasn't beside her. How could she not know? Where was she with the steak knife now? But I didn't blame her for it. I blamed myself, for Chad and for Paul. I took the dares they offered and somewhere I'd lost the truth, but I hadn't lost the sin.

Eventually I began recreating the good feelings each time I could sneak away to the basement of my grandmother's house. It became so important that I would get dressed quickly and sneak downstairs before school. Then after Grandma picked me up, I would go downstairs as soon as she lost track of me. I loved my own touch: the heat and the smell. I would even do it before and after church on Sundays. I didn't think of Chad, though, or Paul. I thought of pain, of

being beaten. I thought of being punished by God for what I had done and for what I was doing. I fantasized about being raped. When I used to disobey, my grandmother would whip me with tree branches, and sometimes I would think of that--the sound of the limb coming for my skin--and I would orgasm, shuddering on the yellow vinyl floor of the basement.

I wanted to talk to Mom. I wanted to tell her everything about Chad, and masturbating excessively, and Paul, but I couldn't. I couldn't wreck her world. If she were to find out, she had to do it herself. It was like Chad said, she wouldn't believe me anyway, especially not when it came to Paul.

The night before my tenth birthday, I got my period, but I didn't know that's what it was. I went to the bathroom to pee and noticed two big red spots in my underwear. I thought Paul had finally broken something loose and I was about to die. I finished peeing because I couldn't hold it. I figured there was no sense dying with a full bladder. Then I went to find Mom. I found Paul first.

"Come here, Sam," he said. I went over to him on the couch. "Come up here and sit down." He motioned to his lap.

"Where's Momma?" I asked.

"She's out back."

I left the living room and yelled out the back door for her to come inside. She did and I showed her my problem. She explained that it was "a natural part of growing up," but I was sure that Paul had caused it. Mom gave me the only sanitary napkins she had in the house, which were the size of my forearm. Then she went into the living room to tell Paul what had happened. I listened at the kitchen door.

"She got her period," Mom said.

“Oh, Lord,” he said.

“She was scared she was going to bleed to death,” Mom said and both laughed.

It felt funny wearing the big diaper to bed, and it felt odd bleeding down there. It sort of hurt, too. Paul came as usual, and brought a towel. The game hurt as usual and more because of cramps, but he only used his fingers this time. I could see him in the light coming through the blinds. He closed his eyes, jerked himself harder, and pushed his fingers harder into me, but I didn't make a sound.

His eyes were closed when I saw more light from the hallway spill into the room. The door opened wider and my mom's silhouette appeared. I couldn't see her features immediately because my eyes hadn't adjusted to the light coming in from the hall. All I could hear was Paul's moaning growing in intensity as he reached his peak and he pushed his fingers farther inside me, which made me shut my eyes tightly. After he was done, he pulled his fingers out and I opened my eyes to find the door shut and Mom gone. I didn't mention what I had seen to Paul. Why would I? I wanted her to see. I prayed for her to see.

Paul said, "Goodnight," and left. I had to pee, so I rolled out of bed. I noticed the bathroom door was closed, but Paul hadn't gone in there. He went toward Mom's bedroom. I slightly and silently tried to turn the knob, but the door was locked. That's when I heard a snuffle and crying from the other side of the door. I got down on the carpet so that I could see under the crack. I saw my mom lying on the bathroom floor curled into herself crying. Seeing her upset made me cry, too. I still had to pee, but I didn't knock on the door. I climbed back into the bed and cried myself to sleep.

I woke up the next morning wet. It was my tenth birthday and I heard my mother yelling. I went to my bedroom door and put my ear against it so that I could hear better.



“What have you been doing to my little girl?” Mom yelled.

Paul was calm when he began, “Cindy, it’s not like that--”

“Oh? What is it then? I have eyes. I saw you last night. I saw what you were doing to her.”

“Cindy, I love you. And I love Samantha. And I wouldn’t hurt her. What you thought you saw was a mistake.”

“Yeah, a big mistake, Paul. You made a big, fucking mistake. Get the hell out,” Mom said, and inside I cheered.

“Cindy.”

“Quit saying my name. Don’t ever say it again. Here are your truck keys. Leave.”

I listened to silence and weight shifting on carpet. Then I heard keys switch hands and the front door open and close. I was about to come out of my bedroom and hug my mom, thank her for ridding this house of that evil, but when I cracked the door open, I heard that she was crying. I closed the door back because I didn’t know if she were crying for me or for him.

I put on dry clothes and stayed in my room for most of my birthday, waiting for my mom to say something to me. Eventually she said, “Come eat something.” I put my Barbie dolls down and went to the kitchen. She had boiled some hotdogs and made me a sandwich. “What do you want to drink? Juice?” Her tone was threaded with love and annoyance. I just nodded. She handed me the juice and the sandwich, and I went back to my room and shut the door. Maybe life without Paul wasn’t so good after all, but I didn’t want him to come back. I didn’t want him to touch me anymore. I didn’t want to take the dare.

Then there was a knock on the door. “Come in,” I said.

“Hi, Sam,” Mom said. “I’m sorry for ignoring you this morning.”

“It’s fine,” I said, not looking up from my sandwich and juice.

“It’s just that Paul moved out this morning before you woke up and I’ve been having a hard time with that. I didn’t mean to take it out on you.” She put a hand on my head.

“I know.” And I did know all of that.

“I love you, Sam. I hope you know that. I would never put you in danger.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m your mother and I’m supposed to protect you,” she said.

I realized that the whole time she hadn’t mentioned anything about what she had caught Paul doing last night or what the actual argument had been about this morning. Then the phone rang.

“Hang on,” she said. I couldn’t hear the phone conversation, but she was back in my room in a few seconds with the receiver in hand. “It’s for you.”

I answered the phone tentatively because Mom was standing over me. “Hello?”

“Hey, Sam.” It was Paul. “I just wanted to wish you ‘Happy Birthday.’ I had to leave in a bit of a hurry this morning before you got up.”

“Yeah, that’s what Mom said.”

“I’ll bring your gift home tonight, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Give me back to your mom.”

She took the phone, kissed my temple, and left my room, shutting the door behind her before putting the phone to her ear. I rubbed the kiss away when she turned her back.

That night, Paul did come home. He rang the doorbell and Mom let him in without a fuss. He *did* have a birthday present for me and she didn’t, so maybe that was why she let him in. For

the first time that day, I was the center of attention as I opened my only gift. It was a new Barbie house. My old one was too small. I took the gift into my room to clear a space for it. I moved the furniture and people out of the old house and placed it to the side. I put the new house on my table in place of the old one. Then I picked up the old one to take it to the large trash can in the kitchen.

I entered the living room to find Paul and Mom kissing. I froze. All I could think was that I had prayed for God to take him away, I prayed for God to make him stop hurting me, I wanted Mom to be happy, but God had failed me. She couldn't just forgive him, just forget. I wouldn't.

"Mom! I need your help," I yelled, almost stomping the rest of the way into the kitchen and throwing the old Barbie house in the vicinity of the trash can so that it flattened into pieces.

She followed me. "What is it, sweetie?"

"Sit down, Mom," I said. I needed to see into her eyes. She did and I stood before her.

"You're going to take him back?"

She blinked a long, hard blink, like it hurt her to answer. "I know you think he did things to you, but he didn't. We talked today on the phone and he explained it to me."

"What did he tell you?"

"The truth, Sam. He told me the truth. And you and I are going to have a talk about inappropriate touching. He told me what you did. Men and women have different body parts--"

"I know that already. I know about touching, too. He touched me here." I moved my hand between my legs.

"Sam."

"You were there, Mom--"

"Samantha!"

“You’re going to believe him over me?”

“Stop it!” She screamed and the exclamation was emphasized by the stinging slap of her hand across my face. I stumbled and my eyes watered. “I love him, Sam. And I’m going to marry him.” She hugged me to her and cried into my hair, pressing my reddening cheek into her breast. “But I love you, too.”

I pushed her away, stepped out of her reach. “Liar,” I said, with tears on my cheeks. And that was the truth.

### Three

My mother and I fell apart after that day in the kitchen. I began describing things in relation to before Mom found out and after. I found myself not caring whether she forgave me or not. She had forgiven Paul, but I didn't want the same absolution he had. That day in the kitchen when I was ten was the last time I hugged my mother fully. I had wrapped both arms around her and squeezed. I turned my head and rested my temple on her shoulder. I had depended on her to carry me, but she had dropped me. I didn't make the mistake again. Each hug following the day she slapped me, I embraced her loosely, often absently, as children hug strangers or distant relatives. I did the same to Paul. I hugged them out of necessity and habit because that's how daughters "honor thy mother and father."

I learned the different embraces. I learned how to hug a friend from school, leaning in straight-backed and with my arms bent like a Barbie doll, and then scrunching my shoulders in a last-ditch effort at conveying warmth. I learned how to hug a family member I only saw every few years, open-armed, wide-palmed, but still withholding because the embrace must also show dignity--a kind of formality like between acquaintances.

As a teenager I began hugging my mother and Paul using a combination of the hugs I had learned. I hugged them halfway, turning almost perpendicularly to their bodies and wrapping my arms low--between mid-torso and waist--and squeezing. I hugged them as I might soothe a

crying baby or embrace someone I am supposed to know well but don't--hands splayed on their backs, rubbing small circles or patting out whimpers or burps. I hugged them like they hugged me, like they were my parents, Cindy and Paul, but strangers, too.

The only embraces I didn't have to label and file away were the hugs my grandmother gave. Hers weren't like my mother's. Even before Mom knew about the nights with Paul, her hugs were half-hearted. I remember wrapping my short arms around one of her thighs. My mother would simply reach a hand down and pat my head or rub my back, never stopping what she was doing. My grandmother's hugs were full of attention. I would wrap my arms around Grandma's waist, and she'd wipe her hands on her apron and lean down to circle me with her arms. Grandma was my sense of permanence as birthdays passed me by, none as good as the eighth. She stayed the loving constant as the rift between my mother and me became a canyon, stretching farther and wider until we had no choice but to get cell phones to be able to communicate across it because to each other we were little specks standing on opposite sides.

I started high school in my zoned area, so I no longer went to Grandma's every day. There was no reason. I just woke myself up in the mornings and caught the bus. I would call Grandma after school, though, just to talk. Two days after my sixteenth birthday and one week after my sophomore year started, Grandma was baking tea cakes, had just finished them, and passed out in her kitchen. I was at school, listening intently as Grandma had taught me, although I could care less about U.S. history and it seemed my teacher could, too, by the way he sat like the rest of us, hunched over the textbook. At the end of reading each page word for word, he asked for questions or comments. Then he swigged slowly from a plastic University of Tennessee coffee mug and peered over the rim at the class. Putting the cup down, he ran his palm

over his goatee, sniffed, hunched, and began reading again. That's when the announcement came.

"Samantha Henderson to the office." I wasn't thinking too hard about being called to the office. I had had doctors' appointments that Grandma picked me up for. I had sometimes forgotten my lunch and Grandma dropped it off. The other students looked at me both suspiciously and longingly, as if I could save them from U.S. history as well. I gathered my textbook into my backpack and rose from my seat in the front row. The teacher didn't look up from reading about Thomas Jefferson. I walked out.

Between classes, only a few people were in the hallways: those students in study hall, staff members, and teachers who didn't have class. I enjoyed the quiet of the hallways during this time. I usually spent my study-hall periods in the hallways, tucked away in some corner. I made my way to the office, not too fast because I wanted to prolong my excused absence from third period, but not too slow because I figured my grandmother had come to see me. Opening the outward swinging door, I stepped in and the office assistant zoomed in on me.

"Samantha," she said. I nodded and smiled in acknowledgement. She didn't smile back, but gestured behind me. "Your father's here."

Father? I don't have a father! I turned quickly to find Paul standing a few steps behind me. I smiled out of habit. Eight years will make you do that. I don't know if I were more shocked that it was Paul or that it was someone other than Grandma. Either way, I still hadn't gotten used to having a father.

Mom and Paul had gotten married six months after I turned ten. I wasn't at the ceremony. Neither was Grandma. They took a vacation to Atlanta for three days and came back married. On my twelfth birthday, Paul legally adopted me. That was the birthday present my mom had been

trying to give me since I was born--a father. Standing in the school office before him, both the idea and the word were foreign and dead, like Latin.

By sixteen I had grown to nearly 5'7", but Paul still towered over me. I looked up and held his gaze but didn't step closer. "What are you doing here?" I asked.

He hesitated, looked over my head, I assume at the red-haired office assistant, and then back at me. I heard motion stop behind me. Papers quit rustling. I felt eyes on my back. "Grandma's in the hospital," he said. *My* grandmother, I thought. *My* grandma, but I didn't make a scene. It was strange how my annoyance at Paul overwhelmed me before the knowledge of my grandma's emergency did. I knew the people in the office were staring. I knew that they knew before I did, that they knew *more* than I did--more than he was telling me. I finally understood that I was leaving school early.

"I'll get my homework," I said, pushing out the office door. Paul followed behind me and put his hand on my neck. I heard him thank the office assistant. I turned toward the staircase to go to my locker.

"Sam, forget it. Let's go," Paul said, his hand still guiding me from the base of my skull.

We got to his truck and climbed in. I had ridden alone with him countless times over the years, both before the adoption and after, both before Mom found out and after, but he had never picked me up from school. The year he married my mom, he let me go. He still came to my room at night, but he just tucked me in and kissed my forehead. He touched my legs, my back and sides, but it wasn't like before. He would say "Goodnight" and leave. It was as if he didn't have to convince me anymore, and he'd gotten what he wanted from both of us. But Paul was still around, and he and Mom acted as if nothing had happened, as if Mom hadn't found out. I was



the only one struggling. In the truck, I focused on the road, tried to think about Grandma, but Paul's hand was on the stick shift, and he spread his fingers so that they brushed my leg.

I shifted in my seat, scooted closer to the door. "What happened to her?" I asked.

"She passed out at home. The mailman found her and called the ambulance," Paul said, merging onto the interstate.

"What made her pass out?"

He didn't look at me, but that hand was resting on the seat between us. I noticed his hands hadn't changed from how I remembered them when I was eight: large, heavy hands. "She has liver cancer, Sam. She's probably not going to make it. Your mom's at the hospital already."

Subtlety had not been one of Paul's strengths when it came to death. I knew from experience that he was uncomfortable with sadness and wanted to get it over with quickly. I had a dog when I was twelve that was hit by a car. Paul tried to spare me and tell me it ran away, but gave up and said, "Your dog's gone to heaven." Those were terms I understood. I was still going to church in middle school. I had a bird when I was thirteen that froze to death over an air vent. Paul didn't bother to spare me this one when the bird was stiff as a board, standing on its head in its own poop. He said, "Everything's going to die someday. Lou picked today."

Looking out the passenger window of the truck, I thought that perhaps Paul's frankness over the years might have toughened me toward death. I had lost many animals: the dog, the bird, a kitten, a cat who thought he was dog (he chased other cats and came when I whistled), and countless fish, of course, because they love to croak at the slightest change in temperature. I had encountered so much death when it came to my pets that I thought of death as quickly-passing sadness that went away as soon as the next pet arrived.

I knew from Grandma that “once the liver goes, you go” because one of Grandma’s sisters had liver problems, too. My grandmother had to travel to her hometown in Marion, Alabama, for the funeral within six months of her sister’s diagnosis. My train of thought was broken by the weight of Paul’s hand on my leg. I glanced at it but tried not to react. I somehow knew it would end up there.

“We’re here,” he said, lightly squeezing my thigh.

As easily as he had been touching my leg, I slid it from under his hand and followed him into the packed emergency room. People were sitting in nearly every chair watching “The Price is Right.” The nurse told Paul that Grandma had been transferred to ICU. We made our way upstairs and found Mom, who was dry-eyed but looked as if she had been crying. Paul embraced her in the hallway. I looked away at nurses and doctors going to and fro with trays and equipment. “Where’s Grandma?” I asked.

My mom looked at me as if she had just noticed that I stood there. She had dread on her face--her eyes were wide, her forehead worried, her lips pursed. She visibly sighed before she let go of Paul, took two steps and embraced me. It was her trademark hug, the one she had given when I was a child. She rubbed my back and petted my hair. I mimicked her embrace.

“She’s gone,” Mom said. And I knew black folks often said “gone” and meant “dead,” not literally “left the building.” Mom continued, “You can see her, if you want.”

I nodded, or maybe said “yeah,” or maybe just grunted. Mom got the point and took me to my grandmother.

A male nurse was in the room, which was more of a cubicle with walls made of curtains. He said she was hooked up to the breathing machine, which made it look like she was still alive. The nurse and Mom left me with Grandma. I stood at the foot of the bed and looked at all the

machines. The first one I picked out was the breathing machine that was steadily pumping air into her lungs, and steadily freaking me out. I traced all the IV lines to their bags. Then my eyes caught her face. No, it was the sunken, shape-shifted, disfigured form of what used to be her face. A tube was taped to her lip and it shifted the lower part of her mouth and jaw to the left.

I came around the left of the bed and sat in the only chair. I picked up her hand and started crying. I leaned my head onto the side of the bed, lightly resting my forehead on the cold, liquid-like skin of her forearm. I stared at the dust bunnies on the tile floor, thinking that my best friend was gone. I got up to look her in the face. As I leaned over her, my tears fell onto Grandma's face. I touched her cheek with mine, embraced her as much as was possible, and whispered two words in her ear: "I'm sorry."

Once when I was very young and had broken one of my toys and lied about it, Grandma said that when she went to Heaven she would ask God if I had lied and He would tell her the truth. In other words, Grandma would know everything about me when she died. Well, she was dead, and I was sorry for not having told her so many things. She would have to find them out from God. I couldn't lie to my grandmother, but I couldn't tell her about what Paul had done either. If she knew what he had done, then she would have to know about my incessant trips to the basement as well. When she died, I felt as though I had let her down. I was an elephant of sin sitting in the middle of her newly dusted room.

Mom and Paul came to get me, and they were followed by aunts and uncles I knew but rarely spoke to. Grandma and Grandpa had three children--two girls and a boy. My aunt and uncle hugged me, then went to Grandma. Mom tugged me away, said we were leaving. She had barely gotten along with Grandma and didn't get along with her siblings at all.

Grandma's funeral was held at the funeral home, not at the church as she would have wanted. After she was buried, I stopped going to church. I wasn't sure I would be able to handle church without Grandma anyway, with nothing to keep me from disintegrating under His gaze. So I fell into a different routine in Sunday mornings, which involved sleeping until ten, eating a large breakfast, and worshipping a different kind of god—whatever sport was on television.

I started a different routine at school, too. Grandma had taught me to “get my lesson” and I had done well in high school so far—had made straight *A*'s, except a *B* in algebra because it took me longer to understand how  $x$  was a number. After Grandma's death, however, the *A*'s dropped to *C*'s. My teachers wanted to confer with my mother *and* father about my sudden “failure to complete assignments,” habitual absenteeism,” and “lack of concentration in class.” I tried to do homework in study hall or at lunch, but I couldn't find the motivation. All I could do was find my corner on the fourth floor with the window overlooking the senior courtyard and dangle my legs over the edge. I talked to my grandmother up there sometimes. I thought maybe, being that high up, she would hear me. So one day, I started to tell her everything, starting with Truth or Dare.

After I told her, I felt empty as if Grandma had pulled away from me and God had condemned me. I was suddenly cold. I looked down into the courtyard below, at the students socializing. I looked down at a long crack in the concrete and tried to focus my eyes on one spot—one square inch—to aim for. Then I knew what I had to do to make it up to God and Grandma, to get my absolution.

After school, I went home and gave Mom my progress report. I didn't wait for her to open it as I usually did when I was making good grades. I just handed it to her, told her she

needed to sign it, and went to my room. Ten minutes later, a heavy hand knocked on the door. It was Paul. Mom was with him.

“What’s this?” Mom asked.

“It’s my report card.”

“C’s?”

“I didn’t do good this time.”

“You had straight A’s last six weeks,” Paul said.

I shrugged.

“What does that mean?” he asked, referring to the gesture. “What about the teacher comments here? Why do they want to meet with us?”

“They usually conference with the parents of kids who are failing,” I said.

“This has never happened before, Sam. What’s going on with you?” Mom asked.

“Nothing. The work load was harder this six weeks,” I lied. It had never been hard for me to lie to my mother, and Paul was just an extension of her.

Two days later, they talked to three of my five teachers. I sat in the hallway and pretended to do homework. I couldn’t hear their conversation, but I knew what they were saying. I knew by the time we left that Mom and Paul would be angry and disappointed, but I didn’t expect what happened next.

When we got home, after a quiet truck ride, Mom started cooking dinner. Paul and I were watching television in the living room. Mom realized that she didn’t have enough milk for the macaroni and cheese.

“Honey, would you go to the store real quick and get some milk?”

“Sure,” Paul said, going into the kitchen. I could still hear them over the television. “I’m going to take Sam, too. I’d like to talk to her about school.”

“I think that’s a good idea. She doesn’t listen to me anymore,” Mom said.

“Get your shoes on, Sam. We’re going to the store,” he called.

I didn’t ask any questions because I already knew the answers, so I just stood up and pulled my tennis shoes on and followed him out the door.

In the truck, he started the conversation bluntly. “You need to get yourself together. I don’t know what’s going on with you, but it shouldn’t interfere with your schoolwork.”

I didn’t respond because this was a lecture, so, I looked straight ahead at the parallel yellow lines in the road and hooked my thumbs under my seatbelt.

“Sam, your Mom’s worried that you’re doing drugs. Are you?”

“No.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said, pulling into the back of the parking lot of the Walgreens. I was content not to respond, but he probed. “What do you say to that?”

“I don’t care,” I mumbled.

“What?” He turned off the ignition.

“I don’t care what you believe,” I said, still staring ahead. I heard the click of his seatbelt unbuckling and was about to reach for my own when his large hand grasped it, buckle and clip. I couldn’t get to it to push the button and unbuckle myself and I didn’t dare try. I turned and glared at him.

He reached over the space between us and forced his left hand between my pressed legs. My right hand released its grip on the seatbelt and went to his wrist. I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. His other hand pushed under my T-shirt and beneath my bra. My eyes darted

around the truck and the parking lot. I thought I could probably scream loudly enough for the woman getting out of her car two rows away to hear me, so I yelled. The woman didn't turn around, but Paul pushed my face into the window to shush me. I felt his hands continue roaming, his lips on my neck, as the woman vanished into the grocery store.

I couldn't move because the seatbelt and Paul's hand were holding me. He pushed his left hand into my panties and squeezed my left breast with his right hand. I pushed at his chest and face, and the more I pushed, the more he hurt me with his left hand until I sat pliant in his grip. Pressed between his body and the door, my only defense was to say, "I'll never forgive you," which he laughed at.

He left me in the truck while he went inside the Walgreens. I straightened my clothes and wiped his lips off my neck. I wished to die, to have wings, to be someone else. And I hated myself for wishing because Grandma had always taught me that wishing was the evil negative of praying. Then again, praying hadn't gotten me anywhere.

When we returned home, Paul said, "You better not bring home another report card like that one."

I sat in the truck for a long time after he had gone inside. Surely he gave my mother some excuse for my not coming in after him. My thoughts raced as I teetered on the line between hating God for not saving me from Him, for not letting the woman hear me, and thanking God for showing me that I would have to save myself. Relief ran through me in a shiver. I wondered if they would see my happiness in the goosebumps on my skin.

"Dinner's on the stove," Mom said.

"Okay," I said, keeping my happiness in check. I went to the bathroom and shut the door. Kids at school and people in the movies had always talked about how hard it was to cut along the

correct veins in the wrists. I looked at the dirty razorblade on the edge of the sink. I had come from Paul's razor. I gripped it in my right hand and broke the skin of my left wrist enough to bleed. It hurt too badly.

I opened the medicine cabinet over the toilet and grabbed all the bottles. Most of them were pain pills for Mom's arthritis. I'd heard at school that sleeping pills were good and figured maybe it was a good idea to mix medication, since doctors always say not to do that. I turned on the faucet, opened the Tylenol PM, Vicodin, and Ultram. I started swallowing them. I counted as I swallowed. I got to forty-five and got tired of swallowing pills. I put the bottles back in the cabinet.

I stared at myself a long time, wondering how long it would take. Then I went to the kitchen and fixed myself a plate of macaroni and cheese.



## Four

When I awoke, macaroni and cheese was smashed against my face and my mother was wiping it away with a damp washcloth--an ice-cold, damp washcloth. So cold on my face that I wanted to push her hand away, but I couldn't lift my right arm. I couldn't lift the left one either. Lying on my back in the backseat, my head in my mother's lap, I couldn't see my arms, but it did not feel as though anything were restricting them. In fact, I couldn't feel them at all. What I *could* feel was the cold rag on my cheeks, my throbbing headache, my churning stomach, and one piece of macaroni tickling my right temple that Mom hadn't gotten to yet. I had peeled my cheese-caked eyelids apart to find my mother staring down at me.

"We're on the way to the hospital, Sam. It's going to be okay."

Looking up at her silhouette, outlined by the window, I blinked every two seconds because the passing streetlights kept blinding me. After the sixth or seventh one, I gave up and let my eyes roll back. I knew we weren't in an ambulance because there would have been more bright lights, loud sirens, needles, and I would have had more leg room. It didn't make sense to call the ambulance anyway, since we lived three minutes from the hospital. It would take the ambulance and fire trucks fifteen minutes to find the house and then another ten to back out of the dead-end street. I'd rather be cramped in the back of a car I knew and coddled in a familiar lap--although not a lap I'd known lately.

“Is she awake?” Paul’s voice came from the front of the car. I cracked one eye open.

“Yes,” Mom looked up.

“Good. She’ll be awake for everything they have to do to her,” he said.

If he were saying this to scare me, it worked. I hadn’t expected to live through the night and wasn’t expecting to have to come back from the dead. I wasn’t expecting to have to deal with Mom and Paul again. Mom didn’t respond to Paul and didn’t look back at me. When I figured our moment of bonding was over, I closed my eye. If I could have moved from her lap, I suppose that awkward silence was my cue to have done so. I didn’t know if she agreed with Paul and wanted to scare me or not. Either way, I couldn’t move.

So I dozed and wondered how they found me—face down in my plate of macaroni and cheese. Perhaps Mom came into the kitchen to make sure I was eating. She sometimes tried to do those motherly things. I remembered fixing the plate and sitting down at the table. I looked around the kitchen and tried to take a picture in my head of what everything looked like so I could take a bit of this world into the next. I chewed so slowly on the macaroni noodles that I forgot I was eating at times. Then I felt that icy rag on my face again. My eyes snapped open while a streetlamp was going by and that ticked off the little man who was gnawing on the nerves in my brain, and made him bite down harder and my head throb worse.

“Keep your eyes open,” Mom said. “Stay awake.” The way she said it was the same way Paul had said “everything they have to do to her.” It was threatening and challenging. Her tone made me want to both rise to the challenge and admit defeat in the same breath.

When we arrived at the hospital, Paul parked the car in one of the emergency spots. Then he went to get a wheelchair. He and Mom helped me into it since I still couldn’t feel my extremities, and wheeled me into the waiting room. The fluorescent light was too bright

bouncing off the cream-colored floor tiles and pale yellow walls. Even the rows of mauve and green-checkered chairs were too much to look at in the flickering overhead light. Mom signed me in and told the nurse what I did. Or I assumed she was saying words, but I couldn't hear them over the crying baby, the television, and the stomping little man in my head. Mom held up a Ziploc baggie holding medicine bottles and the nurses took us all back immediately. I wasn't surprised that Mom knew exactly which of her pain pills were missing.

A strawberry blonde nurse, who I could tell wasn't naturally blonde because of her dark roots, wheeled me into a separate area while Mom and Paul stayed behind to fill out paperwork. The blonde nurse pushed me into an area with small curtained cubicles. She pulled back the second curtain and parked me in front of the bed. She worked so fast around the cubicle that I couldn't read her nametag, and she didn't offer her name either. I fought to stay awake, perhaps because Mom wanted me to, or maybe to prove that I could take whatever torture was in store, or perhaps because I was already at the hospital and there was no other choice.

Then three other people came into my makeshift room. One was an Asian woman with long, dark brown hair falling around her shoulders and covering her nametag, one was a white man not much taller than the Asian woman with the same hair color, and the third was a black woman who was about the same height as Paul. The male and the blonde nurse got me into the bed. He was gentle, but she seemed to drop me onto the cot. I tried to glare, but my eyes threatened to roll back again. I wasn't even put into one of those hospital gowns first, which was all right with me. With the blonde nurse standing over me, I then saw that her name was Mallory. I resolved to call her Nurse Death.

Once I was on the bed, the black doctor sat on a stool and introduced herself. "I'm Dr. Upshaw. Tell me what happened."

I realized that I hadn't tried speaking to this point. I was doing a great deal of blinking, swallowing around my dry esophagus, and thinking, but I hadn't spoken yet. I tried to create some saliva so I'd have something to work with. While moving my tongue around, I thought, *She's read my chart. Why is she asking me? She wants to talk? Yeah, right. She wants to give me a lecture—exercise her psychology skills. Well, not on me.* I stopped trying to answer Dr. Upshaw's question. She wanted to lecture me on the dangers of overdosing, the stupidity of suicide, the embarrassment of not actually killing myself and ending up here. I wasn't going to take it. I could still succeed. I hadn't asked to be rescued.

My mouth stopped working, and she must have noticed because she smiled a knowing smile. I gave the same "you're going to have to do better than that" look back to her. "Okay," she said. "Why did you do it?"

I looked around at the other faces—Nurse Death, the dark-haired man, and the Asian woman. I smiled inwardly to think that perhaps they wouldn't be so angry at having to deal with "one more suicide attempt" if they knew the truth—that I'd tried to kill myself because I couldn't stand being raped by my father anymore. Or perhaps they wouldn't believe me. After all it would still be two happily married adults against one rebellious, suicidal teenager. Dr. Upshaw's authoritative voice broke through.

"You don't have to tell me. I've dealt with a hundred attempts. I already know the answer." She mocked a teenager's voice and droned, "I don't know."

Mom and Paul stood at the edge of the curtain. I wasn't paying attention to them, though, because I wanted to see the reaction of this doctor when I answered her. "I know exactly why I did it," I told the doctor. Since my throat was still mostly dry, my voice came out raspy like a croak. "I wanted to die. I still want to die."

“Well, that’s too bad because we’re not going to let you.”

Then my saviors started moving around simultaneously preparing different machines. I particularly kept an eye on Nurse Death, who put on latex gloves and then asked if I were allergic to latex. I wasn’t so I didn’t bother to answer. She came to my side holding something in her hand. “You’re going to have to hold your mouth open and this is going to help,” Nurse Death said. She held up the white plastic contraption that looked like a football player’s mouth guard. The next thing I knew she was forcing it into my mouth. I couldn’t fight her except to press my lips together and turn my head because my arms and legs were still rather limp. She won.

I thought I wouldn’t be able to breathe, but there was a hole in the center of the plastic. I couldn’t push it out of my mouth because it was behind my teeth, and I couldn’t close my lips around it because it was too big. All I could do was pant and glare at the doctor, who said, “You have to swallow this tube.” She proceeded to shove it past the plastic thing and my gag reflex. I turned my head away and she said, “Samantha,” in that annoyed mother way. I realized then that she might have had children, and I pitied them. I looked up at the doctor and Nurse Death, both looked in the direction of Mom and Paul. Then Nurse Death grasped my head and Dr. Upshaw pushed the tube again and repeated, “Swallow,” until I did. I wanted to believe that Paul had told the doctor to use force, and maybe he had, and if so, I knew Mom had agreed.

When the doctor realized that I was in effect paralyzed, she sent the Asian nurse and the male nurse away. Dr. Upshaw told Nurse Death to continue, and the doctor went to talk to Mom and Paul. I overheard the phrases “cry for help” and “in these cases.” I tried to listen to the rest of their conversation, but I could only focus on Satan in Latex as she poured a clear liquid down the tube in my throat. Then she chased that with charcoal. Between the tube, the clear liquid, the charcoal, the pills, and the macaroni and cheese, I threw up immediately. All I saw was the tube

fill up and spew out the other end. Nurse Death reached to get one of those kidney-shaped spit cups. I turned my head toward her back, and the tube sprayed her. I didn't have time to celebrate that small victory, however, because I couldn't stop puking.

Dr. Upshaw called the male nurse back. By the time everything was out and I had ruined my clothes, Dr. Upshaw's coat, the male nurse's scrubs, and at least four blankets, Nurse Death ripped the tube from my esophagus, changed me into a hospital gown, and shoved an IV into my arm. By then I could move my arms and legs, and my stomach wasn't churning anymore, but my head still hurt. Dr. Upshaw had told me to get some sleep, but I couldn't sleep because I was too cold dressed only in the hospital gown and wrapped in a sheet. I looked around for Mom. She and Paul weren't standing at the end of the cubicle anymore. I wanted clean clothes. I thought about pushing the button to call the nurses' station, but then I thought that it might still be Nurse Death's shift. So I swung my legs over the side and grabbed the IV pole. I was weak from throwing up, but the cold floor kept my mind focused on my task. I was on my way down the hall and back into the waiting room area when I heard my name.

"Sam." I knew it was Paul. If I hadn't been so tired, I would have run. I didn't stop.

"Samantha." That was a different voice—my mother's voice. I turned.

"Let's go back to your room," Paul said. It wasn't a suggestion although it came out that way. I wheeled the IV back to the cubicle and they followed. I got back into the bed, Paul drew the curtain, and Mom sat on the doctor's stool near the bed. Paul came around the other side and stood over me.

"I'm cold. I need clean clothes," I said to Mom.

"Okay," she said, but her look conveyed nothing.

“No,” Paul said simply. “You don’t get to need anything. You don’t get what you want after what you’ve done to us tonight. You know what people are going to say about you? About *us* now? They’re going to say we can’t control you.”

“You can’t,” I said.

“What did you say?” he asked and leaned closer to my face. I could feel him breathing my air.

I felt braver even as I lay beneath him, in the same position I’d always been. I had taken some control. “What have I ever done to you?” I asked him. I didn’t wait for an answer before I said, “I’m not going to be a warm place for your dick anymore.” Being that close, I could tell when the rage hit his eyes. *Dick* made them twitch, and by *anymore* they had narrowed and darkened.

I expected the blow when it came, hard and even from across the left side of my face. I felt the tears filling the ducts in the corners of my eyes, but didn’t blink so they wouldn’t spill. I turned to my mother and asked, “What did I do to you?”

I saw something in my mother’s face then. Her eyes turned down and her lips matched her eyes. She clasped her hands in her lap, then reached for my hand. I didn’t pull it out of her reach. I didn’t move at all. I saw her lips beginning to move.

“Samantha, I love you, too.” She said it the same way she had that day in the kitchen years ago.

It was then I realized that she *did* love me; she just didn’t know how to do it the right way. She didn’t know how to love me more than sex, more than men, or more than Paul. Maybe she was telling the truth after all.

Suddenly the curtain was pulled back and in walked the Asian nurse from earlier. She had a wheelchair with her. Her dark brown hair still flowed around her shoulders. She smiled at us, but none of us could return the smile. "Ready to change rooms?" she asked.

She helped me into the wheelchair and pushed me down the hall. I knew the bruise should have already been forming on my cheek. Mom and Paul stayed behind in the curtain cubicle. I didn't cover the bruise and I didn't look back at them.

On the way upstairs in the elevator, I saw that the nurse's hair was covering her nametag. She took me to a real room with walls and a door. I got into the bed and she covered me up.

She said, "It doesn't get as cold up here, but here's an extra blanket in case."

"Thank you," I told her.

"Your parents probably just worried about you," she said. "They're scared about losing their little girl."

"Sure."

"Suicide is a hard thing to deal with. It's tough on family members left behind." She pulled a chair close to the bedside and sat down. "My daughter killed herself three years ago. She was twelve."

I couldn't find anything to say. The normal expression of condolence would be "I'm sorry," but being in the hospital for attempting suicide myself, "I'm sorry" seemed worn-out.

"When I found her body in the bathtub and the bloody water, I didn't believe it. I didn't think her life had been that bad. I had never let anything happen to her, gave her everything I could, but I found out after the funeral that she was being bullied at school." She paused then and looked at me. "If you are being bullied at school, you should tell your parents and they can stop it. Is that what's happening?"



I said, “No.”

“Whatever it is, somebody can help. I would have done anything to save my little girl.”

She leaned over the bed and continued, “It isn’t worth killing yourself.”

I was overcome. I felt like apologizing for what I had done, apologizing for living through it. She was close and I reached out and hugged her. She hugged me back. I cried because I wanted to tell her but couldn’t, because I was sorry for living when her daughter had died, and because I lacked a mother and she a daughter and there was nothing either of us could do.

I asked her name and she looked at me as if that was the most thoughtful request ever made to her. Then she replied in her soft-spoken way. The name was foreign and because of my sniffles and her softness, I didn’t understand. She was the only person willing to share my agony, and I wouldn’t be able to find her tomorrow.

The nurse’s words were cliché, but her embrace was what mattered. I thought no one would ever hold me this way again, the way Grandma had, because Paul had made me ugly. He had made Mom ugly, too—had made us tears, clenched teeth, and blind eyes. He had me play the game with him. I would go home the next day and start the game again—see-sawing between truth or dare, between heaven or hell, alive and dead. I was holding onto the conjunctions, trying to keep away from the definitive states of being because I didn’t know which I deserved. I still don’t, but if I sit in the middle of the see-saw, I can keep it steady a little while longer.

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