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EXPLOSIVE FAMILY DINNERS: BIPOLAR DISORDER, TEMPORAL LOBE
EPILEPSY & ME

CRITICAL AFTERWORD
CONVULSIVE FAMILY DYNAMICS:
WHEN MENTAL AND NEUROLOGICAL DISABILITIES ENTANGLE AND
ISOLATE

By

Elizabeth Lane Glass
B.A. University of Louisville 1989
M.Ed. University of Louisville 1995
M.A. Miami University 1997

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Humanities

Department of Comparative Humanities
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

August 2021

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A Dissertation Approved on

August 6, 2021

by the following Dissertation Committee:

Prof. Paul Griner, Director

Dr. Amy Clukey, Committee Member

Dr. Catherine Fosl, Committee Member

Dr. Kristi Maxwell, Outside Reader

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother

Nell Owen Glass

And in the memory of

Joe Glass, Guy Gardner, and Dr. Annette Allen

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I would like to thank Prof. Paul Griner for the many readings and writing expertise in helping me mold my dissertation. Thank you to Dr. Cate Fosl and Dr. Amy Clukey for your wisdom, and to Dr. Kristi Maxwell for your thorough reading and to all of you for your excellent feedback. I also am grateful for all of them believing in me. Thank you to Prof. Kiki Petrosino and Jason Howard for telling me I was not writing essays, but was writing chapters. I'm grateful to my sister, Catherine Dobbs, and my mother, Nell Glass, for your time in sharing your memories with me and for your love. And my thanks and appreciation to my partner Cammie Sizemore, for your love and support while completing the dissertation and coursework.

ABSTRACT

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EPILEPSY & ME

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Elizabeth Lane Glass

August 6, 2021

This dissertation is a memoir that is about my nuclear family. The themes within the memoir itself include my father's bipolar disorder, my temporal lobe epilepsy, and how volatile the combination was as I grew up, but also how loving my family was, despite all the issues. It also looks at the ramifications of having temporal lobe epilepsy, growing up queer (bi+) in a time when being queer at all was not accepted and being bi+ was not understood, and the issues I've had with my sisters, which were caused in part by my father. The memoir is accompanied by a critical afterword that examines my positions within the memoir (primarily) through the lenses of disability studies, medical humanities, and creative writing/memoir studies.

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SECTION ONE
HOW IT BEGINS

CHAPTER ONE

JANE'S FIRST SUICIDE

I began dating Jane after a friend introduced us so I could interview her for an oral history project for a class I took during my PhD coursework. After I did her interview, we talked for six hours, which led to flirting online, then to a date a few days later. There's a lot of truth to what they say about lesbians and U-Haul trucks: the second date is a U-Haul moving the two women in together. Though we weren't officially living together yet, I was a week from having a key to her place and two weeks from staying there every night. We texted nonstop for hours every day and night then; we still text a lot, over four years into our relationship.

Two days after our first date, after we'd been texting for at least four hours, I wrote, *My dad was an attorney and shot himself in his office on 5th street between Liberty and Jefferson. It made the news before I knew. I've heard people poured out of their offices and there were cops galore because they all thought well of him. Joe Glass. In the stairwell of that building.*

Was it in 2000? She wrote.

My heart beat faster, but I tried to keep calm. *Yeah. September 25th of 2000.*

My dog Grayzie wanted to go out, but I couldn't begin to stand up.

She texted back, *Oh my Lord. That was my first suicide.*

I was silent.

Then came, *Downtown wasn't my area normally, but [we] would respond if everyone else in the first [division] was tied up on calls or crowd/traffic control.*

I knew she was a social worker with the police five years around then. *I'm so sorry. My personal trauma has been professional awfulness to you.*

She wrote, *Oh my God, no. My part is almost less than nothing, just randomness of the world. I'm sorrier than I can say for your loss.*

What did you do? I asked.

Nothing. It was too long before she wrote back. Grayzie kept pawing me, but I ignored him. He lay back down, looking at me pitifully. When she didn't answer soon enough, and we were too new for me to be pushy, I tried to go back to the paper I was writing, but it wasn't going to get finished. It was due the next day, but I emailed my professor asking for an extension because I couldn't think. It took a year to complete because it was so hard to go back to that space.

Finally, I couldn't stand it. *"What did you do?"*

Silence again. Eventually came, *"Mostly traffic control."*

"Mostly?"

"Mostly."

"Tell me about that night."

"You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do. Please tell me."

I knew Dad left a note for his secretary saying, "Don't look in the stairwell. Go upstairs and call the police." Of course she looked down the stairs, where Dad lay surrounded by blood, a gun nearby. I didn't know that or anything until I got to the hospital six hours after he shot himself, and had never heard much except this and what was in the newspaper.

There was silence from Jane. She didn't text back.

Finally, ten very long minutes later my phone dinged. "*Sorry, listening to Morrissey. Where were we?*" I'd learn later that when she didn't want to talk about something, she tried hard to avoid it—and this, she definitely didn't want to talk about.

"What happened that night?"

"You really don't want to know. No child should know those things about a parent."

It would be two years before she told me.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ILLUANDAS

As a kid, and especially as an adolescent, my relationship with my dad was fraught with discord because of his mental illness—bipolar disorder—and my oddness caused by the partial complex seizures of temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). Partial complex seizures means my body did stuff I wasn't aware of; I was on vacation somewhere and my body kept acting, doing strange things like screaming, pulling my hair, rocking, crying—stuff that looks like a big temper tantrum, no matter my age. That epilepsy weirdness meant I got made fun of by kids in my classes and neighborhood; it caused me all sorts of problems with both kids and adults because I saw and experienced things others didn't because I had hallucinations. The blow ups between me and Dad then happened almost every night after our family dinner. Before that, though, when I was younger, sometimes things were really good, and he thought I was cute when I told stories. He didn't realize that I *saw* and experienced the fantastic things like faeries, gnomes, and other beings I spoke of.

I was never a well-behaved child, in large part because of the TLE, because it would make me argue and fight with other kids or walk off and seek adults when kids made fun of me. As a little kid, my parents thought I was peculiar, but not bizarre yet. When I told stories, I was a little kid with a big imagination. At that time, I watched *Sesame Street* every day—one place my folks nodded to as to why I saw monsters and believed in fantastical beings. I had a creative mind and was thinking of Cookie Monster and Grover. *Sesame Street* began in 1969, when I was two. It was precisely the right timing for me since that's when I began watching TV. One night when I was four, I was

punished by my mom and sent to bed with no dinner and no TV the next day. I sat on the stairs, crying, holding my stuffed animal dogs, Bozo and Lassie, waiting for Dad. When he got home, I stuck my head through the rails of the banister and said, “Dad, let’s cooperate.” He and Mom burst out laughing. They hadn’t taught me that word. I learned it from *Sesame Street*. I remembered the word, the definition, and how to use it. I got out of my punishment because they found my use of that word so cute. As time went on, the punishments grew to more and more time (weeks upon weeks) without TV or telephone privileges or being grounded and made to stay home after school or not go to friends’ houses on weekends, but I could usually get out of them to some degree. The fights, though, were bad: full of yelling and screaming, plus me having those temper-tantrum-like seizures. I had a bad time with Dad—but none of us had an easy time with him. It certainly wasn’t easy on Mom and Dad since I saw things—ghosts, pixies, faeries, invisible friends—and believed they were there. Dad didn’t realize I actually had experiences with them, or I thought I did. Mom knew, though.

When I was ten, every night the Illuanda Indians got me out of my bed and took me across the street to the Reed’s yard, which was five-acres in the middle of our neighborhood. I was their new leader, an old soul, born anew in 1967. It was 1977, and I was old enough to be so special they took me in as their medicine woman. The Illuandas were an ancient tribe that had lived on that property hundreds of years earlier. They wore orange leather pants and tops with beautiful fringe. The tops had intricate beadwork that the women taught me how to do so I could make it by myself when they no longer appeared to me. They taught me their ways: how to hunt buffalo, tan their hides, and make clothes and instruments out of the leather. Some nights I wore the headdress I had

gotten from the South Union Shaker Museum with my maternal grandmother, Mommie O', and carried the American Indian doll purse, which was a dark-skinned doll with a purple leather dress around her that zipped up the back. Other nights I took the drum with stretched cream-colored leather. I hadn't wondered why a Shaker Village museum sold those things; I just knew they were important because they brought me closer to the Illuandas.

I tried to tell Mommie O' that summer when we went to the Shaker Museum how important the Indian items were to me, and how much closer I was to the Illuandas, but she poo-pooed me and dismissed it. The school counselors, though, were very interested in them. I went to them every day to tell them about the Illuandas, and how important I was to them. I loved making the trip down the hall to the office, past the decorated bulletin boards and the library—my favorite place in the school. I was taken seriously and listened to by the counselors. I told Mr. Abbott and Mrs. Matchem, a rapt audience, about the flowers the Illuandas taught me how to make into a poultice to cure ailments and to make soup out of wild onions and flowers that I practiced making in my mom's cast iron cauldron during spring and summer breaks. I taught my sister Callie how to make the soup, but when I tried to teach her more spiritual things like how to meditate, which I learned about in the yoga classes Mom and I took together when I was six, or how to *see* the Illuandas, she hollered for Mom. It was important for me to teach her everything. The Illuandas were willing to have her join the tribe if she would believe in them, but she had to get second-sight before they would take her to the Reed's yard at night and begin training her. She wouldn't to open her mind that way, which worried me

about when the end of the world came, which I was sure would happen any time—an idea that I'm not sure where I came up with.

The day came when Mr. Abbott told me that he would like to send me to the University of Louisville for them to study me. I was so proud. I was in touch with other worlds, and the doctors and scientists were going to learn from me. I told my mom with a puffed-up chest of importance. “No,” she said. I argued. She told me, “I’ll go down and talk to the Counselors tomorrow.” I was sure that she’d see their insight, but when she got there, she asked, “Does this happen at a certain time each day?” Mrs. Matchem checked her calendar. She was surprised to learn that it was always just before 10:30 a. m. “What subject does she have at 10:30?” Mrs. Matchem went to my classroom and asked Mrs. Dixon, then came back and told my mom, “Math.” My mom humped, and said, “Elizabeth doesn’t like math” and left. She told me not to go to the Counselors anymore, and when I tried, they turned me away. They and my Dad had been the only adults who listened to me. Friends and I spent time with the Illuandas, but they’ve since told me they thought we were playing and not that I actually *saw* them. The Illuandas still visited me nightly until we moved when I was ten. I didn’t mention them often after that. Mom asked me as an adult why they didn’t move with us and weren’t in the woods behind the new house. I shrugged. “They lived at the Reed’s.”

It wasn’t until I was twenty-two that I got studied. I was reading a chapter for my Abnormal Psychology class while I worked on my Masters in Counseling Psychology; a small paragraph of no more than six sentences described temporal lobe epilepsy. It’s a type of epilepsy that causes heightened sensations, feelings of uniqueness, and those

“temper tantrum” seizures, full of flailing hands, screaming, hair pulling, kicking, and other psychomotor activities. The seizures can also be small involving staring, but I was unreachable during those times, or déjà vus, where I felt like I had done something or been somewhere before, but I hadn’t, and jamais vus, which is when I had done something repeatedly, but have the overwhelming sensation that I haven’t ever been there or done that. TLE mirrors bipolar disorder in many ways, but it is caused by seizures, which are a neurological disorder rather than a chemical disorder like bipolar. I read that paragraph and immediately knew what was “wrong” with me, something I had been searching for since I was a child. I was so tired of being weird enough to scare off friends and romantic entanglements; I had good friends at this point, but I was at risk of losing my husband because of the seizures. I’d always known something was wrong, that there was something I couldn’t control. It’s the big seizures I found wrong, though, not the visits from the Illuandas or other magical thoughts. Really, that’s still the case. If I could have visits from strange beings and fantastical things without the big seizures, would I go off anticonvulsants? That, I can’t answer because I don’t know. It’s not a realistic thing to spend too much time on, though, because that’s not a possibility. They don’t make medicine that minor seizures, auras, and beliefs and not be at risk for the temper tantrum-like seizures.

I went to a therapist at the University of Louisville Counseling Center and told her what I thought. The psychiatrist, Dr. Stein, was there and asked me to describe my seizures. I told her of the times I had no control and had what seemed to be horrible behavior outbursts, and that I never remembered them afterward. I pieced them together based on what those around me said, but I didn’t actually remember them, and included

that I had to take a nap afterward. She told me that TLE is fairly rare, but it did sound like I had it, so she referred me to a neurologist.

The neurologist I saw, Dr. Botts, didn't do a physical exam. He took me into his large office and sat me across from the desk from him. His office resembled that of a lawyer more than one of a doctor and seemed to be set up to be intimidating.

"When did you begin having these so-called seizures?"

"All my life," I answered. "I've always had them."

He had me describe them, then said, "You're just having temper tantrums and want an excuse for them, aren't you?"

I could have cried. I felt helpless, finally having found out what was wrong with me, having spent most of my life feeling insane. No matter how special I felt within my hallucinations, away from them I felt like outsider, and now I wasn't being taken seriously. "No, that's not it," I said.

"Well, you go on home to your husband and straighten up. There's no reason to think you have temporal lobe epilepsy. It's very uncommon. You read in your book what you thought would be something to excuse your behavior, and now you just want to blame your bad behavior on it." I stood up. I had just gotten married and was already having trouble, due in large part to my seizures. I knew I couldn't control them, and they would make my relationship end. Lee, my then-husband, was already frustrated about my behaviors, and we'd only been married a few months. I had the big outburst-type seizures every day or two. As I stood to leave, he said, "Let me ask you one more question, have you ever had a déjà vu?"

"Yes," I answered. "All the time."

“How often is ‘all the time’?”

I thought about it. I knew that everything hinged on this question, and I wanted to answer him in a way that showed I had TLE, but I didn’t know what the proper answer for that would be, so I answered truthfully. “Six or seven.”

“Six or seven ever?”

“No,” I said, “six or seven a day.”

He sat up. He had been leaning back in his executive desk chair the way my dad, always the attorney, did when he knew the whole story already, or when he was lecturing someone—be it me or one of his clients. The doctor’s eyes had opened wider, but then went back to his regular look. “Well, I don’t think it will show anything, but I’ll order this EEG for you. You have to stay awake twenty-four hours before the test. Can you do that?” I nodded. “Just because of the *déjà vu*, I’ll go ahead and start you on Tegretol. If you were to really have it, you’d need a much stronger dose, but this might help you with your troubles.”

Walking into the hospital for the EEG with Lee, I felt foolish. It seemed neither he nor anyone else believed I had TLE, which made me feel crazy. What if the test showed that I didn’t have epilepsy and I was simply out of control on my own without a cause? In my memory I had my pillow, a blanket, and Bozo with me when I went to the hospital. I know I didn’t, but that was how powerless I felt. During the EEG, I sat in the recliner after having twenty electrodes hooked to my scalp that would measure my brain waves. I was so tired. I had not been allowed to drink coffee or have any caffeine to stay awake, though Lee had because he stayed up with me so I wouldn’t fall asleep. The test involved

sitting in the chair and having my brain waves measured during regular times as well as when strobe lights went off in my closed eyes. When I was done, the technician wouldn't tell me anything, just that I should hear from my doctor the next day.

I didn't. So I called him after two days, but he didn't return my call. On the third day, I got a call from my mom. "Well, apparently you have it."

I was quiet, then asked, "What?"

"Dr. Saunders, Michelle's psychiatrist, called and she has seen your EEG. It's being passed around the hospital because it's the perfect example of someone with temporal lobe epilepsy because it's on both sides and it's constant. That's apparently really unusual."

This was 1990, pre-HIPPA, and even so it was within the same hospital, so it's conceivable that could still happen. It was surreal—finding out from my mom through my sister Michelle's psychiatrist that I had TLE. I called the neurologist's office again. It was a Friday and around 3 p.m. If I didn't get hold of him, I wouldn't hear until at least Monday.

"He's on vacation for the next three weeks. He's going out of the country," the receptionist said. I told her what I had heard. She seemed skeptical, but I got a call back from his nurse.

"What is it you heard?" she asked. When I told her what my mom said and how it got to her, she put me on hold. It wasn't long before she came back. "I need to try to reach Dr. Botts. He's going out of the country, and I don't know if I'll be able to tell you anything if he's already gone. I'll call you back." Calling me back was quite a process. I worked in a school building running an after-school childcare program and the only

phone was down the hall in the Home Economics room. I had a pager—this was before many people had cell phones—so she had to page me and I called her back from the Home Ec room. The page finally came. When I reached her, she said, “I caught Dr. Botts on the airplane. He said to immediately up your Tegretol. Do you have some with you that you can take?” I did. “Take it right away. And triple the dose he had you on.”

I got off the phone and went to the nearest water fountain and took another Tegretol. I felt crazy, vulnerable, and relieved. I slid down the wall, three kids watching me because they were waiting to be able to go outside and play. It was a small program, so I was the only staff person. I worried about the parents or my boss finding out I had epilepsy. The Americans with Disabilities (ADA) act had literally just been passed—only a month earlier. I didn’t even know I had some protection, though even with the ADA, things don’t always work out in one’s favor. A big seizure never happened there, maybe because they’re most often brought on by stress and there was little stress in that job with only a few kids and no other adults. That day, six eyes stared at me as I sat on the floor against the wall and cried before we went outside and had the best afternoon of that entire fall.

Dad found my Indian tribe funny. Back then he had drinks sometimes, and one night, he had me tell his best friend, another lawyer named Mr. Hammill, about the Illuandas.

I stood in my nightgown, proud to have been chosen and now to have an audience to tell.

“Why haven’t I heard of them before?” Mr. Hammill asked.

“Well, they were all killed by white men.”

He nodded, looked at Dad.

“They were completely wiped out. You should have seen them, though. They were a regal”—I looked at Dad. He nodded; I had used that word right—“and proud tribe. They had mystical powers, and now . . . now, they now live inside stardust and show themselves to me.”

Mr. Hammill shook his Scotch on the rocks. “Honey, why were you chosen as a new one?” He looked at Dad and they both smiled. Dad was more of a grinner, but he was smiling then.

“Because I’m special,” I said. “Because I can see them.” I stopped. He was my rapt audience. Adults didn’t listen to me when I talked about the Illuandas anymore after Mom made the counselors at school stop listening. “See, we dance around a fire really, really late. In the middle of the night—when it’s morning.” I turned my attention to Dad. “That’s right, right? It’s morning in the middle of the night, isn’t it?” He nodded, still smiling. I said to Mr. Hammill, “They take me out of my bed at night, take me to the Reed’s yard and teach me all this stuff, then leave me on the floor in the mornings when it’s getting light so I can get ready for school.”

“Are you awake while they teach you these things?” Mr. Hammill said.

“Oh yeah. That’s why it’s hard for me to get up mornings.” Mom could barely get me up before school; she even bought me Charlie Brown sheets on which Lucy said, “I hate to go to bed at night and I hate to get up in the mornings.” I’ve always been that way, and still am, even though I now understand I’m not visited by Illuanda Indians—or anything else, except peculiar dreams, which are also a trait of those with TLE, even well-controlled TLE.

“What do you do with the Indians. The Inca, is that right?”

“No, no, no,” I said. “The Illuanda.” I stamped my foot, then thought better of it.

“Well, it’s okay you forgot. They’re used to that. They teach me stuff.”

“Like what ‘stuff?’” Mr. Hammill said.

“Well, like how to heal people.”

He nodded.

“And how to put spells on people, but I don’t want to do that ‘cause it’s bad.”

He took a drink of his Scotch and laughed. “What else, little missy?”

“They teach me their ways. Like how to build teepees and those things that they used to pull behind horses to carry their stuff.”

“A travois?” Dad said.

“Yeah, those,” I said.

“Travois were primarily used by Plains Indians, darlin,’” he said. “They didn’t live here.”

I stomped again. “Yes! Yes, they did, too!” I was starting to get mad; stress can bring on seizures, though I didn’t have one that night.

“No, hon’, they didn’t,” Dad said. I pulled my hair, getting more and more frustrated. “But it’s okay if your Indians used them,” he amended.

“Really?”

“Really. Go on. What else do they teach you?” he said.

Mr. Hammill shook his glass, which only had ice in it now. Dad went to the enormous TV/stereo console that held the ice bucket and Scotch and made them both new

drinks. He and Mr. Hammill were starting to laugh at me, and I grew more and more upset with them as it continued.

“They taugth me,” I stopped. They were laughing hard, tipsy now from their Scotch and my story. I stomped my foot. “Shut up!” I ran upstairs to my bed to wait for the Illuandas to get me and take me away from them and Callie, who also made fun of me.

Later that night, my dad and Mr. Hammill came into my room and picked me up out of my bed and put me on the floor. They shushed each other and giggled like the girls in my class did when I had seizures. I heard them say “Indians” more than once. I pretended to be asleep while they moved me and stood in the doorway talking. After they left and I was falling back asleep, I was cold. At least the Illuandas covered me up when they brought me back to my room.

CHAPTER THREE

THE PROBLEM WITH SEEING FAERIES

The best moment in middle school was at the end of a basketball game. We were losing badly, and I was put in. I hadn't played the whole season. It seemed to me the entire game would be decided by my performance. The room was crowded; kids stood on the edge of the court and filled the gym, which was hot and smelled like the underarms of a bunch of adult-sized young people who didn't realize they should wear deodorant. The air pressed in and I felt the aura of a seizure coming on, which made the court seem as long as a football field, turn purple and blue tinted, and tilt. I didn't end up having a full seizure that day—just the auras—but seizures were always a possibility.

I ran, my thighs chafing together beneath the polyester shorts, then stopped and raised my arms. I was surprised when someone passed the ball to me. I threw it toward the basket and it went in. The gym exploded and a boy from my church turned yellow in the aura, pumping his fist, happily yelling "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" over and over. I got the ball again—and made another basket, just as the final buzzer rang. It didn't matter that we didn't win, a shout of my name repeated rippled through the gym and I was lifted into the air by my teammates. The other team didn't understand why mine was excited since we lost. The coaches shook hands, and after a prolonged celebration, Mr. Singleton, our coach, led us over to shake the hands of the other team. I went, and some of them complimented me. There's something about a loser having a winning moment that can be infectious. I scored four points in a losing game of girls' middle school basketball, and I was on top of the world.

We ran up the stairs to the locker room and for once I stripped out of my uniform at the same time as everybody else instead of waiting until everyone else was in the showers. For the first time I felt like part of the team instead of the weirdo. Then one of the girls said, “Look, who isn’t too good to get naked around us today!” I pulled my shirt back on and went to a far shower. That was all it took to knock me down to my usual self-conscious strange self. I didn’t know how to explain that I didn’t get undressed until they were in the showers because I was fat and didn’t want to be seen. Some of the other girls were fat also, but they didn’t seem to care that the rest of us saw them. I was jealous of those girls; how could they be so secure to strip down in front of people? I cried in the shower and waited until everyone was gone before getting out to the point that Mr. Singleton called up for me to come on down. The water was cold as I dashed over to get dressed. I tried to hurry, so didn’t dry off, which made putting my clothes on take longer. I took so long pulling on the last of my clothes, then trying to put my socks on over wet feet, that Mr. Singleton eventually came up to see if I was okay. “Don’t let them get to you,” he said. “You were great today.” He patted my head and descended the stairs. I quietly left a few minutes later, just an awkward kid who didn’t fit in. Middle school didn’t have many of those basketball game moments for me.

In seventh grade, I had two school friends—Lyndie and JeanAnne. We had sleepovers where we talked and joked until two or three in the morning. One time we were at Lyndie’s house, lying next to each other in sleeping bags on the floor. I was closest to the sliding glass door, which I didn’t like. I was scared, so didn’t want to go to sleep yet even though it was late. Dad, always the attorney, had filled my head with stories of abducted

children—horrible things happening to them just because they were seen through windows or walking down the street. This never bothered me during the day, but at night, I was a shaking rabbit around open windows.

“There are faeries in the woods behind my house,” I said.

Lyndie sat up, her short white-blonde hair catching the light. JeanAnne leaned up on her elbows. Her darker blonde hair was long and girly—different than my and Lyndie’s short hair—and it fell around her shoulders.

I sat cross-legged on my open Holly Hobbie sleeping bag. “I watch them in the bushes, and if I’m really still they forget about me and dance and spin without worrying that I’m there.”

My friends nodded. JeanAnne frowned a little, but Lyndie was leaning forward now.

“They’re beautiful and look like Tinkerbell, but are bigger. About this tall.” I held my hand a foot above the floor. “They wear flowing dresses that are pink or blue or purple. They don’t have wands like Tinkerbell. She’s made up, but they did a really good job drawing her. She’s really close. The person who draws her must have seen them, too.” I sat back a little. My friends were smiling. “Oh, but they can’t fly,” I added. “The ones in my woods can’t. I don’t know if there’s another kind. Maybe in England or Ireland or California or something. I would ask mine, but I can’t understand their language.”

JeanAnne frowned. “Lyndie, come’ere.” They ran into the laundry room next to Lyndie’s basement den. They were gone a long time, and I didn’t like the aloneness I felt in the room with the darkness on the other side of the glass door. There was no covering

on the door, and I was sure bad guys could see right in, watch us three girls, and want to hurt us.

“Hey ya’ll, come back,” I said. I felt the type of aloneness that was so common to that point of my life and for so many years to come—the sort caused from being different, from having temporal lobe epilepsy, from being peculiar and not entirely accepted. It’s a kind that can still come over me at night if I’m not careful, a reason I keep music on at night when I’m by myself even now.

They stayed gone.

I stood. “Come on. Stop it.” I walked to the swinging “saloon” doors and opened them.

The girls were whispering when they came toward me. They stopped five feet away. “We want you to sleep over there,” JeanAnne said, and pointed to the area across the room by a high, round kitchen table with barstool-height chairs around it.

“No.” I couldn’t. That was even closer to the sliding glass door. I didn’t know what was going on, but I wasn’t moving there.

“Then we’re moving over here. Stay there,” JeanAnne said.

They moved to the bottom of the staircase—only about five feet away from where they had been, but it seemed a few states distance apart from me. Lyndie turned off the lights, and it was darker than my house, which had nightlights in each bedroom and hall. When friends stayed with me in the basement guest room at my house, we left a lamp on in the large living area just outside the bedroom.

“Stop it. You two. Please quit,” I said. A minute passed. “Can y’all come back?”

Giggles were my answer.

“Please? What’s wrong?”

More laughing.

“Can I move over there?”

“No,” JeanAnne said. Her voice sounded mad. Angry and grownup. It was the tone a mom uses when she means it and no more questions better be asked.

I didn’t know what I’d done wrong, so sat on my sleeping bag looking around. I had a book, but no flashlight to read with, and I was sure evil men lurked on the other side of the glass doors watching us. Lyndie and JeanAnne fell asleep quickly, but until light streaked the sky, I didn’t lay back. I fell asleep as soon as I did, but it was a fitful rest, and I woke up often until it was even lighter outside.

The next thing I knew, Lyndie kicked my shoulder. I opened my eyes. It was bright. I wanted to sleep, but I could tell it was late.

“Your dad’s here. Get up.”

My eyes popped open. I was always in trouble, especially with Dad. By this point, we’d not been getting along, something that began in earnest when I was about eleven. I was twelve now, so Dad and I had a year of arguments by then. His symptoms with untreated bipolar disorder were getting worse, too. Between the two things, when he said “jump,” he didn’t expect me to say “how high?” He expected that I was already standing in front of him. It was usually my mom who picked me up when I went over to friends’ houses, and she would grouse about it, but I wouldn’t be in trouble about not being ready when she arrived. I was wearing pajamas, hadn’t packed my things, and my sleeping bag wasn’t rolled up.

“Why didn’t you wake me up?” I quickly changed into my t-shirt and out-of-style bell bottoms from the day before. Dad hated to wait, and I knew he’d be sitting outside in the car.

“We just didn’t,” she said and shrugged.

I noticed my things were packed. I shoved my pajamas in my bag while Lyndie roughly stuffed my sleeping bag in the cloth carrying bag. I always rolled it first. I would get yelled at by Mom for it just being shoved in there. Maybe I could fix it before Mom saw it.

I look back now and realize that I had it easy compared to so many other kids. I knew my parents loved me, unconditionally. They didn’t always like me, and they treated me like a freak sometimes, but they always did and always would love me. A year before I hung out with JeanAnne and Lyndie, my parents took me to a psychiatrist for an IQ test to see if I was underperforming at school (I was, by a long-shot). When the psychiatrist asked, “Which of you does she remind you of?” Mom says she pulled back insulted, sure that no one else had ever been like me, especially neither she nor her husband. She looked at Dad, whose hand was raised. She recalls the shock of this often. “She’s just like me,” Dad said. Mom was appalled. It’s a story she repeats, though now with fondness; it’s something I don’t hurry her past anymore. Despite hearing it dozens, maybe even hundreds of times, I now relish it. I won’t always have her stories, not first hand anyway. She’s a receptacle for memories of her and Dad because she won’t always be around, either. Maybe it was that I was so unlike her that made her get irritated at me, and so like Dad that made him angry with me.

“Go,” Lyndie said.

It was a long march up the stairs. JeanAnne stood at the top with Lyndie's mom, and they watched me come. Lyndie walked behind me, swinging my sleeping bag against my heels. Nobody spoke to me. They stared.

"Call me later?" I asked Lyndie.

"I don't think that's a good idea," her mom said.

What did they think happened? What did they think I did? I didn't understand what was wrong. Had I done something? I searched my brain. Did I have a seizure? Even though I didn't know that's what they were then, I knew sometimes people acted differently toward me than they had, with seemingly no cause. I was pretty sure I hadn't had one, so I was confused. Did they think I was gay? I wondered. Did they know? It was decades before I'd admit that I liked both men and women. Had they figured that out? I decided that had to be it. I thought in my sleep I must have tried to kiss one of them. Because of the seizures, I was used to lost time and didn't find it strange to think I did something I couldn't remember because that happened every day. The strange beliefs and hallucinations did, too—also caused by the epilepsy.

Lyndie shoved my sleeping bag into my arms, and I walked outside. Her dad was leaning against our car talking to my dad. Oh no, how would Dad react to my having tried to kiss a girl? That was surely the only thing that would make them act this way. Lyndie's dad looked at me with pity in his eyes. I ducked my head and got in the passenger seat.

Lyndie and JeanAnne were cruel to me the way adolescents can be to each other. But I gave them chance after chance. We had countless sleepovers, even after this point. Most of the time we all got along. I was better friends with Lyndie; JeanAnne didn't like

that. She used my weird behaviors as leverage to do things like this whenever she could. Most of the adversity in my life before Dad died came the result of my epilepsy. TLE didn't just define my behaviors, it dictated my personality before being on medication, and even, to a lesser degree, until I my seizures were 100% controlled. It gave me hypergraphia—an uncontrollable need to write. I have the other traits, too: hyper- or hyposexuality, hypersociability, hallucinations, nervousness, irritability, depression. All of this is called Geschwind Syndrome. I had every peculiarity of it before I was on anticonvulsants—and have them all, just small versions of them, even still.

“Anything you want to tell me, kid?” Dad asked when we were leaving Lyndie’s neighborhood. I shook my head. He nodded. “Want to go downtown with me to get the mail?”

I looked at my lap. I wanted to go home to bed, but said, “Sure.”

Dad went to the mail room in the courthouse where the letters were sorted for the nearby businesses every Saturday. They saved Dad’s mail out, knowing he was coming for it. Apparently lawyers frequently mailed important documents on Fridays, then the weekend went by without the opposing attorney being able to work on whatever legal matter the paperwork involved while the deadline dwindled down.

“Come with me,” he said when he parked next to the courthouse.

“Can I just stay here?” I sunk down into the seat to hide from passersby.

He gave me a look that said I was going. When we got to the men at the postal window, Dad said, “This is my eldest, Elizabeth. I’m so proud of her. She’s a keeper,”

which surprised me. In hindsight, it shouldn't have, but that day, after that night and on little sleep, I was astounded he wanted me around.

When we headed back to the car, he said, "You didn't eat yet?"

"No." I shook my head.

"Come with me." We went to a corner restaurant that sold doughnuts and coffee. He introduced me to everyone.

"Good thing you're here early," the waitress said. "We close at one."

I looked up. It was 12:30.

The doughnuts were good. They were a treat I didn't get often because my mom worried about my weight and always had me on diets. She says now that I wanted to diet because I got teased about being chubby from elementary school up, but I remember it being her idea. Either way, I think being urged to conform to societal norms before I was ten-years-old contributed to why I'm fat now.

The deli had a cement floor, people were smoking, and the waitress talked to me. It felt like she was pumping me for information about Dad, who was a handsome man. It seemed deceitful to me, like she had ulterior motives, but maybe she was just trying to get on his good side. When we were leaving, he paid with a \$50 bill and said, "Keep the change."

"Joe, your mind is somewhere else. Unless you meant to give me almost a \$50 tip," she said.

Dad stopped. "I meant to tip well, but not that well. I thought it was a \$10." He chuckled. "I'll take \$30 of it. You can have change from a \$20 since you were honest."

The door to the restaurant shut, and he turned to me. “Hey kiddo, what’s say you don’t tell your mom that I almost gave away \$50 and I don’t tell her about your bad sleepover.”

I wondered if Dad was having an affair with the waitress, if that was why she had been so attentive to me, but instead of saying anything to him—or later to Mom—I smiled and nodded. “Deal.” We both had secrets to keep now.

Because Dad wouldn’t seek treatment for bipolar disorder, our relationship during the years I had seizures, was explosive. He never hit me, but he yelled. And yelled. One night after dinner, I said, “Dad, my science book got thrown out of the window, and disappeared before the janitor got it.” The kids threw my books out the windows a lot, especially in Mr. Tate’s science class. He was young, and didn’t know how to control his classes well, and almost every day my book went out the window of his classroom. Since the school was in the projects, and most of the white kids, including me, were bussed there for integration reasons, the janitor always had to go get my books. I was embarrassed that the janitor always had to go, but he was nice about it.

“What do you mean it ‘disappeared’?” Dad gritted his teeth, his jaw movements flexing showed though his five o’clock shadow.

I glanced at Mom. She made eye contact with me, turned, and pretended to be busy putting up leftovers. I never thought about whether she should have stepped in, stopped Dad’s raging until recently. I’m still undecided on that. She made arguments not get worse than they did, so I do think she could have redirected him sooner. The only

way they finally ended were when I had a seizure or Mom diverted his attention away from me.

“The book was gone. When he went down there, it wasn’t there.”

“When *who* went down there?”

“The janitor.”

Dad’s fists lifted, then banged on varnished wood dinner table. The dishes popped up, then landed, clanking against each other.

“Dad, stop.”

“Why didn’t *you* go get the book?”

“I’m not allowed.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m just not.” I wondered why he even asked since he dropped me at school every morning. Surely he knew why this school administration didn’t let kids outside unsupervised. The racist assumption by either the school administration, or parents who swayed them, was that the neighborhood was unsafe.

“We’ll see about this.” He looked at Mom. “Nell, call school tomorrow. Make sure Elizabeth is able to get her own books when they *fly* out the window.” He turned back to me. “Why is it they go out the window so much?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

His fists banged the table again. “I asked you a question.”

I pleaded with Mom with my eyes. She was the only way this could stop before it got worse. She wasn’t meek but didn’t like to get in the middle of my and Dad’s

arguments because it never turned out in her favor. Mom made eye contact with me, a little support, but didn't speak up.

"I don't know," I said.

He stood up, put his thumbs through the waistline of his shorts, and moved them backward and forward, which was intimidating, and meant he was about to pounce, verbally, but aggressively. He seemed to want to hit me and was stopping himself when he did that. "Do you hear this, Nell? Do you hear your daughter?"

"I hear her," Mom said.

"Can't you keep track of your own things? Maybe we should take away your TV privileges for a week to teach you some responsibility." He was standing, all 6'3" of him, towering over me.

"Da-aa-ad."

"Don't Dad me. Say another word and it's two weeks."

"Dad, don't."

"Two weeks. Want to make it three?"

"Uhgh."

"Three."

The stress brought on a seizure. I came out of it on the marble floor in the front hallway rocking back and forth on my knees. I didn't know why I was there, or how I got there from the kitchen.

Mom said, "Elizabeth, go to your room. Joe, calm down."

I went upstairs, crawled into bed, lay down, and cried. When I woke up—I always slept after a big seizure—I was refreshed and didn't remember anything other than the

beginning of the argument and that I was on my knees rocking at the end. I had no idea what happened in between or how “no TV” had gone up to two months.

That’s why the day he picked me up at Lyndie’s was so nice: he didn’t get mad at me, never gritted his teeth, didn’t punish me. After breakfast, he asked if I wanted to go shopping. I said yes whenever shopping was offered because he usually bought me anything I wanted. We went to the The Mall St. Matthews. He got me a Kelly green Fair Isle sweater and at Rhodes Department Store, he bought a bunch—at least twenty—ties. He whispered, “Don’t tell your mother. It’s our secret.”

“Just like the money you almost gave that lady.”

Dad blanched, nodded, and looked away. “Yes, like that.”

In science class the Monday following that Friday night sleepover with Lyndie and JeanAnne, notes were being passed every time Mr. Tate turned his back. This wasn’t entirely unusual, but it was usually me and Lyndie, or the three of us—me, Lyndie, and JeanAnne—passing them. Other sets of girls also passed notes on typical days, too. What was odd about this day was that the notes were going to everyone but me. All the boys, all the girls opened these notes, and they were being passed wildfire fast. When one of the notes was finally given to me it said, “Elizabeth’s a big fat lesbian! She sees faeries so she’s a druggie fairy!” I turned red, then white, wished I hadn’t told them, and was glad I hadn’t told them about the elves or the Illuandas I also saw. I knew I needed to hide things from people. Mom told me that all the time, but I never did it, not like I should have.

Over the weekend, I searched my mind to see if I tried to kiss JeanAnne or Lyndie, but I didn't think I had. Now I wasn't sure. Lyndie and I were closer, so when we saw each other by our lockers, I said, "What happened Friday?"

"You know. You see faeries, you freak."

"That's it?"

"What do you mean 'that's it?' You're a druggie freak." She laughed. "You use Mary Jane and LSD just like those songs say. Just like my mom said. She said normal people don't see things like that, and you use drugs, so to stay away from you, so bye, you lezzie freak!" She slammed her locker, which was next to mine, pivoted on her heel, and walked away.

I looked down and pushed my head into my locker, hiding it from the other kids. I'd known since I was little that I was interested in girls and boys. Outwardly I was boy crazy, but as I grew up, some of my female friends and I had experimented with getting naked in front of each other and exploring each other's flat chests with tentative fingers. By myself later, I imagined that we'd kissed. Just kissed. I was still a little kid, but as I grew older the fantasies became more prurient. By the time I was in seventh grade with Lyndie and JeanAnne, some of my friends and I had begun to talk about our imaginings with boys that sometimes ventured into what we imagined other girls would like, which led to touching each other's budding breasts. By the time I was twelve in seventh grade, I had a C-cup, and my female friends always seemed to want to see my breasts. It seemed normal to me because I was curious about their bodies, too. I realize now that some of them just wondered what they would look like later, but there was a sexual aspect to

some of the pondering. Lyndie was one who I'd shared such fantasies with, and who had shared them with me. I wondered if JeanAnne knew.

Deep into one night I was spending the night at Lyndie's house before our bigger sleepover with JeanAnne, Lyndie pulled me to her. "I want to know what it feels like." We hugged for a long time. She pushed her shirt up, then mine. Neither of us took off our shirts; we wore them above our breasts, up under our arms, so we could pull them down if someone came downstairs. That way it was like we weren't doing it. We held our faces pointing away from each other. We weren't gay, after all.

"Take your bra off," she said. She took her small bra off while I removed my adult-sized one. "Come'ere."

We pressed our breasts together. It was so warm and soft. So different, I thought, than a boy's chest would be. We giggled, then parted. Lyndie came back, toward me, her breath warm against my lip before I turned my face, suddenly self-conscious. She breathed against my neck, then cheek, before she turned her head, too. We held each other for long minutes, softness and heavy breathing, before parting a little and looking at each other. We giggled then, and her mom opened the basement door, "You girls are having way too much fun down there." We scurried to our sleeping bags laid out next to each other's, crawled in, and pretended we'd been asleep.

"Lyndie?" I whispered after a few minutes.

"Yeah?"

"That was nice."

"Yeah."

At 1:30 the Monday afternoon after the sleepover with Lyndie and JeanAnne, I was paged on the overhead intercom to go to the office to meet both middle school counselors. I was in trouble again. I figured I'd lost time and acted up, which is how I usually knew I'd had a seizure. I wondered what I'd done. Typically when I had a big seizure, the kind that looked like horrible temper fits, I was in an argument or fight, but not always. I hadn't been very tardy to any classes that day, and I got to school on time. Dad drove me most days, and he often ran late, but hadn't that day. My books hadn't been thrown out the windows, which I got in trouble for instead of the kids who threw them. I look back on that and the unfairness of this, and instead of getting mad, it only makes me somewhat sad. I hope things are better now. I've heard they aren't, though, from about the experiences of my friends' kids after being bullied.

I walked slowly down the old staircase, sure they knew I liked girls from JeanAnne and Lydie, and that they were going to talk to me about it. I thought it was amoral, everyone said so back in 1980. The other kids were calling me a lesbian, so that had to be it. Maybe I tried to kiss another girl if I had a seizure in school, since I had myself convinced that's what happened at Lyndie's at the sleepover. I didn't run down the stairs the way I usually did. I took each stair carefully, like I'd fall if I didn't watch my every step. I carried my books for homework in case I was being sent home for being bisexual, something I didn't begin to have a word for. I passed Darryl, the janitor who saved my books by getting them after they were thrown out the windows by other kids. He said, "Keep your head up, missy. It'll all work out."

As I walked into the office, the counselors, Mr. Cohen and Mrs. Porter, were waiting for me. Mrs. Porter grabbed my Trapper Keeper, making my books and pencil

case fall to the floor. I stooped to pick them up, but Mr. Cohen grabbed them. “Not so fast,” he said. I was an Office Aide during third period, and when I looked at the office staff, none of them would meet my eyes, which stung. Mr. Jefferson, the principal, stood at his door, watching, shaking his head. When he looked at me, his eyes reminded me of my dad’s, downturned at the corners with a look of disappointment. He held his mouth tightly, lips pressed together, and I knew I was in bad trouble.

I felt dizzy, and started seeing yellow, the office swayed and turned green like often happened before a seizure. I sat down, bumping my head on the teachers’ mailboxes mounted above the chairs as I did. Most kids were too short to hit them, but I was already 5’6” and weighed 160, so big that my awkwardness was exacerbated.

Mr. Cohen and Mrs. Porter pulled my books apart, searching each page one-by-one, looking between the spine and sewn pages of the book. They ruined my science book, which I had to pay to replace at the end of the year. No one believed me, especially not my parents, when I said Mr. Cohen did it.

When they were done searching, they patted me down, reached into each pocket, removed my shoes and socks. Then Mrs. Porter took me to the office restroom to look in my underwear and bra. This would never be allowed now, but at the time, they didn’t even act like it was unusual behavior. It just had to be the female counselor who did it, and it had to be in the privacy of the adults-only bathroom. The bathroom vibrated dark violet with the strum of the fluorescent light’s flicker. I was embarrassed to have her looking at me because I was big—bigger than the other students and larger than her—and I was also sure it meant lesbians looked different naked than other girls. Since I liked boys, too, I wondered if I looked straight or gay under my panties. She didn’t say, and

when she pushed me forward, out of the bathroom, the office was unsteady, streaked in yellow and green, and I was close to having a seizure.

She looked at Mr. Jefferson, then Mr. Cohen, and said, “Nothing.”

“Take us to your locker,” Mr. Cohen said. I stood there. I didn’t want to. I’d kept one of the notes being passed that day, the one that was passed to me. They would find it and know I was a lesbian if they didn’t already. My mom was Miss Kentucky in 1963 and was involved in the pageant after that; a man on the Board of Directors with her was gay, but I only realized that based on a comment by my dad not long before that, and I thought only men could be gay. Then I met the female gym teacher at my middle school and knew she was like me. Or at least like the gay part of me. I didn’t think that *anyone* else liked both boys and girls, which made me feel like even more of a freak than if I’d only been into boys or only into girls. I’d heard the word lesbian, but I had no idea that anyone could be bi+.

There were also other things in my locker I didn’t want them to see. Things I was embarrassed about.

“Do we have to call your mother?” I wonder now if I’d said yes what they would have done, and what Mom would have said. She laughed at most of the accusations of teachers over the years because usually it was that when I was done with my work, I wrote notes or played with erasers. But sometimes she got mad at me over things, though. I couldn’t predict what would happen, so remained quiet when the counselors asked me if they should call her. They still hadn’t told me what was going on, but we were climbing the stairs to my locker because the threat of them calling my mom had worked. They

would see that note and know, though they probably already did since Mrs. Porter saw beneath my underwear.

What came to me while climbing the stairs was a memory of one night when Lyndie and I stayed in her basement—the last sleepover with each other before JeanAnne was there, too. We had touched each other’s breasts over our t-shirts with our bras off like other nights. I was certain the counselors could read my thoughts, but I couldn’t help recalling it.

“This is nice,” Lyndie said.

“I know.” I pushed her shirt up a little, touching her stomach. We lay on the floor on our sleeping bags facing each other. Our faces got closer.

“I wish I was a guy,” Lyndie said quietly. “I wish that all the time.”

“Yeah.” I said it, but was confused. I didn’t want to be male. I wished I could have a girlfriend, but that was different.

Lyndie was still mostly flat-chested and she kept her hair very short. I looked at her closely and noticed she had thin blonde hair on her upper lip. It was probably the peach fuzz all women have, but it made me self-conscious after she just said she wanted to be a boy. I pushed away from her and went to the easel in the laundry room. “Do you have paint?”

She got up and came toward me. “It’s upstairs. I could get it.” She took a step toward the stairs.

“No, that’s okay.” The spell was broken. As much as I wanted to reach out to her later in the night, I couldn’t. I was afraid I’d be rebuffed.

When I got near my locker with Mr. Cohen and Mrs. Porter, I walked past it to another hall, and tried to open a locker that wasn't mine. I couldn't get it open, and when I failed several times, Mrs. Porter looked at a small scrap of paper in her hand and said, "*Your* locker, please," her face set, forehead scrunched, mouth tight, eyebrows knitted.

We got to my locker, and I tried to open Lyndie's, which was next to mine. I knew her combination, but suddenly couldn't remember it. Mrs. Porter looked at her paper. "That one," and pointed to mine. My hands shook, and the lock clanked against the metal body of the locker. The wall of lockers swung in my eyes with a pre-seizure aura, making it harder to see and comprehend the numbers on the lock. I did the combination wrong until Mrs. Porter pushed me aside and unlocked it with the combination from her slip of paper. "Open it." I pulled open the small bottom locker where my books, mirror, and jacket were, where cut out magazine pictures of Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta from *Grease*, the singers Leif Garrett, Andy Gibb, and the band Queen hung on the door. I didn't push the button up that would open the top, smaller locker above this one. I didn't want them to go into that one. I hoped they'd forget about it and not look there.

I watched them until Mrs. Porter said, "Sit," and pointed to the floor nearby. I felt like a dog, and the kids across the hall in Mr. Tate's room laughed. That wasn't my class, but it was my grade, and they were taking turns coming out to see what was going on until Mr. Tate looked at us all apologetically and closed the door.

"You finding anything?" Mrs. Porter asked.

“No. Edna, I said I didn’t,” but he was cut off by a quick slash of Mrs. Porter’s hand across the air. Her coral fingernails seemed to stutter, and time was moving funny. I hit my head against the locker. Not now, I thought, not now. It wasn’t a good time for the small seizure that made my vision to do that. It was the sign of a larger one possible, one I’m glad didn’t come, but during this little one, I watched their heads balloon and shrink, hands moving fast, sped up in time, like a 45 record sounds on 78 time, then slow like a 33 on the 45 setting.

When all my stuff was sitting in the hall around us, they stood from their stooping positions. “I told you,” Mr. Cohen said, but Mrs. Porter popped the top locker section, the one I didn’t want her to see. I watched them go through my class paperwork—old quizzes, notes passed back and forth with classmates, a graded paper or two—until she came to a purse shaped like a saddle that my aunt Peggy had given me because I liked horses. That’s what I didn’t want them to look in. I ran down the hall. “Get her!” Mrs. Porter yelled. Mr. Cohen ran after me. Mr. Tate came to the hall. Mrs. Porter yelled, “Call the office. Tell them to call the police.” I heard that, then pulsing in my ears, and nothing else. Mr. Cohen grabbed my shirt to slow me, then tackled me around the waist, bringing me to the ground. My chin hit the floor hard, giving me an instant headache. He had me pinned down when I heard, “Oh God. Let her up. Let her go.” I ran to the office, crying, and asked them to call my mom.

They’d found my sanitary pads and tampons, something no other girls in the school seemed to need yet. Each month I snuck to the garbage cans in the girls’ restrooms to throw what I’d used after going to the bathroom, because small bins for this garbage weren’t in the stalls; they didn’t show up until high school. Back then, schools acted like

middle school kids would not have their periods yet. Girls also teased other girls on their periods. I felt humiliated every month, just for having one.

When I was eleven, on the way home from summer church camp, I began my period and bled through my jeans and onto the seat of the of minister who gave me a ride home. The following year, the two cute, popular boys who had also ridden in the car teased me the whole week of camp about it. I pretended I didn't know what they were talking about; I wish I'd had the courage to tell them off. That's easy to say now. But then, I was embarrassed the whole week of camp.

Because of this shame, I was mortified about Mr. Cohen and Mrs. Porter finding my pads and tampons. I thought it meant I was dirty, never considering that Mrs. Porter probably had her own stash in her office and each female teacher in their desks; it never would have dawned on me that any other girls had started their periods, too.

Besides that, all the notes I had gathered lately that were bad about me were in my locker, too. I took them home sometimes and threw them in the fireplace when we had a fire going. It was worth the risk of getting in trouble for opening the glass door to the fireplace, something I wasn't allowed to do, to get rid of them. Sometimes I took my dad's lighter for his pipe and caught the notes on fire until my mom twice smelled something burning, and I was afraid I'd get caught. My mom broke her wooden paddle on me quite a few times, and Dad used his belt on me once, but most of my punishments came in the form of privileges being taken away. I lived in great fear of them and getting "in trouble," though, I think because it seemed to me punishments were meted out for no reason since I didn't remember my big seizures and got punished for what happened during them. To this day I feel like people are mad at me for no reason because that

happened so often growing up, until my seizures were well-controlled at some point in my twenties. Since I wasn't even on anticonvulsants until twenty-two, it seemed like people were randomly mad at me and I got punished for no reason. My concept of the fact that people actually get mad for a reason is very skewed. I often make friends, family members, and partners irritated by asking them, "Are you mad at me?" when they are simply not talkative or are in bad moods. It's still a learning experience that they almost never are mad at me, especially when I didn't do anything wrong. Jane frequently says, "You know this has nothing to do with you, right?" when she's in a bad mood or cleaning because I jump to the conclusion that she is mad, which makes me get quiet and small. My therapist says I have to stay in an adult space and not revert to being a kid in trouble, which is hard as hell to do since I had seizures almost half of my life.

When the counselors came in the office, Mrs. Porter squatted in front of me. "Why didn't you just tell us what you had in your locker? We thought there were drugs there. That's what your classmates said." How could I? It was embarrassing. The girls all teased me, so when I had my period, I stayed in the bathroom stall so long I waited them out before going into the common area in front of the sinks to throw anything away. I got a lot of tardies those weeks.

I looked away and wouldn't make eye contact, but shrugged my shoulders. Mr. Cohen walked up. "Sorry I . . .," and trailed off. How does a forty-year-old man apologize for tackling a twelve-year-old girl and bringing her to the ground? I didn't know, and neither did he.

My mom walked into the office as I was surrounded by them, and Mr. Jefferson stood to the side. "What happened?" Mom was usually upset with me when things

happened, so I always figured things were my fault. “What did you do?” I thought she asked me, but she was asking the school personnel. Mr. Jefferson had called her when I went upstairs with the counselors. He was so certain they would find drugs in my locker because that’s what Lyndie and JeanAnne spread around that he went ahead and called her.

“We . . . may we talk to you in our offices?” I didn’t know that Mr. Cohen and Mrs. Porter had left out me getting tackled until recently, thirty-some years later, but whatever they did admit to was bad enough that when Mom came back, she quietly said, “Get your things. Come on, honey.”

I looked up, and her eyes were soft. They could light with fire underneath when she was angry, or they could be kind, doe-like, as they were then. She was hard to figure out when I was young and having strange thoughts, hallucinations, and seizures no one knew I couldn’t control. That came between us a lot. That afternoon, though, I followed her out to the car, and got into the front seat. “Turn the radio on your favorite station. As loud as you want,” she said. She hated the radio, so this was big. She squeezed my arm gently, met my eyes, and said, “you’re all right in my book, kid. You always will be. No matter what,” and kissed my cheek. Despite the adversity I’ve faced because of my epilepsy, and how dramatically it came between me and my parents, I never for one moment doubted that they loved me, which is a privileged spot to grow up and exist in. And, oddly enough, I wouldn’t take away my epilepsy; I say that with the knowledge and access to anticonvulsants, though, and that I don’t have seizures anymore, even though I’m still odd because of the epilepsy. It makes me who I am. I liked seeing faeries, Indians, and elves, and miss that. I liked the colors blending and bleeding, people’s heads

shrinking and growing, all of the strange sensations and beliefs I had, which I also miss. I didn't like the big seizures because I got made fun of or punished after them, depending on whether they happened in front of kids or my parents. My mom would take my epilepsy from me and wish me a more "normal" existence—one where we got along better in my childhood and adolescence; one I didn't get teased and lose friends because of. She was angry with me much of the time while I grew up, and has said if she had into a crystal ball and could see the future, she would have never thought I'd be stable—able to hold a job, keep friends and partners—as an adult. I don't know if I find that hurtful or wonderful, or somewhere in between. I guess the latter.

That day, I smiled at her, then reached to the radio knob. "Call Me" by Blondie began mid-song. I turned it up and sang loudly, happily. It didn't fix what happened at school, but my tension eased, and for that moment, I felt pretty rad.

CHAPTER FOUR

TOBACCO AND LIGHTER FLUID

Mr. Reed, the man who lived in the plantation home across the street when I was a kid, puttered around outside a lot. The Reeds had an arched pergola complete with hanging grape vines and a small cupola-shaped outdoor building. I hope it was too new to have been slave quarters given how much I enjoyed going in it; it didn't seem old—more of the times—of the sixties or seventies. He smoked cigars and kept his empty cigar boxes in that outbuilding. I often asked him to give me boxes to take home, which I then kept notes, erasers, pencils, or small toys in. I had different ones for each kind of item. I loved them because they seemed to be small tokens of affection from someone who didn't have to like me because they weren't related to me, but cared for me anyway.

The boxes smelled strongly of cherry-flavored tobacco, and I inhaled them deeply when I felt lonely. My dad smelled like cherry tobacco also. He smoked a pipe when I was little, until Kristen was born, but the cigar and pipe smells were different. The cigars were stronger and more bitter than the sweet smell of Dad's pipe. I loved to inhale the aroma of Dad's cherry tobacco, too. I held his tobacco pouch to my nose, sniffing deeply, bringing the sweet cherry scent inside me.

The smell of lighter fluid is also evocative of Dad. He opened his refillable brass lighters—some of them monogrammed, some with special things like eagles or the Scales of Justice. That momentary whiff of lighter fluid before it caught into a flame still brings Dad back as sure as if he were sitting in his deep burgundy leather recliner in the library, smoking his pipe, a thick book on his lap. I sat in the room with him, on the scratchy green couch, reading my own book. Sometimes he dozed off, other times we both fell

asleep, still others we read for hours. It is from him I got my love of reading because Mom doesn't read much—no one else in the family does.

Not long after Dad died, Callie and I found some of his old pipes. We inhaled them, and though the scent was faint, that specific tobacco smell was still there. It was one of those seldom times Callie and I connected and understood what the other felt. That's rarely been the case.

"I rode my bike to The Galleria," a downtown shopping mall when I was in college, "and went into a tobacconist's shop. I sniffed and sniffed their cherry tobacco. It was the same as Dad's," I said, then paused. "And in my 20's, there was this guy with a lighter like Dad's. Whenever he lit his cigarettes, I could smell Dad in that interstitial moment between opening the lighter and the cigarette starting to burn."

She didn't say anything to that. Or, she did, but it was something cruel and the spell between us was broken. Either way, what I remember is that she picked up the pipes and walked off with them. She asked Mom if she could keep them—both of them, not one for each of us. But it didn't matter because Mom said no, that they were too expensive, even used. She was going to sell them. She never liked him smoking once the dangers of it and secondhand smoke were known. Maybe that's why she didn't want us to have them more than their cost. Mom added, "The smell will leave the pipes eventually anyway." She couldn't understand that so many memories of my and Callie's dad—the separate one from Michelle and Kristen's dad since they weren't born when he smoked—were tied up with that scent, and that whether it lasted a day, a year, or ten years, it would be worth having him around for that time.

CHAPTER FIVE

HIDEY HOLE

Growing up across from the plantation house, my favorite area of our house was the basement. It was finished, with a tile floor, a laundry room, and a huge built-in toy closet under the staircase that was big enough to house a small child. Actually, it was exactly as big as Harry Potter's bedroom. That is a horrible living area for a real kid, but for a make-believe hiding spot, it was amazing.

Callie and I each had our own section—wooden shelves covered with carpet that matched the shag from our bedroom upstairs—our own hidey-hole. I had the bottom layer and Callie had the shelf above it. There was a space between the end of the shelves and the thick wooden paneling and two-by-four door that allowed us to pass dolls and toys back and forth. I had my favorite stuffed animals—the orange dog named Lassie, the Snoopy-like dog named Bozo, a black cat named Midnight, and a brown dog named Presto—with me most of the time in this toy closet, and those I would never give Callie, but our other things like the Flip Wilson talking doll or the Playskool Dressy Bessy doll that taught kids to tie and snap, I passed.

Looking back, it really is any kid's dream: having her very own huge toy closet like that where she can lie on the shelf like she's a girl-doll herself, going to be taken out to play with at any moment. Instead, I was hiding because it *felt* like few wanted to play with me. I think that, but I always had friends, even if they came in spirals, looping in and out, nearby then shooting away from me—each friend being a helix that looped around a helix me. Their helix spiraled and circled me. When we came close, there was the line between our helixes, like in DNA, where we joined and we played together. I have

always had a lot more friends than Callie. Growing up, it seemed to me like she had more friends, though really, she wasn't close to many of them. She had one friend in third through fifth grade, and I think it's the only actual friend she's ever had. For the last twenty-five years, I've found Callie distasteful; maybe other people realized she isn't likable earlier than I did. I've always had genuine friendships, a few close friends who weren't afraid of my seizures and stuck around, no matter how weird I was, and no matter how ostracized I felt myself to be. This included Sandy, who has been my best friend since we met making a crepe paper butterfly in Sunday School when we were ten. Post-seizure meds, I've had lots of friends and acquaintances, plus always a handful of good friends. I've had people in my corner all my life—not just adults, though them, too, but friends. I just didn't always know it.

When I was in college, the people who bought the plantation house from the Reeds sold tickets to tour their house to benefit charity, and they allowed visitors to tour part of the mansion. It was the same part I spent time in as a kid. After touring it and seeing the changes made—which were really just different furnishings, we knocked on the door of our old house. The family let us inside. The woman spoke of the built-in furniture my parents put it, how awful it was, asked who in the world would do that. An awkward moment of silence passed before the family let us in to see the changes there, too.

I remember seeing vividly was the toy closet. It still smelled the same—of the cedar wood that was on the interior side of the paneling. Dad put cedar into all the closets to keep out moths, and I suppose this was considered a closet. Maybe they just had extra cedar. My friend Sarah's phone number was written there: 897-9160, which I still

remember. My officemate at one of my jobs had cause to need that number often and could never remember nor find it. She'd simply ask me what it was, and I'd recite it.

I asked, "Did your kids play in here?" The woman looked at me oddly. It wasn't a toy closet anymore; instead, it held coolers and outdoorsy stuff. Still, the kids could empty it out and play. Even though I was in college, it seemed like a logical question. "No," she answered, and shut its door. An awkward, strange moment passed. I felt like I'm sure Dad had when the woman said his built-in furniture, designed just for me and Callie with twin beds and desks, that I loved so much, was horrible, and they'd torn it out immediately.

CHAPTER SIX

I WANT MY DADDY

The first time I went to the hospital—after my birth—was when I had the second seizure my mom knows about. I was four, sitting with my back against the beige and gold striped couch, in front of the large console TV. Mom hollered at me to turn off *Sesame Street* and come with her. The stress of her yelling at me brought on the seizure and I tried to flop backward, but I would have hit my head on a knee-high porcelain elephant. She grabbed my forearm, I ripped my arm away from her where she held, and my elbow got dislocated. I screamed, and because of my dangling forearm, had to go to the hospital. Mom has always said that before we knew I have epilepsy, she thought I just got angry—that I was bullheaded—but she looks back now, and calls that was the second seizure she knows I had.

The first, I was six months old and made a similar flop-backwards move, this time for seemingly no reason. Mommie O' and my aunt, Peggy, were in my parents' bedroom with me and Mom. Maybe I was stressed at all the people where it should be just me and Mom. I don't know, but I "flopped backwards & cracked the window, in the shape of the back of your head. There was a thin curtain. I ended up vacuuming the back of your head to be sure no little glass shards were there," Mom told me via text. She says I did the flop backwards when I was upset often, all of which she just now considers seizures—the precursors to the big temper tantrum ones.

Callie, who was a toddler when my elbow got dislocated, was unsteady on her feet and had two black eyes from falling into the same large porcelain elephant in the living room a few days earlier. Mom realized that taking both of us to the hospital would

be a bad idea and we might be taken away from her and Dad, so she got Callie a babysitter.

When we got to the hospital, they put me in a child's-size wheelchair. I screamed "I want my daddy!" over and over and over. I flailed in the chair and they had to buckle me in. They separated me from Mom to ask if she ever hurt me. I didn't understand what was happening. She didn't hurt me, not beyond spanking. I was cold as I sat on the hospital gurney, my arms poking through a child-sized hospital gown.

I didn't know why Dad wasn't there. I wanted my daddy, the one who protected me from all the bad things in the world and read with me. Mom did much more, really, but it was Dad who I watched Sunday night Disney movies with, who read me books, who sat on the side of my bed, asking about my day long after I'd fallen asleep when he worked late. I woke and talked to him most nights, even though I rarely remembered that in the morning. He told me I said funny things; he liked talking to me in my punch-drunk-three-fourths-asleep state because I told humorous stories about my dreams and the hallucinations I saw. TLE causes strange dreams, and I loved talking about them. Mom hated hearing them—Jane hates hearing about them—but Dad would listen as long as I'd talk before dozing back off.

At the hospital, I screamed for my daddy because he was even more comforting than my stuffed animal Bozo that I clung to, not understanding why Dad wasn't there, only knowing that a stuffed animal was a poor substitute for my missing father.

SECTION TWO
GROWING UP

CHAPTER SEVEN

JANE AND DAD

I *mostly* believed Jane when she said she worked traffic the day my dad died, but I knew there was more she wasn't telling me. A couple of years after we got together, I finally stopped renting my house, acknowledging that we were really a couple that might last, and we lived in a warm apartment where the heat set on seventy stayed at seventy. It was winter and we lay in bed under the duvet I'd replaced because Grayzie ate her other one. He lay by our legs on the bed and her dog, Arthur lay to my right; our shoulders were propped against the cream-colored IKEA headboard bought used for fifty bucks to help make our apartment into *home*.

"I'm tired of my job," Jane said. "Sick as shit of it." She meant the one as a domestic violence victim's advocate. She heard a lot of the worst things that happened in Louisville. People came for Emergency Protective Orders (EPOs) that gave them legal documents to make their abusers keep at least five hundred feet away—as long as the perpetrator paid attention to it. When they didn't and got caught, they were arrested. Part of Jane's job was seeing which victims were at high risk of being murdered by the domestic violence (DV) perpetrators. A woman had just been murdered by her husband she had an EPO against, and I consoled Jane, who was always hit hard by these women's deaths, feeling she had failed them in some way.

"I'm sorry, baby," I said.

She was looking at new jobs, had interviewed for probation and parole, but didn't take the job after she went to second shift as DV advocate. Our heads leaned close, touching gently, and we held hands. With our other hands, we pet Grayzie and Arthur and

our cat Jellybones. Each begged for attention, even Jellybones, who seemed more dog than cat. Arthur, a black pit-lab-Dane mix, bumped my hand with his big, blocky head. Him asking for attention was terrific given what an awful situation he came from. I waited for her to go on. “I just can’t do anything for the victims. They take the men, well usually men, back. Or the men won’t listen and go dicking around the house.” She stopped, called Grayzie to come up between our knees.

“I miss my old job with the police, but murders were really hard. They took it out of you, but at least we had each other—the guys and me—to talk with afterward. Suicides were hard to work, though. I couldn’t talk to them after those. They were too intimate in a different way, and none of them knew how bad my depression got hit afterward.”

I stayed still. I was afraid to breathe. Then finally I asked, “What happened the day my dad died?”

I didn’t think she would answer, but she took a deep breath and let it out. “You don’t want to hear this.”

“I do, though. Jane, I do. I want to know. Since I wasn’t there, I don’t know as much as I wish I did.”

“It’ll be hard to hear.”

“I know.”

I was starting to grow physically uncomfortable, but I dared not move. I knew hearing about my dad was precarious enough. If I moved or showed emotion now, I was sure she wouldn’t say anything.

“I didn’t help with traffic that day,” she said.

“I know.”

“We were the first on the scene.” She glanced at me, then at Grayzie. “The guys cleared the building,” she glanced up. “They had to make sure no one else was there. That no one had shot him.”

“Even with the note to his secretary?”

Jane looked at me, surprised I knew about the note. It had been taped to the gate that pulled across the elevator shaft, which prevented people from getting off on the second floor if no one was there. The elevator opened directly into Dad’s office suite; without the gate, anyone could get in his office any time the building door was unlocked. Before he shot himself, he padlocked the gate shut so no one found him; I also realize now, all these years later, that it was also so no one took his belongings, which he cared far too much about—something Jane accuses me of.

She said, “Even with the note. Notes can be forged or forced.”

Dad’s secretary, Dorothy, came down the elevator from the third floor after being sent upstairs to make some copies. When she found him, he was alive, but barely. Maybe it was the rush hour traffic that made the gunshot inaudible throughout the building.

Jane took my other hand into hers, too. She watched Arthur, reached to pet his head, which was on my thigh. She only sometimes glanced at me.

“When we got there, I went down the stairs. At first we had to access it from the second floor because we didn’t have a key.”

“You went—even with the blood?”

“Even with the blood. That wasn’t on my mind then. He was moaning and calling out.”

My head went up, left hers. “He was *talking*?”

“Yeah. You didn’t know?”

“When I saw him, he was out. His head wasn’t bandaged, and blood pumped out of the wound in his temple with every heartbeat. It was awful.” I stopped. “A kid should never see a parent that way. It’s how I remember him. Lying there that way, on a gurney in the hallway. There wasn’t a room for him.”

“He wasn’t a priority. He wasn’t going to live. They knew that. There was also a big pileup on the expressway that day. That’s why we got called in, since my unit was in the next division. We only covered downtown when we were needed.” That’s when my tears started. I was quiet, but I couldn’t stop them from falling down my face. She began again. “It blocked all of downtown. It was chaos. It took a lot of officers to handle it.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. It was too little, and way too late. My dad didn’t always consider others, which is what went through my mind hearing that. I felt bad for something my dad did that happened almost two decades earlier. I pictured the calamity that he caused, all the cops called away from policing other areas.

“Yes, all of the news stations were there. They were blocking the ambulance and police from getting to the scene,” she said.

I wanted to apologize again, but just listened, picturing his office building downtown. The one I had visited so often, filling in when his secretary was on vacation, helping him move from down the street to this office because the Humana Building displaced his old office.

Jane said that about the reporters with disapproval, then glanced up at me and softened. She shook her head, clearing the thoughts running there.

“Go on,” I said.

She took a breath. “I held his hand. He was crying.”

So was I, hearing this, but I needed to know. I’d waited since 2000 to know and it was 2018. I never imagined being able to learn this, but wanted to know everything she’d tell me. Maybe I hadn’t *since* it happened, but I did once some healing occurred.

Jane looked at me, saw my tears, and touched the wetness on my face.

“He was conscious?” I asked.

“Yeah. I didn’t realize you didn’t know.”

I shook my head.

“He was conscious until they sedated him in the hospital. He tried to rip out all of the tubes connected to him, so they had to knock him out.” She stopped.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“Are you sure you want to know?”

I nodded. “What did he say?”

“He kept saying, ‘I’m going to die.’”

“What did you say?” I asked.

“‘Yes, you probably are.’ Then he said, ‘I don’t want to go to the hospital.’ I told him he had to. The police kept telling me to leave and that EMS would take care of him. I told them, ‘No, this man is dying. I can’t leave him.’”

“I never knew he was conscious.” I stopped. Nodded. Stared forward at Grayzie.

“What then?”

She regarded me. Touched my face again. “I stayed, held his hand.”

I took this in, watched the dogs who slept, both quietly snoring on the bed around us, then she and I were quiet for a while. “Did you go to the ER with him?”

“Yeah. The police kept telling me that if I was going to treat every suicide this way, I was going to have a very short career as an advocate. But I wasn’t going to leave a dying man.” It seemed like for a minute that she had forgotten I was there, who I was to him.

“How’d you get to the hospital?”

“Rode in the bus—the ambulance.”

I was stunned again because of the blood, so I asked about it. Whoever cleaned up the stairwell afterward, which I’ve assumed was a company that does such things, hadn’t even been able to clean all of it. It was still in the treads of the steps and on the baseboards when I walked down there a few weeks after he died, which I *had* to do. I had to see where he’d been in what I had assumed were the last conscious moments of his life.

“Yeah,” she answered. “I ruined my pants, shirt, undershirt, and socks. I think I got to keep my shoes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” she asked.

“He was my dad. You had clothes ruined because of him. I feel responsible.”

“No honey, no.” I nodded reluctantly. I still feel guilty about those clothes, though she insists I not. She told me recently it was her favorite shirt—an actual rugby shirt from the Scottish team. “That was before I got clothes that blood—and other things—just fell off of.” She played with a thread on the top of the duvet cover. The thread came loose, and I touched her hand to still it. “That’s why I got that kind of pants.”

“Sorry.”

“Honey, hush,” a mantra of our relationship when I was being ridiculous about something, which was, and is, often.

“How long did you stay with him?”

“The whole time. Until your mom got there.”

I could imagine Jane there, the way I had seen that she looked in pictures from that time—bigger than now, with longer, blonde hair, so different that her dark brown and gray short hair now—holding his hand in the cramped corridor of the hospital.

“I couldn’t leave him,” she said. “I had to yell at the people at the ER. They weren’t doing anything for him, weren’t making him comfortable.” I looked at her, confused. “He pulled out the Foley catheter, everything, and was so anxious,” she said. “I made them sedate him. That would have been no way for his family—y’all—to see him. It was no way for him to have to be.”

“Thank you,” I said.

“I had to yell at the hospital people to allow me stay with him, too. They kept wanting me to leave, especially since I was in the way.”

“Thank you.” I could—can—never say that enough. “Thank you for staying with him. Thank you for being there. Thank you.” She thinks I’m being absurd when I thank her still for being with him in his last conscious moments. It took someone very strong to do that, and she was even new to the job. Jane is one of the most robust people I’ve ever met. She can handle so much, which of course she must have done in her job then, too. She got plenty of training with the police. I don’t know how she handled either job, even though I was a social worker for fifteen years. I had a sweet ride as social work goes; my clients had stable housing and daytime programming most of the time. I saw them every

month to be sure they were doing well, for emergencies, lots of paperwork, and to make sure things in their lives ran smoothly. It was hard some of the time, but nothing like her jobs.

“You don’t have to thank me. It’s what any decent person would do.”

“No, it’s not. The police didn’t do it. Didn’t even want you to do it.”

“They’ve seen too much. There was too much to do. I wasn’t supposed to go down the stairs to him, or stay with him, or go to the hospital with him. But all I could think of was not leaving him.”

“Thank you.” I hushed. The tears never had stopped, but I quit talking for a minute to digest what she said. “Were you the one who told my mom? She said it was ‘a woman *with the police*,’ but she didn’t know how. She knew it wasn’t a cop, but that was it.”

Jane nodded.

“Thanks. I always wanted to meet that woman.” I paused, thinking. “Were you covered in blood?”

She shook her head. “No. I had cleaned up.” She stopped, seeming to try to remember. “I have no idea what clothes I put on,” she said, shaking her head. “I probably had on one of the guys’ clothes. Unless Angela brought me some, which she might have because she was off work by then and had the car.” Angela was her long-time girlfriend; they broke up a year or two before I came along. “I have no idea what I was wearing, but I remember cleaning up and changing in a bathroom not accessible to the public that the nurses let me into. They were great—got me soap and gauze pads to get the blood off.” She looked up at me. I must have looked shocked. She seemed to have forgotten who she

was talking to again, for a minute. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop. I need to stop. But I wouldn’t have gone in to talk to a victim’s family covered in blood, unless it was at the scene and couldn’t be helped. I kept extra clothes with me at the substation after that.” She glanced at me, seeming to check if I’d been offended. I hadn’t been. It hurt hearing this, but I wanted all the details. I had to know them. My life story wasn’t complete without them. There was too much I had wondered for eighteen years and never dared believe I’d find the answers, but here they were. It was two more years before she told me that she did go talk to my mom covered in bloody clothes, wearing the pants and shoes she’d had on when she was with Dad. A clean scrubs top the only clean thing she had on.

“What did you tell my mom?”

“How do you even remember that it was me? Or even possibly me?”

“I’m not sure. I guess because Mom didn’t fully know who she—you—was. That seemed weird. I also wondered if you were a lesbian and regretted that I hadn’t seen you.”

She laughed. “You had a shortage of lesbians in your life or something?”

I blushed. “No. Remember I was a social worker: plenty of lesbians. I don’t know why I wondered.” I stopped. “I mean, I knew. That I liked guys and girls.”

“‘People’ and women, huh?”

I laughed a short laugh. A couple of days after we began going out, I’d told her that I’d had sex with “plenty of people” to avoid saying I hadn’t been with a woman.

“People” became a running joke to mean men.

I said, “Yeah.” I started playing with her fingernail, my tell when I’m nervous. “I also just wanted to see the woman who told Mom that because I wasn’t there to hear it.”

“Well, you’re looking at her.”

I paused, thinking how weird this was. How even in Louisville, where we joke that there are no more than a few degrees of separation between any two people, that I ended up with the woman who was with my dad at the very end.

I smiled at her, then my smile fell. “What did you tell her? Mom, I mean.”

“I don’t really remember exactly.”

“Did you tell her that he wasn’t going to make it?”

“Yeah. The police decided it would be better coming from me. They made me do that a lot when it was something that took some gentleness to deliver.”

I nodded. “What else?”

“Oh sweetheart. I don’t really know. Things sort of blend together. I had to tell a lot of families.” She stopped me from playing with her nails, holding my hand with both of hers, and kissing one of them, then putting them in my lap. “Sorry. I don’t mean to sound cold.” She touched my face.

I said, “No, no.” It was okay that she didn’t remember, even though I hated for both of us that she didn’t—for her because there had been *so many she didn’t remember*, and for me because I wish she’d been able to remember this one better. I played with the duvet, then pulled Grayzie close to me, wishing it were Dad I could hug instead another white dog with black spots, like Bozo but living.

CHAPTER EIGHT

MITTENS

When I was a little kid, Callie and I wore mittens. We lost them all the time, so we had little elastic things with metal clasps on each end that held them on. I like gloves better as an adult, but there's something nostalgic to me about mittens. They just aren't as convenient for walking the dogs or pulling keys out of my pockets before driving, though. But they remind me of snow days—when Callie and I donned snow suits and played outside, making snowmen, building igloos, and having snowball fights. My hands stayed warmer in mittens than they did in gloves, so though they made me feel like a little kid, it was nice to have warm hands.

On snowy days, Mom made cinnamon toast in the oven—toasted bread, then added butter, cinnamon, and sugar, and put inside the oven on broil so that it melted together and became one. The cinnamon and sweetness wafted in the air, a smell that still makes me recall those days. Mom also made homemade hot chocolate, the sweet scent of the cinnamon sugar mixing with the thick, earthy smell of cocoa.

I have a picture of me and Callie outside playing in the snow. It looks late in the day, or at least it's overcast. We're lying in the snow, as if we couldn't walk in it. I'm four-years-old, though, so even though it was ten inches deep, I could walk on it because I wasn't heavy enough to sink very far into it. Callie was only two, so she may have needed help.

I liked trying to build igloos. We got deep snow in Louisville back then—not so much anymore. It's been years since we got a lot of snow, though we have ice thick as an ice-skating rink outside right now. The smell of ice coating the world is cold, crisp, but

doesn't hold the promise snow does—that of fun, full of memories of days without school, of making snow cream with sugar and vanilla, of building snowmen. When we got a bunch of snow at our old house, I'd set out to build a structure. I could get the walls done, but once I began its ceiling, the snow fell inside on top of us. Callie got mad and ran inside, telling on me that I got her wet and snowy. I kept working on it, unable to control the snow the way I wanted to, which was frustrating, but I couldn't stop.

When we were a bit older and lived at the new house in Prospect that had a golf course all around it, Dad took us sledding. By that point, Kristen and Michelle were born and actual little human beings who could go with us. We had plastic sleds, which were my favorite, and a wooden Flexible Flyer with metal runners. I didn't like it as much because if there wasn't enough snow, it got caught midway down the long, sloped hill; it was great, though, when there was a bunch of snow.

Kristen had brown corkscrew curls covering her hair when she was a little kid. She rode in the sled with me a lot, but I also rode with Michelle since she and Callie really didn't get along most of their lives. Michelle and I did get along at different points, though certainly not always. I'm nine years older than her. When she was a kid with beautiful blonde hair and deep blue eyes, we got along a lot of the time. Most of the pictures of me at the time are of me holding Kristen, though. Maybe that's why we've always been so close. I was eleven when she was born and was a built-in babysitter.

Those snowy days, Michelle and Kristen had to ride the sleds with me, Callie, or Dad while they were little and Callie and I were adolescents. We could glide the sleds away from the trees that threatened wrecks at the bottom of the hill. When the sled petered out, we held Kristen or Michelle's mittened hands as we walked back up the long

hill. We fell and fell and fell, the whole way up. Sometimes the boys who picked on me at school were there, and if they didn't see six-foot-three, two-hundred-and-eighty pound, intimidating Dad, they pushed their sleds straight for me and whichever sister was with me, swooshing away at the last second—until they got back to the top of the hill and saw Dad. Then it was, “I’m sorry, sir” and “It was a mistake, Mr. Glass. It won’t happen again.”

Callie and I were allowed to go to the sledding hill without parents, and then the boys and I wrecked into each other over and over. Those weren't the memories I treasure, though. The ones I hold gently in my mind, soft as snow I don't want to melt in my mittens, are the ones with Dad, Callie, Michelle, Kristen and me—getting soaked by melted snow and laughing hysterically.

CHAPTER NINE

GRAVY LESSONS

1. *I need to look at a recipe or two before heading willy nilly into fixing something I have never fixed before.*

It doesn't matter that I saw my grandma—Mom's mom, Mommie O'—fix sausage gravy thirty-five years ago, that's different than making turkey gravy now. I was a kid then and was busy looking out the shiny picture window into the dirt yard, wondering when I could go swing under that big oak tree with its flashes of green-green and bright white and earth brown while I flew up high. I liked the way my vision blurred and was thinking about that and not watching Mommie O'. It was like before one of my seizures, but I could feel dizzy and big and happy without it then getting ugly because that's what happened when a seizure came. I don't like to think about that, so I glance back at Mommie O', watch her put the flour in, stir, but soon enough I'm watching the window, staring at that swing.

Do I realize that's where my mom swung when she was my age? That wooden swing with its flaking white paint and splinters was new when she was little. It was made for her by her daddy, the one who shot himself before I met him. He was a good man, my mom would tell me if it didn't hurt her to talk about. She would tell me how she painted the wood herself, that she handed pieces of wire up to her daddy on a ladder while he strung the inch-thick cable around that big tree that shaded the whole yard when my mom was little, too. I didn't know that then. I looked at that tree, look how it healed over the metal, how far inside the tree the wire is. I have noticed it before, and it made me dizzy as I wondered if

it would hold me, wondered if I was too fat and would make that tree let go of its hold after that quarter century. This was Mom's yard as a little girl, which she wandered to get out of work, get her brother to do the chores first. She swung whenever she could, between collecting eggs and feeding chickens. If I'd let Mom, if I'd listen, she'd tell me about planning barn-sized chicken coops and feed experiments with her dad, but all I'm worried about is being released from my gravy lesson. I'm not paying a lick of attention to Mommie O', not listening as she tells me when to add salt, how much pepper. I ache to swing. I like the sandpaper feel of the wood. That's why I get so many splinters. I move, let the caress of the wood stand in for other touch. For good touch, which doesn't come often enough.

I get hurt when the seizures come. When my vision spins and blurs, when they throw me to the ground spitting mad, banging my head, things no one understood as seizures for twenty more years. All I care about is swinging. I need to realize it was my Mom's favorite thing first. Maybe I could ask her how to make gravy if I won't look at a recipe, but she didn't pay any more mind to Mommie O—or her grandmama, Bray—teaching her than I am right now.

I know I should see Mommie O' tend to the gravy, learn about it. I look back at her, get her the sweet milk when she asks. Then as I walk back to the kitchen table, I spy the barn behind the swing and big tree out that picture window. I'm really not paying a bit of attention to Mommie O'. I'll think I did when I go to make my own gravy, but I didn't. As soon as my grandmother's gravy is made, I won't even wait to eat any. She made it for me, but I want outside. I'll go to the barn when I'm done swinging, climb up the rung ladder into

the hayloft. I'll wonder if the cat will be there with her kittens, or the pig with piglets, or a cow with calves, there in the lower level of the barn. Can I watch them without spooking their mamas? When I'm up there, I'll wonder why my mom left me on the farm for the week. My mom felt left when Mommie O' went to work out in the field at dawn, came home to feed the men at dinner, then was right back out with them afterward, when my mom's grandma cleaned up.

Mom loved her mother. She did. But she was closer to her grandmother, who was the "inside Mom," whereas her actual mother was her "outside mom." Her grandmother, who everyone—family, friends, and people who they knew from church or anywhere else—called Bray, her last name, cooked for the family and the men on the farm, while Mommie O' was always outside tending to the chickens, pigs, or garden.

One time a man came by and asked Mom, "Where is your mother?"

"One's inside, one's out there," Mom said, pointing to the family garden. It was a story repeated in the house for years, but it only came to remind Mom that she had half an actual mother.

My mom missed hers, but knew to cleave to her grandma, which I'm not doing. All that's on my mind is swinging and that I want to see those critters. I'll think later, when I don't look at recipes first, that I learned from Mommie O' how to make gravy. I'll believe I did. But I need to think about whether I saw her or watched her. Saw, I saw her. I wasn't paying attention to my grandma at all. I need to check a recipe.

2. *I didn't listen, did I? Look at recipes.*

Check recipes and don't jump into things like I always do. I get an idea and run it to the ground. I throw myself full into things and then get weary of them before I even start. I did that with painting, crocheting, reading everything a favorite author has written until I tire of them, overplaying every album by favored musicians. I liked the comfort of those things. The way they touched my heart. I got myself there aching for that physical touch I didn't get, though, just like I ached for those splinters from the swing. I didn't get as much good attention from my parents as I should have, and I missed out being the oldest. Bunches of folks, even my friends, had it much worse. Still, with my seizures, my friends, the boys who liked me, everyone, pulled away and tore off running when they saw me yell and curse and pull my hair, those strange seizures, those auras that made colors bleed so that when I did acid that one time it didn't seem weird to me at all.

The seizures blurred things in my head so badly they made me sad and worried, made me feel alone because no one stayed around, made me feel huge and big in my head when I really wasn't. Everyone said I was fat as a kid, and I believed them. I wasn't actually fat until I was an adult. People, even in college, saw me have a seizure and ran away, just like my friends did when I was a kid. I didn't have a lot of good touch when I was growing up, or even as an adult.

To get that kind of touch, several times I took up gardening. I had a few strays into that, tearing up my whole yard, not knowing what I was doing. Planting and planting and planting—the wrong flowers, plants, bushes, and bulbs into bad soil, soil that shouldn't grow a thing. I could grow anything, though—

maybe because I come from farmers? All my plants grew, but then I left those gardens, all of them, as soon as things came up. I didn't want to weed, get back down on my knees, push my hands into the dirt that I loved planting things into. Dirt that was good touch, not bad. Dirt that couldn't hurt me while I reached into it. Dirt I used to replace empty holes in my life. I didn't want to tend things once I began them, refused to realize I had to tend them or they'd die. I learned, but it took I a long time. Mommie O' knew how to keep things alive. She kept working plants—flowers, fruits, and vegetables—and they thrived.

Her cooking was farm-raised good. She didn't follow recipes—just threw things together. I eventually got to where I can cook pretty darn well, without recipes, too. And so I thought I could make gravy. I should have asked for gravy advice.

- 3. Flour will thicken some, but not as much turkey crock pot drippings with two cans of broth in it that I started my gravy with. I'll need a little corn starch and more flour.***

What was that I used to do with baby powder and lotion? Mixed it in the palm of my hand in the bathroom of my childhood home. I was only eight, and loved the texture. I spread it on the walls and didn't clean the mess. It was thick and thin, like I imagined quicksand was. When I saw quicksand in Utah and felt it, it was just like that mixture. I was taken back to that bathroom when I held that quicksand in my hand. I felt the world tilt and get blurry, like I had a seizure coming on, it was so much like my starchy powder-lotion concoctions. I remember

not cleaning that powder and lotion. Or did I? I mentioned it to Mom recently, and she acted surprised. How could she not remember? I recall getting fussed at for doing it, and it seems like because I was eight and Mom was thirty, she should remember better than me. I need to bear in mind that my mom losing her dad, her husband, her daughter, and two sons-in-law suddenly to death is as bad or worse than me losing a dad, life partner, sister, and brother-in-law that way. Plus, she's had more adult living in these forty years than me, and adults' lives are hard. I need to remember that when my mom forgets things. She's forgetting more now. I have noticed it, but haven't said anything to her. I worry about that because Mommie O' is so forgetful. Senile. Forgets Mom and even my aunt Peggy, who she lives with part of the time. Mom's forgetting what she's been told, and it worries me, just like it worries me because she's been sick the last few years. That frightens me, as it does when I think of her being seventy-five. When I say that to her, she fusses. I made her old before her time. She wants to stay young as long as possible.

So that's why I remember that lotion-powder mixture and my mom doesn't. I remember because it made my vision expand and contract in that fun pre-seizure way like the swing did. Those pre-seizure auras were the best where I felt special and enlightened, high as a kite. I felt smart then. I hadn't lost control yet like when the seizures came and my memory blacked out. I don't remember the seizures, just that I got in trouble for things I didn't know I did. I was always in trouble, and seldom knew why. But my seizures, the big ones, were like temper tantrums. I kicked and hollered and looked like a fool. People thought I was out of

control, twirling around screaming, beating my head, and cursing. I was, but it wasn't my fault, and I don't even remember them. But I do remember the lotion and baby powder made of corn starch, mixing it into balls in my hand, which made my head and mind expand.

4. *Corn starch goes a long way, and it continues to thicken as I stir it.*

It's like lies. They thicken, get denser the further I strung them. I'd think they'd lengthen and thin. I was a great spinner of lies, but forgot who I told what and got stuck in those complex webs of them. I lied to Michelle and Kristen, told them the dark brown moles on my face and neck were because I was born Black but painted white. Adopted from an African American family. I gave words to not getting along with my parents by making up this origin myth. I learned as an adult that Michelle thought that true for many years.

Sometimes I took my "Going to Grandma's" plastic blue suitcase down from the attic and walked out the front door while babysitting them, saying I was leaving, running away from home—a lie I was spinning, but didn't mean. To this day I wonder if that's what caused Michelle's borderline personality disorder, from the fear of abandonment from that one act. That's not how that happens. While research shows it's unclear entirely why some people develop it and some don't, it would not have been one act. Michelle's was one more death in my life. She died of pneumonia after the flu, way too young at thirty-five. Too many deaths. I have had a lot of death around me, and it hurts.

So many people believed my lies, like the one my sisters did with the moles. Like when I told counselors at my elementary school about the Illuandas, faeries, gnomes, and that had a friend named Timmy who was invisible; but those weren't lies. My seizure-y mind thought those up and believed them; I saw those things. Callie played Indians with me until she decided I was a liar, told the other kids I was "retarded" because I was seizure-weird. Temporal lobe epilepsy makes a person very strange. I believed I had special powers, that I could talk to God, and he listened and did what I asked, that I could wish upon a star and get what I wanted, that I could use my eyelashes to wish for the same. When there is a stack of utensils, say, or straws, or plates, there will be one that I must choose, or bad things will happen. What bad things? I don't know. This sounds ridiculous, and I know that even as I write it: once someone else got the lucky straw. I didn't say anything. Guy died that night. (I know—crazy talk.) Now, even in public I ask for the lucky item from people when they get it. I always will. It's an oddity I hope folks don't notice too much. What I don't tell people is that all these things, the ones I just listed, I still believe in, even with the seizure meds.

Once when I had my social work job, I had a seizure at a client's house. It was only about six years ago—and the first seizure I'd had in forever. I entered it, grabbed my client's arm and the door jamb, and in it, the kind of seizure I remember—a déjà vu. With its hallucinations, I could see absolutely clearly the coal-burning furnace, feel its heat, see the hunched, old man shoveling in coal, see the cellar I was in with my client and the door across the room. I saw the

pipes above me, ones that spurted hot steam, and I wanted to pull my client away so she wouldn't get burned. I thought no one would notice when I came out of it, knew it would look like I was staring, but I lost my balance when I went into it, had to grab hold of her arm, the door jamb, then stumbled a bit when I came back into myself the way I do. That boom, swoop, back into myself because I had been elsewhere, in the cellar, looking at things. I hadn't been there, between her kitchen and living room. I was at my client's house, only it was and wasn't. It was her cellar, but it wasn't really. Even thinking about that seizure now I can feel that heat, see the steam from the pipes.

I told someone at work about the seizure. It wasn't the smartest thing I have done. I heard from others how it got around—that day, an hour after I told her—even though she said she wouldn't tell. Even though she lied. She thought I was crazy because of the hallucination, and I kind of am. But people don't understand my epilepsy—how it causes hallucinations. I don't tell people these things anymore. I keep them secret because I think it might be part of why I got fired from that job. A job I loved, but also hated. A job that I should have left for academia years and years before it happened. A job that even with the Americans with Disabilities Act I lost because how do you prove that physical conditions—the epilepsy and a back surgery I'd just had—largely caused the firing? I told their lawyer it was illegal. That was as far as I went. They didn't fight me in getting unemployment—and they fight everyone on getting unemployment.

I eventually learned not to talk about my hallucinations when they happen, and not to lie, just to omit. Lying, when I did it, tied me in thick, clotted knots like

corn starch and turkey juice with drippings when there's not enough broth to make a gravy. I got wrapped up so many times in those lies. So, I quit lying over a decade ago, not because I couldn't, but because I couldn't keep straight what I told whom.

My mom knew how to lie. When she was young, Bray, her grandmama, was at a loss about what to do with her because she was sure Mom was headed for trouble, Bray just knew it. She was dusting the top of the piano in Mom's room one morning when she found a diary. She hadn't even known that Mom kept a diary, and she thought she knew everything that happened in that house. The piano top was higher than anyone could see, and she placed it back carefully as soon as she read it.

At first the entries were unremarkable: complaints about chores Mom did, lessons learned in school, little things she did with her best friend. However, they began to change.

Mom had a fellow visiting on the porch in the evenings. When Bray or Mommie O' walked by, if they had been sitting close on the glider, Bobby Jake would slide away from Mom. That was especially true if my grandfather strolled by. To hear it said, they all thought it seemed harmless, and Bobby Jake such a good boy. But then Bray read that diary each day, surely the moment that Mom stepped into the school bus.

From the diary, Bray learned that Mom was smoking cigarettes. Bray knew that men did it, but a child? Mom? A fourteen-year-old girl? It just wasn't ladylike, and it was common.

She also hadn't known that Bobby Jake had given kisses to Mom, or that Mom had kissed back. That was worse than the cigarettes. Girls that age should not be kissing boys, most especially at school. Neither of them could drive, it must be right out in the open. People must be talking, and she hadn't even heard about it. What did people think of her and her family?

Bray knew she had to keep her find a secret so that she could keep an eye on Mom. Maybe more church would help. Or stricter rules. She had to think on it. She had to protect her granddaughter.

But Mom could lie. Every morning, she climbed quietly onto the piano bench and took care to line her diary up precisely in the small pencil marks she had made on the piano top after she realized Bray was reading it. She knew she shocked Bray with the tales she made up, and she and her best friend giggled each day as they decided the next thing Mom would write in the diary. But eventually she grew tired of it and stopped keeping the journal. It surprises me that Mom could lie that way. Maybe the stories were her best friend's idea. I suspect maybe they were.

I might have been able to lie in the past, but Jane says I've lost the touch, that I can't lie at all. I get flustered, and when asked about something I don't want to

answer, I sit, unable to respond. I can't even lie about simple things. Big lies, and even small ones, have become too complicated.

I need to bear that in mind when making gravy. If it thickens too much, I need add more broth, try to save it, like I tried to save relationships with people I lied to. If there's not broth, nothing can save a clotted, messed up relationship. If I have frightened someone with talk of my visions, the ones that sometimes return even though my medicines get raised, I will explain my epilepsy, and if that's not good enough, if someone won't accept that even knowing what's wrong, if they think I'm lying, I need to move on. It's not worth it. It's tough to move on from things, but I must stop trying to add more and more broth, I'll end up with watered down, tasteless gravy, and that's no good. Sometimes I just have to let things go—like Mom let the diary go.

5. Add more liquid to the too-thick gravy, and resist the urge to add more flour.

Milk and some butter make the gravy taste really good. Stir. It'll be perfect.

I need to always pour sweetness onto any kind of meanness I feel. It's hard, but I'm working on it. I try to do that with Callie when I see her, even though it's difficult. It's why she forgets she doesn't like me when we're together, even though she hates me when we're apart. When we see each other, she's cold at first, but within minutes, she's telling me her secrets, laughing with me, acting like my sister. When we're apart, she tells Kristen and Mom how awful I am, how I plot to make her life bad, how I'm out to ruin her life. She changes the facts from our lives so much it nags at me. She has it that I was mean to her when we were

little. She tells her kids, my niece and nephew, and it makes my scalp tingle. My mom is taking care of clearing the facts with those kids. They hear the truth—at least from their grandma. Callie won't ever stop. The older she gets, the worse the stories become. For twenty-five years, she has said I took a machete from the collection of my dad's knives and swords on the wall, pointed it at her stomach, threatened her. Truth is that I said it, pointed at the knife where it hung there on the wall. I no sooner would have touched Dad's knives than cut my finger off with one of them because he was so strict about his things.

Callie lies. She believes her own tales. She has told stories that were wacky and wild, and everyone believed them until slowly things changed, especially after my partner of thirteen years, Guy, died. She checked out at that point. Her stories altered from previous versions, then were all wrong. The ones about my family, especially me, weren't true. When I asked Mom for years, she said, "It was a mistake, Callie didn't mean it," then looked at me through the side of her eye. That glance was my mom saying to ignore it, which held until Callie told of reporting a story about a lion cub at the zoo when she did that sort of thing for her job. Of how her body got ripped because they let her hold that baby lion. How it tore her jeans—even though she wore fancy suits to work—and that she went to the hospital. That the zoo handled the bills. She kept going, telling this story in front of a dozen people. Everyone laughed, and I did, too, for a minute. Until it got too far. Before it went from reporting a story about a lion cub to being attacked by it. Until it was entirely make believe. I met Mom's eyes. She gave me

a look that said Callie's story was all made up, but also said, "Don't say a word. Let her talk. Don't make a scene." That's why Callie doesn't like me—because too often I called her on the made-up stories. Stories I know are invented because Kristen, Mom, and I talk about their outlandishness afterwards. I told stories as a kid, as a teenager—the beliefs I had about the Illuandas, the faeries, the satyrs. They were real, and when I look back, they seem real. But I know they weren't. Just like I know the hallucination at my client's house was just that—a hallucination. But with Callie—Callie doesn't know the things she says are false, and when one tells her, they get her wrath—screaming, cursing, throwing things. Dad-like behavior, but without the power Dad had over us kids. It's easier to not lead her to those outbursts, so now I just let her talk and weave stories like webs more complicated than the stories I told because of temporal lobe epilepsy.

Callie's stories have more frequent. She recently said that we rode our bikes all the way across town for piano lessons every week. Mom and I told her no, and Callie got mad. So angry she moved, left where we were sitting to go fume down the hall, mad as a woodstove with coals turned red in it, as that furnace with the hot coals in my seizure. Her tales get worse, like the knife that turned into a machete on the wall, which has changed from machete to sword to dagger. She says I held those sharp things, whichever it is at the time, near her belly, sliced, made a cut. That I ripped her buttons off her shirt, punctured her stomach with the point. Once it was a sword, she says I put it to her back and pushed in, made her bleed. Now it has become a dagger. Where I pushed, moved up to her chest, then clear to her throat. She says I hacked and slashed, broke her skin, tried to

carve her head off, says she had to wear a turtleneck in the summer for weeks so my mom wouldn't see it. She's angry, so many years later. Mad at Mom now for not noticing non-existent cuts, for not stopping the "abuse" she says I did against her, for not asking why she wore a turtleneck during that summer. That was a summer she was a lifeguard. A year she wore her swimsuit around the house more often than clothes. The family listens to her knife tales. No one tells her the knives weren't sharpened, had blunt edges. That they were museum exhibits. She's beyond being able to understand she's misremembering.

Callie's brain is mush by electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and too many drugs. The drugs she takes are prescribed for her borderline personality disorder, which is a condition that can't be treated by medicine. Medication is prescribed to try to mitigate the psychiatric symptoms that are manifested, though, like her bitter, hateful anger. None of us—not me, Kristen, or Mom—know how Callie gets the amount of prescriptions, or the strengths, she does. Her eyes are glossy, shellacked. Her lips parted, mouth open. Once drool seeped out. It brings up thoughts of people in institutions. She talks of dying every day. How bad she wants to die, how she wants Death to steal her life away. She tells her kids—that niece and nephew she lies about my childhood to—that she wants to be dead, wants to die, to kill herself. She breaks furniture, crushes things, smashes their hearts while they watch, crouched on the floor away from her, their eyes as wide and glossy as hers. Child Protective Services (CPS) has investigated before, but if Callie can do anything, it's lie, so CPS goes away. Her kids saw their dad dead

from a heart attack when they were five and six, so Callie is the only parent they have.

And here's the real reason I don't like her lying to them about me: when she's gone, those kids must trust me. They can't think I bullied and beat their mom if I'm to care for them, or even help care for them. And it could come to that. Mom is to decide what's best for them, but she doesn't know what that will be, yet. It will depend on their ages, she says, but even helping just for a little while means they can't be scared of me or think I picked on their mom.

Callie can't find her mind, it's soaked in Klonopin and Thorazine. It's near drowning. When it's not, she's violent, spitting and kicking and hitting, but not in a seizure. I wasn't violent to anyone but myself during my seizures. I worry about my niece and nephew because Callie is violent. Hopefully just to things, but I wonder. Callie blames me for her life, says her brain went mushy when Guy died, put that on disability forms. She tells me it's my fault whenever she has the mind to, when she has a mind. Says it's my fault she lost her good job with the governor, then the next one with the state fair board. My fault for where her life is, in zombie, personality disorder land. Says I should not have saved her life when she overdosed and Guy called Mom and Dad while I kept Callie on the phone talking so they could get to her apartment, years before her kids were born. I need to stay kind, not just because I fear her—physically and mentally—but because of my niece and nephew. So I let her say whatever she wants. It hits me in the heart every time, just like if she took that dagger of Dad's, sharpened it, and stuck it in me, moved it around.

I think if someone's allowed to be crazy because Guy died, it should be me, even though I don't want to be crazy. It makes me fume, a hot teakettle blowing with steam, like the one Mommie O' made her Sanka with every afternoon before her show, that Callie cites that date, the one when Guy died, as the reason, blames me for all her crazy. I need to be steel. Be strong as the dagger. Those kids are going to need me. The gentle love I show them now will matter, though Callie won't let me know them well, won't allow me in. She says I can only visit my niece at their house at the kitchen table with Callie sitting there, too. I can't take my niece out to a movie or lunch. Who knows what Callie thinks I might say, but I believe she fears that I'll talk to my niece about being gay, about my agnostic thoughts on religion that don't match Callie's Methodist self, but do match my niece's. (That I'll tell her just how crazy Callie is.)

Mom felt hard towards her brother, like I do towards Callie. He picked on her and made her mad—just like Callie does to me. Mommie O' and my grandfather raised bees when Mom was little. They collected the honey and honeycomb from the beehives and took it to the cellar of the very farmhouse where Mommie O' was trying to teach me how to make gravy and I wasn't listening.

They used a separator to collect the honey away from the honeycomb and put into bottles to sell. Mom and her brother helped, though Mom hated the cellar, where the separator was. Mommie O' was content to not make Mom assist,

but Bray told Mom she best help if she wanted to eat the food that was served on the family's table because that honey they were bottling helped put it there.

The cellar had a dirt floor and walls, and it was dark even when the door was open. A steep set of wooden stairs that Mom's brother and father built led into it. Mom's brother told Mom he left some nails out and one day she'd find herself falling because of them into the cellar head-first, never mind that it didn't make sense that the nails would suddenly reappear days, months, years after the steps were built.

One afternoon, Bray sent Mom to the cellar. Her brother watched her open the cellar door and sit on the top step. He told her Bray said to go down, set up the separator. When Mom said, come on, my uncle said he had to help with the bees. It didn't matter that he'd never done that before, Mom believed him, and if there was anything Mom hated more than the cellar, it was bees. When she got stung, her skin swelled, turned red hot, and itched worse than when she got poison ivy.

Reluctantly, she headed into the cellar. She hurried to turn on the bare bulb, then set about getting the separator ready for the honey. She didn't mind helping, and even liked turning the separator; it was the cellar, with its dank smell of wet dirt, mildew, and the thick shadows around the full canning jars that she hated.

Then she heard her brother yell, "Tornado!" and the cellar door slam. She expected to see him running down the stairs, followed by the family, but what

occurred was only darkness when the light went off. She ran up the stairs, but couldn't budge the door. It was latched.

Her brother was laughing hard until he felt a pinch on his ear. He was led to the cellar door, told to unlatch it, where he watched Mom scuttle out. "Down yourself," Bray told him. "I said down," she said when he didn't oblige her. She knew that her grandson was just as afraid of the cellar as my mom, but hid it better. Bray shut the latch on the door, chuckled, and sat down on a chair nearby. Mom wondered how long until Mommie O' and my grandfather got back from the field, but was in no hurry for them to return. She liked her brother being down there in the dark.

I need to show kindness and patience to Callie, like Mom eventually did with her brother as they got older. Keep adding sweetness when she's ugly—kindness to her, her kids, myself. We're sisters; I didn't pick her, but that niece and nephew need to see an adult who's normal. Yes, even with my seizures, my hallucinations, weirdness, and strangeness, that's me—and Kristen, who doesn't have the seizures or anything else. We're the milk and butter here, the sweetness in the gravy. Me and Mom and Kristen, we're what can save those kids. I need to add my tenderness in like the milk and butter, and stir. It'll fix the gravy, and hopefully will mend those kids.

- 6. I'm pretty good at finding my way around a kitchen. I need to trust myself. I'll figure it out. I just need to mind these lessons. They'll help.***

CHAPTER TEN

THERE WAS LOVE, FOR ALL ITS GOODS AND BADS

There is one thing that I have always known no matter what: my mom and dad loved me. The same is true for my sisters—that they love me and I love them—even Callie, even Michelle. It has always been easy to love them, even if we haven't liked each other, because that's what we were taught the whole time we grew up. It was even taught that my whole extended family feels that way, especially my mom's side, since my Dad's isn't as demonstrative. I barely talk to their side, but I talk to my mom's regularly, and see them, too, at least pre-pandemic.

Given my childhood—how people didn't always like me—it has been incredibly important knowing that I have unconditional love from my family. My parents haven't always liked me; Callie and Michelle regularly haven't, since they see in black and white; they can't stand me at times, but do always love me. I'm Callie's nemesis, and was Michelle's, until we're together, then they like me. As soon as we're apart, I'm their enemy again. When Guy died, Callie sent me a “thinking of you” or sympathy card every day for a month. Sometimes it felt like, why is she reminding me daily about Guy dying, but when they ended abruptly, I missed them.

When I was young, my mom sometimes said, “I don't like you right now. I love you, though” after I'd had a seizure and had screamed, hollered, and rocked. Since I had no idea I'd had one, since we didn't even know I had epilepsy, I just knew people were treating me weirdly.

I thought that all families were like this, but have learned that I'm lucky and that's not the case at all. Sometimes it's felt like the only living beings who have loved me unconditionally are my dogs—all of them—from my first as an adult, Wiggly, an apricot miniature poodle, to my current ones, Grayzie and Arthur. Even my cats have loved me unconditionally—both seeming more dog than cat.

It's harder to remember that I'm loved unconditionally in relationships, but I've known with Guy and Jane. Even when we've not liked each other very much, there has been a deep love. I still love Guy, am still *in* love with Guy. Luckily Jane doesn't mind. We talk about Guy often and she has said if I want to have a photo of him up, that's fine with her. I don't. For one, he's so young when I look at him now. He stopped aging and I didn't. That sometimes makes his death more real. It's easier to remember him than to see him all the time.

With Jane, I worry that if we ever break up, she'll stop loving me. That bothers me a lot. She compartmentalizes life and, in some ways, doesn't remember why she loved her exes. I wouldn't want that to happen to me.

Growing up, knowing that my parents loved me so much was formative. I've never questioned that I was loved in this world. That has been important when friends turned away from me because I had seizures, when my I wasn't neurologically, psychologically, or psychiatrically stable.

Two or three times in Guy's last years, I looked at him and said, "I'm sorry I've hurt you." He said back, "I'm sorry I've hurt you, too." I said, "No, really, it's been me who caused the hurt," and it was, when I've acted badly towards him, with the manias

and depressions and seizures early-on in our relationship—I caused the pain. He didn't. At least until he died. I don't know if it was worse to bring it up after all the years—a decade even—had passed since those, or if it would have been better to never mention it again. It felt important to say. I hope it didn't hurt him all over again. I realize now that it probably did.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SWIMMING HOLE

When I was a kid, I was out for the cheap applause. In 1976, Callie and I stayed with my aunt Peggy and her husband, Robert, in Bowling Green, Kentucky for a week while my parents went to England. Though my mom and dad were in their thirties, Peggy and Robert were only twenty, and my parents gave us many rules to follow while we were with them. Callie and I didn't tell Peggy and Robert our parents' doctrine of forbidden activities because we both wanted to do them. I also wanted their approval.

They took in many strays—cats, dogs, people—it didn't matter, if they were ill-fitting in their “born into” spot, Robert and Peggy would take them in. They didn't adopt the people into their house, but did include them in their activities, such as the day we went to the swimming hole. The stray's name was Wayne. I was nine and he was twelve. I was boy-crazy and he was cute. He had hair like David Cassidy, but blonde, and I wanted to kiss him, even if I wasn't quite sure what that meant.

I wanted to ride in the truck bed since that's where Wayne was. I wasn't supposed to ride there, according to my parents. I asked Peggy if Wayne could ride up front, but she shook her head because there wasn't room. “I'll ride in back then,” I said. I sat on the ridged rows of the bed. My back twisted trying to get comfortable and my legs and butt fell asleep as I leaned this way or that, never able to get off a ridge. Wayne sat on the wheel well. I watched his hair fly and flow. He had a way of flipping it just like a rock star. He faced the wind like a dog feeling the breeze on its face. It was a freedom I didn't dare try. I would fall out onto the highway and get run over, I was sure. I tried to talk to Wayne, but he didn't talk back. Whether it was because I was nine and he was twelve, or

because he couldn't hear me, I didn't know. Those ages are different worlds, but I thought it was because I was chunky.

When we got to the swimming hole, everyone had buddies. Robert's brothers and their girlfriends or wives were with us, but Wayne, Callie, and I were the only kids. I followed Wayne around like a pull-behind toy. I tried splashing him with water, but it didn't work, he still ignored me. The area was beautiful. It was summer and hot, so the water was warm, but the green maples, oaks, and beeches surrounding the swimming hole kept the air cooler than elsewhere. The cove was green and brown—the green leaves, reflection of green from the water, the water itself brown, the hills surrounding it were brown as were the tree trunks.

The grownups started climbing a high hill and swinging out on a long piece of metal tied to a rope that hung from a tree. They'd drop into the swimming hole with war-whoops and shouts of "Geronimo!" I wanted to grab that metal swing, fly over the water and jump into it, but I knew my parents would kill me. It wasn't specifically on the "do not do" list, but I'm sure it would have been had my mom thought of it. I watched everyone swing out again and again. It looked like such fun. I was afraid to ask, sure Peggy would say no. I watched person after person swing out and drop off, but since none of us kids were doing it, I was okay with staying in the water. Then Wayne went up. He swung high, dropping, and landed in the swimming hole. He hooted on the way down. I wanted to prove I wasn't afraid, so I climbed the steep muddy hill and waited in line. I thought when I got to the front where Robert was getting the rope for people I'd be stopped. But then I got there. "You going, brave girl?" he asked. I nodded and he smiled.

“Good going. We’ll take that city out of you yet.” I hated when he called me a city girl. It was an insult when he said it.

I grabbed the metal. It was a dingy silver color with rust stains on it. I thought if I scratched my hands and got an infection Mom would know what I did, but I didn’t care. I looked over the swimming hole. It seemed I would fly out past the water with the length the rope was, but I’d seen the adults do it. I could do it, too. I was scared, but I wanted to show Wayne that I was cool and strong and would be a great girlfriend. He kept hanging out with Callie, but she was seven and he was twelve. He probably thought she was a cute little kid with her brown pixie cut and tan skin, but I didn’t think that’s what it was then. I took a little run, jumped and swung out over the water. I pulsed with the anticipation of flying. I dreamed of flying often, and of swimming underwater without the need of an oxygen tank, which I still dream. I always heard if I landed in flying dreams I would die, but I landed night after night after night, and I landed that day, plopped right into the deepest area of the swimming hole, just like I was supposed to. I swam to the side and climbed back up the hill to go again. I went over and over. Every time before my turn, Robert tried to coax Callie into swinging, but she wouldn’t. She was always right before me, which made me wait. I tried to be patient, though, because this was even better than swinging so hard I went around the bar at the top of the swing set at home, which made my pulse quicken with panic and excitement.

The hill was messy and thick with mud from people dripping river water on it. At one point when I ran up the hill for my next turn, I slipped back down and had to use my hands to pull myself up since my feet alone couldn’t do it. I smeared my muddy hands against my swimsuit. Mud covered my legs, and from the water that fell from my suit,

my legs looked like they were bleeding brown muck. When I got to the top, Robert tried to convince Callie to go—the difference was this time Callie did. She grasped the metal and Robert lifted her up, held her back, and let her go. She went out over the water. All the adults shouted for her to let go, but she didn't. She swung right back onto the hill. Robert caught her and everyone laughed, and Robert said she was cute for doing that. Wayne patted her back and beamed a huge smile. I looked at his large bright teeth which were beautiful even though they were crooked.

It was my turn again. It didn't matter to me that I had been going for an hour, this time when I swung out, I flew over the deep part of the swimming hole and held fast. I wanted to be as cute as Callie. I watched the green of the trees go up, saw a hint of the blue sky through the green, then realized on the way back my hands were covered with slick brown mud. I was headed back to the hill, but I was slipping. I was up higher than our two-story house and my hands were sliding on the metal. I had to make it back to the bank, but they were slipping fast. I was almost to the edge of where I wasn't over water anymore, just a little further to be back on the hill. Then they slid off. I fell from twenty feet in the air in slow motion, just like in my dreams. When I landed, I didn't die, but I had searing pain in my knee. I was afraid of getting in trouble so said I was fine. I got up, fell, got back up. I wanted to beat Peggy, who was running toward me, to the shore. I was only a few feet out, on the rocky part between the shore and water. I stood, still trying to get to the shore, but fell again. I stood back up. I tried hard to get to the bank, but Peggy was to me before I could take any steps. Robert was on my right nearly as soon as Peggy stood in front of me. "I'm fine. I'm okay," I said. Robert shouted to his brother to bring his truck to the riverbank. "No, I don't want to go. I'm alright," I said, but I was crying—

not from the pain, but because I could have died, because we had to leave now, because I would get in trouble.

While they helped me to shore, I saw blood gushing from my knee into the mud on my leg, bright red mixed with deep brown. Robert's brother poured cold water from the cooler onto my knee, which made me cringe and nearly throw up. Many handkerchiefs came out to staunch the bleeding. Some had been in the river water, others were from trucks; when they didn't stop the bleeding, Peggy started using towels. She said I should ride in front, but I insisted on riding in the pickup bed so I could lie down and so blood wouldn't get inside the cab—and so I would be near Wayne. He gave me dirty looks because we had to leave. This had been a respite from what Peggy had described as his miserable home life. He wouldn't get near me until I was shivering badly. I tried to scoot underneath the truck's cross-bed tool box. I got my head partway under it, but that's all that fit. Robert's brother scooted next to me and had Wayne give him all the towels, which he covered me with. He made Wayne sit next to me on one side while he sat on my other one, their legs warming me. I still hoped Wayne would kiss me. I dream-thought he needed to save me because I got hurt and leaned down and kissed me. He didn't. He didn't even say goodbye when we dropped him off.

I was sure I would get in trouble from my parents over this, and that Callie and I would never be allowed to go back to Bowling Green to stay with Peggy and Robert, but by the time my mom saw me, she was so relieved I was okay that I didn't get in trouble. I needed stitches, but wailed and cried, convincing the doctor not to give me any. It bled for hours, and for years, it hurt when I walked, but overall, I was fine. I would love to have learned my lesson, that when I swing out over a swimming hole, I shout “woot

woot” and drop into the deepest part. But I haven’t. Too often I try to hold tight, return to the original position. Unable to hang on, I slip, fall hard, and land awkwardly and injured in the rocky shallows. From necessity, now I press a towel to the injury, and slowly move to the shoreline.

CHAPTER TWELVE

MOTOR MOUTH

Dad called me “Motor Mouth” and “Mouth of the South” growing up. And Jane says I talk all the time. When I told her about Dad calling me Motor Mouth, she smiled, then laughed, and said, “You certainly earned it, didn’t you?” When I’m excited I still talk quite a bit—especially when I’m speaking with someone I know well. Because Dad called me Motor Mouth, I try to be cognizant of the amount of time I spend speaking and tamp it down. Is it still too much? A lot? An appropriate amount?

In middle school, my friends and I were loud and laughed a lot—over boys, over nothing, over silly, ridiculous, adolescent stuff. I still laugh a lot. Maybe more now on a daily basis than then, though it’s rarely that goofy laugh of adolescents. Sometimes Jane and I, or my best friend Sandy and I, will get going and laugh like teenagers. I take things a lot less seriously now than I used to. I don’t get upset at things that used to hurt my feelings, such as times when Jane says “well, stop it” when I say “I love you”—a running joke between us—and I just laugh. This happens a lot with us. If she says I’m hard to understand when I talk because I sometimes speak in a discombobulated manner, instead of being insulted or mad, I laugh. With TLE being in my language center, I’m sure I am sometimes difficult to follow, though it’s not deliberate.

In elementary school, the comments on my report cards said “unsatisfactory” for behavior with notes saying “talks too much.” Even as an adult, at my social work job, I sometimes got pointed looks for talking to my coworkers too often.

Maybe I am a motor mouth. It hurt my feelings when Dad said it, even though he was joking in that way he had. Everyone had nicknames to him. Callie was “the

Poughkeepsie Picker,” which is from a movie Mom and Dad saw together and because she picked her toes all the time. She became “Miss Microwave” as she got older because she wanted everything done *now*—and still does. Kristen was “Angel May,” named for her favorite doll and “Punky Tai”—the Tai part from Michelle who couldn’t pronounce Kristen’s name when Michelle was a toddler and the Punky from the show Punky Brewster that Kristen loved.

Though Jane doesn’t call me Motor Mouth outright often, at times she ignores what I’m saying until I ask, “Jane, did you hear me?” We went for a drive Sunday, and before we were even two blocks away, she asked, “Elizabeth, why are you talking so much?” I said, “Because I like you” and was quiet after that until after we’d had both eaten and Jane began talking. After that, we spoke the rest of the afternoon.

When I’m cognizant of the fact that I’m talking too much tends to happen when I’m not with one of my best friends or Jane. I feel like that kid being called Motor Mouth all over again. The one who tells the kids in class about the faeries and gnomes in the Reed’s big yard. Sometimes kids listened with rapt attention—sometimes not.

They laughed behind my back, and in front of my face a lot of the time, at the stories I told about the things that weren’t actually there. I didn’t know to stop saying these things: the belief that a workman killed himself in our basement while building our house, that a ghost threw my lunch to me one day I ran late to school, and of course, the Illuandas.

For some reason, Jane saying I talk so much or tuning me out doesn’t hurt the way it does if I worry that others think I’m too talkative. With strangers and acquaintances, I go over every conversation, wonder when I should have been quiet. The

dynamic, queer, Black poet Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who creates powerful poem-photo duos about her father writes, “Make the loudest sound you can / and don’t apologize.”

This is finally, exactly how I’ve come to feel I can be with my closest friends.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEING ELEVEN AND EPILEPTIC

Sixth grade was my worst year academically and at all before Dad and Guy died. I was bored—the material did not challenge me. Also, lots of both the boys and girls picked on and teased me about having a C-cup bra and a woman’s figure. I was bigger than other kids, too, and strange. There was also my science teacher, Mr. Moss, who hated me. He had a personal vendetta against me and a couple of boys from the class. He primarily focused on me and one other boy, though. If we did an experiment—the only days I liked—he kicked me out of class. One day I said, “But I didn’t do anything. I was having fun.” He said, “Yes. I don’t want you to have fun,” and sent me to the principal’s office. I left my sweater in the classroom, which had been hot. When I went back to get it, he was talking about me to my classmates, saying I was fat. He made me stand in the hall, and when he brought me my sweater, I confronted him about saying that. He yelled at me for a solid ten minutes. Turning him in for yelling would have done no good. I was in trouble so often that year with the school administration that he would have been the one believed had he denied doing it. I didn’t dare believe the other kids had my back; I didn’t figure they’d speak up against a teacher—people far more fearsome then than now.

He was a small effeminate man, and I was sure even then that he was gay—and he probably hated me because I asked him if he was in front of my classmates. I was eleven, and I knew what gay was, though not what a bisexual was; I was sure liking boys and girls made me some sort of perverted freak. I’d never heard of anyone who was like me. The character David Rose from *Schitt’s Creek* who holds up red and white wine, while telling another character he liked both to describe being pansexual certainly didn’t

exist yet. I'm not even sure the word pansexual existed yet, which is most accurately how I would describe myself rather than simply bisexual.

I didn't think there was anything wrong with being gay for a grown man, not to me anyway, even if the rest of the world still found something wrong with it. It had been presented to me and Callie as just another way to be by my mom who knew a gay man from the Miss Kentucky pageant circle. Even though that's how she described it, I'd heard her call him a fairy behind his back, which she now says was because she couldn't stand him. But even though it was just a thing to me, in hindsight, I realized it was a bad thing to other people. I didn't find my teacher being gay—or not—offensive, but he hated me after I asked, which I did, in large part, as a way of figuring myself out. I hadn't meant to offend him, but I had never considered that an out gay teacher couldn't have kept his job in 1979. Now I realize me asking likely added to the stress of being closeted and the fear of losing his job.

I wasn't particularly disruptive most of the time, especially not on the days with experiments, but I got removed anyway. Sometimes Mr. Moss kicked my classmate Adam out as well. He was one of the few boys who was nice to me. When we got sent out of class together, we walked back to the shop classroom, where the teacher had a planning period that hour, and where Adam spent a fair amount of his time. I liked the deep smell of leather that students worked into belts, keyrings, and wallets and the scent of fresh sawdust from wood on its way to becoming birdhouses and knickknack shelves in the classroom. Plus, the shop teacher, who I had for first period, liked me.

Sometimes when we got kicked out of science class, Adam leaned close to me and said, "Let's go get smokes." I rarely smoked, but nodded every time, then we walked

to the tennis club nearby to buy cigarettes. We did this before we went to shop instead of going to the Principal's office because we had figured out Mr. Moss didn't check whether we had gone there or not. This arrangement suited me just fine.

Cigarette machines were still around, including in places kids could bring their coins and make purchases. After we went in and bought the cigs—always Marlboro Reds—we stood in a copse of pine trees just outside the tennis club and smoked, the stinky smell of cigarette smoke swirling around us in the cold air. We shivered in winter, not wearing coats, since that would have meant bringing attention to ourselves by going to our lockers or keeping them with us during the day. On those days, the clean, cold air burned my lungs as much as the smoke did. We sweated during late spring, and since I didn't wear deodorant all the time, sometimes I ended up pretty ripe afterward; Adam never wore deodorant, and he was very fragrant by the time we headed back inside.

At first, I wasn't sure what to do, but I followed Adam's lead—tamping down the cigarettes by holding the box in my right hand and rapping it hard on my left, lighting the cigarette, and inhaling deeply. Even though smoking didn't stick for me, I started using my lunch money on Fridays to buy cigarettes whenever Mr. Moss made me leave the classroom. I gave most of the cigarettes away, and kids swarmed me to get them. It was one of the only times that year I felt popular.

Adam was nice, and he was all through middle and high school. Most of the guys in middle school and the first couple years of high school were mean—fighting me after school, putting notes on my back, stuffing me in lockers and trash cans—so I valued my friendship with Adam.

I wonder now if it was because Mr. Moss was closeted and could tell I was queer that he was so nasty with me. I didn't even know—not yet—that I was gay. Not entirely. I did joke and laugh with the other girls in class, but I wouldn't think that he could tell from that. He might have been able to, though. In hindsight, I think I was probably fairly flirty, especially with one girl, Heidi. Nevertheless, I was stunned each Friday when he told me I had to leave class during the experiments. One week, we were looking at prisms, which I found enthralling. I held the prism this way and that, when suddenly Mr. Moss shouted I had to leave. That time, Heidi said, "Why, Mr. Moss? She hasn't done anything wrong," but he sent me to the Principal's office anyway. That was one of the days that Adam and I sneaked to the tennis club and bought cigarettes. I loved smoking before we came back to school. I loved it so much that I'm surprised in some ways it didn't begin a lifetime of smoking.

Not long after that, though, I left school as soon as the bell rang and headed across the field to buy cigarettes. I did the worst thing possible as far as getting in trouble with Mom: I missed the bus. And when I came back, none of my schoolbooks were where I had left them, waiting in line for the bus. I asked the Principal if he had seen them, but he said no. The next day, the boys I rode the bus with laughed that the books were on top of the building. There was no way to retrieve them, and they ended up throwing six of my math books up there—at sixty-bucks a pop—over the school year. I remember the cost because Dad got so mad at me about it. He never could understand my being picked on.

Knowing Dad, he probably went to school and said in his lawyerly tone that they should be protecting me and my books, and that the fact that they weren't was a problem.

And knowing Dad, he got out of paying for them—or at least paying for all of them. The same way I got out of completing my own punishments.

I was warned by the school counselor that I might fail sixth grade. A few days before grades came out, Mr. Moss said I hadn't completed any of the experiments, so he couldn't pass me. I said, "You know if you fail me, I'll be right back in your classroom next year."

I was terrified as I waited for my report card, sitting across from the school office, alone on a long bench. If I failed Science, the school counselor said I would fail the grade. I remember opening my report card, D-. I got a D- in Science. Maybe it was because he knew that he had kicked me out on experiment days, and that's why I almost failed. Or maybe it was because he didn't want my queer ass back in his class.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BEING OUTSIDE

Nature has always been important to me. I don't ever remember not being invested and involved with it. From picking daffodils as a little bitty kid and trying to find four-leaf clovers and wild violets in the yard when I was about four. Around five, I was obsessed with the ginkgo leaves when they rained down yellow in the fall and the helicopters from the maple tree next door as the spiraled towards the ground every spring. I sat in the ginkgo leaves, which were moist and made my pants damp, something I tried to hide from my mom.

I gathered things to make into "soup" in the huge cast iron cauldron my mom had. I'm not sure where she came by it, but it was something that was in my life throughout my childhood. When we moved, it came with us, but flowers were planted in it and it was on the deck of the house, which I hated because it meant Kristen and Michelle's childhood wasn't filled with playing with it.

When we moved to Prospect, there were woods behind the house with a creek and lots of trees that I could follow, then cross the golf course into more woods. There was an empty shack in those woods if one went far enough, but I didn't venture that far until I was in high school and went there to make out with a guy from the neighborhood.

At ten, though, Callie and I played in the creek. Even when it was dry, we could find crawdads in it if we lifted rocks in the bed to expose the damp earth beneath. Dad always said to Callie, who was scared of snakes, "watch out for tight-eyes" to freak her out that a snake would pop out of the wooded area across from the creek. I didn't care. I spent every minute I could back there. Sometimes I sat on the swing set next to the creek

reading. Other times, I took books—*The Outsiders*, *The Pigman*, *Flowers for Algernon*—into the woods with me and sat on a downed tree to read. I took my diary with the red satin cover and Japanese design on it with me and wrote, the pages getting smudged with dirt.

This love carried over to college at the University of Louisville, where I lived on campus, away from my parents. Friends and I packed up and went to the Red River Gorge, often on whims. We went so frequently that some people kept their gear in the trunks of their cars so they wouldn't even have to go home first. I kept mine packed in my dorm room, since I didn't have a car.

Later still, I hiked by myself at Bernheim Forest, Jefferson Memorial Forest, and Red River Gorge. I lost a lot of weight hiking. I joined the Red River Gorge Trail Crew and did trail maintenance one weekend a month for several years, until Guy was doing so badly with his depression when I traveled that I stopped and stayed home. It didn't keep him alive forever, but it did for longer than if I had kept going. After Guy died, I returned to the woods.

Even being disabled with a drop-foot now, I love to hike. I go with Jane as far as I can, then we hike back out to the trailhead. We even hiked a mile and a half last year. That might not seem like very far, but I was proud of myself for being able to do it.

The woods bring me solace. Remind me that everything is okay, despite whatever I'm facing. Even just sitting outside helps me. As a kid, the woods were an escape—from my mom and dad, from Callie, into books. Now they help me get away from the negative parts of life and into a place to help me think. They remind me that things will be alright, no matter how bad they seem. They're a place to reset myself, something I've needed so

many times. Sitting by a running stream, with the green leaves of forest trees and brown of the dirt, calms me, renews me, in a way that nothing else can. I look into the water, knowing if I lift a rock, I'll find a crawdad—so resilient it can live in both fast-running creeks and barely-damp earth.

SECTION THREE
ABANDONMENT

CHAPTER FIFTEEN
GOODBYE CHILDHOOD

I'm going away now from the seizures, the strange ones that marred my childhood, made me so different people turned away, that so many other children wouldn't play with me. I'm leaving those seizures behind me, pretending they never happened. I didn't ever yell and yell and yell at friends. I didn't stare, unreachable, teachers and children calling my name, me not ignoring them, but deeply hidden. I didn't have highs that made me indestructible enough to climb to the tippy top of a seventy-foot pine, or lows so cavernous I hid in closets and sobbed. I didn't play in the woods in my neighborhood with fawns or bear cubs, satyrs or wood nymphs, elves, or faeries. I didn't allow boys to put me in lockers, in trash cans, throw my books on the roof of the school or in the Biology pond. I didn't need that attention, didn't crave the touch of their fists because other people didn't reach out to me, skin to skin, in gentle ways. I let them do it, and no one understood. In my yearbooks so many wrote that I was sweet, but too weird, should stop being bizarre, and quit letting the boys hit me. But I didn't stop. Not for years.

I'm leaving the distant father who was there and not there. Present physically, but not emotionally. The father who didn't beat me, but who stopped hugging me at eleven when I grew breasts, became a girl-woman, that blow was worse than those made with fists. Emotional punches every time he said no when I tried to sit on his lap. I felt too fat to sit there, not that my growing body was something he didn't understand. I'm parting from being hit by my mom with a brush, paddle, once a belt. Abandoning bigger seizures that were like temper tantrums, were misunderstood, that Mom used physical aggression

to punish. Attacks I didn't understand since my seizures were unremembered, unknown to me while or after they occurred. I must have done something to deserve the beating.

I'm erasing the other kids' taunts, children who pointed and laughed when I was weird, odd, strange, when seizures happened. Why is she acting like a freak, standing, thrashing about, banging her head, punching the wall, yelling, screaming, they wondered. They spit paper wads into my hair, passed notes about me, laughed and joked. The do you like me yes or no notes each a prank. Yes, I said, then was stalked with checked paper, others giggling and laughing, me not understanding why it was funny. I'm abandoning being mocked for being fat. Still big, it no longer bothers me to be called that. I embrace it, turn it around, am empowered by it. Accepting my fatness, my largeness. Being comfortable in my body allows me assurance not attainable before. I'm taking my seizures and adding anticonvulsants; my manias and depressions and adding antipsychotics; my weirdness and adding idiosyncrasy and eccentricity. Ahhh, happiness. I'm forgiving my parents, which allows closeness. Overlooking teasing, which brings security. I'm saying goodbye to my childhood, goodbye.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE “ACCIDENT”

That night, Mom called the landline over and over until Guy finally answered the phone. She told him little, and no specific details. When I got home, he said, “Your dad has been in an accident. I couldn’t reach you. We have to go.”

I leaned back against the door after just shutting it.

“When?”

“Earlier. Like six? Five-thirty?”

I looked at the clock above me. It was ten.

“I didn’t know where you were. I’m so sorry.”

I was working my extra job. My coworker and officemate Darla and I took six people with intellectual and developmental disabilities out to eat, to movies, bowling and the like every Monday. That night, after the movies, when someone’s ride didn’t come, I volunteered to stay. I didn’t have a cell phone and hadn’t given Guy Darla’s cell number. I fixed that that night. A few days later, I took over Dad’s phone number and phone. For a while, I didn’t change his outgoing message, so I could call and hear his voice. I kept it that way until Callie called and got upset at hearing Dad. I still regret not recording his voice and keeping it before I recorded my own outgoing message.

When we got to the car, I handed Guy my keys. “Can you drive? I can’t.” I felt sick to my stomach and my whole body shook like I was freezing. Ten minutes into our drive, once we were on the expressway, I said, “Was the accident on purpose?” I had an idea it might happen. Dad was quiet and depressed when I’d seen him the past weekend. The whole afternoon, though the rest of us laughed often and talked over each other like

we always do, he sat quietly, with a sad look on his face. I got a card with a chimpanzee on the front that was blank inside where I wrote, “I love you so much. Love, Elizabeth” on the inside. I put it in the mail to him that night, hoping to buoy him, but it wasn’t enough. The deepest depression certainly can’t be overcome with a piece of cardstock. He did get the card, though. It was opened, sitting on his desk when Mom went to his office a couple days later.

Guy shook his head and shrugged, but I barely saw him because I was looking straight ahead at the Louisville skyline with the familiar Humana Building and Aegon Center. “Your mom just said ‘an accident,’ not what happened.”

“Did he . . .?”

“I don’t know.” He lifted his shoulders and shook his head again, which I fully saw this time.

“If he did, I hope he didn’t hurt anyone else.” I started crying. Dad was at University Hospital—the trauma hospital—I knew it wasn’t anything good that had happened, or anything small. It could have been an unintentional car or other type of accident, but I didn’t think it was. I knew it was bad or Mom would have given Guy more details.

We rode in silence after that until we got to the hospital. Once we parked, as we approached the hospital, I saw Michelle outside smoking. “Don’t tell me anything,” I said.

She nodded. “I’ll show you where we are.”

She took me to a small room that had a sign on the door that said, “Family Room” on it. I knew then, with horrible certainty he wasn’t going to make it, since we weren’t in

the regular waiting room. Seeing that was awful. When Guy, Michelle, and I went in, Mom and Callie were there. Kristen hadn't gotten there yet. I burst into tears, crying hard. I wondered if a client had come into his office and he had been shot, if he'd been in a car accident, if he'd done something to himself; all I knew for certain was that he was going to die. Jane told me later—about six months after the day she told me Dad had been conscious—that she made them give us a room so we were away from other people.

That night, I waited a moment for Mom to begin talking. She'd took a deep breath and began. "About five p.m., Joe went into the stairwell on the first floor and shot himself." That simply: there it was.

I fell into a crouch, limp as a Raggedy Ann doll. Guy came to me, took my hand, and pulled me into a chair. Even though we had broken up a year earlier, but still lived together—him downstairs, me up—we acted like a couple that night. We weren't mad at each other anymore even before this night, but I didn't always treat him well around then. He told me much later he was getting ready to move out, but realized he couldn't right then when Dad died. By the time enough time had passed, he no longer wanted to, and we were back together.

I leaned into him, wishing we were actually a couple, not just faking it for the night. Even as close friends, it didn't feel like enough.

"Where's Kristen?" I asked, hiccupping back tears and breathing hard. We were close, and selfishly, I wanted her there. I wanted her hand in mine, and mine in hers. I wanted shared tears. I also didn't want her to know yet—for her to have more time before learning the awfulness of the situation.

Callie and Michelle ran hot and cold towards me. They were towards much of the world and were prone to emotional outbursts and dramatic explosions with yelling and rushing out of the house at family events. I'd grown tired of it, and their instability made me leery of them. A dozen years of it from each of them had been enough for me to keep them at a distance. Even though Callie and Michelle were seven years apart, they both began having these eruptions about the same time. Maybe one didn't want the other to outdo her. Mom says she thinks Michelle was emulating Callie—the little sister copying her older sister's behavior—and that they both did it for the main thing they crave/d: attention.

There's an irony since as a kid and teenager, I was the one who was emotionally and neurologically unstable, but with medication, I'd gotten better; Callie and Michelle never would.

“She's coming,” Mom said. “I called Paul and told him to go get her.”

“From Cincinnati?” Mom nodded. “Did you tell Kristen what happened?” I hoped she didn't know—part of me didn't want to be the last person to know, and part of me hoped Kristen didn't know yet so she was still innocent of this knowledge.

“I told Paul,” Kristen's new boyfriend. Mom looked for something in her purse and came out with her lipstick. “Dry lips,” she said. “He dropped everything and headed down there. He's a good guy.” Kristen told me later that he didn't even take a change of clothes, so had to drive an hour and a half back to Cincinnati for clean ones and funeral attire, then come back to Louisville.

“Yeah, he is.” I wiped my nose. There were Kleenex boxes everywhere. “Did you tell her?”

Mom didn't answer. Michelle did. "Sort of."

"I had to tell her something after I told her Paul was headed there to pick her up and bring her here," Mom said.

"What'd you say?"

"To bring a dress."

I let that hang in the air for a minute. What a horrible way to find out. "Did you tell her more?"

"No. I left it to Paul to tell her. On the way here."

I hated that Kristen would hear that from him and not learn it at the hospital from Mom. I learned a year ago that Mom did tell her a couple of hours after it happened, but it was Kristen who told me, not Mom. I'm glad it was Mom and not Paul who told her. I'm also glad I told Michelle not to tell me when I arrived, and she was outside smoking. I wanted to learn whatever was going on from Mom.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IT'S EASIER THAN I THOUGHT--LEAVING

As a kid, the tar from around my mother's Cadillac windows in summers covered my fingers when I pushed them into it, pulled them out with the sticky substance that's scent, thick, dark, and bitter, the way this Kentucky girl imagined the La Brea Tar Pits smelled. This bitterness of childhood has gone as I've grown older, become an adult, left my childhood behind.

It's easy to leave behind the charcoal and liquid fire scent of barbeques, though they were good nights—mostly—but still, I was left alone catching lightning bugs, pretending that my sister and the kids of my Dad's friends were playing with me. Those nights, I invited my invisible friend Pam along, who twirled in the darkness, following the lightning bugs along with me, putting them in a large Ball jar with sticks and grass, air holes punched with a metallic scented nail and heavy hammer into the jar's lid.

I wasn't allowed to use the hammer yet, at ten, but I would sneak into the garage on weekends, the concrete floor smooth and cool on my feet. I used the hammer, punching nails into bits of two-by-fours. I picked up potatoes from the bin, their earthy, dirt scent a reminder of autumns, and pushed nails into them, put them back, later said I didn't do it when confronted by Mom.

Leaving came easy when I turned eighteen and went away, even though that garage—and the next one when we moved, where I found nails and screws to create things with—not just the potatoes punched with nails, not just random wood, but projects made, the bar to keep dishes—and alcohol, which Mom and Dad surely knew—in, and the loft I helped Mom build for my dorm room; the scent of the wood shavings of the four-

by-fours, holes made for the huge ten-inch long screws to hold the loft up, to ensure I didn't fall onto my desk below.

It was strong enough to hold me and a partner, who pushed his fingers inside me, pulled them out with a sticky substance. Occasionally, with some partners, I wished I hadn't left my childhood, imagined myself back with the tar, the wood shavings, and potatoes. With the lightning bugs, alone, or with my invisible friend. I wished for the daffodils between our yard and the next-door neighbors, of the ginkgo leaves covering Dad's Cadillac, of the tar, the sticky bitter substance, covering my hands.

*But most of the time, leaving the dad who bunched his hands into fists, banged them down **hard** onto the dinner table so that everything jumped inches and inches off the surface was easy to leave. I knew trouble was coming. No, trouble was already there. Trouble was in my face, and the force of the jumping dishes, the pounding of his fists, scared me. I was afraid he'd use those fists on me, even though he never had before and never did.*

The dad I had as an adult—until that one day, anyway—was so much better. Even when we were little and he drove me and Callie to the movies in his long, white Cadillac, or to my Aunt Mary's swimming pool where I glided through the smooth, warm water like a sleek bottlenose dolphin—some of the only times I ever felt sleek. We played “catch the train” where Callie and I jumped onto Dad's wet, slick shoulder and rode to the other side of the pool. If we missed, we swam across the pool to get to him, but we hardly ever missed. My cousins wanted to play it, but their dad wouldn't get in the water. Dad wasn't comfortable with having his nieces on his shoulder, so we stopped playing when they were there, stopped playing even when they weren't when I hit puberty, grew girl-breasts,

which confused me, not knowing why Dad stopped playing with me, his daughter. Dad, the lawyer. Dad, who knew allegations can be made. Dad who trusted Callie less than anyone not to make allegations against him—something Mom told me eight years ago that she denies saying now.

Some days, we went to the Hammill's house where we exchanged KISS trading cards with the Hammills and the Coxes. I've re-met Andrea Hammill since then, worked with her three decades ago; we are Facebook friends even now—and that she found me, instead of the other way around, makes me happier than it should. Those were good days, mostly, until Dad quit taking us out alone on Saturdays because he realized it was divorced dads who had kids away from home without their wives. Even these days are easy to leave. I was awkward, even with Andrea. I had a crush on Ethan Cox, who is gay, and I am gay, or bi, or pansexual. Ethan avoided me, my fawning over him. I wanted him to like me, but that wasn't going to happen. Because that awkwardness stays, lingers within me, maybe it is harder than I thought—leaving—since I look back and feel embarrassed even now about then. I want to say goodbye, but maybe I'm not able to, maybe it's hard to leave after all.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TRIVIAL PURSUIT

The dining room at my house in Prospect was my least favorite room. It was the room that most made the house feel like the “big blue box”—what Callie called it, a house she felt was one of emptiness, stress, and sadness. The dining room table was piled with magazines, newspapers, and recently purchased antique figurines for Mom’s small antiques business all through the year except for Christmas and Thanksgiving and the occasional *Trivial Pursuit* night when I was in high school in the mid-80’s. The recently purchased antiques ranged from expensive painted brass art deco statues, most of which Dad kept, to dishes and fancy costume jewelry from the 1920s.

Trivial Pursuit nights were the only time I felt welcomed in that room of imposing cherry-wood antique furniture full of serving dishes that held dust most of the year, silver we had to polish before holidays, and a glass-fronted display case holding fine china. There was plush white carpet I was afraid I’d spill a drink on and get in trouble any time we celebrated a holiday in there. The windows had custom-made stained-glass hangings in front of them.

On those game nights, my dad and I dominated. I was sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, and I played with the adult deck, while Kristen and Michelle played with a children’s deck. Callie played with the adult deck but got mad because she always lost. She hated to stay until the end of the game, which we were all required to do, but she did it. Kristen has told me that even though she lost every time, she loved those nights because Dad and I got along.

That I could beat Mom when I was that young brought out my competition, so I also tried to beat Dad. I'm not sure I ever did, but I sometimes came close. But mostly, we were close: in proximity, in a joint pursuit to beat everyone else, and in competition to beat each other. We laughed a lot those nights and then Dad and I stayed up late talking after the game, way after everyone else had left the room.

He told me familiar stories of living in the huge house at 350 East Broadway when it was The American Turners Athletic Club, and his stepdad was its athletic director. It's the building where my doctor's office is now and every time I'm there I feel like Dad haunts the halls. I want to know where he stepped, to put my feet there. Dad told stories of dressing like the guys from *West Side Story*, sneaking out late at night to hang out with his friends or go on dates. The stories he never told were of his dad—Grandad—taking him on jobs with his carpet laying business and leaving Dad there when he got mad that Dad wasn't laying the carpet perfectly. Dad, who was just a kid—fourteen, fifteen. He would have to walk back to his mom's, Grandma's. His dad was just as explosive as he was as an adult—maybe more so.

One night I was babysitting Michelle and Kristen and answered the phone to, "This is a nurse from Methodist Hospital. We have Mr. Glass here. He asked that we call you. He has a broken hip. He won't be able to return home. Where would you like him to go?"

"Oh my God. Is he okay? What happened? Where's my mom?"

Confused moments passed. I heard papers shuffled. She came back and said, "Aren't you Mrs. Glass?"

“Miss Glass. Mom’s . . . well, Mom’s not here.” We weren’t allowed to say they weren’t home, but this seemed like an extreme case.

Through a lot of misunderstandings, it was *Grandad* who had fallen. We hadn’t spoken to him in a decade. He had never met Kristen and Michelle and I was fifteen, making them already four and six. When he quit speaking to us, Callie and I wrote letter after letter after letter to him begging him to call us or come over. They were letters he never answered, but Mom found them on a table by his favorite chair—all of them, from all the years we’d written them. Letters that were sent often at first and went down to a small trickle as time went by, as we figured out he wasn’t going to have anything to do with us. I wish I had the letters Callie and I wrote Grandad. The fact that Grandad kept them means a lot to me.

Grandad got mad at Dad and Mom when his sister, Dad’s aunt, left everything to Dad when she died. She was a lot younger than Grandad and in better health, so it would seem he would die before her; plus, it was her right to leave her things to whomever she wanted, and it was *his son* who was the beneficiary of the will.

Her house had a cockroach infestation like I’d never seen, caused by her hoarding old bread wrappers with bread still in them, newspapers, crafting materials eaten up by mice, with roaches crawling over the balls of yarn, the papery wings of moths long-dead hanging on the strings of yarn, the plastic circle holders that went around six-packs of soft drinks. Mom and Dad spent weeks cleaning out the house and hired a dumpster that had to be emptied three times with all the junk my great-aunt hoarded. It’s a house that

was near the house I was renting when Jane and I got together, one I wished Mom and Dad had rented out until I was old enough to buy it from them, but they sold it.

That might have stopped me going to Ohio for grad school, though, without selling it myself. Maybe that would have been good since I hated my program at Miami University so badly, but I'm who I am because of going there, and I like myself. I also have one of my best friends because I went there, and Guy and I got three dogs—Kookie Doodle, Pudgy, and Slimey—while we lived there and I've always loved my dogs.

It wonder, if I had bought that house, if I would have filled it with hoarded material, too—a tendency that Dad had, that I do, that Kristen and Callie do to a lesser degree, and Michelle totally did. Michelle was worse than my great-aunt and Grandad, whose house they also had to hire a dumpster to empty.

If I can't find a pair of scissors or a book after looking pretty hard, I buy new ones instead of continuing to look. Jane read an article that said that's a sign of hoarding. I just think it's practical and lets me not waste time, but my house was bad with junk when I moved in with Jane. I had to get a small dumpster to downsize enough to move into Jane's five-hundred square foot apartment that was already full of her things. I rented a storage unit for my signed books, cherry bookcases, the few knickknacks I kept—the ones from Dad's office, some Guy gave me.

Mom and I went through a spell of playing dominos together, but nothing compares to those *Trivial Pursuit* nights. I wish we had played a million more times than we did. I want to be back in that imposing room, sitting next to Dad, placing a well-earned piece of pie in my circular, green game piece, hopeful of beating him, but mostly just glad to be by his side.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

BURDEN OF BEASTS

I followed her into the restroom. “Moowoo,” and “Beast, Beast, Beast,” I yelled. She, a rung below me. She, what I was to popular girls. We used the bathroom far from classrooms, one with fewer initials carved into the walls, one we hoped to be safe, but instead of friendly smiles, I pelted her with words. Hard edged ones that hurt more than fists.

She was kind, hoping I’d change. I was the same with the popular girls. I wished they’d accept me. See my just-right shoes and not the wrong jeans. The right jeans—Gloria Vanderbilt, Jordache—didn’t come in my size.

She was what I feared I was: fat, pocked-face, greasy hair in a home-cut style, in Special Ed. I was what the cool kids feared: fat, awkward, erratic. Callie told people I was “retarded” to explain away my seizures.

The girl threw a mirror image at me, the girl my sister talked about. I should have been nice. I seemed to have everything: college prep classes, clear face, salon haircut, the right L. L. Bean backpack and shoes. It wouldn’t matter I felt stupid, my haircut by a lady who only styled “blue hairs,” and that no matter what, I was still fat.

There’s an irony I wish to share: I was called “The Beast” in college like I struck her with in the bathroom. “Why go to King’s Island when you can ride The Beast here?” the fraternity boys said. “Elizabeast,” they hollered. I smiled, but it hurt. I gave myself away to prove someone wanted me, to feel cool and popular, but it didn’t work. I felt as isolated as we did in high school.

What became of her? I hope she found herself, as I did. I hope she has love and a family. I had love. She might remember him—Guy. We all went to high school together. He was an oddball, too, but depression took him after we'd been together thirteen years. I worried about that with her, but found her on Facebook. She only has nineteen friends. That makes me sad. I messaged her, "I'm sorry," but didn't ask for forgiveness. That's for her to decide whether to give. But she hasn't read it yet.

I teased her with the moans of a sick ghost—"Mooowoooo," and "The Beeeeaaast," yelled them when we were alone in the restroom, when she was in the black-walled stalls, or we stood next to each other at the sinks, wide mirror above them. She wouldn't look in it, but I stared at her while I groaned those horrible things. I watched her tears fall, relished them.

Until the day I walked out the bathroom and her dad stood there. Her dad, an elderly man, our school security guard. The popular kids ridiculed him as being "slow," but I thought he was great. He was nice to me, didn't trouble me when I didn't have a hall pass. I carried a blank piece of paper to skip study hall where I was teased, and he waved me by. I talked to him sometimes, and he spoke of the daughter he cherished, the daughter who was her, which I didn't realize until he leaned into the bathroom, "Honey, you okay?"

That day, her dad greeted me with a cheerful "Hello" and a smile. When he called to her, my heart fell. She became human. She became loved. He had heard me. It would have crushed Dad to hear me taunted, and I did that to hers. I hadn't meant to attack her, she was a stand-in for me. I meant to hurt myself when I hit her with insults. I hit the mirror-me, but it was her—a daughter, a human—who took the blows and was injured.

I said hello to her dad, then hurried off. I never teased her again, tried to smile, but she wouldn't look me in the eyes. I'd bullied her into submission, a place she shouldn't have been. A place I hope she isn't now.

If I saw her again, I'd say, "Your dad loved you. Always know that. He bragged about you every day. He thought I was kind, trusted me, and I damaged you out of fear. I tore out parts of you trying to fix the holes in me." I'd like to rebuild both of us piece-by-piece, with yarn and sticks and glue and clay, to as close to whole as possible, and maybe, hopefully, toward forgiveness.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A SERIES OF ALMOSTS

I was ten when I found my dad's *Playboy* magazines. I pulled them out from under the bed one at a time and looked at the pictures. I sat in the window box and pulled out the centerfolds, let my fingers go over their breasts and legs, noticed the hair they had that I didn't yet. The women were perfect—no moles, no fat, no imperfections, which I was full of. When I read the blurbs about them, they said they had always wanted to be in *Playboy*. I decided right then I wanted to be a *Playboy* Bunny one day. I was a chubby kid, and it crossed my mind that none of the women were fat, but I didn't care. I practiced how to be a *Playboy* Bunny, which meant stripping in the basement while listening to the 45 rpm record of "The Telephone Man" by Meri Wilson on endless repeat. I moved the Barbie townhouse away from the fireplace and used the brick hearth as a stage to practice my stripping and naked dancing. I wore my ballet recital pink and purple tulle tutus and pastel satin sequined leotards to strip out of. There were poles in the finished basement and I did my own rendition of pole dancing, too. In the magazines were stories of Hugh Hefner and his Bunnies, how they lived with him on his ranch, so I needed to get ready for all the sleepovers I'd have with them. I practiced in forts I made in the basement with sheets and blankets, gathering pillows from around the house to have pretend sleepovers with my friend Kim who lived two doors down. She was fun to do this with, but wasn't very adventurous. My friend Ellie was, though.

I was at Ellie's house on a snow day from school. I pulled a *Playboy* magazine out of the brown paper grocery bag I brought dry clothes in so I didn't wear snowy clothes in the house while we played. When I was changing, I stopped while I was naked.

“Look.” I pointed at the women, then at Hugh. “We need to be *Playboy* Bunnies together.”

“What do you mean?” Ellie asked. She looked at the women curiously.

“You have to go with me when I go to the ranch. Those women and a man live together. They get naked together.” I kneeled down.

Ellie looked at the magazine again. “What if my mom finds out?”

“She never comes down here.”

Ellie nodded and she slipped out of her striped cotton long-sleeved shirt and corduroys. I tied her hands with her shirt to the gate that marked off the area of the basement we weren’t allowed into. I tied my hands to it, too, as best as I could so that both of our hands were above our heads. I was sure Hugh wanted his Bunnies tied up. Where I got such ideas, I don’t know.

“We need to touch each other,” I said.

Ellie nodded. We untied our arms and we pulled them down, touched the other’s chest.

“Lick mine, then I’ll do yours.”

She bent over and licked my child nipple.

Her mom came down the stairs just then carrying laundry. “Keep playing,” she said, “I’m not looking.” Then she looked. The wicker laundry basket fell from her arms. “Oh! No, no, no, no, no,” she said, then went back upstairs. The door at the top of the steps slammed.

We dressed quickly and began playing like we normally would have. She had an erector set. I didn't have one and loved to play with hers. We were in the other area of the basement when her mom came back down a few minutes later.

“Elizabeth, you need to go.”

I got my paper bag and pushed the magazine down into it. I didn't change into my snow clothes or boots, just walked out wearing jeans, a long sleeved shirt, and socks. “Your boots and coat,” her mom said. I went back for them, but wouldn't make eye contact. After that Ellie and I weren't allowed to play together. We still did outside, but I knew we were hiding that from her mom because we met at St. Leonard's in her Catholic school's playground, which was near her house, but couldn't be seen from it. We swung on the swing set, played on the monkey bars, climbed the pine trees, higher and higher, and never spoke of what happened in the basement.

This was a theme through my life—a lot of “almosts,” but never a full experience. When my friend Melissa and I went to Champs Roller Rink in 1980, three years after the time I spent with Ellie, Melissa pushed me while I skated squatted down; she skated with me during the dances, me going forward and her backward. There was a foot between us to show we were both girls and it was “okay” to skate together. People called us names anyway. She was braver than I and said to ignore them. I couldn't and we stopped skating the slow dances together. When we sat on the sides, she put her hand on my lap, my hand next to hers, touching but not holding it. I was confused. I wanted more than anything to hold her hand, but I wasn't a lesbian because I liked boys, was “boy crazy,” even. That

didn't stop how I felt about Melissa, which was more real than what I had with any of the boys I liked.

One night Melissa spent the night with me. We were at the new house and there was a completely finished basement with carpet and a bedroom, so when friends stayed over, we slept in the basement.

"Have you ever been kissed?" Melissa asked.

"Yeah," I said. I was lying.

"French kissed?"

"What's that?"

"With your tongue. Come here, I'll show you." She pulled me to her, but I heard the "Oh! No, no, no, no, no!" of Ellie's mom and stopped her.

"Show me on your hand," I said.

"Oh," she said. "Okay, but then you'll have to practice." She showed me what it was on her hand. "Practice now." I kissed my hand. "You need to practice standing up."

"I'll practice over here," I said. I French kissed the wood paneling on the walls. Melissa tried to pull me close again. I felt the warmth of her chest, of our breasts pushing against each other's, but all I could think of was the shame after Ellie's mom found us, so I pulled away.

"For us to be best friends," she said a few hours later, "we have to run outside to the creek and back." I knew I'd be in trouble if I did that. We weren't allowed to go outside late at night, especially without mom and dad knowing, but we went to the sliding glass door and eased it open. We ran to the creek and back. "I dare you to do it naked," she said.

“Only if you will.” We stripped. We looked at each other. I wanted to cover myself, but Melissa was a year older than I and stood confidently in front of me. We ran to the creek wearing nothing. My heart pounded, the fall coolness felt wonderful on my body, and my bare feet enjoyed the dewy grass. When we got back inside she suggested we go to bed. “We have to brush our teeth,” I said, not understanding at all.

When we crawled into bed we weren’t wearing tops—she had dared me not to—but we wore our pajama bottoms. Both of us had breasts well beyond our ages of thirteen and fourteen. She touched mine and I touched hers. She leaned in to kiss me, but I made sure it was a peck. I was nervous all night because we slept topless. I woke her as the sun came up and made her put her shirt on. We fell back asleep and I got the first good sleep of the night. It was me this time who said I couldn’t play with her anymore. She called me often asking me to go skating, to spend the night. I didn’t want my mom to find out, for anyone to find out. I didn’t want anyone to think I was a lesbian. Billie Jean King hadn’t even come out yet, and I liked boys. I was confused and couldn’t talk to anyone because I was scared of what people would think of me.

Once I was forty-five, I was outspoken advocate for Fairness and Marriage Equality for the LGBTQ+ population. I had arguments about it. I posted about it on Facebook. I didn’t care as an adult if someone thought I was a lesbian. But I had still never acted on it. I had trouble saying I’m a “B” in the letters “LGBTQ” because I had had all of these “almosts,” and never followed through, so I felt it wasn’t my “B” to claim. I was still afraid of what people would think, but I was more afraid I would hurt someone, that I

would begin a relationship and then not be able to follow it through to its conclusion.

That Ellie's mother's words, and the similar words of others, would make me pull back.

My friend Anne and I held hands every time we went to the bar Uncle Pleasant's well past college and into our twenties so that guys wouldn't come onto us. By holding Anne's hand, rubbing her leg, it lead a particularly persistent guy who was interested in me to leave us alone. Anne and I held hands and touched legs every time we went there, and did it during the entire show. Another friend, Jennifer, and I went to see the Indigo Girls in Dayton. She leaned back on my lap, I held her in my arms, my legs encircled her. I thought it would continue after the concert. I was excited to finally, in my mid-twenties, have my first true same-sex experience, but she let it be known pretty quickly that it was a concert-only snuggle.

Anne and I had a dance around our attraction. We never actually spoke of it until we were on the way to Sandy's wedding to which Anne was my "date." She looked at me. I had my feet up on her dashboard, my bridesmaid's dress pooled around me. "I love you," she said.

"I love you, too, Anne."

"No, I mean, I'm *in love* with you."

There it was: the invitation to have a relationship, one with someone I didn't have to worry about hurting her because it would be her first same-sex relationship, too. We would have been exploring together. But timing wasn't on our side. I had started dating Guy. I knew with him I had the "real deal." I didn't date for almost nine years after he died. Part of it was a my focus on writing and school, but some was no matter how outspoken I was on Fairness and Marriage Equality, I didn't know how to say, "Hi, I'm

Elizabeth. I don't know what I'm doing, and I don't know where it could go, but I'd like to kiss you," to a woman. I told my friend Nickole a couple years ago, "I think I want to kiss women." She laughed and said, "I highly recommend it." I needed to take that advice. I'll never un-hear Ellie's mom's response, but I finally realized I couldn't let the fear of such utterances guide my romantic life. I couldn't keep silently pining for women the way I did for Ellie while I watched her classroom window in St. Leonard's from up high in the pine trees when I knew we weren't supposed to play together anymore.

SECTION FOUR

KISS ME, KISS ME, KISS ME

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

1977: "I JUST WANT TO BE YOUR EVERYTHING"

My first kiss was with two guys. We were all thirteen, a bit young for first kisses, at least for then, but here's what happened: we were under the diving boards in the deep end at the pool across the street from my house in Prospect. I swam every day since I was on the swim team, and so was Brian. Greg wasn't, but he was there every afternoon. I spent the whole day at the pool, sometimes laying out, but mostly swimming. That night, Brian dared me to kiss Greg. Greg, who Dad started calling The Redheaded Frog, which made me break up with him about two weeks later. I did, a peck at first, then longer kisses. This was after Melissa had taught me how to kiss on the wall and on my hand because I wouldn't kiss her on her mouth, though I wanted to. Lord, did I want to. So instead, I kissed Greg. Then he dared me to kiss Brian, which I did. He was a much better kisser, but it was Greg who showed the most interest in me, so we kept kissing. We kissed there, under the diving boards for hours, me going back and forth between the two guys, then when the pool closed at nine, we stood in the parking lot on the way to my house and kissed some more. I got home after ten and got in so much trouble. Dad was worried, and I couldn't tell him I was kissing two guys, so I told him I lost my towel and looked for it for a long time. He didn't buy it, so I said I'd had to go through all the lost towels to find it, said that the boys there stole it as a prank and wouldn't let me have it again. This he believed because I was always getting picked on by guys—at school, on the bus, at the pool. Greg, the Redheaded Frog, began coming over to my house, where Dad made us sit outside together. The funny thing is that he let girls come in, girls who really, had I been honest with myself, were a bigger threat to my wholesomeness than guys were. Guys

weren't allowed upstairs, but girls were. Guys weren't allowed in the basement because God forbid, there was a bedroom down there. But girls were, including Melissa.

After I broke up with Greg without even telling him, even though I'd been writing him love notes a week earlier, but that Redheaded Frog thing got to me, it was Brian who I was more interested in and who got my attention after that. Brian had a lot more experience than I did, which was clear by his kissing and his hands, his moving hands, which wandered over my body in ways that made me uncomfortable. I wanted to be liked, though, so I let him—at least up to a point. He had to stop when he tried to go under the clothes (or swimsuit). Despite his begging, at the time I thought I was saving myself for marriage, plus at thirteen, I wasn't ready, so bully for me sticking to my morals. They didn't stay at the level of above-the-clothes—well, with boys—for more than a couple of years, and even then, those two years weren't enough to get me to where I needed to be developmentally to be ready to be in a mature, sexual relationship, but at least I got to fifteen. It seemed so much more innocent with girls, like we were just exploring each other, mapping out the mountains and valleys that made up our bodies.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

1983: “TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE HEART”

Andy was my stupid high school relationship. Certainly not my only stupid relationship ever, but my first one. We talked on the phone nightly—after I talked to Sandy and then Guy, who was my one of my closest friends by then. I was on the phone most of the time from when I got home until dinner, then after that as well. Callie didn’t have many friends, so rarely wanted to use the phone. It took me very little time to do my homework, whereas she studied all afternoon, evening after our mandatory family dinner, and night, which might have added to why we didn’t fight over the phone. We had two different lines, so my parents didn’t need the phone either.

Andy and I were good friends sophomore year through senior year. I lusted after him, which he surely knew. We hung out at his house a lot, and went for rides in his Camaro, which I loved, starting the fall of ‘83. My parents let me ride in the car with him once he was sixteen, but wouldn’t let me ride with any girls that age. That includes me driving myself unless I had a very good excuse for needing the car. They said boys had better hand-eye coordination and could be trusted to drive better.

Most of the time at Andy’s house, we watched TV on channels I couldn’t see since my family didn’t have cable. It was how I was introduced to George Carlin’s dirty comedy; I’d only seen him on *Saturday Night Live*, where he toned things down. We saw movies, too, like *Caddyshack* and *The Blues Brothers*. Though I’d seen *Caddyshack* at Sandy’s house, I pretended I hadn’t. We watched hours of videos on MTV, which still played music back then. I could only see music videos on *Friday Night Videos*. The host,

Nick Michaels, often broke into the end of songs or talked over the beginnings of them, which drove me nuts.

Andy and I lay on the couch together, me nestled into him with his arms around me, even with his dad there, which made me uncomfortable. One afternoon when his dad wasn't home yet, Andy said something low and intimate in my ear. "What?" I said.

"You heard me."

"No, I—," and he kissed me. It was just what I had wanted, and I'd only kissed a few guys since Brian and Greg. Even then, the guys were at church camp, out of town, where the repercussions weren't the same as back home. I lay awkwardly above Andy, my head leaning left to reach his mouth. He tried to spin me around so that I was on top of him, but I was sure I'd squash him. I pushed my butt too far off the couch, and nearly landed on the floor.

He pulled me towards him. The ugly couch—something left from the early 70's with wood showing on the armrests and thick upholstery in an dreadful brown plaid—made a patchwork of indented marks in the skin of his neck, which I reached down to kiss. His neck turned hot pink and he pulled me on top of him.

His dad walked in the door. "Never mind me, kids," he said, taking his big lunch box to the kitchen.

I rolled off Andy and was settling my unruly curly hair back in place as best as I could when his dad walked back into the living room.

"Seriously, Elizabeth. No need to stop on my behalf," Andy's dad said. A year later, Andy's dad took us to King's Island after Andy insisted I ask my friend Allie to go with us, I thought so I had another friend to hang out with in addition to him. Instead,

Andy had his arm around her on the drive up, before we even got halfway to Cincinnati. I moped around King's Island, the fat third wheel, when I thought it was to be a romantic time for me and Andy. Andy's dad was a fat man and looked twenty-something, though he was in his forties, and I thought I was fat, though I wore a size fourteen, which is the average size for women now. I was positive everyone at the amusement park thought, "look at the two fatties, she can't get any better." It's a horrible thought about Andy's dad that I'm embarrassed at having had now.

I'm astounded I stayed friends with Andy, and even continued a sexual/romantic relationship with him after that, after King's Island.

The afternoon of our first kiss, Andy's dad started watching comedy shows with us. Andy pulled me on top of him, but no longer facing him. Instead, we were in our usual position of my back lying on his shoulder and chest. His dad never had any issues with all of this going on around him. He was Andy's buddy more than a father-figure to him.

The next time I was at his house, he said, "Let me show you my music room." The house was ugly, and his dad had worked on it, creating rooms where there hadn't been rooms before, making other rooms larger. This was a cubbyhole of a room in the center of the house. It wasn't big enough to be a bedroom, and there were no windows, but it was a perfect spot to do homework and keep a giant boom box—one too big to be portable, despite folks running around with some that large—and a record player with speakers. I would have preferred watching MTV since I listened to music all the time at home, but I did what he wanted rather than what I did. He thumbed through his records, past Prince and Michael Jackson, my favorites, and stopped. "Okay, here, Lionel

Ritchie,” he said. He put on the album *Can't Slow Down*, a make-out album if one ever existed. We kissed in an uncomfortable position, sitting cross-legged, facing each other, knees touching, leaning forward. He was the first guy I kissed with braces and he liked me to lick across them, which I found weird, but kind of cool. When the album ended, he stood up, clicked off the record player, and said, “Put your bluchers on. I’m taking you home.” I learned to play “Hello,” “Stuck on You,” and “All Night Long” on the piano just for Andy, though he never heard me play.

Guy hated Andy and had no qualms about telling me what a creep Andy was. So much of me wanted to date Guy then. I know I would have fucked it up if we had gotten together that young, but I sometimes do wonder what would have happened if we had, how life would be different.

Guy had bad acne then and people thought he was weird—no weirder than me, I realize now—but I didn’t feel like two weirdos should date one another. They probably thought Andy just as strange. He drove a Camaro, a redneck car, instead of a sedan of some sort that belonged to his parents. His dad was working class—did construction, hence the reconstructed rooms at their house. His mom was never discussed. I don’t know where she was. Andy wore tight Jordache jeans and Ralph Lauren Polo shirts, but the purple comb with a handle in his back pocket and the fancy scrolled thread designs on the pockets showed him as different than the popular kids. But he was cute, and not *unpopular*. I felt like I was moving up to the social strata to be seen with him.

One afternoon, Andy and I walked into his house and instead of plopping down on the couch after he put his books down, he said, “I have to get something in my bedroom.” He opened the door to the basement.

“Your bedroom is down there?” I looked and it seemed to be an unfinished basement—all concrete and utilitarian.

“Yes, come see it. It’s nice. You should see mine even though I can’t see yours.”

I blushed. I hated that boys couldn’t come upstairs at my house. “I don’t know.”

He leaned into me. I faltered and backed up to the couch. “I’ll wait for you here.”

“My dad’s going to be late. It’s parent-teacher conferences. He’s going straight there after work.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be alright here.” I thought about what my parents would think if I weren’t home before they left for conferences. I’d have to be home or I’d be in trouble. Mom gave me a fair amount of leeway after school to hang out with friends, but I’d need to be home to watch Kristen and Michelle while Mom and Dad were gone. I knew I had a while, though. But I didn’t want to go downstairs. Especially with his dad gone. It just seemed somehow sinister.

I took his hand and led him to the couch. “Let’s watch videos. Or some shows. I think *Hogan’s Heroes* is on.” He loved the reruns of that show. He aggressively pulled his hand from mine. He went downstairs and stayed there so long my body grew stiff. I wanted to pick up his phone and call Sandy or Guy to come and get me, but they didn’t have cars. Maybe Mom would come and not be mad. What would Andy think if I was on his phone when he came back upstairs. If he came back upstairs. I went to the kitchen, stood staring at a calendar on the fridge, considering how I would get home.

Suddenly hands went around my eyes. I knew it was him, his Jordache cologne gave him away, but his hands grasped my face with a force I didn't like. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just really wanted you to go downstairs with me. I want you to be my first. I thought since my dad wasn't going to be home. . .," he trailed off.

I cried. I wanted him to be my first also, but then? That day? I had to babysit afterward. What would my sisters think? Would my parents know?

"It's okay, Elizabeth. It really is. I'll wait for you," he said.

We took our typical positions on the couch and made out for about an hour, then got too handsy. "I have to go. I'm sorry. I have to babysit."

"God, can't your parents ever *pay* someone to sit those brats?" he said.

I blanched. I got paid. A little. Fifty cents an hour, but it added up. It wasn't the two dollars I got paid from other people, but it was something.

"I'm sorry, Andy. I am."

We still hung out after that, but never at his house again. Not until six months later when I signed his yearbook. We saved each other a full page to sign. Guy and Sandy each got a page in mine also, even though Sandy went to another school. In Andy's yearbook, I wrote at the bottom of the page, "Maybe we can finish what we started last year on parent-teacher conference day." It was May. I was older than in the previous fall, though still only sixteen.

When he read it, he grinned. He had the best smile. When we went to his house that day, Andy turned on a video in his music room: "Thriller" by Michael Jackson. I hadn't gotten to see the whole video, even though it came out December of the previous

year because *Friday Night Videos* only showed the short version. Every second of the long version was awesome.

I knew Andy had a girlfriend, Carla, but I didn't care. I didn't like her, even though we sometimes talked on the phone. She may have thought we were friends, but to me, we weren't. He had her the whole time he and I messed around together. She went to a different school, so he had me at our school, Ballard, and her on weekends. I'm not sure how Carla and I came to talk on the phone and be "friends," but I'm sure Andy did it. In retrospect, I bet he thought we'd have a threesome. He tried to manipulate us into all being together whenever he could, though Carla and I didn't want that to happen. Whatever his reasoning for getting us talking, it seems cruel now because my job as Andy's "best friend" was to reassure Carla that Andy loved her and wasn't seeing anyone else. I did that, despite what I wanted to tell her about me and Andy, and hell, even about Andy and Allie. They only lasted a minute after King's Island, but I was more upset about that than about him and Carla, since I knew about Carla all along and he had me get Allie to come along to the amusement park.

The afternoon we watched "Thriller," Andy tried to kiss me, but I kept him away throughout almost the entire video. I hoped that Andy would ask me to "be his girl" like Michael Jackson asked Ola Ray. He never did, but he did kiss me after the thirteen-minute video played. I wanted him to hold my hand through it, but he didn't. He only plunged into a kiss the second the video ended, as Vincent Price laughed and I strained to look around Andy's head at the last seconds.

He clicked off the TV and we walked past his dad in the living room, straight downstairs. He held my hand, leading me. It was the first and one of the only times he

held it. We went to his bedroom. He didn't undress me, something I had always imagined would happen my first time. He made me take my own clothes off. I wanted his approval and attention so badly—that male approval girls are taught to seek our whole lives. He had stripped out of his clothes and put a towel down on his bed, though I had no idea why. That's not true. I knew I was supposed to bleed, but I didn't know how much and was surprised he knew enough to do that.

He had satin sheets, which I found tacky and uncomfortable. Having sex was painful and I felt alone. He barely kissed me, didn't talk, and didn't ask me if I was okay. I cried the whole time, and there were no caresses, no soft words. It was nothing like I imagined.

As soon as we were done, he stood up and said, "I've fucked many. Now I've fucked you," picked up his polo shirt, tossed it over his head. "Put your clothes on. I'm taking you home."

I thought we were going to be *making love*. He had said it was his first time. In the days after, I was weepy. Guy told Andy to leave me alone. I had planned to be done with Andy, but after Guy said that, Andy upped his game with me, which worked. I fell for him again. He came in for touch landings, then went away again, letting me run after him. Despite Allie and Carla, I felt like Andy and I were in love. Or at least I thought I loved him. So, in some strange way of keeping tally of how often we had sex, I put a nickel in a ceramic mug with a horse on it every time we had sex.

Not long after that, Andy dropped out of high school. He said he thought school was stupid. I thought he was stupid for quitting. Right after that, he got Carla pregnant. I didn't see him for a couple of years and our friendship dissipated. I cried a lot, but not as much as I would have thought.

Andy had finally ceased being a threat to Guy, not that I anything happened between Guy and me for years—not until we became a couple at twenty-six. We were on the phone one night when Guy said, “What do you think your first time will be like?”

I was silent. Still my go-to: silence. I freeze when I don't know what to do or say.

“It was Andy, wasn't it?” Guy asked.

At first, I was quiet, then said. “Yeah.” Silence. “How did you know?”

I could almost hear him shrug, a movement I came to love in him so many years later. “I figured.” I hadn't told anyone but Sandy, so I was surprised he knew, but Guy paid a lot of attention to Andy and me. He always had.

I ran into Andy at the Student Center during college. He was pushing a toddler in a stroller and had a baby strapped to his chest. “I married Carla. I did the right thing,” he said. I hadn't known. I had wondered but didn't *know*. “Let's do something. For old time's sake.”

I shook my head.

“Just us—me and you. No kids. No Carla.”

I stood there looking at him, finally *seeing* him. “No, Andy. No.”

His voice raised. “I love you,” he said. “Come on. It was never Carla. It was always you.”

Good God, I thought. I shook my head again.

He seemed dejected, desperate. “I was going to drop you after the first time.” He paused. “Then that fucker. He told me to leave you alone. I couldn’t then.” That fucker was Guy. Andy trailed off.

I lost any lingering feelings I had for Andy. Him saying he chased me only because Guy told him not to changed everything I thought about our relationship. I thought at the time he had liked me, wanted me. Not that he only kept it up with me to spite Guy.

Andy found me in the student directory and called my dorm over and over for weeks, but I never took the calls. When I went home for a few days and my floormates told him, he called me at my parents’ house repeatedly until my mom—then Dad—finally told him to leave me alone.

That night I poured the nickels out of the horse mug. Nickels I thought I would keep forever. When I got back to the dorm, I bought candy bars from the vending machine and passed them out to anyone who walked by, which made for bunches of happy smiles—way more smiles and good feelings than ever garnered those saved nickels to begin with.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

1985: “SHOUT”

William and I had a strange, unhealthy passion and heat that made our fists plant against one another but included gentle times when he came to my dorm room to eat homemade lasagna with Italian sausage, then stayed into the night. It’s good that it ended; while it went on, it was obsessive and loving, but violent, too. We fought—yelling, punches, wrestling—sometimes when we got drunk. Alcohol lowers the seizure threshold, making seizures more likely and my body acted, but I have little memory when they were seizures. I know I screamed at William, and also know we hit each other. I was too drunk and too seizure-y when we fought. I’d wake up the next morning with bruises on my arms or legs—never the face—and head over to the frat house to piece together what happened. I thought they were blackouts until . . . well, until now. I wasn’t on anticonvulsants for four years after my freshman year of undergrad, so there was nothing to keep alcohol from causing seizures. The fights didn’t all include seizures, but some did.

William and I weren’t good together anyway, but there was chemistry. But chemistry can be volatile. What we had, though, means that last year when I saw him walking in downtown Louisville a block from Jane’s work as I was on the way to pick her up, my heart raced, and I had to pull over before I could text her to say I was there.

William and I weren’t a true couple, but sometimes I “honored” us and didn’t sleep with others, didn’t go to other guys, didn’t try to find love in their embraces that didn’t last. When a new man wanted to date me, William’s fraternity brothers quickly told him I was “William’s,” that I belonged to him. I did though, didn’t I? I loved him

compulsively. I chose a dorm across the dirt-packed courtyard from his fraternity house after freshman year, was a Little Sister to his fraternity. I *was* his, yet we ignored each other when we weren't drinking.

I didn't see anything of him or his frat brothers for decades; now we're all Facebook friends. Their words decorate my wall, but William never posts. I thought he hid them from me, but others have asked *me* why he's quiet, thinking I'll know the answer, though I've run into him only twice in twenty-five years.

The night we met: my sorority pledge night my freshman year, just a few days after my eighteenth birthday. I was determined not to be a loser in college. Before Sorority Rush, I got a cool new haircut with fall-over curls, cut like the lead singer of A Flock of Seagulls, a cut I wore again a few years back, thirty years later. I bought a lot of new clothes. I got into Alpha Omicron Pi—AOΠ—the sorority I wanted. That night, TKE, Tau Kappa Epsilon, the fraternity next to William's was having a Splash Bash, their basement floor covered in several inches of sand and baby pools full of water. Good music played: “new wave” by REM, English Station, INXS, things not played on the radio yet. These guys weren't my type, though. They were too clean, too preppy, too pretty, and dressed too much like all the people I didn't like in high school.

Several hours into the party, Becky, an AOΠ sorority sister, walked up to me as I leaned against a concrete wall. I was comfortable, but bored. “Wanna go next door?”

“Sure,” I said. I followed her out the basement door. “What's next door?”

“Delta Upsilon—DU—another fraternity.

We walked into the frat house, William's fraternity, and I knew I was home. The hall walls were lined with mattresses. It smelled like beer and underarms. Like sweat. Like pheromones. The other fraternity just smelled like beer and cologne.

"Stay here," Becky said. "Rod, will you watch her while I go upstairs?"

Rod laughed and said, "Of course." He looked at me. "So, you pledged, huh?"

I nodded. He handed me a wine cooler that he took from his friend. His friend was William.

"Give her the other."

William passed me a pint of Jack Daniels.

"How do I do this?" I stared at William—his mahogany hair, tanned skin, large frame, brown eyes. He was perfect. He was just my type.

"Turn it up and swallow."

His friends laughed. I took a long pull, coughed, gulped hard. It was hot and burned, but he was too cute to spit whiskey on. "Thanks."

"Have another," Rod said. "William will."

He leaned against the mattress on the wall. I did, too. William's back was on the blue and white ticking, my shoulder pressed into it. My face warmed as I imagined the sprung metal coils were his body against my skin. I pictured us alone. I had been with two guys. I thought I knew what college would be about.

He took a gulp and passed Rod the bottle. It came back to me. Around it went. I'd never had hard liquor. I barely drank before. The bottle was empty when Becky came back down. She'd been upstairs in the frat house moving about freely with no escort, no time limits. In my dorm, the men's floors had 24/7 visitation, but men could only be on

the women's floors until midnight—and on both of the men's and women's floors, one had to have an escort from that floor at all times.

“Do you want to go back to TKE?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No. I'm good. I like it here.” I smiled at William and moved in closer.

He left hickeys on my neck that night. My first morning as a pledge, nobody believed we hadn't screwed. I hadn't let us. We kissed for hours, sometimes pausing to talk quietly. After an hour, a bunch of his fraternity brothers poured out of the closets and from behind beds. “If you're not going to fuck, we're out of here,” one shouted. They laughed and oozed out of the room like insects whose nest is disturbed.

I sat up from the floor. “This isn't funny. I'm going.” I was embarrassed. I was a joke. I was there to be made fun of. But he grabbed my hand, talked me into staying. With the guys gone, he began to talk more. A while later, he asked, “Do your parents love each other?”

I found it a silly question. Don't everyone's? “Yeah. They fight sometimes, but there's lots of love. Don't yours?”

“Naw. Maybe when I was a kid, but not since I can remember. My grandparents do, though. They'd do anything for each other. And the way they look at one another. . . .” He closed his eyes and trailed off. His fingers gently pulled at the curls of my hair. “I'll never find it. I'm not that lucky.”

That bit of vulnerability nabbed me.

There's something I didn't tell William for a very long time. Something I should have told him then. Told someone. But I didn't. I kept it silent and hidden away. A few weeks later, after a party at his fraternity, I began to walk back to my dorm across campus.

"Hey girl," a man's voice yelled.

I waved, then kept walking. Running steps hit the pavement behind me. Just keep going, I thought.

"Girl," the voice said. "Elizabeth." He grabbed my arm and whipped me around. "Want a ride?" He was tall. Nearly seven feet. Lanky, too, but his fingers pressed into my arm with a strength his frame didn't give away.

"No. I'm good." I tried to turn, but the long fingers pushed further in.

"Come on. I'll drive you."

My muscles tensed. "It's okay." I turned, tried to walk away.

"Unitas, right?"

I stopped when I heard my dorm's name. "Yeah. How did you know that?"

"William. He sent me out to give you a ride."

I glanced up at William's room. He wasn't there. I wondered why he didn't give me a ride himself, but he was as drunk as I. I knew he'd be in his window if he sent this guy. "You don't even know my name. How could he have sent you?"

"I just said it."

He had. "Why did you call me 'Girl?'"

"Aren't you one?" He smiled. He was cute. Sort of.

He unlocked the door of a giant truck modified with tractor tires. We weren't at the edge of the parking lot anymore. We were all the way across it. I hadn't noticed us move.

I was uncomfortable, nervous. He opened the truck door, pushed me against the seat, which was against my upper back, and pressed a hard kiss on me. I tried to push him away. He was scaring me.

"Oh, come on. William told me to."

"To kiss me?"

"To drive you. To kiss you. Is there a difference?"

I was confused. I wondered if William was testing me. And if he was, what he wanted me to do. I looked back at his window. "There is a difference." I didn't know if there was or wasn't, but I didn't want this guy. I didn't like his dirty truck with its giant tires. I ducked under his arm and ran. I thought I was making great time, then heard two quick footsteps on the pavement before he had my arm in those gigantic hands again.

"This isn't funny. William told me to drive you and I'm driving you." He pulled me by the arm like a mad parent pulling a toddler and told me to get in the truck.

"William!" I hollered his name, but the man pushed me behind the open truck door. I tried to call William again, but the guy's long fingers covered my mouth. William's window was open. If I could just holler enough times—I moved my head around to escape his hand.

"He'll kill me if he finds out you're not sound asleep across campus by now."

I stilled. Did I believe him? I must have. And I didn't. William's window was dark. Was he there? Over the years to come, William would hit several guys who did less to me. I'm almost certain he wasn't there, but that's hindsight. That night I wasn't sure.

"I'm going to walk."

He let me go. When I got ten feet, he said, "What would your daddy say?"

When his words sank in, I stopped, but faced the other way.

"What will he say? When he gets the call?"

"What call?" Was he going to call my dad and say I was drunk if I didn't come? I was only eighteen, I'd be in so much trouble.

"The one from the cops."

I turned around expecting blue lights, but no police cars were there. No one seemed to be there, though the windows of two frats faced us. "What cops?"

"The ones who'll call him in the morning."

Chills ran my spine. "What do you mean?"

"The ones who'll say his little girl got murdered."

I looked toward the library. I had to pass it, the art museum, the planetarium, some other campus buildings, then I'd be at my dorm, but I couldn't quit shivering despite the sweater I wore. I pictured men waiting, like wolves for Red Riding Hood, then wondered if he was the very wolf he warned me of. I glanced at him, then toward the library. He came close, gripped my arm again, but then it fell away.

"Hi, Damian Madden. I'll be your driver." He shook my hand, then put his arm around me. Not brotherly, or fatherly, or friendly, but proprietarily. I looked back at the

expansive lawn between me and the library. Anyone could be there. *He* could follow me there. It was just a ride across campus.

I tried to get into his truck, hiked my pale blue jean miniskirt up, hit the concrete heavily, and felt ridiculous. It didn't matter that his truck came up past my hips, I was sure I couldn't get in because I was fat. I wouldn't pull my skirt up past my thighs, past my panties where I'd stand a chance of getting in, though even without the drinking it would be next to impossible to get into the truck without being the 6'8" that Damian was. Is, it's is. He's on Facebook. I blocked him the first time I saw him.

After multiple tries to get in, I decided to walk again, but he shoved me headfirst inside the truck. My head struck the passenger side floorboard. He pushed me the rest of the way in and slammed the door shut behind me. It was only a ride. He was nice. He was cute. I should be grateful.

When we got to my dorm, I tugged at the truck's door handle, but it wouldn't open. I tried to unlock it, but the interior door lock was shorn off. We were outside my dorm, though. I was home. I tried to convince myself I was safe. He clutched my arm and tugged me like a doll across the bucket seat and out of the truck. I landed roughly on the concrete.

"Careful. Long drop." He laughed. I thought, I should be glad a guy this good looking is interested in me. I should appreciate the ride.

"Give me your keys," he said.

"I'm fine. Really."

Damian grabbed my keys and opened the dorm's front door. He gripped my upper arm as we walked into the dorm lobby. "Kiss me."

"What?" I wanted to be in my bed alone and asleep.

He held my face and kissed me. I was motionless. He lifted me up and put his mouth to mine. My feet dangled above the ground like a ragdoll's. As he put me down, he whispered, "Say anything, I'll hurt him. I'll kill William and have you expelled." He put me down and rushed me to the men's elevator, his arm around me, hands clutching my elbows, in what looked to be an embrace. "Morning," he said to the stranger manning the dorm's security desk. "Drunk." He nodded at me. I wanted to mouth help. To scream. But he'd kill William. He'd have me thrown out of school.

It'll be okay, I thought. He can only get me to the sixth floor on the men's elevator and my room was on seven. No men on seven after midnight and it was four a. m.

As soon as the elevator door opened on six, he pinned my elbows behind my back and thrust me toward the stairwell. I was unwilling to move, but he shoved me forward to the interior stairwell. "Step up, step up, step up." When we got to the seventh floor, he pushed me into my room and onto my bed. "One word, I swear you're out of this school. You and William both. Don't think I can't do it. You don't know who I am." The whole time, that was the threat. I heard it over and over, whether it echoed in my mind or he kept saying it, I'm not sure. He'd hurt William. I'd get kicked out of school. I'd be in trouble with my parents. As it turned out, he wasn't anyone. He was lying. But I didn't know that then.

I don't remember the penetration, just his hand pushing hard against my mouth, being barely able to breathe, turning my head back and forth to free it from his hand, his taunts, then letting my body go limp so it would end faster.

When it was over, Damian said, "Don't even think about pressing charges. I'll have every one of my fraternity brothers say they've fucked you, and they will because that's what brothers do for each other." I'd turned onto my stomach, and he spit on my back. "You won't be believed. You'll be flung out of this school and everyone will think you're the filthy whore you are." I lay there, my face pushed into the mattress, trying to hide; as he left, he dropped a dollar bill on my hair.

I locked the door, set the thermostat to ninety because I shivered and couldn't warm myself. When I hoped he was gone, I took a shower so hot, for so long, my skin turned dark pink. Then I used one of my roommate Candi's disposable douches to try to rid myself of him completely. I listened The Cure's song "The Kiss" over and over. "Your tongue is poison ... You nail me to the floor and push my guts inside out ... Get your fucking voice out of my head. I never wanted this."

I wrote in my journal that night, but tore those pages out a month later. Ripped the whole first part of freshman year out—the rape, the sorority days, and meeting William. I'd love to reread meeting him, those early days, but reading about the rape written moments after it happened would mean reliving it. For years I barely admitted to myself it happened. I only told my mom recently, during dinner with mutual friends. "Yeah, I was raped my freshman year. It's so common," tossed into a conversation about college

rapes so Mom couldn't react. She sat stunned, then thanked me for telling her. I've always tried not to think about it at all, but since then it won't leave my mind.

After that I no longer cared about my reputation. I hadn't had sex with anyone since college began, but my body felt like it was no longer mine. Damian made sex meaningless. If it could be taken, I might as well give it. And if I was going to have the reputation of a slut, I was going to have the fun of one, or at least try to erase what Damian did.

A few days later William and I had sex. I don't even remember it except that I cried afterward, a long, snotty, sloppy cry while he held me. I thought he'd never want to see me again, but I was wrong. It wasn't the last time at all.

We had a fucked-up relationship, though. Our fights were as passion-filled as our sex, but left us more emotionally broken and both physically and psychologically bruised each time. I'm sure seizures brought on by arguing fueled the fights. It's surprising we continued two-and-a-half years. It was the stolen moments of sweetness when he read my writing, kissed me gently, whispered sweetly inches from my face, all while looking at me with those deep, chestnut-colored eyes that kept me hooked. So, I lived in the dorm across the courtyard from him my sophomore, junior, and half of my senior years. It was the building with my suddenly-former sorority in it. Former because pictures of William and I were taken kissing on a couch in his fraternity's basement. Former because Damian spread rumors that I had a "train" with guys in their frat. Because Candi was mad when I asked that her boyfriend not stay the night in our room anymore. She was pledging the same sorority and told the sorority president I locked her out of the room to screw men

every night for money, danced naked at TKE, and screwed every Phi Tau. Former because my reputation was a liability, and the truth doesn't matter at such times.

"Why do you always come back?" William asked me frequently.

"William, we're in *my* room." We lay in my dorm bed, the loft I built with Mom. I leaned up on one arm and our eyes held each other's gaze. "Why do *you* come back?"

He grinned. "Because you feed me." I smiled. He was like a bear—recommended not to feed, but who came back because he found a dependable food source.

"And?" I asked.

"You give me something else." I pushed him away, but he pulled me in. "Not sex." His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "Well, that too, but I was going to say love. Because you give me that. No matter what."

I kissed him. My hair was long by then. He liked how it looked, but hated that hairs always ended up in his mouth. "Why *do* you, you didn't answer," he said.

"Come back?" I asked. He nodded. "You said it. Because I love you."

"But why?"

"Because I like when we're together." He waited, motioned for more. "That you like me." I paused. "And you tell me that, even if you don't tell your friends." I looked down. That bothered me.

"The guys. . ."

I cut him off. "I know. It's okay." I watched the now-deflated condoms that had been blown up for a lark for some past party in my dorm room. They hung from my

ceiling with masking tape and string and swung in the heated air blowing from the vent. I'd take him how he was.

“I feel the same,” he said.

That hurt. “That it's okay to ignore me?” I asked.

“No, the love part.” I kissed him. He moved my curls away, then grinned. “I'd love you more if you cut your hair.”

We had sweet times, but when we fought or when I decided we'd never be a *real* couple, I pursued other men. Each time they were told by William's frat brothers to leave me alone after I'd kissed or had sex with them once. Except one who didn't listen. This is hard to write. I hate admitting it to myself. There's something called repetition compulsion. It's a theory of Freud's where someone tries to fix something that went horribly wrong by making it go right over and over. I don't want to talk about that. Let me talk of the times William and I sat in the courtyard looking at the stars, talking until the sun rose. Of staying still and quiet, kissing gently in my loft bed after a fire alarm went off, waiting for everyone to return to their rooms so he could sneak out the side door.

Let me remember the hayride with another sorority I pledged but quit because it wasn't right for me. William and I rode on bales of straw to a field where we threw empty liquor bottles into the bonfire. Everyone watched us—the drunks—while we laughed, ran through the field, falling down, rolling on the ground happily. Let me recollect the times he read my poetry and stories. “That's about me?” He looked at his

lap. I waited. “You’re good,” he said. His eyes gleamed and crinkled in a way that let me know he liked them.

Once, after reading one of my poems, he told me his grandmother just died. “I won’t be the same again. I can’t love someone that much.” We lay on my bed, his arms around me. “Will I?” I kissed his face gently. “I hope so,” I said. I couldn’t rid him of the sadness of her loss, but hoped to fill other parts of his heart.

I even want to write of our final fight, the one that lasted hours and was so bad the fraternity said we needed to take two weeks apart from each other. I barely recall our fight—because of seizures or alcohol, I don’t know; I suspect both. I even prefer going over it to what I’m going to write now. To try to scrub away the scary memories of the rape by Damian, about a year after it happened, I started having sex with him. I put myself in charge. It was always my idea when it happened. Always my doing. I chose the most awkward times for him: at the fraternity’s Alumni Brunch; at his girlfriend’s Little Sister ceremony; at another fraternity house in Lexington. I attempted to reinhabit my own body. Each time felt like I got a bit of myself back. It didn’t return all of myself—nothing can—but I grew unafraid of him. If it could be on my terms, it wouldn’t have to be on his again.

That final fight between me and William was bad. He hit me with a metal chair. We punched each other. I ran away after it, back across the courtyard to my dorm room. I have no idea what caused the fight. It just happened, like it seemed they all did. Later that night, I knocked on a window that surrounded the door of the fraternity house—knocked open palmed, so that my jade ring on my left ring finger hit the glass. The glass broke, I

cut my hand, and again, ran across the courtyard. Sandy, who was my roommate at the time, poured vodka on it to sterilize it because we didn't have rubbing alcohol. It was bleeding too badly and wouldn't stop. A couple of William's frat brothers came over to see about my hand, and they convinced me to go to the ER to get it seen. Sandy took me there, then when we got home, I went back to the fraternity. William had been waiting for me in the living room. It was the last time we spoke anywhere near campus, and I only saw him twice after that, both randomly by accident.

That night, we lay next to each other on the floor of his frat room's living room. I said, "I love you, you know."

He said, "Yeah, me, too."

"You love me?"

"Yeah."

Two of his frat brothers were there and heard us, though I doubt they ever admitted it later—or maybe even remembered it, given how drunk they were. It was enough that they heard it. I kissed William gently on the lips, said goodbye, and walked across the courtyard alone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

1989: “LOST IN YOUR EYES”

I rode in the back of a VW bus, and when we got off the exit, Victor opened the side door. As soon as we started up the hill, I watched the sandstone cliffs, which had trees that seemed to grow straight out of the rock and were covered with moss that I knew would be soft and smell like sweet damp earth. The scents hit me as we rounded a corner—the dirt, campfires, pine trees and hemlocks, and air that was purer than what I was used to in Louisville. It rushed into my lungs through the open bus door and filled me up. It was my my close friend Shannon’s first trip to the Gorge. We lay down in the van; we felt we’d pass out from the onslaught to our senses, but kept watching the rocks anyway. The sandstone was so different than the limestone at home that was light gray, the color of Mommie O’s hair at seventy before it turned solid white and so beautiful later. These rocks were brown and I could see their texture even lying down, could tell they would feel rough like a cat’s tongue. I found that I was right when I was finally able to touch the rocks after the larger group of us piled out of our vehicles and into the campsite.

Pine needles softly covered the ground. I wanted to roll in them, but I knew from climbing trees with Ellie all that time ago that the thick sticky sap would stay on me, and I’d be covered in needles. I’d need a shower where there wasn’t one—but it did look inviting. I camped over them, and the bottom of my tent was covered in the needles when I got home. It was lovely to take the smell of the Gorge home with me in my clothes and on my tent.

Rhododendrons bloomed, mostly bold white, like bleached towels, but soft instead of hard and crisp. Some of the rhododendron petals were pink, but they were scarce; it made them prettier; they were a color that I didn't even know existed in nature. The flowers were syrupy, strong, sweeter than any perfume could capture, but also make me wheeze; the leaves were hard, and when I bent them, the scent was tangy, not a smell I expected. It was so different from anything I'd ever experienced before.

After years of visiting this special place, now when I come around a certain bend on Mountain Parkway on the way to the Gorge, I'm *home*. There is a farm on the right side and the trees, mostly pines, in blue and green with mist hanging overhead on the left make me feel it. In the late spring in the Gorge, the rhododendrons bloom. In the winter, snow hangs on the pine and hemlock branches and hits me in the back of my bare neck as I walk under them. The branches are held low when the white snow glistens in the sun.

That first trip, we camped in a primitive camp site that all the folks who had been going on these trips for years knew of. The week before this, Shannon and I went to a small sporting goods store and bought sleeping bags, tents, and everything we'd need. She hoped Victor would sleep in her tent, and I knew that my boyfriend Kevin would sleep in mine. Kevin had a tent before that, but put it too close to the fire one night and a good part of one wall melted away. I wanted us to have privacy—and to stay warm—so bought a tent of my own.

The next morning, I woke hearing the dew from the pine trees above hitting the top of my cheap pup tent and thought it was raining. Wondering if the plastic rain flap would keep the rain off us, I listened to the sounds of the forest in the predawn morning

with my eyes closed. I heard a whippoorwill singing its mournful song; it sounded wonderful. I could smell the pines, the lingering scent of last night's campfire, and even the sandstone beneath me.

Someone was up wandering around, then there was the sound of them pissing against a tree.

Kevin leaned over me, startling me a bit. "Morning," he whispered, then leaned in closer, kissing me with morning breath. I always worried about my breath after sleeping, but it never seemed to bother Kevin. Even though I was twenty-one, he was my first *real* boyfriend, the first one with promise of a future.

We pushed the sleeping bags and clothing around to so that we faced each other, then he rolled on top of me. Five minutes later, Earl was outside shouting for everyone to get up or they'd "miss it." He came to our tent and rattled it. "Get up buds, or I'm coming in. I'm serious!"

Kevin and I untangled ourselves from each other and put on our clothes, damp from the closeness of the tent and the humidity in the air.

"Into the cars, into the cars." Earl said, leading the way. As everyone climbed into one car or the other, he passed out boxes of powdered sugar donuts to every other person.

We drove through Red River Gorge at speeds we shouldn't have, but Earl urged us quickly forward. We drove down Rock Bridge Road, around to Sky Bridge Road. After we poured out of the cars, we sat on Sky Bridge and watched the sun come up. It was an amazing sunrise. The colors rose individually, joining each other, forming an ever-brightening sky.

“Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky in the morning, sailors take warning,” Earl said, as we watched the pink and red fill the eastern sky.

We were in the foothills of the Appalachians, and from Sky Bridge, I could see the low valleys, and the ridges towering above them, almost as high as we sat. I had never seen anything like it. Beauty spread before us from Sky Bridge’s height. A million shades of green from pine and hardwood trees flowed across the rolling hills.

Kevin, ever the scientist, or science college student, leaned over to me. “The arches—even when they’re called bridges here—were formed by air whipping through the sandstone until it formed what looked like a bridge, but is really an arch, across two points. Except Rock Bridge. It’s a bridge formed by water, which is what bridges have to be.” He took another breath to continue, but Earl touched his boot.

“Shut up, buds, just let her watch,” Earl said.

Everyone was quiet after that. Kevin scurried forward and sat on a rock outcropping. I have a painting I made of him sitting there—the blue of his t-shirt distinct against the orange and greens of the background. He motioned for me to come out there with him, but I shook my head. I had never been afraid of heights until I began rappelling. After that, when I was up high, I was scared I would think I was rappelling and just go off the edge of the cliff no rope, harness, or other gear to rappel down with, and instead would free-fall. Kevin smiled, then turned around, facing the sunrise.

I listened to the air. It was cool, with the promise of warmth; the wind ran past me quickly, hitting me in the face, and tousling my long hair. I wished I had a ponytail holder, but they were back at the campsite, so I tucked my hair into the neck of my sweatshirt. It was quickly brought out again by the wind, so I just let it dance in the sky. I

was taken with the hawks floating in the wind. They barely moved their wings; instead, they glided, looking down for prey. Kevin turned to me and started to say something, but Earl shot a look, and Kevin turned back around.

We sat on the arch until the sun was fully up, and I had shed my sweatshirt. Layers were coming off of everyone, and suddenly Earl jumped up and shouted, “Okay, folks. Back to the campsite. We’ll pack up, make lunch, and go rappelling.”

I was nervous about rappelling there; I had only rappelled in Louisville, and just a few times, and we were going to rappel the most dangerous place in the Gorge—Half-Moon Arch.

After breaking camp, we hiked to Rock Bridge, then stopped at a picnic area on Chimney Top Road. The guys discussed the best way to make a fire in the permanent grills, and when the fire was going, heated aluminum cans of Dinty Moore Beef Stew. Kevin handed me a warm can, which I dug into with what seemed to be a dirty fork. I was hungry, and knew I needed energy. Someone had milk, but it was warm, so I didn’t drink any.

“We need something sweet,” Ted said, though I wasn’t sure where Ted had come from. He didn’t go down with us the night before. He walked to his car and brought out ingredients for S’mores. We took turns skewering marshmallows on sticks and cooking them over the grill.

Other people went to cars and soon there were Doritos, Lucky Charms, crackers and spray cheese, Golden Grahams, some of the morning’s donuts, soft drinks—some

warm, some cold—and from somewhere, chilled Reddi-Wip and maraschino cherries piled up on the picnic table.

I counted twenty-six people there, all Student Activities volunteers like Kevin, the others I came with, and me. To my knowledge, we hadn't planned to meet up with the rest of the crew in the Gorge. Nobody seemed to question it, though. Victor swung on tree branches, lots of folks chased each other through and around picnic tables, the on-the-ground grills, and the upright ones like we had used. We sat around all of the picnic tables in the whole area. A bootleg tape of a concert by the band Government Cheese played on a boom box. Someone put on an REM tape after that.

Earl walked over to Kevin and me. "Buds, how we gonna teach all these folks to rappel? Elizabeth and Shannon were enough newbies."

Kevin looked at me and touched my nose. I almost said that I didn't need to rappel, but the guys walked away. While they were talking, people slowly disappeared until there were only eight people left—which was fewer than we came with. I thought about going over to tell Kevin, but Earl sometimes got on my nerves, so I let them talk, smiling that the problem had solved itself.

We drove to the parking area closest to where we were headed. We were going to have to walk up the road for a while before getting to the cutoff for Half-Moon Arch, but none of us minded. We all put on our harnesses and changed from sneakers into boots. We piled ropes and webbing around Kevin and Earl's shoulders. They also wore our group's two helmets. They were caving helmets, but we wore them for climbing and rappelling also. They wouldn't help in a fall, but if a rock came down from above, they would.

I reminded myself to stay calm and breathe. Being outdoors with my allergies was making my asthma act up, and I didn't like using my inhaler in front of people. I always kept it with me, hidden in a pocket, purse, or backpack. I hated the way the movies showed people only needing it when they were nervous, then getting over it and throwing the inhaler away when overcoming adversity. That wasn't how it worked at all, though I wished it were.

We walked up the hill toward the cutoff to Half-Moon Arch, and when we were about halfway there, I heard something.

"Was that a scream?"

Earl shook his head and kept walking.

"Stop!" I said, "I heard it again."

They stopped, and I could hear someone screaming, though no one else could.

"That way," I pointed. Everyone ran, plunging through the woods, not following any path or trail. Shannon fell over some roots, and I had to stop and use my inhaler. I held back to use it. Ted stopped with me and wouldn't go forward until I was ready. Then we ran toward the noises, which were louder now; more people were screaming.

We got to a rock outcropping, but couldn't tell what had happened. We could see that a group of people was below Half-Moon Arch.

"Buds, I think they're just glad they made it. They fucking rappelled the hardest place in the whole damn Gorge," Earl said.

"I don't think that's it," Kevin said.

They all heard the screams then. A woman, screaming and crying.

"Someone fell!" I said.

We went as far as we could, but it seemed that to actually get to them, we would have to rappel from Half Moon Arch itself.

“We’re coming,” Kevin yelled. “We have to come down from above.” He and Earl exchanged looks and then ran back the way we came.

Earl stopped. “Elizabeth, take my car. Go to the Ranger’s Station. Tell them what happened.”

I looked at him. “I can’t drive a stick.”

He glared at me. “Shit, well find someone who can.” He put the keys in my hand.

Ted gently took the keys. “I know where it is. I’ll go. Come back to the road. We’ll get the van and bring it and some water jugs to you. They’re going to need water. Then I’ll take Earl’s car.” He started running with Victor behind him. Shannon went back, too. She was a nursing student. “Shock. They need emergency blankets for shock. We have those foil blanket things. Help me get those,” she said.

Ted went on to Slade to call the ranger and Victor got to the road with the van where Shannon and I waited for the gear. We pulled things out onto the gravel. All the bags in there, everything in the van. We could take what they needed; the van and the rest would mark where the rescue workers should come. One of our friends, Bear, ended up staying there, too most of the day, after his one trip part-way down.

I was scared for Kevin to rappel down a rig that just failed. Maybe he would set up a new one. I wasn’t sure. I wanted to get back to watch him go down, make sure he was okay. Shannon and I went through our gear, gathered the emergency blankets in their tiny wrapped packages, any first aid products around, and two jugs of water.

When we got back to where we could see, where Bear was watching everything, he caught us up. Kevin and Earl had made it down to them by using a new rig that they set up instead of using the rig by the group at the bottom. Linda found that she could get to them from where we were standing by fixing a rope to help cross the outcroppings and near drop-offs between the bottom of the rappel site and where Shannon, Bear, and I were. Linda was certified in First Aid and she was strong. She was at the accident site, and when she saw Shannon and me, she motioned for us. We began the descent. Shannon went all the way, holding onto the rope, the emergency blankets tucked into her fanny pack. She went cautiously, and made it after about ten minutes, which was good time.

I started, got halfway, then couldn't go any further. I had on my harness, my figure 8, my locking carabineers, but it wasn't a straight drop that would allow me to clip in. The trip over dropped quickly in a lot of four- to eight-foot steep increments over a quarter mile to where the accident was. I couldn't go forward when I reached an eight-foot drop. I had new boots, and my left foot slipped in them. If I could just clip in it would be fine. There was a sheer drop-off of hundreds of feet to my left, so a significant enough misstep and I would fall that way, even though I should be going forward. I couldn't do it, despite them calling for me. I was sure there was a way for me to clip to the rope instead of just using it as a guide, but I didn't know how. Even if I had been able to, the rope wasn't attached to anything at the rescue site; if I went off the cliff to the left, it would have been a freefall.

I had been so consumed with trying to get there, and with how Kevin was, that I hadn't wondered what had happened that caused the screams. I could barely see them, and now with all the people crowded in a tiny area, I could hardly tell which people were

my friends and who were the others, much less what had happened. I was too nervous to just watch. There was so much I couldn't do, so I did what I knew how to do: I went back to the top and got the water jugs and brought them down.

It was Kevin who came to me. "Did you go for help? Where is help?" He stopped, grabbed one of the gallon jugs and began gulping water. "Thank God for this water. We all need water. That guy needs water." He drank more. "Is help here? Are they coming over the Moon?"

"Ed went. Stick shift," I said.

"Shit. Damn. How long?"

"I don't know. I really don't." I stopped. I was about to cry. "What happened?"

"Oh damn. They were rappelling, never had done it before. You have to go off the side there, not on the top of the Moon. Every experienced person knows that, but this is their first time doing this. They had no business on that rappel." He paused, drank more, and looked back to the accident site.

"But what happened?" I asked again.

Kevin looked at me. "He was rappelling. His brother was on belay at the bottom, so should have been able to stop him, but the rope slipped off the Moon and suddenly there was ten feet of slack. The guy slammed into the cliff face, then free-fell to the bottom. He was almost all the way at the top. It's bad, Elizabeth. It's bad. I don't know if he's going to make it. I don't even know how we can get him out." He paused, then touched my nose. "Come on. I'll help you. Thank God for the water. Thank you for bringing it. Grab that other one."

I tried again to go. Kevin held my hand. "I'm just going to be in everyone's way. If I can't get there myself, there's no sense in going. I'll go get more water. Send someone to get it here."

The whole afternoon I ran water up and down the hill. As fast as I could get to the potable waterspout at the top of the hill and then down to the point where I could get, there would be two empty ones waiting for me. I climbed that quarter mile to the road dozens of times. Luckily, Bear brought lots of gallon jugs. He filled the empty ones up and had them waiting for me. He was a really big guy and couldn't hike much. I was awfully thankful for him filling the jugs.

"Stop," he told me sometimes. "Rest for a minute."

The first time he said it, I said, "I can't," and turned away.

"Drink. You have to drink, too."

I did. I was so thirsty. I drank half a gallon. I'd forgotten I had to drink, too.

"Sit, you're not breathing well."

I used my inhaler, then started down the hill again with water.

A couple hours after the accident, Ted got back.

"Where's rescue?" I asked.

"They're coming. They have to come in from everywhere, all over the place." He took a drink from one of the water jugs. "I had to go all the way to Stanton. That's what took so long."

"Oh shit," I said. Stanton was a forty-five-minute drive from where we were.

“The store down in Slade, I tried to call, but no one answered. They said someone is always there, but nobody answered the phone, so I drove to Stanton and to the ranger station there.” He took another drink of water, then opened the side of the van and sat down. “They’ve called in all the rescue crew they can get hold of, but it’s Saturday afternoon and people aren’t home. They don’t know if they’ll be able to get enough people, but they’re coming with who they can. They have to meet up and get all their gear. They said to get the details and meet them here so I can fill them in.”

“They don’t know if the guy’s going to make it. They’re trying to keep him from going into shock.” I had learned more over the course of the last two hours. “He has a bone sticking out of the top of his leg, and one from his forearm. He’s lost a lot of blood. They’re keeping him still. I’ll tell whoever comes up next that help is on the way.”

I carried two more jugs of water down. Linda waved to me. She was coming up with someone who held onto her arm.

When they got there, Linda said, “Mary, this is Elizabeth. She’ll be with you from now on.” Linda looked at me. “Mary is Andrew’s fiancée.” I knew immediately that Andrew was the guy in the accident.

“We were getting married next week,” Mary cried. She clutched the side of my t-shirt and my arm. “Next week. I love him. I already have the dress. We’ve sent invitations.” Mary’s nose was dripping, and dirt was caked against her skin where her nose and tears had run all afternoon.

“Come with me. We need to get you cleaned up. You want to look good when they bring Andrew up,” I said. I walked to the top of the hill with Mary, up to the van.

“They said I’d be more help up here, waiting for the rescue people,” Mary said.

“That’s true,” I said. “You can tell them what happened.”

Mary crumpled on the ground. I squatted behind her and put my arms around her. I held her that way for ten minutes. Her whole life was changed. I could only imagine how she felt. My gut felt low in my stomach, and I wanted to cry, but needed to be strong for Mary.

“Have you had any water?” I asked.

“No, I don’t need any.”

“Yes, you do. Andrew needs you to be strong. You’re going to have to take care of him, and you can’t do that if you get dehydrated and fall out.” I handed Mary a water jug, and she drank deeply. “Let’s clean you up. Sit here.” I had Mary sit next to Ted.

“A VW van. Cool,” she said.

“Yeah,” I answered. “I helped paint it.”

I watched Mary notice the paint job of the van. It was blue leaves, painted with real leaves as stencils. “That’s nice.” She smiled, then seemed to suddenly remember Andrew.

“Are you engaged to that one guy? Kevin? It’s hard, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I lied. “We’re getting married next year.” It seemed like a kindness to put us in the same romantic situation since that’s what she assumed.

“God, so you understand,” Mary said. She began sobbing again.

It was hard for me not to cry, Mary’s pain was so palpable. I got a towel out of my bag and gave it to Mary, who started shaking. “Sorry, I can’t stop. It’s so cold.”

It was still warm out. I realized Mary could go into shock, so I opened my sleeping bag and wrapped her in it. She looked lost, so I put my arm around her and held her hands.

“We were just in New Mexico last week,” Mary began. “I was so worried the whole time. Something’s going to happen, I thought. Every minute we were out there. Something is going to happen and ruin the wedding. I knew it. Then we made it back. The flight landed, and I was so happy.”

“Everything will be okay,” I lied, hoping to calm her. “Tell me about yourself.”

“I’m getting married...,” Mary trailed off, crying.

“Did you go to college?” I asked, trying to keep her focused on something else.

“Yeah. Andrew’s a grad student now. Did you?”

“We’re students now. Undergrads,” I said.

“What? I thought. I mean. You all don’t do this all the time?” Mary almost stopped crying when she said this.

“No. It’s okay, we’re good at it,” I lied again. “We’ve been here camping.” I paused. I hated lying to her, but wanted to keep her talking. “I heard someone scream.”

“That was me. I was at the bottom. I had already gone. We all had. Andrew was last.” She looked at me. “You understand. You’re engaged, too.” She hugged me close.

“Drink some more water.” I handed Mary a jug. Shit, I thought, nobody’s been taking water down there. “Ted, can you take some water down. It’s been a long time.”

Ted nodded. “Sorry,” he said. He had been watching Mary and me talking. He picked up two jugs and ran down the hill with them.

During the time that Ted was gone, I kept Mary talking, and even got her to eat some Cheese Whiz on crackers. She ate it mechanically, and would only eat three of them, but at least it was something.

A green Ranger truck sped up the road. A big Ranger with a salt-and-pepper crew cut got out of the truck. “Where are they?” he asked.

“Don’t leave me,” Mary begged.

“Ted! Ted, can you hear me? We need you,” I shouted as loud as I could.

Ted ran out of the woods carrying two empty gallon water jugs.

“Take him down. Show him the way. Have you been all the way over?”

Ted blanched. “No.”

“It’s okay, he’ll see how to get there if you take him to the water area.” Ted started back down the hill.

“You’ll direct the rescue crew?” he asked me.

“Yes,” I said.

Mary had crumpled onto the ground and was shaking and crying again while I talked to the ranger and told him what happened. When the ranger headed down the hill, I sat on the ground next to Mary, and pulled the sleeping bag back on her, which she had dropped. I put my arm around her, keeping the sleeping bag in place at the same time. I kept her talking while we waited. Most of the time, I could keep her half-distracted so she calmed down. It was hard to keep her chatting. We talked of how Mary and Andrew met, their dates, when they were in college together, Andrew’s grad school program, the future. It was an hour before we heard the rescue sirens. When we did, Mary and I started, then stood up quickly.

Ted came out of the woods with a woman holding onto his arm. She ran to Mary, and they clung to each other. Mary grabbed me as soon as I took a step away, so I stayed with them.

“This is my best friend,” Mary told me, but she held me instead of her.

When the ambulance and rescue van got to where we were, there was only a two-man rescue crew, three counting the ranger. I gasped. “Where are the others?” I asked.

“This is it. Beautiful Saturday afternoon. Nobody’s home. Couldn’t even raise them with radios.” He got a bag, a board that looked like a sled, and pulled a body bag out. “Live rescue or body recovery?”

Mary fell to the ground and began sobbing again. “We’re getting married.”

I nodded and said, “Live rescue.”

The two men loaded themselves with equipment. “Please be careful what you say. That’s the fiancée,” I said.

The man in front gave a curt nod, then said, “Take us.”

“Ted, you’re faster. Can you take them? I’ll bring water.”

I carried water back and forth for the next two hours, covering that quarter mile what felt like hundreds of times, stopping midway occasionally to use my inhaler. Every time I saw Mary, I said encouraging words, even though I couldn’t actually see what was going on.

The sled the rescuers brought was for six people to carry someone out, and there were only the three of them. Andrew’s friends came ahead while mine stayed with the rescue team. I met his friends at the water point and took them up to the top of the hill. I got them each to drink and fed them some of the cheese on crackers.

“Where is your car?” I asked.

“Down in the parking lot,” one said, pointing.

“Go get it. Be ready to drive people to the hospital following the ambulance.”

He looked at me. I watched him pointedly. He checked his pocket. “I don’t have the key.”

“Do you?” I asked the other guy.

He checked his pockets. “Yes, to my car, but not to Andrew’s.”

“Move,” I said. “Fast.”

I turned to Mary, who was falling apart again because her friend was as well.

“Mary, you have to be brave here, right? Andrew is going to need to see you strong. He is going to need it because *he* isn’t going to be strong. Whatever it is, you can do it. Get the towel and clean yourself up. You can do this. He’ll be here soon. You can do this,” I told her.

I grabbed two more water jugs. Bear was sitting in the van. He wasn’t able to do much physically and the long day had worn on him, so I filled the jugs. Bear said “sorry,” but I just waved and smiled.

When I got to the water point, I saw the rescue group headed my way, people handing the sled off as it came up the drops, everyone taking their part in carrying Andrew. It was slow going. The rescue crew had gone down over two hours earlier.

I ran up for more water and told Mary that they were bringing Andrew. I lied and said he looked good, though I could only see the sled and not him. I headed down with more water.

When they got to the water spot, I stepped in and helped carry Andrew for the quarter mile up to the top while others stopped and drank. It is the hardest physical work I have ever done. I noticed that my hand was in Andrew's blood, but dismissed it. All our hands were. Only the rescue crew had on gloves, and they were leather, not latex. I watched the rescue team and my friends' arms shake. With all the work they had all done, they hadn't eaten since late morning and it was dusk now. We were all exhausted. Carrying him the quarter mile I helped wasn't as hard as what my friends did, who still switched off now to give each other breaks.

As the rescuers were putting Andrew into the ambulance, Mary grabbed my arm, then gave me a full hug. "I will never, ever forget you." She hugged me harder. "Never. I'll always remember you." She paused, crying hard again. "Thank you. Thank you."

She ran over to Andrew. They weren't going to let her ride in the ambulance. I was a few feet away. "She was there when it happened. She was with him all afternoon. They're getting married next weekend. She rides." I was too tired to even be pleasant. The rescue team let Mary on the ambulance. She got on and started crying harder. Without a look outside, she sat down beside him, holding his hand, talking to him. I knew from carrying him that he was still alive, but he wasn't capable of responding to her.

One of the rescuers came up to me and said, "That guy made it because of you and your friends."

I had to fight breaking down, but Mary looked up at me then, so I was determined not to cry. When I saw Kevin, I walked to him. I was tired and my feet hurt. I wanted a hug.

Earl reached me before I got to Kevin. “Damn you!” he screamed. “Fuck you! Your only job was to carry water, and you couldn’t even do that pissant little job. We all could have died of dehydration when you up and felt like not bringing water anymore.” He walked heavily away from me and over to where some of the others were.

Kevin had watched, so came over and hugged me, then touched my nose. “You were just as important. You mattered, Elizabeth.” When he wrote up the rescue in the Student Activities journal he kept called *The Book of Tech*, he didn’t mention I’d been there, though.

We drove to the top of the hill to eat. We snacked on the food we had, then the Ranger came back with a bunch of pizza from Miguel’s—a popular pizza place in the Gorge that allowed rock climbers to camp on its land. The pizzas weren’t hot anymore, but it didn’t matter. It was the best pizza I ever tasted. Miguel’s still—over thirty years and dozens of visits there later—remains the best pizza I’ve ever had.

“You all do this a lot? Volunteer rescue?” the ranger asked.

We shook our heads.

“That guy, he made it because of y’all,” he said. He stayed for a bit, thanked each of us, and then started to leave. He saw me sitting off away from everyone and took me aside.

“You staying with that woman, his girl. She talked about that. You may have saved her. She could have gone into shock, too, and mentally. . . .” He trailed off. “Good job. I heard what your friend said to you.” He shook his head, looking at the ground, then clapped me on the shoulder. “Good work.”

Everyone was talking about what they did, bragging on each other and themselves. It was good to hear what had happened over at the accident site. Kevin smiled at me sometimes.

No one saw me as I walked around to the other side of the van and sat down. The tears I had been holding in all day came pouring out. I sobbed as hard as Mary had, but silently because I hoped no one would know. I cried for Mary, for Andrew, for his brother, for all of them, for Kevin and our friends, for the change that we underwent in saving someone's life. And for Mary's pain and how changed her life would be. I empathized with her. I couldn't take her anguish or worry from her, though I wished I could have. Being with her all those hours, I felt her pain in my chest.

When I joined my friends again, I tried to hide that I had been crying, but wasn't successful, so everyone encircled me. I knew they didn't know why I was crying, just that I needed their caring and friendship right then.

When we were done with the pizza, Kevin and Earl played songs on their guitars, and everyone sang. The group's closeness returned as darkness came. Kevin let Earl play solo guitar for a while and sat behind me, holding me, kissing my head and neck every now and then, whispering how much he loved me. At a point, we were quiet. All of us were changed by the day. We were a group, in some ways brought closer through the rescue, but it was also clear each of us was facing our own internal struggles from the day.

What no one who was there knows is that I could remember Andrew's last name because Kevin saw him at Hawley-Cooke bookstore where he worked at and told me what it was.

He gleaned Andrew's last name from Andrew's store credit account. Kevin got animated in a way that only Kevin can, loudly telling Andrew that he was part of the rescue group that saved him. Andrew just looked down, didn't say anything, and walked out of the store. Kevin took that to be that Andrew was embarrassed.

Andrew's reaction never set quite right with me. I couldn't believe it was just embarrassment. If it were me, I would have bounded into a hug with Kevin and thanked him profusely; at least I think I would. For decades I wondered how Mary and Andrew were. A few years ago, twenty-five years or so after the rescue, I realized as I fell asleep one night that I could Google Andrew and Mary, who presumably had his last name, and see how they were doing. I wanted to learn what became of them. I didn't find Andrew, though; instead, I found his obituary. He died in 2010, just over twenty years after his accident. Having to gulp tears back, I worried about Mary. I'd lost Guy by then and knew what it was like to lose a spouse (or spouse-like person). I traced her to an email address halfway across the world and emailed her. She didn't remember me, but I wasn't surprised; she was too shocked that day to remember much. She and I have become Facebook friends and regularly comment on one another's posts. My friends from that day don't know how often Andrew told her he wished he'd died when he fell. They don't know how he got addicted to pain meds, alcohol, and other drugs. They also don't know that he killed himself. My friends, when I see them, which isn't as often as we used to since we're spread around the country, talk about the rescue as a high point of their lives. Kevin regularly posts about it on Facebook and tags everyone who was there. They're so glad they saved Andrew. But Mary told me that both she and Andrew wished he'd never made it.

I suspected at the time of the accident that though we rescuers would forever be bound by the day as if thick framing wire were wound around us, but that has changed for me now, knowing what happened to Andrew and Mary. Now when my friends tell each other stories about that day, my gut tightens because the importance of Andrew and Mary has dropped away, like pink petals falling from a rhododendron bush in a breeze.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

1990: “OPPOSITES ATTRACT”

When my ex-husband Lee moved out of our house, he left behind a trail of empty glass bottles. He told me before we got married, even before our first date, that he was an alcoholic, but didn't drink anymore. Had I known what I do now, I would have run. I was twenty-two and all I knew about alcohol was that it was fun to drink, and that I drank most weekends until about a year earlier when I started grad school and moved into the “quiet dorm,” and out of the dorm I lived in near the fraternities. When Lee and I moved into an apartment together, he even said I could keep alcohol there and that it wouldn't bother him. I didn't, though.

After we'd been married a year, we bought a small house over a hundred years old that had four rooms and a bathroom. It had a lot of strange nooks and hidey holes and a shed with a lock on the door. Lee and I didn't share a bedroom or work the same shift during most of our three-year marriage, so didn't see each other often; we slept or worked when the other was awake.

When Lee came to my dorm room after our first date, I had affirmations written all over the room—quotes from books, lyrics of songwriters like Tracy Chapman and the Indigo Girls—about being a strong woman. They were notes written to not give myself away, to save myself for me, and the truth of it is that they were reminders not to sleep with men soon after meeting them. When I lived near the fraternities having sex seemed natural and something done for fun, but I risked losing myself there. Once I moved, I needed to stop giving my heart to anyone who showed me attention. I had moved away from William. After I moved across campus to the quiet dorm, I hadn't gone back to see

him, and he hadn't sought me out. Part of the point of the notes was to remember not to go across campus looking for William. The other part was reminders to not give myself wholly to someone again. But Lee broke me down. I remember looking over at the Tracy Chapman lyrics written in silver on a purple cardstock, "So don't be tempted by the shiny apple / Don't you eat of a bitter fruit / ...'Cause all that you have is your soul" when I was giving myself to him. I regretted it even as it happened.

I had a pattern during my twenties of doing things I knew I didn't want to because I had already set them in motion. A couple years after Lee and I divorced, when I went to graduate school at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio in Creative Writing, I applied in poetry because that's what I thought I wanted. By the time I was moving to Ohio, I was writing fiction, but I had gotten into the program for poetry, so I went on, even though it meant moving away from home when I had only ever lived in Louisville to enter a course of study I wasn't interested in. After a semester, I decided to switch to fiction, but I stayed at the same school even though I hated it. It was in motion, so I didn't know how to stop it. Guy had moved from Louisville with me, we had a two-year lease, he had a job, and he was in school at a nearby university. I hoped I would like the fiction program better even though I never left the same overall Creative Writing program. The same thing happened when I got married. By the time I decided I didn't actually want to marry Lee, plans were made, things were in progress, the place was reserved with a down payment, and I didn't know how to stop the forward momentum.

I did try. In one way. I called William. There was part of me still in love with him, that always will be, so I called. I hoped he would say he loved me, that he didn't want me to get married, and would ask me to run off with him. I would have been waiting by the

apartment's screen door with a duffel bag. I'd have moved out quickly and silently, even if it was back to the dorm, if William said to, but he wasn't home. His mom asked me if I wanted to leave a message, but I said, "No. It's too late." I saw William in a bar years later and had forgotten about that call. I hadn't left my name, and since I didn't have Caller ID, I figured he didn't. But he knew about it, knew it was me, and hadn't sought me out.

Lee sent a dozen red roses after our first date, which was the first time flowers were ever delivered to me. He was attentive and sweet and wowed me. He asked if I would move in with him a couple weeks after we started dating. I stupidly said yes—as much to get out of the dorm as to move in with him. I had also given myself away and didn't know how to get "me" back.

My parents were paying for school, but one condition was that I had to live in the dorm. I lived in a dorm with single rooms, and there were many other graduate students, but it was still a dorm. I tried to get an apartment with friends several times before, but my parents always said they wouldn't help pay for it. They said I was too weird, too hard to live with, that I would scare my roommates off and Mom and Dad would be stuck paying the rent for the whole apartment. Now I had someone who promised to always love me, who said he could afford the rent even if I wasn't able to help.

My dad called while I was in the middle of the things being taken to the truck and tried to talk me out of moving in with Lee. I'll never forget what he said: "You're breaking your old daddy's heart." I'll always remember that, but by the time the move was set in motion I didn't know how to back out. When Dad said that about breaking his

heart, though, it made me stop. Lee and his friend Dave were moving things out. I stood in my nearly empty dorm room thinking how excited I was about getting an apartment, even if I thought Dad was right that I was rushing things with Lee. I'd been dating a couple people here and there, one whom I was interested in, and now that would end. I would only date Lee from then on. I wondered if I could back out of moving—not break my dad's heart—but I didn't. I didn't know how.

Lee and I were together three years total. We stupidly got married after three months. After a year we didn't share a bedroom, time, or much of anything. I wanted to get a divorce, but I didn't know how to get one. I had put the moving in together and then the marriage into motion; I didn't know how to change that. Until the day he struck me. It was only once, and now I wonder if he had been drinking. We were arguing, he said I was a fat, disgusting pig, and I smacked him, which I never should have done. He put his hand behind my head and brought my face down hard on the portable dishwasher. It was such a violent act I couldn't believe he had done it, and it cracked the veneer of our marriage. As Lee walked out the door to go to work, I called my mom to ask permission to get divorced. I didn't ask about moving in with Lee or marrying him; I don't know why I felt like I needed permission, but my mom easily granted it. She said she knew I hadn't been happy, but didn't know how to bring it up.

Mommie O' held the loan for the house we lived in, which we bought about six months after moving into the apartment, so it was Lee who moved out. Things were in motion, so by the time he got back from work the next morning, I had packed most of his things in milk crates and boxes and put them in the room where he slept. I was sleeping when he got home and felt him sit on the bed next to me. He had tears in his eyes and

when I saw his, I got my own. He hugged me and asked, “Is this what you want?” I nodded. He kissed my forehead, then left.

He came back little by little to get his things. We had one last fling, but I wasn't tempted to call off the divorce. I knew what I was doing, and I had found myself again, was my own person. When all of Lee's things were gone I started finding bottles. The pantry had areas I had to reach into that I couldn't see. I was digging around in an unseeable area for a Pyrex dish when I found the first stash of bottles. There were at least twenty empty glass liquor bottles—tequila, rum, whiskey, triple sec, vodka—all types and they were all empty. A few weeks later I was in the shed getting ready for spring gardening. There was a stand like one that held paperback books in bookstores that had somehow become mine through Mom and Dad hunting antiques and special finds at auctions and yard sales. It held a few boxes of nails, but mostly didn't have a purpose and was being stored in the shed. In each section where paperbacks would be displayed, there were empty bottles. There was the same array of liquors there as in the pantry. I lived in that house for another couple years and I found empty bottles frequently.

Lee bought the house from me a couple years later when I got an apartment before moving to Ohio for the creative writing degree. I was packing and found a bunch more empty glass bottles—again all fifths of hard liquor. They were hidden on the top shelves of closets, in bookcases behind the books, stashed with the photo albums I rarely looked at, even in paper grocery bags in the unused space behind the hooded cat litter box. I left them on the kitchen table for him. I'd never mentioned finding the empty bottles until I was moving out. I still wonder how long he drank while we were married—whether it was the whole time or only part of it. I also don't know how I never found any

bottles during our marriage and only after he moved out. When he saw them on the table, he said, “I had to drink. It was the only way I could live with you.” He laughed then, but it was like he’d slammed my face onto the top of the dishwasher all over again.

What Lee said screamed in my mind fifteen years later as I cleaned out Guy’s things after he killed himself. I found several empty glass beer bottles hidden in his desk. Guy said he never drank because his dad was a recovering alcoholic. Finding his empty beer bottles made me feel like I had been so hard to live with he had been forced to drink. It didn’t matter that it was only three bottles, Lee’s words blasted in my ears. Anyone whose loved one kills themselves questions if she could have done something differently, something that would have prevented him from going through with it. Finding those bottles made me feel like I’d been so hard to live with Guy had to drink, and then that I’d been so hard to live with he killed himself. It wasn’t rational and I knew better, but that’s what I thought when I saw those glass bottles.

A few years after I moved from the house I shared with Guy, empty bottles played in my life once more. Three guys in their twenties lived next door. Our houses were thirty-six inches apart, so their back porch sat next to mine, only separated by a fence. There were way over a hundred empty liquor bottles on that porch. They were stacked in cardboard boxes, and there was even a grocery cart full of them. When I saw the bottles through the fence, I knew they had nothing to do with me, but this irrational part of me felt like the guys were flaunting them. “You’re hard to live with: here are some bottles so we can remind you of that.” I should have asked them to clean up their mess, but setting that

request into motion might have exacerbated the problem, so I avoided looking at their porch and tried not to let Lee's words reverberate in my mind.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

1994: "I'LL MAKE LOVE TO YOU"

In sixth grade, I walked up to Guy in the lunchroom and gave him the extra chocolate milk I bought but couldn't drink. My folks taught me not to waste food, and I couldn't drink the milk, so didn't know what to do with it. I walked right up to Guy and put it on his tray. He was sitting alone at the table, so I sat at the other end, about four seats down to finish the fruit roll-up I was eating. I wouldn't look at him, terrified he might beam the milk at my head. I'd been eating alone for the two weeks school had been in session and it was nice to have company, even if we were four seats apart. As I sat there, he slid a dime toward me and smiled. I scooted down to give him his dime back and we became instant friends.

In seventh grade, we gobbled our food down and spent the rest of lunch wandering the hall, stuffing raisins into the keyholes that were old, and big, made for skeleton keys. That seems like such a jerk thing to do now, but at the time it was funny to us.

Guy bought me lemon drops every day that year. We had to sneak since only teachers were allowed to use the vending machines during the school day. We sat in the stairwell and ate the sweet lemony drops of candy. He bit and chewed them with his teeth, but I sucked all the sugar off until they became tiny slivers between my tongue and the roof of my mouth. Guy was always sure we got an even amount, even though he paid for them and I sucked mine so slowly.

On my sixteenth birthday, I decided I wanted to go out with him. Sandy and I went to his house and he gave me a sweater because I was cold. I know now it was one of his only sweaters, but I certainly didn't then. It was a sweater Michelle wore for years after I decided I didn't want it anymore, but never returned it to Guy.

But I couldn't bring myself to date him then. Not in high school. Not when Andy told me weird stories about Guy to keep me away from him.

Andy lived about a mile down the road from Guy. He said Guy creeped around behind trees and inside bushes and watched the neighborhood kids. Andy even said he'd seen Guy poking around his house before. I knew it was taken straight from *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but it didn't help that Callie had nicknamed Guy "Boo Radley" before Andy even said that.

I knew Guy wanted us to start dating in high school, but I wasn't ready. I also knew how much he disliked Andy. I didn't blame him; I thought Andy was a real asshole, especially when he drove past Guy every day on the way to school while Guy was waiting for the bus. He flipped Guy off and gunned his bad-ass orange-sparkled Camaro, squealed his tires, and roared past Guy standing on the corner. Then he came to school and made fun of Guy for riding the city bus. Of course, I rode a school bus, unless I was going over to Andy's, but while he made fun of Guy, I sat there and smiled.

The week Guy got out of the Army was the same week America invaded Panama. Not realizing he was home, I watched every news story, sure he was in Panama, that he was going to die. I didn't know how to find out if he was there or not. It was finals week my senior year in college, and I couldn't concentrate or study; all I could do was imagine him

getting killed in the middle of a rainforest at night, with night-vision goggles on, standing next to his tank. His tank he'd named *Elizabeth*. And his dying words would be to make sure I knew he loved me. Then his buddy would come to Kentucky after his wounds healed, to tell me Guy's final words were of me and that through the three years they were in the Army together all Guy could do was talk of me. He'd tell me how Guy hoped one day we would get together, that one day we would be happily in love. Then I would work in a hospital and nurse people back to health, being forever loyal to his memory and the love we never got to express to one another. Until one day I would meet a handsome young soldier, his leg in a cast held up by a sling. I would apologize to Guy and his memory and go off with the soldier.

On the second day of no sleep, except for nodding off when I tried to read about textiles for an art class, I called Guy's post and asked if Guy had been sent to Panama.

"We're not authorized to give out any information on the strategic maneuvers of the situation in Panama," the woman said. I started crying, said I was Guy's fiancée, that my phone had just gotten reconnected after the phone company lost my last check.

"I can't tell you if that specific person is gone, but, I'll tell you what, if you tell me his platoon, I'll let you know if it was sent."

I didn't know what platoon he was in. I'd gone through all of that and I still wasn't going to find out. "If I know the address I send mail to, would it say his platoon?"

"Yes, honey. It would." By that point the lady felt so sorry for me I could have gotten her to tell me if President Bush wore purple underwear if she knew.

The lady told me that Guy's platoon *was* in Panama. I figured he was being shot at as we spoke. I cried harder and said thanks. I was lying on my waterbed bawling, the

bed waving up and down, when the phone rang. It was Guy. He just happened to call right then—he'd been at his mom's for a week. I was so mad and glad I could have screamed.

A couple days later, we went to the Museum of History and Science, and saw an IMAX film. We sat so close I could feel his shoulder next to mine. Warm, soft in the grape cotton polo shirt—but also hard, muscular. It was just there. Not trying to be anywhere else but next to my shoulder. I was so used to frat boys who thought that once our shoulders touched, they could unzip my jeans. It was nice to have someone who just wanted to touch shoulders.

That was how we finally got together—touching shoulders. I wrote him a letter saying I was having a keg party at my apartment. He came to the party and brought an Army buddy of his (the one who would have told me he was dead if he had gotten killed in Panama?) who was visiting from Connecticut. I talked to Guy for hours, even though there were about fifty people there. One of the guys I was dating, who was from Cincinnati, came down for it too. But the Cincinnati guy ended up drinking whiskey, puking, and leaving. I was mad he would drive a hundred miles, and after four hours of drinking and two of puking, just leave, but I couldn't stop him. He never called again, which I was glad of.

The other guy I was seeing was there, too. He saw Guy and said, “Aaah, my competition.” I smiled, said “Yep,” then went on. I saw him a few more times at the video store where he worked, but I was always with Guy then, which made me ten kinds of happy since this man had started dating someone else while we were seeing each other

and hadn't told me. He had a key to my apartment, and shortly after Guy came to the party, I asked for it back, which he agreed to do, and dropping it in my mailbox the next day.

Guy and I had our first date after the party. Once we went to a night of wrestling matches for something different to do. We leaned against each other, shoulders touching. It felt to me like it was me and Guy against the world, huddled in our seats. We loved the people there screaming and shouting, the wrestlers pounding each other in their fake ways.

After that we went back to my apartment and tried to drink hazelnut liqueur straight, which we thought was disgusting, but I didn't have any Half-and-Half or 7-up. We barely drank any before I said, "Are you ticklish?" He was surprised when I said that—like my words had popped out of a Jack-in-the-box.

"Um, well, um, no. . . ." It was obvious he was lying, so I began to tickle him. I wanted us to touch again. My shoulder still felt warm from where we leaned together earlier. He tickled back. I had to try hard to be ticklish. When I was little, my sisters and I had gotten into such hellacious tickle-matches that the only way to compete was to will myself no to no longer be ticklish. Pretty soon after the tickling started, Guy and I were kissing. We kissed for an hour before he pushed up my shirt.

"I want to see your cat," he said. My eyes opened wide. "Your lion, you perv. Your tattoo. I've never seen it."

I laughed, looked down, put my fingers on either side of the lion's brown head, pulled the skin opposite directions, making it growl. He poked my stomach with his finger—something he did to show affection throughout the entirety of our relationship.

He pushed my black T-shirt up further, pulled it and one of my earrings off over my head, then took his shirt off. I could smell the musky odor of his underarms, the sweat from our skin touching.

We were inseparable after that, moved in together a year later when I—we—moved to Hamilton, Ohio, for me to go to grad school in Oxford. He went to Northern Kentucky University, so we thought Hamilton was a midpoint. Hamilton was horrible; we most likely would have been happier living in Cincinnati for the arts scene, restaurants, and shops, but we didn't. We didn't like Hamilton, but we did get three dogs—Pudgy, Kookie Doodle, and Slimey—because we lived somewhere that allowed pets. It was a tough time in our relationship, though tougher times were yet to come.

When we returned to Louisville, we rented a place in Oldham County, about a block outside the city limits of Louisville. Guy had a job that had him traveling a lot, and he asked his brother to watch out for me. Not long after that, during an intense manic episode, his brother and I did what we never should have done. Michelle had a key and even very nearly walked in on us once. It was a stupid mistake. Stupid, stupid, stupid. The worst mistake of my life. That I dated his brother for a while after that was the epitome of grossness on my part. I never told Guy exactly, but he had to know because of all the time I spent hanging out with his brother.

After the initial cheating, I broke up with Guy while he was at work—on the phone. Another stupid mistake that I regret. I thought he knew it was coming, but he didn't. It took us about a year to get back together. We didn't move away from each other because of the dogs and because neither of us could afford to live alone. Getting back

together was something we never exactly said in words, but we both knew we were a couple again, and we began having regular date nights, renting videos together, and generally doing couple-things. We never kissed again, but that may just be because I didn't say anything, and he didn't, either. We did begin sleeping in the same bed about two years before he died. We did *almost* all the couple stuff again. It was nice.

Things were so much better that one day he said, "Hey, Elizabeth, I have an idea."

"Yeah?"

"How about some time we go somewhere and say sweet things to each other?"

Like a wedding without the wedding. A marriage without the paper."

I smiled and hugged him.

It was dark when we got to Red River Gorge, where we'd decided to go to say sweet things. I had been there a million times before—with college friends, then with Sandy, and Callie, Michelle, Kristen and I even went as adults once.

I could tell we were going to Rock Bridge as soon as we turned up the gravel road. I had taken him there once or twice before. It was the first hike I took in the Gorge, and it's where I return each trip. I've even taken Jane there, though I can't hike the whole way because of my drop-foot. We walked about half-a-mile where it was flat, then turned around. But back then with Guy, I had no problems hiking.

"This is my favorite place in the world," I told him, taking a deep breath of the air, which smelled like campfires, trees, and dirt. "When I die, I want to be cremated and scattered here."

He smiled and said, "I know," then poked my belly.

When we could see Rock Bridge, I took off running and climbed it. It was harder to get to the top than I remembered. It always was. I had forgotten about having to climb straight rockface, jump from wet mossy sandstone to a higher part of wet mossy sandstone to get to the top—but that was the place, my favorite place in the Gorge. It took Guy about five minutes to catch up with me, but before long he was on the sandstone bridge with me, sitting and swinging his legs. We held hands and looked at the olive water, emerald trees, pink and white blooming rhododendron covering the hills. We were encircled by colors as perfect as wet oil paint. We looked at each other and began to speak.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

2016: “CLOSER”

*“Any time I’m doing something / I’m doing something I’m afraid of”
--Joshua Jennifer Espinosa*

The first thing Jane said to me was “I’m a big ol’ lesbian,” which made me laugh. She had agreed to be interviewed for my LGBTQ Oral History class. I was about twenty minutes late to her apartment—later my apartment, too—for the interview. I texted her, but her phone was dead. She said she was about to give up on me and take her (now our) dog Arthur to the park when I got there.

She’d told people, and herself, that she would not date anyone again (not that she wouldn’t fool around with anybody, but that she wouldn’t date them) unless they politely knocked on her door, came in, and sat her living room. I politely knocked on her door, came in, and sat in her living room.

For the project, I interviewed queer folks over forty from Kentucky. I added the catch that mine would be from Appalachia. I’d interviewed my friends Duane and Allen, and Jane was my third one of three. Allen introduced us via Facebook and suggested I do one of the oral histories on her. During the interview, she was very forthcoming about everything I asked and then some. I not only thought she was super hot, but also found her fascinating. I’d said I wouldn’t date anyone until after I was done with my PhD. A couple of days later, though, she messaged me on Facebook and said, “How about we go to a lesbian film I know about Tuesday night?”

My heart beat fast. I was in the tiny office I shared with all other Humanities part-timers at a Catholic university. Sitting next to me was a Baptist minister who taught theology, a required class for all students. I wasn’t sure what he would think of my

conversation, so minimized it every time he walked by, which seemed like hundreds of times that day.

“I can’t. I’d love to, but I have class.” I paused just a beat. “Rebecca Solnit is going to be here Wednesday and Thursday night. She’s—.”

“I know who she is. That sounds great.”

We made plans to go. A few moments later, I checked my school email. “Damn, Jane. The events are postponed until next year.”

“Well, we’ll have to go then.”

“I know of a film festival raising money for a trans awareness group here in town. It’s Thursday. I can get us tickets.” I blurted it, if one can blurt via Messenger.

“Sure. We can do that.”

“Dinner first?”

“Nope. Have plans. Just made them.”

“Oh. Okay.” I didn’t realize it was to get a haircut before our date.

When I got to her apartment, she had flowers for me, wrapped with a ribbon, which I still have. We went to the movie—*Miss Major*—which she remembers nothing of because she stared at my chest the entire movie. I was wearing a flattering, subtly revealing dress, that I looked good in. She says it isn’t fair, that I “lured her in” with my tits.

Now here we are four and a half years later, I’m just now getting ready to finish my PhD, and we’ve been together this whole time. I was scared to get together with anyone. So scared. I was afraid someone would die on me like Guy died on me.

Jane and I had only been together for a minute when I had a key to her place. In fact, it was less than a week in, even though she hadn't given a key to the woman she was in her last relationship with at all. Technically it was so I could cat-sit Jellybones, her foster cat, now our foster fail and forever cat. As she handed me the key, she said, "Go ahead and keep this. I know I'm not going to want it back. I might as well admit that now." It was the first moment of saying aloud that we were becoming a thing, not just a *thing*.

It took longer than I wish for Grayzie and Weeties, my (then our) dogs to start staying at her apartment, though Jane and I were spending every night together. Each evening while I was in class, Jane texted me, asking me to please come over. She is plagued with nightmares, even now, but does better with someone who she cares about sleeping next to her. It's no wonder: her job as a domestic violence social worker was *tough*, and her life hasn't always been easy. I'm not surprised she has bad dreams.

My shadow who follows me everywhere I go and howls when I leave the house without him, Grayzie has horrible separation anxiety. He's been this way since I took him home from Red River Gorge. When he stayed at the house when I stayed with Jane, he tore down the blinds of the house's front window. Grayzie and Weeties, my other dog, began staying the night with us at her apartment. Since Grayzie sometimes went after Arthur, I tried to leave Grayzie in a crate, but he flipped out both times. He shat and peed in the crate and tore up Jane's quilt. Luckily, it was *not* one that her grandmother made—those were in the closet, safely on a shelf. We moved him to the living room and he tore a big piece of the fabric off the side of the couch. Somehow, even though she said—and still says—that he tears up everything, she didn't break up with me. When I think now about how early that happened in our relationship, I'm sure glad that she's a dog person.

For a while, Grayzie stayed at the house I rented during the day while I taught or was in class, but he hated it. I dropped him off in the early afternoon and Jane picked him up around six o'clock after work. He seemingly stood on top of the dresser the whole time I wasn't there; that's where he was when I left and where he was when Jane picked him up. Neighbors commented on it occasionally, saying he was literally "that doggie in the window." My heart hurt hearing that.

To remedy the situation, I took Grayzie to school with me. No one questioned it because those of us who teach aren't supposed to ask many questions about dogs on campus, other than one can ask if it's a service dog. That I used a walker at the time probably made it less likely that anyone would ask. I didn't say he was or wasn't one, and nobody asked, except for one man who yelled at me about having a dog there. He was no one in any sort of authority that I could tell, and he definitely had no authority over me, so I just walked away from him without a word. It made me go to the bathroom and cry, whether out of anger or sadness or feeling stigmatized because of using a walker, I'm not sure, but I silently cried. Grayzie stuck his head under the stall wall, into the next one without me noticing it until the student in there laughed and petted him. She was so delighted, it cheered me.

That summer and fall semesters, Grayzie lay on a blanket while I taught or was in class, if Jane was at work. If I had the blanket, he was fine. If I didn't, he paced, stood, and whined. Once in German class, he did that, and a fellow student lent me his jacket to lie on. I forgot his blanket in a class I taught, and a student lent me *his* jacket for Grayzie to lie on. Grayzie loved that guy. Almost everyone else in class ignored him.

By the following semester, Jane and I had worked with Grayzie so that he could stay at the apartment without us. We got him a collar that shot citronella spray in front of his face when he barked. It wasn't ideal, but dogs hate the smell, so don't bark. He learned to not bark within an hour or two of wearing it when neither Jane nor I were home. We put a baby gate between Arthur in the bedroom and Grayzie in the living room—until Grayzie began climbing over the gate to lie with Arthur. He loves Arthur, though the feeling is *not* mutual because Grayzie used to be aggressive towards him.

Jane. She's complicated and messy, maybe as much as I am. Things aren't as easy with her as they were with Guy, but I think some of that is simply that Guy and I knew each other so long—from eleven until forty when he died. We got together in our twenties and essentially became adults together—luckily growing the same ways. Jane and I got together in our late forties and were both set in our ways. I'm messy, which she hates. I want my good non-stick pan handwashed with a soft cloth and she forgets to do that. I buy too many things and our apartment is small. It hasn't been easy, but it has also been lovely at the same time. We've made a home with our dogs and cat—the same way Guy and I did. We love to go on drives in the country. Grayzie goes with us most days, and we often stop and hike.

Last November, we hiked over a mile, something hard for me to do. When we began, I thought we'd hike in a little bit, then turn around and go back, but we kept going. It was a flat trail and gorgeous out, warm despite being late autumn. I chose the hike because it was flat and rated "easy." We hiked and hiked and kept hiking. When I began wondering if I could hike out, Jane had to lie down on the ground because her right hip

hurt. My left leg began getting numb, as it likes to do. My foot brace helps a lot, and my leg gets numb much later, but it still does quit working and hurt like it's been repeatedly hit with a mallet.

“Hey Jane, should we turn around?” I asked.

“We're almost done with the hike,” she said.

“Oh. I need to stop for a second. I didn't know we were going to do the whole thing.” We stopped. We were next to a creek in a cool area under trees, despite the warmth of the day. I leaned against a tree to take the pressure off my left leg.

“What? Why didn't you use your words? You chose the hike. I thought you wanted to do the whole thing.”

I wish she didn't say things like “use my words,” which makes me feel four-years-old. I also hate that she has a point. I too often shut down and don't say what I am thinking. She believes she might be on the autism spectrum because she doesn't read feelings well, and honestly, I agree with her.

I have had to learn to *say* what I'm thinking and not allude to it. Maybe that's a good practice no matter who one is in a relationship with. Maybe it would have helped Guy and me get over that hump between loving each other and sleeping in the same bed to actually kissing—and maybe even being sexual together again. It would have at least been beneficial and gotten rid of the bubble of unspoken things between us. Neither of us had the guts to say some things that needed to be said, and now I can't say them. I wish I could, but it's too late. So I try to use my words with Jane. It doesn't always happen, and I'm bad about alluding to things and thinking she'll know what I'm talking about. Now I get frustrated with myself instead of irritated at her when she doesn't understand what I

want when I don't say it. Now I know that she doesn't *get it* when things aren't spelled out, so it's on me to "use my words," as she likes to say.

The hike was lovely except that we both were exhausted after it. Poor Grayzie was worn out even more than we were, especially since he hiked twice as far as we did because he crossed the path—back and forth—to smell both sides of the trail the whole way. Jane tried to give him to me to walk with, but he tripped me up walking in front of me like that, so she took him back. It would turn out that we hiked in the middle of goldenrod blossoms and all three sneezed and wheezed for the entire evening.

When we were done with the hike, we caught our breath sitting at a picnic table. On the way home Jane pulled up in front of a convenience store and handed me money. "I'm sorry. I can't go in. You'll have to," she said.

I didn't tell her I was shaky, could barely walk. I just got out of the SUV and went in, bought her two Diet Pepsis and myself two Gatorade Zeros and came out. She kept one of the Gatorades for—for when? I'm not sure when she drank it. It wasn't then, and I didn't say that I wanted it. I'm getting better about using words, but I have a way to go.

That night Jane asked what I was going to do after I get my PhD. Because she has newly-diagnosed cancer, we need to stay in Louisville. I've been hired by the University of Louisville to teach the class I've been teaching for the last few years and by Indiana University Southeast (IUS) to teach English classes. I know at UofL, I'll never get a fulltime job because I came out of that school. Or it's at least very unlikely. Maybe I can get one at IUS or another school here in town. I hope so.

Before I landed on staying in Louisville, I was going to apply to a variety of jobs—one in Lexington, one in Colorado, some online, some elsewhere. One weekend while we were cleaning in the bedroom, I said, “Did I tell you that I’m applying to a job in Lexington?”

“No,” she answered. She was quiet then. The air was so still I could feel it growing between us.

“I figure that would mean I wouldn’t have to move. At least not any farther than we would have to if we move in March when the lease is up.”

She just listened, so I kept on.

“I could drive. Or hopefully it would be online. I mean, so much is online with the pandemic. I don’t know what that would mean. Hopefully online.”

She was still quiet.

“It says that it’s one of the top places to work. I don’t remember the context. In Higher Ed? In Kentucky? I’m not sure.”

Silence.

“The vet tech from my old vet, her mom worked at Sullivan and loved it.”

“Would you have to teach in person? Wherever you have a job?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I’ve been super lucky to teach only online this year.” I went into freakout mode then. Would I have to teach in person as the new person? During the pandemic. Could I say I’m high risk and be allowed to teach online like now? I suddenly realized how far behind I was in grading and that my annual teaching evaluation that time meant that the professor doing it was let into my class and given carte blanche access to everything, which might mean he could see how far behind I was. But maybe he couldn’t

look in the grade book. Maybe that was out of bounds. I realized I needed to get done with as much as I could before I added him in the class to do the eval.

“One job in Colorado, too,” I added after a while, after I’d been in my head a while. I felt like Jane didn’t like me anymore since she wasn’t interested in moving if I got a job elsewhere. I was wrong, though; I hadn’t used my words to ask.

“Colorado? Damn, Elizabeth,” she said.

And then the conversation was over. The job in Colorado was a dream one. Teaching creative nonfiction. But it was in fucking Colorado. And I’d have probably had to teach in person. Mostly it was in Colorado, and I hadn’t done well when I moved away from home before. I didn’t think I’d do well if I moved away from Jane. No matter how complicated and messy our relationship is. She’s good for me, and I think I am for her. We’re a family: me, her, Arthur, Grayzie, and Jellybones. I can’t imagine it otherwise, so didn’t apply anywhere else. She wants her pension, which she has more years to go to work for, and I want to be with Jane.

I put my head on Arthur, his short black fur not as much of a cushion as Grayzie’s. I knew it would be hard—or harder—to be away from him as Jane. I sniffed his feet—dog feet being my favorite smell after the scent of the Gorge. I held him close—as close as I used to hold my stuffed dog, Bozo, when things went wrong as a kid.

SECTION FIVE
WITH MY SISTERS, MY SISTERS

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

THE KID PSYCHIC

When I was little, I pictured my wedding, like most every little kid does. I sometimes thought of a church wedding with bridesmaids (who I was afraid I wouldn't have) and a groom (who I also was afraid I wouldn't have), but mostly I imagined getting married outside, at the "teepee" at Hogan's Fountain in Cherokee Park. Once I was in college, that solidified as my place. But when it came time to get married, my mom took over and it was at some neighborhood clubhouse. Lee and I did get married outside, but about ten yards from the building in a gazebo. I wore a dress instead of the cutoff khaki shorts and t-shirt I wanted to wear. Maybe that's why it didn't work out. Or maybe we were just ill-suited.

As a kid, I also imagined the children I might have. In college, it was two boys: Forrest and Hunter. Gag. I thought they sounded preppy. By the time I was twenty-two, I knew I had temporal lobe epilepsy, but didn't know if it was genetic or not; it isn't, typically, but I didn't know that then. I realized I couldn't go off my meds without plunging back into seizures. I had wanted kids up to that point, but I couldn't risk passing it on to a child. Since I couldn't go off my medication, I couldn't have a kid. I still wanted them, but wondered if they were possible.

I sought out the only way of finding out for sure: a psychic. I've been to a couple psychics. The second one I saw was a pet psychic I went to about my dog Wiggly. This one, though, the first one. I walked in the psychic's place; it was an office in St. Matthews with fluorescent lighting and no windows. A large black and brown scarf hung on one wall—the only decoration besides some flowerpots in macrame holders with dead

plants in them hanging from the ceiling. There was a card table and four folding chairs around it. A tarot deck sat in front of the psychic on his left. After apologizing for the décor, this psychic asked if I came to him with a question. I said I did: would I have children. I saw my chances fading, dwindling away, the more I realized that I couldn't afford to adopt and I wouldn't be willing to have one of my own.

He read the tarot cards I chose. He shook his head no, said, "N—, wait, yes, maybe. I see a small boy. About two. Dark hair."

I was hopeful but discouraged. "I've just got a job as a nanny. A boy. Two. Dark hair." I knew that was it.

When I was twenty-six, just after I got together with Guy, we talked about kids. He said, "I don't want kids. I'll tell you that right now. If you want them, I'm not the one for you."

I laughed, "I don't either. I was going to tell you that any day, as soon as it came up."

I made an appointment with an ob-gyn to get my tubes tied. I sat with my mom in a bleak waiting room, where all the chairs faced forward—like a movie theater, except that the seats were more like kitchen chairs with orange and yellow vinyl cushions. The room was wrong. I knew it wasn't going to go well.

"Glass," a nurse said. I followed her back to a room, stripped out of my clothes.

Before the exam even began, I said to the doctor, "I want to get my tubes tied. I don't want kids."

He looked at the manilla file folder in his hand. "How old are you? Oh, no, twenty-six. You're too young. You'll change your mind."

My eyes teared up. “No. No, I won’t. I’ve wanted to do this a long time.”

“Lie back now. Let’s get this over with.”

That was it. The discussion was over. Nothing but condoms was mentioned. I’d been dismissed except for the speculum going inside me for an exam I had hoped would lead me to the protection I needed for me and Guy to have the freedom from worrying about the possibility of kids since I couldn’t take the pill without getting migraines.

About ten months later, a few days after Guy and I had sex—something we only seemed to do once a week—my breasts were tender. I felt bloated. I called my mom. “I don’t know what to do,” I said into the phone. “I don’t want a kid. But this was love. But I want my degree. And hell, I don’t know if it even is anything.”

“What does Guy say?”

“I haven’t told him.”

“Well, I’d say you start there. I’m here for you, but I’m not raising another kid. That’s Michelle I have to worry about with that, though, not you.” She told me later that she wondered how in the world we’d manage. Neither of us had good jobs. I was getting my MA in English and Guy worked at Pizza Hut while working towards a bachelor’s degree.

Late that night when Guy got off work, we were watching *Columbo*, something we did every night. During a commercial, I said, “I don’t know, but I think I might be pregnant.”

He sat his piece of pizza down and walked upstairs.

I put my piece down, too, and sat there, the sound of the TV show playing, but not making any sense in my ears. When I went to bed that night, Guy pretended to be asleep. I knew he wasn't really because of the way he was breathing, but I didn't say anything. If he'd given me a chance, I would have said I already had the pills out that I was prescribed once when a condom broke. I knew what to do: three pills one day, three the next. I'd be sort of sick and queasy feeling, but it would work.

Finally, I couldn't stand it and shook his shoulder.

"Not tonight, Elizabeth. I can't talk about anything tonight."

"I have these pills. Guy, I have pills." I showed him the circle of strong birth control pills. "It'll stop anything."

He turned over, leaned up, and hugged me. "I was so scared," he said.

"It'll be okay," I told him. He told me later that it scared him so badly it made him leery of having sex anymore. It became hard to get him to be intimate. It was a problem between us.

That night, though, I had a cup of cold water, pushed three pills out of the container and took them. "That's it. Three more tomorrow and presto! No baby. No kid. We're fine. I don't even know that I'm pregnant. I never took a test. I wanted to talk to you first."

He cried and held me, pulled the ugly second-hand comforter around us, and buried us like we were alone, together, in a soft cocoon.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

OH SISTERS

Oh my sisters. We haven't always gotten along—all together, or just even separately. Even Kristen has had problems with Michelle and Callie over the years. I definitely have. As a little kid, Callie called me names and turned her classmates against me. She tried to make the neighborhood kids hate me, too, which about half-worked. Some of the kids still liked me; some thought I was a freak. At times she's tried to turn other family members against me, too. When we were really little, about four and six, she began saying I hit her or pushed her down when she had just fallen. She also regularly said I began fights and arguments that she started. I got punished for those things in addition to what happened when I had seizures, which made me a confused kid since I got randomly in trouble—for the things I didn't do because Callie lied or didn't know about because of the epilepsy.

It wasn't until my aunt Peggy stayed with us during some summers as a teenager and we were little that Mom found out Callie was lying. We were about eight and six that year Peggy stayed most of the summer. The year before, Peggy had back surgery to correct scoliosis, which was so bad the surgeons had to put a metal rod in her back. Because she and my grandmother lived in south-central Kentucky and Louisville was (and is) a medical city, she had the surgery in Louisville and stayed with us.

The summer she visited a long time, she, Callie, and I laid out in the sun on aluminum foil, with aluminum foil held in front of our faces, baby oil spread on ourselves to get the ultimate tan. I burn at first if I'm outside much, but then will tan, so first I peeled. I loved peeling the dead skin off myself. It was something that happened every

summer, but was especially pronounced that one because of sunbathing. That was during the time when people didn't know the dangers of sunburns. I got the tannest I've ever been then.

I thought Peggy didn't like me since I was always in trouble with Mom and they were sisters. I was also so weird, and Callie tanned like Peggy. But it was she who noticed that Callie often lied about who had started fights and that Callie got bruises in ways that weren't me hitting her. Peggy told Mom, which was something Mom kept from me until I was an adult.

If Mom had told me, it might have led to Peggy and me being closer than we were while I was growing up. I always felt ostracized when we were with Peggy since it seemed like she and Callie were so much alike. I was bigger, larger boned and fatter than either of them. I didn't love painting my finger- and toenails the way they did and picked the polish off my fingernails the next day. At times Peggy laughed about it, but other times, she admonished me that I was wasting fingernail polish. It didn't help that Callie reiterated how much she was like Peggy. That I was a weird outsider. She's done that to me our whole lives, no matter the situation. Instead, for the last thirty years, it has actually been people staring at her for her inappropriate behaviors like hitting a customer service desk worker at JCPenney, driving like a madman full of road rage, or breaking furniture and items at her house while she screams that no one loves her and she wishes she were dead.

Oddly enough, Callie and Michelle have both gotten letters from Peggy over the years telling them to repent about things or they'd go to hell—Callie's was for being a

vegetarian because God put beasts on the earth for our nourishment, Peggy said, and Michelle's was for having a baby out of wedlock. She even went so far as to call my nephew, Michelle's son who had not been born yet, a bastard, even though Michelle and my nephew's dad had been together for a few years then and were until she died. I've, thankfully, and for unknown reasons, never gotten a letter, despite living with Guy "out of wedlock" for thirteen years, being a vegetarian for six years, and being openly queer and living with Jane now. Even when I hadn't acted on being queer in a relationship sort of way, I had put it on Facebook, and she didn't say anything. She has "liked" Facebook posts about Jane or our dogs when I've tagged Jane, which surprises me, and she even said I can bring Jane to visit Mommie O', which *also* surprised me. Of course, once the pandemic started, that was not possible, and Mommie O' died of old age at one-hundred-and-three just before vaccinations became available, so I didn't get to see her again, with Jane or without, which hurts.

Michelle was hard to get along with. At least as hard as Callie is. She stayed in contact with Lee after we divorced, and during the period when Guy and I were broken up, she told him about me and his brother, which despite her knowing about, was not her business to share. I knew Guy *knew*, but I tried to keep it from him as much as I could. Once he and I were back together, Michelle called him when she knew I wasn't home. She did that with Kristen's husband, too. Guy answered, thinking something was wrong, only to get on the phone with Michelle and be unable to get off it. Sometimes I'd come home in the middle of a call and he'd say, "Welp, here's Elizabeth!" and hand me the

phone. She sent him sexually inappropriate emails—forwards of dirty, raunchy jokes. Sometimes she'd tell him about her sexual exploits.

One day he brought me a printout of an email. "Elizabeth, make it stop," he said. "She sends them all the time."

I had no idea she'd been doing that. "She'll keep doing it if I tell her to stop. Just to spite me."

He nodded and hung his head.

"I'll tell Mom." I did, and the emails stopped.

Guy and I often made fun of the way Michelle dressed. She wore lots of camouflage and had an entire wardrobe "down to the underwear" of "Get 'er done" clothes—some awful comedian's signature saying. She had a swastika tattoo, which horrified us, including Mom—so badly that Mom paid for her to have it covered up. She had a confederate flag license plate on the front of her car, and Mom said Michelle couldn't park her car in front of her house, so she took it off.

Michelle morphed into the guys she dated, and she dated losers. They were the ones who encouraged the direct racist behavior, got her into taking pills and drinking too much. I was always afraid she'd die from an overdose—deliberate, mostly likely, but perhaps accidental—but it was pneumonia that got her. I'd always known she wouldn't live long. I've thought that about Callie, but she's fifty-two now and still going. Her partner of two years has terminal cancer, though, so despite her being fairly stable the last couple of years, I don't know how she'll do once he dies. It's not fair that she's going to lose him. That's not anything I'd wish on anyone, especially my sister. She lost her first

husband to a “widow-maker” heart attack, and now this. Sometimes I think we’re like the Kennedys with all the deaths we have in our family. And it’s an analogy that other people have made, too.

Michelle and I got along well when she was a teenager until she started dating the wrong kind of guy. Or what I (and the rest of the family) believe is the wrong kind of guy. I’m not sure how many people would think blatant racists are the right kind of guy, but I’m sure there are some. I “took her to raise” during a period of her life beginning about fourteen, but especially once she was seventeen. She wasn’t getting along well with Mom or Dad at all. She stayed at my apartment occasionally, then at my house at least a weekend a month when I was with Lee and then until Guy came along when I was twenty-six. Then I moved to Ohio. I had to go into therapy because I didn’t know how to move away when I was the only one in the family she got along with. I felt like it was my responsibility to keep her stable. It wasn’t, but it took me a while to realize that.

Kristen stayed with me much of the time Michelle did. She still remembers and comments how great it was to dance in the streets barefoot in the rain—the barefoot and in the rain parts both being something Mom and Dad wouldn’t allow. We swam in Bluegrass Creek at Big Rock in Cherokee Park later that day—a creek now closed to people going into it because it fills with sewer water when it rains. It was common knowledge back then, too, apparently, but I was twenty-two and didn’t know. Kristen doesn’t remember that, but Mom does because I “took [her] babies to wallow in sewage.” Michelle remembered swimming in the swimming hole there. We had a lot of fun, and luckily none of us got sick from the bad water.

When Michelle was seventeen, I said, “You said your boyfriend James smokes pot, right?”

“Yeah, all the time.”

“Have you done it?”

“No. I’m scared. I want to, though. I’m going to. He keeps trying to make me smoke it.”

“Michelle, you don’t have to do anything you don’t want. If you don’t want to, just don’t. If he doesn’t like it, get a new boyfriend,” I said.

“I want to. I’m just afraid what would happen.”

I paused, thinking. “Alright, here’s the deal: you get it, and we’ll smoke it together your first time.” It made sense to then-pothead me, which I was for a year at twenty-five. I knew that she’d do whatever James wanted her to do. He was her first serious(ish) boyfriend.

I picked her up at James’s house. “You have to go get it. At Kroger. Well, the parking lot,” he said. “We didn’t get to pick it up.”

“What?” I said. “I told her she had to get it. That’s my rule. I’m not doing this otherwise.”

“Fine,” he said. “She’ll stay here and we’ll smoke.”

“I’m not smoking with y’all.” He was eighteen, but I was the adult-adult. He wasn’t my sister. I reasoned that smoking with Michelle seemed okay because she said she was going to do it anyway, and I wanted her to have a safe first experience.

“I didn’t say you were invited,” James said.

I was pissed that this punk was getting the best of me, so said, “Michelle, go get in the car.” I turned to him. “What’s the deal with the guy at Kroger?”

“Pull around to the back on the left side. Michelle has the money, but he’ll only do the handoff with you.”

I looked at him hard. “Is this some kind of setup?”

“I don’t much like any of your family, but you seem cool. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

I nodded and walked out, joined Michelle in the car. “He said you have the money?”

“Yeah. He gave it to me.”

“If it’s his money and his friend, why didn’t he get the pot?”

She shrugged.

I pulled away from his house feeling very uneasy. When I got to the place where James said to go, it seemed like it was in the middle of the parking lot where anyone could see—and they could have if they looked at us. I waited just a moment when an old brown two-door car pulled around the corner.

“Hey Michelle,” the guy said, nodding at her through the open window. “You Elizabeth?” he asked.

“Yeah.” My heart was beating in my throat and I could barely hear him over it. It’s horrible that I even thought that if it was Michelle passing the drug and money, she was a juvenile and wouldn’t get in the legal trouble I would. I was sure it was a sting. I’d only ever bought weed from friends. I’d never bought from a dealer.

I handed him the bills that I'd folded in quarters. He stopped to count it before he passed me the weed. "Come on. It's there. James is who gave her the money."

"That's why I'm counting it. I don't trust that bastard."

After he gave me the baggie, I pulled into a parking spot in the parking lot and put my head down on the steering wheel, then pushed back and breathed, nearly hyperventilating.

"Wait, I'll be back," Michelle said. She got out of the car and walked towards Kroger. It was just across from James's house and I still wondered if it was part of a setup. I didn't think Michelle would do that, but I wasn't sure. While she went in, I kept breathing hard, but got out of the car and put the baggie of weed in the trunk in the wheel-well of the spare. Such a typical place to put drugs, but I was an amateur, and thankfully stayed that way.

I was back in the car, still breathing funny, when Michelle came back. She put some bags in the back seat—Cheetos, Doritos, and other snacks—then rummaged around one specific bag. "Here," she said, handing me something over the seat. "Use this. Breathe in it. It'll help."

She handed me a paper lunch bag. I opened it and breathed into it, in deeper, slower breaths. I don't know if it was the mindfulness of slowing my breaths or the paper bag itself, but I finally calmed down. I worried about why Michelle knew about hyperventilating.

We got to my house and I asked her what she wanted for dinner. "Pizza," she said. "Here, Mom gave me money." We ordered pizza and my friend Lori came over. The three of us

sat on the dusty hardwood floor, tracing the cuts and dents in the hundred-year-old wood. We moved dust around, ate pizza, then after, smoked the weed. Michelle got so giddy with laughter and kept saying, “I don’t feel anything,” which made Lori and me laugh hard. It was the typical first-timer’s inability to recognize being high.

I felt awful about getting her stoned not long after that and told her. She said, “Elizabeth, I’d been high tons of times before that.” I wasn’t sure whether to believe her. I’m still not. It seemed like it was her first time smoking that night together, but she did know what to do. Anyone who watches movies knows that, though. I’ll never know, and even if Michelle were still living, I wouldn’t. She was an unreliable narrator of her own story. She changed all facets of her life from conversation to conversation from the jobs she’d supposedly held, but hadn’t to all of the well-known people she said she knew, but didn’t. I never knew which Michelle I was going to get—the nice one, or the horribly, ugly, evil one, who was biting and caustic with her words, calling me every curse word in existence or saying cruel things to me about Guy.

But I wouldn’t trade those few years that we hung out and got along for anything. I have those memories of her. Of getting her a job at the museum where I worked to help with summer camps. Of hanging out at my house when I moved back from Ohio. Of me telling her how weird my cat Wendell was being since we’d moved back from Ohio and her sweeping under the stairs. Calling me downstairs. “Eliz-a-beeeth, Eliz-a-beeeth, I think I know why Wendell’s weird.” I went downstairs and crawled under the steps. There was a pile of dried marijuana leaves on the floor where Michelle had swept it. Wendell’s litter box was under the stairwell, so even if cats weren’t naturally curious and she would have likely found it anyway, I encouraged her to go there by having her litter

box in there. Michelle and I laughed so hard it was as if we'd smoked those leaves ourselves and it wasn't just Wendell imbibing in them.

I called the vet in Ohio and had to say, "We moved to Louisville and will miss you, but I have a question. My cat, Wendell, who you've seen, has been eating pot. We moved into a house where they grew it, and it was in a weird place that I didn't see. Will she be okay?"

I held my breath, worried about my poor cat, until I heard him laugh. "I hate to hear that you moved, but yeah, she'll be fine. A little hungry, maybe, but fine."

"Aaah, she'll have the munchies," I said, and the vet, Michelle, and I all laughed.

My sisters. No matter how poorly I've gotten along with Callie and Michelle, I would miss Callie if she died. And I miss Michelle. They're hard to deal with, but are still family. I love them and always will. Sometimes I miss Michelle with a pang that hurts like I was stabbed upward through my heart. It isn't even that I go through the good memories we had together and miss her for those. I miss her *for her*. Even with the bad memories. They were her. Even if we wouldn't get along any better than we did, I want her back. Even though I'm the bane of Callie's existence for some reason and keep her at an arm's length because she's so caustic to my life, I am glad she's living on this planet. I sure wish Michelle still were. If she were, I'd talk to her about the time I took her rappelling in the drop-off to the creek in the woods behind our house. Of how I tried to teach her to prusik up the rope and ended up hanging upside down like a bat. We laughed so hard I could barely right myself. I miss that Michelle—every version of her even—and

wish we could run the streets again, barefoot, singing in the rain, like we do in my dreams.

CHAPTER THIRTY
STRANGE KEEPSAKE

I have something stupid that I keep. I don't want it, but can't give away. It's a broken aluminum stepstool.

There's a snapshot, probably my favorite photo of my mom. She's on this stepladder, creamy paint covers her—clothes, shoes, face, acting as her only makeup. Only four years earlier she was Miss Kentucky, and she's probably uncomfortable without other paint on her face. A kerchief covers her coifed hair, teased to perfection every morning, except this one. She had painting to do; brush in hand she applied coats on the wall. She was nine months pregnant. I'm sure she was grateful for the lightness of the aluminum stepladder that had been her aunt's to reach things in the old store: Quigley and Son Dry Goods in Goodnight, Kentucky. The store where mom found button-up high-heeled black shoes from the 20's while she helped at the store in the 60's. They were on a stand next to the hearth of the fireplace while I grew up. Then in the 60's, I'm a big and kicking (always kicking and rolling) baby in Mom's belly, going to be born a few days later. The photo shows Mom in a flirty, sweet pose. She has a crinkled nose, paint brush pointed toward the camera where she has said Dad thought he was so cute taking a picture of her like that. She has smile on her face behind the scowl.

Mom has always said, even when talking about our partners dying in the same ways, that Dad was the love of her life and her soulmate. That's why I keep that stepladder. I've moved it time and again, since I was eighteen. It's broken now, one leg dented from a heavy toolbox falling on it in a overstuffed closet. It's unusable. I had to replace it, but still I keep this one. A sweet keepsake, even if it's a strange one.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BOHEMIAN BIRTHRIGHT

My paternal grandmother wasn't a giving person. She didn't bake cookies or come to visit. She didn't give personally chosen gifts. She especially didn't give hugs or love. Years ago, but as adults, my cousin Robin and I had lunch at The Grape Leaf. I got a call from my mom and when getting off the phone, I said, "I love you" to her. A strange look crossed Robin's face. "I've always been jealous with how easily you love each other." I didn't understand. Mom, Dad, my sisters and I said "I love you" all the time, and we meant it. Callie even has to kiss my mom's cheek when she leaves, and if she forgets, she'll drive back to kiss it. That's a bit weird, but with even with all my oddities, insecurities, and craziness, I've never questioned whether my parents or sisters loved me—liked me, maybe—loved me, never.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"My mother has never said 'I love you' to me and her mother"—our grandmother—"has never said it to her."

I remember sitting with my eyes wide, not knowing what to say. Then I realized it meant something else, too. "Has Grandma every said it to *you*?" I asked.

"Never."

There was a niggling in my mind, but I was quiet. I was sure Grandma had said it to me, but wasn't *certain*.

When I was in college I wrote Grandma long rambling letters—more like journal entries—about what was going on, what I hoped for my life, my thoughts on religion, and

whatever I happened to be thinking right then. She never wrote back, but when I saw her, she always told me how much it meant to her to get the letters, so I kept sending them. After college, “real life” theoretically started, but I would climb onto the roof of my apartment, sit at the kitchen table of the rented house in Ohio, or at the desk of the job I had for fifteen years and pen her letters faithfully. They were sent less frequently the older I got, but I always sent them. Through the years, I went to see Grandma when my mom reminded me it had been months since my last visit. Grandma would pat the seat closest to her for me to sit in. I always noticed that, but never thought too much of it. I said, “I love you” when leaving, both because I meant it, but also because that’s what my family says when parting. Sitting with Robin, I tried to think back, remember if Grandma spoke back after I said it. I didn’t know then, but I do know that the next time I saw her she said it and it stopped me short. I don’t think it hit me because it was the first time; I think it was because it was familiar.

I was five when I ran away to Grandma’s house. I didn’t think I was doing anything wrong since it was only a couple blocks away and we went there all the time, but it made my mom crazy with worry. That was during what Mom called her “dutiful daughter-in-law” period, when she thought a grandmother wanted to see her grandchildren, so she took us to visit regularly. It was Fess, my step-grandfather, Grandma’s husband, who spent most of the time with me and Callie. He was the athletic director of The American Turner’s Athletic Club and taught us how to do simple gymnastics—somersaults and cartwheels. I grew tired of the lessons after a while and sought out Grandma who was sitting in the living room, smoking, looking out the large picture window that covered

most of the wall across from the couch. Even at five, I could feel the longing she had. I didn't know that word yet, but I knew the feeling—that there's something more, something beyond doing somersaults in the basement, more than collecting cicada shells, than having a sister who I knew didn't usually like me and told other kids derogatory things about me because of my seizures. I sat with Grandma and we watched the world go by, knowing we should be out there in it instead of in that house. I picture her in a smart traveling hat, but it was more likely her nurse's cap.

I'm not sure when she retired—she didn't have to work, but she wasn't one to rely on a man's income. She and my granddad divorced when my dad was a baby. She married a man named Leo and they divorced when my aunt was a baby. By the time Fess came along, she had two children and wasn't going to count on him to ensure she could keep herself and the kids housed, clothed, and fed. He was also twenty years her senior, so she knew he couldn't do that forever, even if they did stay married. They did, until he died when I was about eight. I bet she thought my mother foolish for not working while raising my sisters and me. Mom and Dad were married until Dad died, but I suspect in the 1970s Grandma watched my mom with the same knowing look as she watched outside the window. Grandma knew that when she moved beyond that windowed room, it would be on her terms, not her husband's. She would have been right in many ways to look at my mom in that light. Mom wasn't prepared to carry on financially when Dad died in 2000. Grandma, on the other hand, worked until she retired and then began traveling. She bought a house with my aunt and uncle, and though that happened when my cousins were little, she wasn't "grandmotherly" toward them, either. I learned as an

adult that Grandma didn't hold my youngest cousin until she was nine months old. Not once. And they lived in the same house.

I don't know if it was my letters, my sitting on the couch gazing out the picture window with her, or simply because I was oldest, but when I got married in 1990, she gave me her nice set of china. She did it dismissively—that she didn't need it anymore since she didn't entertain—but the look in her eyes when she said that her grandmother brought them from Bohemia let me know how important they were to her. Mom and I took the boxes out to the car and when we got to Mom's house, we took out the plates that were stamped “Bohemia”—a country no longer in existence—on the bottom. Mom showed me that if china is exceptionally nice, you can see the shadow of your hand through it, and we could through Grandma's plates: china that was mine now. Something in the way Grandma gave them to me also let me know not to tell my cousins or sisters that she had done so. Robin confirmed that when we ate lunch at The Grape Leaf all that time later, years after my divorce, when she said Grandma hadn't acknowledged her marriage. She didn't my sisters or other cousins, either. I didn't tell Robin I was given the dishes, but Mom mentioned before that my aunt didn't know what happened to Grandma's fine china. Mom listened, but didn't say a word. If Grandma hadn't told her, neither would my mom.

When Grandma was a young woman in the 1920s, she dressed as a “flapper,” went to speakeasies, and drank throughout Prohibition. My great-uncle Ba was a bootlegger during that time. I wish I had listened to the tales of my great-aunt Mary and Grandma

going out, sneaking around, being girlish, and of my bootlegging great-aunt Mary's husband. I don't even think I have any pictures of them from then—though I do have a box of Aunt Mary's memories in storage. Mom gave it to me right before I moved and I haven't gotten to go through it well. Hopefully there are pictures there. I'm not sure what spurred me to take the box; maybe hoping for these photos, maybe that Aunt Mary didn't have kids who would have wanted it, and I don't either and hope someone wants my photos and memories. The irony that my grandmother liked to drink and smoke most of her days and lived with my Mormon aunt and uncle has not been lost on me. I am sure when they bought the house together it was laid out clearly that she would keep her vices despite religious objections.

I wonder if Grandma saw herself in me. I'm sure at least some of the letters I wrote her over the years, especially the long ones written in college, were penned after drinks. I wonder if the girl who went to the speakeasies, worked when married, and got divorces when such things were unheard of liked the drinking granddaughter who dreamed of being a writer. I may have gotten her wild side, but I forgive easily and convey my love with hugs and saying "I love you" to relatives often. Any time anyone in my family holds a grudge, we call them "Elsie," my grandmother's name. I don't hold grudges, but Callie does, to the point that my mom calls her "Little Elsie." I was more like my great-aunt Mary than Grandma. Both had the wildness, but Aunt Mary was giving, forgiving, and demonstrative. Dad always joked that Grandma hadn't liked Aunt Mary so long she forgot why she was mad at her. Aunt Mary tried to get Grandma's dander up when they'd both come for Christmas dinner. She talked to Grandma, asked her questions, and forced her to either rudely ignore or answer her, both of which irked

Grandma to no end. When we asked Aunt Mary why Grandma was mad at her, sometimes she said it was too long a story, but I don't know if there even was a specific answer. Mom said that she thinks Grandma just didn't like people, Aunt Mary included. From the days of our childhood when I looked out the picture window with Grandma, Callie hasn't liked me much. She is always mad at me, and I couldn't tell you why. She talks horribly about me and doesn't include me in things like her kids' birthday gatherings. She's always angry when we first get together, but within moments, she's forgotten she doesn't like me and we're instantly close. I'm grateful she's not like Grandma to that degree, but as soon as we aren't together anymore, she becomes "Little Elsie" and doesn't like me again. It's been that way our whole lives. I think Grandma was probably unforgiving and spiteful toward Aunt Mary her entire life, too.

Grandma was in and out of the hospital for a couple years, but when she was ninety-eight, they found dark spots on her lungs. That's what the doctors called them: not cancer, dark spots. To confirm it was cancer would require tests Grandma didn't want. I went to see her several times during those last days. In the next-to-the-last one, my mom and I went. My aunt and uncle were there already. They said Grandma hadn't been eating, that she hadn't eaten in two days. I was appalled no one in my family had tried to feed her, that the nurses weren't feeding her. The hospital staff brought her dinner and I cut up the meat, hid it in mashed potatoes, and fed her bites of it. She didn't want to eat, but she did for me. I thought no one would feed her, so I did. In our strange land of love, she ate for me and I tried to keep her alive by feeding her. I teased that her thickened milk tasted like a milkshake and she drank it all. My mom and I were talking about that day

recently when it occurred to me for the first time Grandma had given up by then, that she didn't want to go on. She was in pain and ready to go. Nobody was feeding her because she didn't want to keep living, because she didn't want to eat so she'd go sooner, not because my relatives or the staff were cruel or lazy. Mom said it was hard to watch me feeding Grandma, Grandma eating for me, laughing together about the "milkshake." Mom said it was a private, intimate, loving moment, something Grandma didn't have, and it was playing out right there with my aunt, uncle, and mother, and they found it difficult to see so turned away.

Two nights later we were told if we wanted to say goodbye, we needed go see Grandma. Callie, Kristin, and I met me at the hospital. We talked to Grandma and my aunt and uncle. Grandma patted on the side of the bed, took my hand in hers, and looked into my eyes. She held my hands with strength I didn't think she still had. We held eye contact for a long time, I told her that I loved her and she could go if she wanted, and then kissed her forehead. When we were leaving, the three of us stood at the end of her bed. Kristin, then Callie, then I said "I love you." She said, "I love you." We all were crying when we left. I cried because I knew I'd not see her again. Kristin and Callie said at the same moment, "That's the first time she's ever said 'I love you' to me." I said "Really? She's always said it to me." There are a few single moments I wish I could change in my life and that is one. I wish I hadn't said it, but I had. I couldn't change it, couldn't take it back.

A year or so ago I said to Kristin I wished I had never said that. She was stirring queso in a crock pot. She took out the spoon and slammed down the crock pot lid. "Well, you

did,” she said. My hope that it would take the sting away by mentioning it years later didn’t work; I only made it worse by bringing it up again.

I have promised myself I won’t let Robin or her sisters know Grandma told me “I love you” or that I inherited the china, even if they ask. I won’t tell them that the china sits in boxes in my mom’s storage room, though Grandma would surely prefer I—the drinking swearing granddaughter—use it daily, risk breaking it, rather than it be encased in cardboard. She knew this was something I was capable of, like showing my emotions as she was unable to. I also won’t ask Robin if Grandma ever told my aunt, her daughter, she loved her at the end. I don’t want to know in case she didn’t. I want to remember Grandma as the one who loved, however parsimoniously that might have been. She may have seemed as hard as the bone china she gave to me, but I bet she knew I was the one capable of seeing the silhouette of love through her the way I could see the shadow of my hand through the plates.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

I'M NOT THE FAVORITE

I'm not the favorite. Kristen is. She's everyone's favorite—Mom's, Callie's, mine, and she was Michelle's, too. If I were going to guess Dad's, it may have been her, too. (Or for him, maybe it was me? I was the most like him, but Kristen is sweeter.)

Before, I never really had a problem with it being known that my Mom has a favorite, but Jane takes issue with it; as such, it has come to bother me more and more. It's not that there *is* a favorite. Surely everyone in every member of all families has a favorite—but maybe it's that there's *one* family favorite. Even knowing my Mom has a favorite isn't what bothers me; it's how open it is and how easily it's commented on that now rankles me.

Kristen does a *lot* more for Mom. Now that Mom's in her mid-70's, it's Kristen who takes her to the hospital (in large part because Mom tells *her* when she doesn't feel well) and Kristen helped pack her things to move from the house I grew up into the condo she lives in now. It was *me* who didn't help. (And *Callie* who didn't help, despite not working and her kids being in school.) It doesn't matter that I was moving at the same time, teaching four college English classes, and doing fulltime coursework for my PhD; it has been mentioned several times (*several* times) that I didn't help pack moving boxes for Mom and I should have.

Kristen is physically more able to help Mom. I'm disabled; she's ablebodied. Throughout much of Kristen's adult life, I was working, and she was not—as was the case when Dad died and Kristen helped Mom clean out the house of Dad's stuff, and when she helped Mom move. She's eleven years younger than me. She was a stay-at-

home mom for many years, was an undergraduate for some of when she helped Mom. I worked a full-time job and two part-time ones when Dad died. But Kristen has done a *million* things for Mom, things I can't do physically, too. I'm grateful for her doing so much more. I'm thankful for each thing she does.

The thing is, I'm not even jealous that Mom has a favorite. Everyone has favorites. Kristen's *my favorite* sister. She gave me my dog Weeties, a thirteen-pound, wheat-colored poodle-terrier mix Kristen rescued from an awful situation where Weeties was malnourished, horribly matted, covered with ticks and fleas, kept outside in a yard with corrosive chemicals that burned her ear terribly, and—the kicker—the owner threw a piece of firewood at Weeties when she barked and injured her so badly that her eye had to be removed. Kristen was the head vet tech where the owner took Weeties. At the end of the second event—the ear—Kristen said she would pay the woman's four-hundred-dollar vet bill if she would give Weeties up. The woman turned around and left the building without even saying goodbye to Weeties.

Since Weeties only had one eye, no one wanted to adopt her. I already had two dogs with one eye—Pudgy and Kookie Doodle—so Kristen knew I had a soft spot for one-eyed dogs. Kristen was going to keep Weeties herself, but the sweet, shy dog didn't like how loud Paul was and that there were little kids in the house that made noise. We concocted a story that Kristen, Paul, and the kids were going to my mom's and I was going to keep Weeties for a few days. A few days passed, then weeks before Guy asked when she was going back. I shrugged, he just shook his head and smiled his crooked

smile. Timid Weeties loved him; he felt the same about her. He even named her Weeties and her original name of Ginger went by the wayside.

Weeties came to be my hiking buddy. I could take her off leash and she stayed on the trail, lagging behind me instead of in front like my other dogs did. She would then burst forward and run to where she was right in front of me, turn in a circle one way, then the other, do a play bow, and take off running to about ten feet ahead of me until I caught up, then she began following me again. She was never afraid to cross the limestone creeks at Bernheim Forest, those creek beds being the reason there are so many bourbon distilleries near there. Weeties ran to me if anyone neared and stayed just off the trail when someone passed.

Weeties lived all the way to when she got to meet Jane. She was a grumpy little old lady by then, but she moved in with me and Grayzie into Jane's life and apartment. Weeties and Grayzie started with me and Guy and lived the whole way to living with me and Jane. That continuity makes them special, and somehow made it okay with Guy's memory when I got together with Jane. That line between my past and present made whole. Kristen led that to happen when she gave me Weeties.

Kristen also came immediately when Guy died, cleaned that day, stayed with me. She slept in bed with me, with Weeties between her and the top of the bed. I wouldn't let her make Weeties move—I was a little out of my mind—and she slept smushed up between me, six dogs, and the wall. She did all this with her two little kids at my mom's house. She also helped me clean out Guy's stuff from his "lair"—the rooms he used downstairs—a year after he died. She was very pregnant at the time. The room had

flooded once and Guy never picked up the layer of clothes on top of the carpet. (To say he was messy is the understatement of the year.) Kristen and I cleared all of that out, plus the dressers, desks, everything. I kept three shirts and some knickknacks, and she hauled everything else away in her truck. It was a hard day and I stopped to cry often. I got mad and threw things. And every time, Kristen put her hand on my shoulder and pulled me into a hug. She's a good, good person, and an excellent sister. It's why she's my favorite.

Kristen does and has done *so much* more for Mom over the years. She also does more for everyone in the family. It's why she's everyone's favorite.

What's ironic regarding Kristen being the favorite is Mom and Mommie O's relationship. The last time I went to California, the people I was with and I stood around eucalyptus trees, and though most people thought they stunk, I breathed in deeply—reminded of the Mentholatum Mommie O' used on her lips, around her mouth, in her nose. Using it is something that my whole family—cousins, aunts, uncles, sisters—do, but first, it started with my grandmother. Even though eucalyptus isn't camphor or menthol, the scents were similar enough to evoke the Mentholatum.

Mommie O' died last week at 103. I'll miss her farm: crawling into the barn's hayloft, sleeping in the little cubby hole upstairs—seemingly always my bed—the horses' and cows' soft noses and warm breath. Who knew cows liked to be petted just as much as horses and dogs?

It's been years since I was there, at Mommie O's farm, because my cousin started living there and I couldn't just go when it was convenient to me. I didn't see Mommie O' much in the last decade, which hurts. We saw each other away from the farm—at family

reunions, which I mostly don't go to because they fall opposite a writing retreat I've attended for years, at smaller family get togethers, which I mostly *do* attend. She didn't remember me anymore the last couple times I saw her. She hadn't even remembered Peggy or my cousin; they cared for her for years and years. She only recalled their husbands, which is always cause for a laugh, but surely hurts my aunt and cousin. I'm sure it hurt my mom when Mommie O' said in a video recording that she lost Mom at the gas station when Mom was young. When questioned more, Mommie O' was adamant that Mom got away from her and she lost her. It's always been a point of contention to Mom—after she moved to Louisville and didn't stay in southcentral Kentucky—that Mommie O' said she got too big for her britches and never came to see her, no matter how often Mom visited.

It's ironic then that Mom has a favorite in Kristen and says it so freely since it bothers her that her mother—Mommie O'—had a favorite in Peggy. It seems weird that Mom makes it so obvious—by saying it frequently, not just once—that Kristen is her favorite.

When Kristen being the favorite started bothering me isn't really Jane saying it's problematic; instead, it began with the fact that I have only talked to my mom on the phone once in the last eight months. The reason Mom called was to tell me that hospice was called in for Mommie O'. Jane came into the kitchen when she figured out it was Mom because she just knew that someone had died. And, essentially, she was right. When Mommie O' died a few days later, the news came via text.

Kristen talks to Mom on the phone regularly—at least once a week, and daily when more is going on with Mom. I call Mom, but it goes to voicemail and she texts her

replies. I love texting with Mom and Kristen, and we have our own private text chat, just the three of us, in addition to any texting we do individually with one other.

But I miss my mom, our “dates” we used to have. Going out to eat or hanging out at her place. I miss being able to tell her what’s wrong, what’s right. And with her age and her health, I’m afraid she’ll disappear, slipping away like the soft tinkling of her windchimes and I won’t have seen her again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

KRISTEN AND DAD

Months after the night Dad shot himself, Kristen and I sat in Mom's kitchen after working in the house. Mom was napping. She took a lot of naps then. We all did—what we'd been through was exhausting. Callie and I both took every Friday off for six weeks, which we only realized when we went to see Dad's headstone in the cemetery on the year anniversary after his death. That's one of my three or four trips there. I don't put much stock into someone still being in their grave. I can talk to Dad anywhere, and did for years—still do sometimes. Who knows if he is there to listen, but I've needed him; he wasn't there in person, so I talked to him anyway—from my bedroom, living room, at work, in my car. I bawled while driving a lot. I was alone and thought about Dad dying without anyone, since I didn't know of Jane being there for close to two decades. I still cry hard occasionally, about both Dad and Guy.

That day at Mom's house—no longer Mom and Dad's house, something that took years to stop saying—Kristen said it was terrible not knowing what was going after Dad shot himself. She paced her apartment waiting for Paul. She cried hard when she asked the old lady across the hall to take care of the fish and Labrat, her pet rat, a rescue from the lab where she was studying to be a vet tech.

“She never wanted to take care of Labrat,” Kristen said, “which is why he usually went to Mom's with me, but this time. Well, this time she didn't have a choice. I figured she'd either feed him or not. I couldn't worry about it. I just had to go.”

“Did she take care of him?”

Kristen laughed. “Yeah. I knew she would.” She picked up her tan chihuahua, Caki, who she took with her everywhere. The night Dad died, her dogs—Caki and Toto, a black and tan chihuahua, had been in Paul’s car outside the hospital.

She said a year ago that he checked on them every hour, which is when she told me that Mom eventually told her what happened when Kristen was freaking out so bad on the phone.

“She did? I didn’t know,” I said.

“Yeah. She said she went into the hall at the hospital to tell me.”

“Like we didn’t already know what happened.”

That afternoon, Kristen stopped, picked up a bowl of water for Caki and put the dog and the water on the table.

I asked, “What happened when you got to the hospital?”

“You don’t remember?” she asked.

“No. I wouldn’t have asked if I did.” I elbowed her gently. We were sitting that close, thinking we’d upset Mom if we talked too loudly, like she could overhear us. Mom slept hard and we were far away from her, so it was unlikely we would wake her, but we still didn’t want to risk being overheard.

Kristen worked hard helping Mom, which was why she was there. She helped clean out Dad’s office, Dad’s stuff in the house. We all hated doing those things. Mom *had* to move his stuff from his office, but she was getting rid of his things from the house fast, too. It’s like he would disappear. In his office, we sisters put our names on things we wanted, things to remember Dad by. I have Humpty Dumpty and Don Quixote ceramic

and metal statues—symbols that meant a lot to Dad because he used them and Alice in Wonderland in legal arguments quite a bit. He didn't have any Alice in Wonderland things, at least that I saw, but he loved her and the novel. I have a half-sleeve of Alice in Wonderland tattoos, largely to remember him by.

Each of us got a hanging stained-glass woman. They were gorgeous pieces of art. Dad had four of them, one representing each of us as legal muses. Not knowing which likeness he considered which of us, we put our names on the one we wanted. Mine is Lady Justice—a woman who has long reddish-brown hair, which I had at the time, who is holding the Scales of Justice. Aside from the stained-glass women, anything that was expensive, Mom sold. The inexpensive things we didn't want, she gave away. She wanted to give the law books to UofL's Law School Library, but they didn't want them. All that money Dad had invested, all the work we did putting in the yearly inserts with updated laws, and Mom could hardly get rid of them. Everything had become electronic.

Kristen and I sat lost in thought before she answered my question. "As soon as I got there, Mom took me back to see him since he probably wouldn't be alive much longer."

"She went with you?"

"Yeah. She didn't go with you?"

"No, she made me go alone." I stopped. "Wait, no, Guy was with me. He held my hand the whole time. I held Dad's hand and told him it was okay, that he could go after you saw him. I don't know if those things matter, but I thought maybe they did." I looked at Kristen, then at my Hardees' Muppets glass that was full of water, which was sweating onto the kitchen table, and took a drink. "Guy held his other hand or stroked his arm,

which meant—means—a lot to me. Our hands were kind of weirdly over Dad, but we both wanted to be right there. I was surprised Guy did that, but he'd been part of my life so long by then . . .” I glanced at her, then back at my glass. “Dad’s head was bleeding.”

“Yeah, when I saw him, too. I hated all those bandages. He looked like a mummy.”

“He had bandages on?”

“He didn’t when you saw him?”

“No.” What I saw had been awful to see; I didn’t want to traumatize her more than how she saw him. I didn’t tell anyone in the family what he looked like for more than a decade. When I told Mom all those years later, she didn’t believe me because I hadn’t told her when it happened. But my therapist remembered. She said it was shocking enough to stay with her and be horrified by. “His head wasn’t wrapped,” I said.

“What did it look like?” Kristen asked. “Could you see the bullet hole?”

“Yeah. It was horrible. I can’t talk about it.” I thought of how he looked when I saw him, my last memory of him. “I wish Mom had gone with me instead of Guy.” I played with the condensation on my glass.

“Did you tell her that?”

“Nah. She didn’t offer. She just told me and Guy to go. I didn’t think about wanting to go with Mom more until later. When I would have asked her to go later, I didn’t want to see him again. I hate that that’s what I see when I think of him. I can hardly remember what he looks like other than that.”

Caki licked the condensation off my glass.

“Yeah, me too,” Kristen said. “It’s the only way I can picture him.”

“Ditto. I can see the way he looked in memories of photos, so can fill in how he looked at different points of my life, but that’s it.” Now, almost twenty years later, that’s still the case. But I can still see the cracked, worn brown leather, illustrated copy of *Alice in Wonderland* he read to me; that smelled perfect, like must and vanilla. It was soft, heavy, and perfect in my hands.

SECTION SIX
SHIT HITTING THE FAN

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

THE EDGE OF SANITY

I have twice been lost to myself and didn't want to live. The first time it happened, in 1990, I came out of a deep depression, went into a mania, and got married within three months of meeting Lee. Another depression came along not long after. I'd hoped marriage would heal me, but it didn't banish my sadness just because someone had promised to love me throughout life, which seemed an ever-shortening amount of time, and I was drowning in a pool of tears. When I'd been as low eight months earlier, I strung my dorm room with dim Christmas lights and listened to Chopin and Tchaikovsky in the near dark. The difference now was only the circumstances: that I was married to someone I barely knew and living in an apartment in an area of town I hated. I turned the window unit up high so it was loud enough to block out the excited shouts of the neighborhood children playing and cold enough for blankets.

I stayed in bed covered with a navy blue comforter with peach flowers—flowers that matched the ones on my knee-length cotton wedding dress. I was angry at the bright sun and that it was gorgeous outside, but I'd fallen down a dark hole and didn't know how to climb out. Lee was no help. He stroked my hair, called me “babyhead,” was sweet, but couldn't reach me.

When I was sixteen, the phone rang on a Sunday afternoon. “Steve Bradfield killed himself,” a friend said. I crumpled cross-legged to my parents' bedroom floor and stared straight ahead. He was a popular kid in our high school class. He'd shot himself. He

wouldn't go to college—the release from high school and a tense home life that I waited for daily.

I got to his visitation five minutes before it was scheduled to begin. The funeral home was dark, and no other kids from school had arrived. It was my first visit to a funeral home; I found the different rooms and quietness daunting. When I located Steve's room, the accordion door was closed. I pulled it back slowly, not knowing I shouldn't. Steve's mother leaned over his body, sobbing, stroking his hair, his face. She bent to where she was nearly lying on top of him, had almost crawled into his casket so that both of her feet were off the ground.

As I drew the door shut, someone—his aunt maybe—looked up and saw me. She walked toward me, but I ran out the main door, slamming into classmates. I kept running. On the drive home, I stopped my car in a deserted parking lot and wept because I knew his pain, had felt that low. After seeing Steve's mom, I knew I could never do that to my mom, dad, or sisters, couldn't make them want to die and descend into the ground with me.

When I considered handfuls of pills that summer after getting married, I called my mom who got me an emergency psychiatric appointment. Getting out of bed was difficult. My body was heavy, sluggish; moving was like walking underwater. The doctor didn't do much, but he made me promise not to kill myself. I did, but didn't mean it. Years later, when Guy gave the same pledge to his psychiatrist. He made it for years, but still jumped from the roof of a twenty-six story building to his death. When people are suicidal, lying is the only way to make that promise. I wanted to mean it, but didn't.

I said the psychiatrist did little, but he scheduled me two days later with a psychiatric resident, Dr. Jackie. She needed to treat one patient for two full years as a part of her residency requirements. That patient was me.

I'd learned just before beginning with Dr. Jackie that I had temporal lobe epilepsy, which mirrors bipolar disorder in the behaviors and psychiatric issues it causes. I had no control of myself during the seizures. Before I learned I had TLE at twenty-two, nobody believed I couldn't stop them. Once medical tests showed it was epilepsy, I struggled with my identity and wondered "am I temporal lobe epilepsy?" The more I learned, the more I realized it defined my personality. It gave me hypergraphia—an uncontrollable need to write. I have the other traits, too: hyper- or hyposexuality—depending on when it has been in my life, hypersociability, hallucinations, nervousness, irritability, depression. All of Geschwind Syndrome. I had every peculiarity of it. I wondered if the epilepsy and accompanying syndrome trapped me, created who I was, and if I was all right with that. I liked the heightened awareness, sensitivity, visions of imaginary people and worlds though, and feared they would go away with seizure medication. I created friends and new places and experiences in my hallucinations. These things made me unique, defined who I was and formed the world I lived in, where I felt most myself and at home. I worried about becoming boring, too, because despite not liking that I was teased and avoided for my seizures, it was in my visions that I was most at home. I created worlds that made sense to me when the one where actual people lived didn't. The places in my mind, which were full of imagined friends—both fantastical and realistic—were where I was accepted despite my seizures.

Losing the illusions of the fictional people and creations was rough because that's where I was *me*, but I decided to try medicine to leave the misery of depression. I was put on Tegretol, an anticonvulsant that stopped most of the seizures. Thinking about temporal lobe epilepsy and how I was before medication takes me to times when it was hard to continue living, to move, to leave the bed. It makes me feel crazy, in part because I know the TLE still affects who I am as a person. I feel like I'm faking my way through the life I have today; I'd be that same person if I stopped taking meds.

I have another secret: I have bipolar disorder, too. Like Dad. It's genetic, so I shouldn't be surprised. I don't tell people that. Instead, I only say temporal lobe epilepsy, even here. Mania, I said a couple of times, but never bipolar. Why don't I tell? Because I've had a seat at a mad tea party, one still on reserve for me if I stop taking my medication. And because when people who have known me for years and think I'm level-headed find out I'm bipolar, every time I'm happy I'm "manic," if I'm sad I'm "depressed." If I do something wacky, it's the bipolar. I'm defined by Geschwind Syndrome, and people define me because of movie versions of bipolar disorder.

For the two years I saw Dr. Jackie beginning in 1990, we spoke of my depression, epilepsy, husband, and mood swings. She prescribed an antidepressant, nothing more.

I was surprised to see her in 2005 when I went with a social work client to a psychiatry appointment with "Dr. Davis" at the mental health section of the agency I worked for. Dr. Davis turned out to be Dr. Jackie Davis. After my client left, I closed the door so we were alone for a moment.

"You have a new last name," I said.

“Divorced. So do you.”

“Same.”

“Good.”

“You don’t go by Dr. Jackie anymore.”

“I didn’t then. Only with you. We thought it would make you feel more comfortable.” She played with her pen, waiting. I’d forgotten she had a supervisor overseeing her then. That was the “we.”

I rushed, felt self-conscious, awkward. Why had I stayed? “I have bipolar disorder in addition to the temporal lobe epilepsy.” I blurted it out, was immediately ashamed. I felt crazy. I was at my workplace, talking to a coworker, though thankfully in a different area of the agency. Was it confidential? Should I have told her? “I’m doing great, though.” I paused, waited for her to say something. She sat smiling.

“We always thought you had it.” She was satisfied, her theory played out, but I wished she had diagnosed me when I was her patient, that she had not let me get suicidal again seven years later.

That second time I didn’t want to keep living, in 1997, I was teaching creative writing and English composition at the UofL. It followed two rough years during my time in Ohio. My assistantship at Miami University wasn’t teaching so I was immediately judged as inferior in intellect and writing ability by classmates who even told me that at the program orientation. I was bullied. Notes were put in my mailbox saying as I was weird, stupid, and fat; written student responses to my stories in workshops focused on me being a poor writer, a loser, and crazy instead of giving writing feedback. Copies of these had

to be turned in to the professor, which I suspect didn't match what I was given. I never went to my advisor or the professors about it because to do that would be to admit a weakness, to risk getting picked on worse if something was said to other students since that's what happened in elementary, middle, and high school. It would be asking an authority figure to take up for me in an already unsupportive environment. Workshops there were cutthroat, and it felt like even the professors competed with the students; little encouragement was given and critiques from them to my classmates and I were often brutal. I decided Guy and I had to move back to Louisville from Ohio early. We commuted hours for the last six weeks of my final semester because I was in the process of losing my mind and my *self*.

My bipolar disorder mixes in depression even when manic. When fully depressed, the lows were worse, but even the mixed part was bad. One day the summer after returning to Louisville, I was in the highest mania ever—a happy time when I was sexually promiscuous and spent thousands of dollars I didn't have. I put in a garden that took up most of the front and back yards that I never kept up after that; took down a wooden jungle gym in the backyard with Michelle, an axe, and a hatchet; and even had sex with Guy's brother and a friend of mine from my undergrad, despite having been with Guy for three years. To me none of these things seemed wrong until after I came out of the mania, then the repercussions were awful. When I came down, I immediately went into depression with debts I couldn't afford: full credit cards, bounced checks, and a cheated-on boyfriend whom I'd spontaneously broken up with. That I had treated Guy badly was the worst part. When we got back together after a year, he always felt some distrust

toward me, which hurt, and I couldn't change it no matter that I never behaved that way again.

It was the nastiest depression of my lifetime. I wanted to die, but wasn't sure how many of what kind of pills it would take to do it. If I was going to try, I wanted it to work. I was supposed to be teaching, but I couldn't get up so couldn't make it to class. I was in a different bed than the other times, in a different house, covered with a different comforter, but drowning in the same feelings.

Because I'm looked at as relatively "normal" now, this is something else I never tell: right then, unable to banish the suicidal desires, I was admitted into the psychiatric unit of a hospital, a locked unit, and put on suicide watch. I couldn't have shoes—no shoelaces were allowed. I wore no-slip socks until Guy brought me house slippers. I wasn't allowed to leave my room except to eat. There was no socializing in a common area. All I did was sleep and once a day a psychiatrist visited me. I begged to go home to my dogs and Guy, but the doctor wouldn't let me. After a couple of days, I was moved off the suicide watch floor to a lower level of psychiatric care. I still couldn't wear real shoes, but there was a living room with a television. I could have notebooks—no spiral ones, though, since the wire could be used as a weapon against myself or someone else—and I could have books. I went to group therapy, coping classes, and because I was coming out of the depression slightly and wasn't suicidal anymore with my new meds, I didn't have to face drastic treatments like electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) the way my roommate did, the way Callie had a few years before. Callie's memory was so affected by ECT, she didn't know how to do basic things like find her pajamas. She still has a damaged memory and isn't able remember most things that happen to her now or any

time in the past. She revises life in ways that don't make sense, are often wholly invented even though she had ECT twenty years ago.

My roommate in the psych ward lost her husband and children to ECT, and they lost her. They came to see her. I was in the room. My roommate begged me to stay because she didn't know the unfamiliar man standing there and she was afraid he would hurt her. She screamed and the nurses and aides came to take the "strangers" to the common area since they shouldn't have come to the room anyway. But her husband left altogether. He said to me, "I've lost my wife. She's gone. That's not her, that's just her body." She tried to kill herself that night—may have been successful—with me in the room. I slept through much of it because I was given a shot of medicine in my hip when I woke up. I remember carts, noises, flashes of nurses, doctors, shouts, light and no light. I heard the scream of electro-currents generating and the thud of release of electric energy from the paddles of the crash cart. I had dreams of it that lasted years. She wasn't in the room in the morning, and when I asked about her, I got terse replies about crash carts, emergencies, doctors, scaring them, and how the staff would never be the same. I asked if she was okay, if she was alive, but they wouldn't answer me, just looked away. I became determined to get better, to never go back there, to never get ECT, to not die that way.

I was released from the inpatient unit after several days, but only with the agreement I would go to outpatient psychiatric treatment every day, all day, for a month. I didn't know how to tell my supervisor at the university about it. I was twenty-six, so young, and was excited to have a teaching job, even if it was part-time. My composition class was at night, and I made arrangements to see my creative writing students at a coffeehouse in

the evenings, but the English Department found out I wasn't holding their regular classes at the university when a student who couldn't attend at night complained. Not knowing what to say, I told the truth, held out a letter from my psychiatrist to my supervisor and the Chair of the English Department explaining why I'd missed class. They looked at me like I was crazy after reading it. I was insane, and now they knew it. Even though I wasn't suicidal anymore, I felt numb, too stupefied to feel anything. I finished the semester, then went to teach at the community college.

Outpatient hospitalization was eight hours, five days a week, which was grueling. I was still depressed and was doozy from new meds that made me exhausted. I barely had energy, but had to be there at seven in the morning to see my psychiatrist. The days were intense, full of group therapy, relaxation techniques, and individual therapy. Though I wanted talk therapy, the hospital staff wanted me in art therapy because they felt I clicked with the art therapist, Sean. While I enjoyed the art, I wasn't getting much out of it as therapy because I had a crush on the art therapist and hated that he knew how messed up I was. I wouldn't tell him things boiling inside or talk much about my relationship with Guy because I'd been so horrible to him. Though I was awful because I was manic, it didn't change what I'd done that to him. I hadn't yet admitted to sleeping with his brother, and never did about my friend, but he knew both; we danced around it, but never discussed it the rest of his life. Instead, in therapy, I drew with colored pencils and talked about the drawings. Guy and I also sketched when he came for couple's art therapy, even though we weren't actually a couple any longer. I kept those pictures for years until they bothered me: they were a reminder I had been hospitalized, so I tore them into pieces,

stuffed them into a garbage bag, and threw it away outside. I didn't want them in the house anymore because we drew cheerful pictures of our future life together. Even as I drew them, I wondered if Guy would move away, but didn't want to ask in front of Sean. I never knew the rules of art therapy to know how much talking was okay, and didn't want Sean to know I thought Guy would leave and I couldn't stand myself enough to be alone. Guy played along and we made happy drawings that convinced Sean we'd always stay together, even though we hadn't discussed anything and I didn't know where things stood.

In outpatient psychiatric hospitalization, there was a woman my age, Riva. She talked the whole time we had group therapy. I complained to my psychiatrist, and since he was also her doctor, he said he would speak to her the next day. He also talked to the therapists because I wasn't the only one who had complained.

Even though she drove me crazy in therapy, Riva and I ate lunch together every day. She was nice enough, and we were the only people in our twenties there; everyone else was older.

While we ate, she said, "Sometimes I think about killing myself."

I nodded. "Me, too." It was why I was there. Why most of us were there.

"I'd do it with a gun. I'd kill my kids and then myself. They shouldn't live without a mother."

Her words shocked me silent. The edges of my brain, which seemed like a wound beginning to heal, felt the scab ripped off and bled anew.

We ate quietly for a while, then I said, "You need to tell your therapist."

She took a bite of an apple. “Yeah, maybe.”

I didn’t know how to tell anyone, but knew I should.

In our group therapy session after lunch, Riva said to the therapists, in front of everyone, “I imagine killing my children. I can see them soaked in blood. It colors my mind red. Then I’d shoot myself and blackness would take me finally.”

The room was quiet. None of us knew how to respond. The counselor leading the group dismissed everyone, but asked Riva to stay. As I left the room, security guards moved in. I didn’t see Riva again and asked my doctor the next day what happened.

“I can’t say specifically, but if someone is a danger to self or others, she has to return to inpatient care.” He smiled at me. “You should know that.”

I nodded, embarrassed I hadn’t remembered that given my MEd in Counseling Psych.

“I hear you helped,” he said. He spoke low, barely audible.

“What?”

“You got her to tell the therapists.”

I reddened. Had I overstepped?

“She told everybody. She’s mad at you, but I’m proud,” he said. He smiled and thumped my knee with my chart.

I’m now on a cocktail of medications to treat my bipolar disorder and temporal lobe epilepsy. Each comes with side effects. I was once on a medication that made me wet the bed because I was so sleepy and out of it. A different medicine made me gain a hundred pounds within six months. Another made me unable to write for the nine years I was on

it. I should have told my doctor immediately each time, but didn't because each medicine took me further out of depression and closer to sanity. It takes time to find the right meds, but I finally have—at least for now. I'm on six medications including an antipsychotic. It's hard to admit that, difficult to say I've had hallucinations as an adult caused by my bipolar disorder and epilepsy. Because of these I've spent time on the Starship Enterprise leaning against a bulkhead, talking to Captain Picard, Deanna Troi, and Riker. We made fun of Wesley Crusher. When he walked by, I went back to my body. I've had a recurring vision of being naked, twirling in the blue-black of space surrounded by stars. I've entered into books and hung out with characters, which made the Thursday Next books by Jasper Fforde, where the main character is a book detective who enters books to interact with the characters, intense, fun, and disconcerting. I spent a lot of time in books. *In* books—with the characters, having conversations with them, being their friend or their enemy. They were real friends many times in life, and if I think about it, I can will myself back into the books, bring on a seizure-like trance and make my neurons fire through those familiar pathways the seizures created. These occurrences were real the first time. Are they now? They still feel like it.

The epilepsy also caused strange beliefs. Like the Illuandas. I invented all of it, but I believed in them. And when I told the counselors at my elementary school, they wanted to send me to the psych ward then—at ten—for these unreal states and visions that epilepsy brought. The Illuandas were kind to me and liked me when other people didn't. I enjoyed being with them, which might have been part of the appeal of visiting them. My time with them while in my house or playing outside was as real as the spitballs hurled toward me or books knocked out of my hands by kids at school. Teachers

didn't stop the kids, said I brought it all on myself, which my parents echoed, and is another reason I never said anything to the professors in grad school about being bullied.

I've also visited with faeries and gnomes. In these visions, the faeries were much nicer than the gnomes, who looked similar to garden gnomes, but were about three feet tall. The gnomes could be jerks and short-fused; the faeries sometimes played tricks, but not on me. They listened to me tell them about kids at school hanging signs on my back or throwing me in trashcans.

My dad laughed about my stories of adventures, fairylands, and lands of curiosity, but my mom, who heard them all day when I wasn't at school, grew tired of them and let me know I should keep them secret. Somehow they were dirty, things not to be told or shared.

Those things were as real to me as going to class or work is now. Medicine made me realize they didn't actually occur, but they feel like memories. I can reflect on them like I can my actual trips to New Mexico, Utah, and California. The memories of hallucinations live inside me, and while I know intellectually they didn't happen, part of my brain doesn't know, doesn't realize, and truly thinks they happened.

I wish I could say I have been one hundred percent hallucination-free since beginning medication, or at least what I'm on now, but I'd be lying. Nine years ago I didn't put one of my anticonvulsants in my weekly pill organizer correctly. I didn't realize I'd put them in for once a day instead of twice until I was having small seizures many times an hour. I kept thinking I was going somewhere new when it was the office building where I'd worked a dozen years; that I was having conversations with coworkers that had happened

before; that I was on the precipice of having an epiphany about the meaning of the universe. These happened all day, each caused by seizures. By the following week, I'd fixed it. The hallucinations stopped because the seizures did.

Another time, six years ago, I was up too late and had gone twenty-three hours without my medicine. I felt myself slump back into my body—hard. I'd been flying in the black night of glowing stars and the bookcase was melting and glowing. I quickly took my medications, but the memory is there, is indelible. It happened to me, even though it wasn't real.

About six months later, I told a client, a young woman who loves to write, "I'll always keep you in notebooks." Then I had the intense *déjà vu*, the feeling it had happened before, caused by a seizure. That one when I saw us in a boiler room where we were having the same conversation. I said the same words in a deep underground room with pipes. We were there right then. As the seizure and hallucination were ending, I had a sudden understanding of the cosmos. It was powerful, and I tried to remember what I had discovered. My body slumped back into itself and moved quickly forward and to the side. I translate this as that I left my body where it was, but my self, my soul, had been projected elsewhere. When I return after these times, my spirit never hits my body just right and it jerks into place, causing a quick bounce. I held onto the wall with one hand and her with the other when I jolted into my body and couldn't move. I told the people around I was fine, tried to smile and laugh it off while they suggested I sit down and drink some water.

One night six years ago, as I lay in bed, I was sure Guy was headed down the walkway into the house coming home from work. I knew exactly what he was wearing,

how he held his backpack, saw the crooked smile on his face, and smelled his soap. I was excited to see him and got up to meet him. I realized it was a hallucination when I took a step toward the door. It was a new experience with Guy, who had been dead almost seven years. I had several more of these before I was able to see my psychiatrist who upped my bipolar medication. I knew I was hypo-manic (a small mania), but despite the racing thoughts and being afraid to tell anyone for fear of not being accepted, that the mania of bipolar caused the hallucinations that let me see Guy again was lovely.

Guy was suicidal for many years before he died. He'd often gone to the lip of the twenty-six story Humana Building where he was a security guard to jump before he went through with it. He was defeated by life, and by himself every time he didn't actually jump.

When he began having night terrors in 2006, dreams that were eerily like mine before seizure meds, he got even more serious about not living anymore. Near the end of 2007, one late afternoon, he was sitting in my favorite chair, an ugly wingback in yellow and orange velour, and said, "You know, my mom just said I have temporal lobe epilepsy."

I'd been half-listening, but my head popped up. "What?"

"Yeah, I had those tests when I was a kid, but she only gave me medicine a little while. Then she decided to take me off and to never tell me apparently." We let that sit, fill the room, tried it on to see how it fit. When the light in the room turned slanted with evening, it refocused our eyes on each other.

"Well, what now?" I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t see a point. My mom wants to die. All she talked about today was suicide. How does that make me feel?”

“Shitty, I bet.” I walked over and sat on the arm of the chair. I touched his head. The physical sweetnesses were things we’d only started doing again in the few years before he died. We’d been happier together in that time, too, though he was in anguish when we were apart. We sat quietly a minute. He stroked the silver-gray back of our dog Pudgy who was in his lap. “So the epilepsy?” I asked.

“Yeah. I don’t know,” he said.

We decided he’d tell his psychiatrist, who asked that he find a neurologist who would see him without insurance, then she’d make the referral. No neurologists in town would. Would he be alive if he’d been put on seizure meds? I don’t know. I can’t. I also can’t put much energy into wondering about it or if things would be different if the Affordable Care Act had already existed; the outcome can’t change now. I’d be lying if I said it didn’t cross my mind, though, far more often than I’d like to admit.

The hallucinations of Guy coming toward the house and the one in the boiler room were remarkable and fascinating. The visions TLE and bipolar disorder cause ecstatic feelings of floating and flying, but they also scare me because I didn’t like myself before I was medicated and a lot of people didn’t like me. I was strange and believed in things that weren’t real. I lived in my head most of the time and my seizures scared people away. I’ve asked my mom to describe my seizures and she won’t. “You were there,” she says, but I wasn’t. I don’t know what I looked like from the outside, how long they lasted, or exactly what my body did during them. I’ve had TLE my whole life and had so many

seizures in front of her that I don't know if she knew when I had the smaller ones. I'm not even sure if she knew what my normal times were, or if to her there *were* no normal times.

Last month she said, "I didn't much like that Elizabeth." It burned. I'm the same person, aren't I? Yes. And no. That's why even with the magic I experience unmedicated, I'm afraid to be that person—the one who never knew when I'd have a seizure, go manic, or get depressed. Life then was terrifying and disturbing. Having those new hallucinations after having none for so long made me realize how tenuous my hold on reality is, how much I need my medications. And how though I love the visions, I'll stay on meds because I'm not willing to lose myself in an insane wonderland of hallucinations, déjà vus, and seizures again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

SHRINE

For a couple years before Dad died, every time Callie and Dad were together, they fought. Horrible arguments with screaming then her stomping off and leaving.

But when he died, killed himself like she wanted to do, she made a shrine for him that hung on her living room wall. It was a wooden shelf with pictures, candles, and small items. One picture was sepia. He's a little boy with a round head, and eyes pale as glacier ice held to the light as he sits on a pony. Both he and the pony have on cowboy hats. Another photo of him is when he was in the Air Force. He wears his dress uniform, those water blue eyes look into the distance, intensely, but has a slight smile on his lips. It's a photo he paid a professional photographer to take. He's handsome, regal as the eagle tattoo on his forearm, the one he had redone shortly before his death, after I began getting more tattoos myself that he hated and liked equally. It's no wonder looking at the photo that he was engaged seven times before meeting Mom. He broke up with each one of them shortly before the wedding, each one planned but not gone through with, courage I wish I'd had regarding my wedding with Lee. My mom was the one Dad married, and the one he stayed with until he died. Another photo is of him in the 70's rounding the corner of the old house wearing white shoes, a wide tie, a pastel suit that looked like a quilt without stuffing with wide lapels, his curly, dark hair longer than he wore any other time, light glinting off his sunglasses that looked like they held the whole sun. It was at my fourth birthday. He came home from work early, my day was made, but Callie swears it was her birthday. The date on my copy of that picture in my mom's handwriting notes that—August 16th, 1971, my fourth birthday.

Callie holds on to the remnants of Dad, the same way Guy's mom did to him. Holding things—photos, trinkets, papers—because they didn't hold onto those relationships in life.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

THAT DAY, ONE YEAR LATER

“I’m spending Thursday with you,” Callie said.

That Thursday would be the one-year anniversary of Guy’s suicide. I wanted to stay in bed, curled with my dogs, hidden beneath a thick blue comforter, reading with a flashlight. Callie didn’t often reach out, though, so I said okay.

She chose eight a.m., then picked me up at my house at eleven. “Alex’s preschool is awful, so I told the director everything that’s wrong from eight until half-an-hour ago,” Callie said. “She was dumbstruck. It was great.”

Of course she did. There was probably nothing wrong with the preschool. “I wanted to sleep today.” It was all I could manage. I wanted to yell.

“You don’t know how important this was.” By that point, we were in her car since she had pulled up and texted she was there. She drove a Honda Accord. It was a good car, but she sped up, and her tires skidded on the damp pavement through the road’s curves. She’d had more wrecks than anyone I knew, and I grew worried.

Callie sees in black and white. There are no grays with her. She has never felt indifferent about anything. She never “liked” me. I was her nemesis or her BFF. We’d gotten along better since Guy died, though. She’d known him since high school, as I had since middle, and he’d been part of our family for a long time. She felt Guy’s loss and pulled me toward her since I was the tangible link to him.

At Starbucks, the smell was of good strong coffee. I ordered, then sat in an overstuffed green-patterned chair in the corner away from other customers.

“I was going to buy yours,” Callie said, though she had let someone order between us. She liked to take credit for things she said she meant to do, but hadn't. Her hair was really short and she wore light pink fitted sweater, jeans, and black boots. I wore the sweatpants and sweatshirt I'd slept in.

By the time we spoke for an hour, she thought I was her closest ally.

“What would you have done today if it wasn't for me?” she asked.

“I was meeting Kristen at two and having dinner with Mom.” I paused. “Still am.”

Callie nodded tightly. We were quiet for a while, then her heels clicked away to get a refill. I heard the barista. “We only give refills when you get a mug.”

“You're giving me a refill. Do you know who I am?” Callie worked for a high-ranking state official, which she felt everyone should know. Rather than argue, the barista filled her cup. “Vanilla,” Callie said. “Sugar-free,” she shouted when he almost added regular vanilla syrup. When she came back, she was livid. She was—and is—always angry. She talked about the barista loudly, though he was only ten feet away.

“I hated grad school,” I said. An offering. “I was miserable there.”

She crossed her arms—something I've since learned means run fast and get out.

“Dad said I wasn't smart enough to go to Law School,” she said.

“He wouldn't say that. You must have misunderstood.” But he had, only I didn't know that then.

She stood up. “He said in a room full of people that I couldn't get through Law School because I don't like to read.” She was loud. People stared. I looked away, and she sat back down.

“You barely got into grad school,” Callie said.

“What?”

“Your GRE scores. Mom told me.”

“I got nearly perfect scores in verbal and analytical.” I closed my eyes. I shouldn’t have said that. She stood again. “I only did so-so in math,” I said.

“Dad hated you!” She was yelling. “And he thought you were disgusting because you had an abortion.”

I was quiet. I wanted to go away. I wanted to be in bed. I closed my eyes. She sat down in her chair, leaned back, and crossed her arms again. Other customers were watching. The barista made eye contact with me and raised concerned eyebrows.

“I was seventeen. I was thirty-three when Dad died, and he never hated me.” Was I too quiet? Had she heard me?

“Guy hated you, too,” she said. “What you did with his brother. . .”

That was my biggest regret. It still is. But I couldn’t change it.

“He killed himself because of you.” Her eyes squinted, and wrinkles showed at their edges.

“He did not.” I was quiet, then louder. “They didn’t hate me.”

“They did. You know it.” She smiled.

“Callie, they didn’t hate me.” I sounded like myself now. Callie stood up and strode out of the coffee shop without me, leaving me there.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

PROWLING BOOKSTORES WITH DAD

When I was five or six, there were two books that I carried with me from room to room to room to outside. Lay with in the hidey-hole. Climbed the tree in the Reed's yard with. Both these books changed me in ways difficult to describe. Many books have altered me over the years—usually by the story's impact on me, like the *Little House on the Prairie* and *Nancy Drew* books I loved as a kid—but these two allowed me to see that there were other people as weird as me. One of the books was *Arm in Arm* by Remy Charlip. It features people, and octopuses, and many colorful imaginary beings. The colors and people and things are bright, twisted, and psychedelic. The other book is *The Ice Cream Coot and Other Rare Birds* by Arnold Lobel. It contains birds made of other things, like the ice cream cone coot, which is made of ice cream cones. They're created by sockets, lightbulbs, my favorite—the pencil—and many other household items. Both books are colorful, unique, and intoxicating, reminiscent of the early 1970s when they were written and illustrated. It's no surprise that I have tattoos from *Arm in Arm* that wrap around my shin and calf on one leg, and on the other one, done the same way, is a parade of rare birds from *The Ice Cream Cone Coot*.

It was Mom who bought these books, and who took Callie and me to the library, my favorite place to go. We went every week, at least once. Every summer there was a contest about reading a certain number of books. The librarians never believed I read as many books as I did, but I was always reading. It was an escape from my life filled with nightmares—oh the nightmares—kids picking on me, and my mom fussing at me. (She hates when I say she yelled. She prefers fussed.)

It was with Dad, though, that I went to bookstores. We had a favorite: Hawley-Cooke. Louisville's bookstore scene went way down when they closed about a decade ago. Dad would buy me any book I wanted. Within reason, but reason was about ten books. He liked when I bought books older than my grade level, which is what I chose at the school library, too. The trips to Hawley-Cooke continued throughout my childhood and then adulthood with and without him. I had permission to put anything I wanted to on his Hawley-Cooke account. I remember one month when I was twenty-one or so, I charged three hundred dollars worth of books. He wasn't happy because I didn't tell him in advance of getting the bill, but he would never tell me not to buy books, so I didn't really get fussed (that word again) at.

One afternoon Dad was going to take me to Hawley-Cooke, but kept piddling around the house. I asked him repeatedly to take me. Ultimately he said no; because I bugged him so much, he decided to punish me. He must have been in a stable spot with his bipolar disorder because he only found it funny instead of getting mad. My punishment was to get the Oxford English Dictionary—we had the two-volume one with a magnifying glass because the words were so small—and look up the word harpy. From there, I had to write a report on why I shouldn't be a harpy. I was mad when I looked up the word, but even I could see the humor in it, though I was hard-pressed to admit that to him then. I've never mentioned this particular punishment to Jane, though I don't know why. She would find it hilarious and laugh, and she would feel seen and like she and my dad would have gotten along great.

It's really odd how much they are alike. Jane doesn't send me to my room to write reports, but I'm sure she wishes she could. We love each other, but I get on her nerves

badly. It's just me being *me* and I bug her. I wish that weren't the case, but it is. I probably got on Dad's nerves, too, but he *could* punish me.

At bookstores, no matter my age, we separated and would see each other periodically, peering around the corners of bookshelves, him grinning at me. He loved that I loved books. I loved that *he* loved books. It's something I'll always have with Dad, a special thing just between us. As I got older, we began going to other bookstores: dusty ones with used books that smelled great. The clean, glue smell of new ones—the lignin vanilla and musty scent of old ones—I love them both. I open books, old ones off my bookshelves and new ones both, and inhale deeply, holding the scents inside me, flooded with memories of Dad.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ONE DAY IT WILL HAPPEN

When I dream of Callie and Michelle, they cost me jobs. They steal my partners. They get me kicked out of school. Other times, I dream of me and Callie playing in the creek behind our house, searching for crawdads, picking them up to watch them pinch, pinch, pinch, their claws extended like tiny versions of the lobsters they resemble. I dream of making potions of wild onions, water, mud, dandelions, ginkgo leaves, moss, grass, and daffodils in the huge cast iron pot of my mom's; of playing in the five-acre yard across the street from our childhood home, where the Reeds lived in the old plantation manor home.

Callie went along with the visions I had that were caused by epilepsy: those of the Illuandas, learning from them how to make the potions with wild onions, of how I was becoming a medicine woman through them. She said she saw the faeries or Indians I really saw because of epilepsy. She deliberately hit herself, bruised her face, so she could get me in trouble when she told Mom I did it. Callie laughed when I got punished. Blaming me for things I didn't do continued to the point where Callie now believes the lies she said, tells anyone who will listen about these invented abuses. Immediate family knows better, but others don't, so to protect myself I don't talk to her except at holidays or other family gatherings.

Sometimes I dream that Michelle and I go to the movies at Showcase Cinemas, which is gone now, too, as Michelle is. Or I dream we're watching *Purple Rain* on VHS in the basement of our parents' house. In them I make her and Kristen run into the bathroom and put their hands over their ears during the sex scene between Prince and

Apolonia, like I did in real life. I dream of the time Michelle and I smoked weed together. She told our parents we smoked, even though she swore she wouldn't. When Michelle stayed with me a lot when she was seventeen and I was twenty-six, we painted ceramics, made tie-dyed t-shirts, swam and splashed in local creeks, ran down my tree-lined street dancing in the summer rain. Soon after that, she went into the hospital for psychiatric reasons for the first time. It wasn't the last. It became so common, my family started calling it Camp Norton instead of Norton Hospital. Her therapist told me I was the only one who was supportive of her. I was the only positive person in her life.

When I awaken from dreams of Callie or Michelle, I'm only glad I'm awake, not glad that we had new experiences together. I've lost two sisters, which left a hole, but it's a complicated one full of rocks and sticks and burrs, not just a void. Callie's living, but she's gone because she is unstable and causes misery because of it. Michelle died in 2011 from pneumonia, but I'd lost her years before that because of the chaos she created in my life. This hole of loss is a complex one that I don't know how to fill, *can't* fill.

Growing up with Callie and Michelle wasn't easy, but growing up with me wasn't either. My seizures were strange and scary to others, but my sisters had to get used to them. The seizures came randomly. Everyone—from my parents, sisters, teachers, principals, friends, boyfriends, and even including my doctors—just thought I was immature and couldn't control myself or my emotions. After seizures, I was teased for being a spaz and a freak. In my head, I could always count on Callie to be my friend. She was my friend, when no one else was around. She gave me her favorite toy, a white bear named Jingly,

but I wouldn't keep it because it was hers. She still tells me that it hurt her to be told no. She tried to make me sleep with it one night, but I snuck it back to before I fell asleep.

The Jingly story has changed throughout the years, like most stories Callie relates. Sometimes Callie tells it the way it happened, but sometimes it's that I kept it and didn't want to give it back until our parents got involved. It's not worth arguing with her anymore, so even though she's wrong, I say, "I don't remember it that way, but that if that's what happened I'm sorry."

I provoked both Callie and Michelle for years, on just about any topic they were lying about. It wasn't a Glass Family Holiday if one of them didn't get mad, slam out of the house, and not return. And I was usually at the center of why they left. Neither Callie nor Michelle could handle being stood up to or told they're wrong. Both lied mercilessly, and I thought I needed to tell them they were lying. If Michelle told of having a job as a gymnastics coach—one of the many jobs she said she had, but didn't—I was the first to point out that wasn't true. When Callie said I shoved an outdoor chaise lounge into her leg as a kid, causing a scar, I quickly corrected her. "I dropped it and you kept walking. I didn't shove it. It was an accident." Then I sighed loudly, deliberately. They annoyed me, and my correcting them infuriated them. I liked getting them riled up. It was amusing and I got to say how they were wrong, something I never do anymore. Some of me was delighted when they stormed out, in part because I felt I'd been able to say what's right and partially because I liked being rid of them. I didn't have to be on edge anymore and could relax. Their angry lashing out had come and gone and I survived it. It was going to happen; if I could control when, I was less hurt and bothered by it.

Callie even stormed off and left Mommie O's farm three hours away to go back to Louisville once. I hadn't even been trying that time, but slightly corrected her in front of our cousins. No one understood what happened, but it comes down to her and Michelle's borderline personality disorder, combined with oversensitivity to my criticisms. Part of that was because she says I think I'm so perfect. I don't. I know it's not been easy to be my sister, especially when I had seizures. She also never liked that school comes naturally to me and she had to work hard to get the same above-average, but not perfect grades I didn't even try for. When I was a junior and then a senior in high school, and she a freshman and sophomore, I goofed off every afternoon. I might read some homework, but I didn't do much and spent most of my time on the phone, watching television, or reading for pleasure. She studied from the moment she got home until late at night.

I said to Mom a few years ago, "I don't understand why Callie has never liked me."

"Elizabeth, it was never easy for her to follow in your footsteps."

"Why? Because I was always into trouble?"

Mom pulled her head back surprised and shook it a bit. "Well, maybe that, but because of what teachers would say to her."

"That I was bad?"

"No, that you were smart."

It was my time to jolt my head backward. It took me a minute to say anything. "I didn't think they saw anything but the kid who played with Silly Putty in their classrooms."

She laughed. “Because you were bored. They knew that. And if they didn’t, I made sure they realized it.”

She had to meet with my Geometry teacher, Mrs. Ramsey, who had taken my Silly Putty away from me after I’d done my in-class work. The Silly Putty was a technique to keep me from talking to other kids. I was considered too old to do play with it, but it kept my hands busy, which let me do something besides asking to go to the bathroom when I didn’t have to go, talking, or passing notes to friends. Mrs. Ramsey made my mom meet with her before she would give me my Silly Putty back. Mom wasn’t happy about that; it meant taking Michelle and Kristen with her. They were small and napped during Mrs. Ramsey’s free period. Mom told her, “If you didn’t run such a boring class, she wouldn’t get done so quickly. Wouldn’t you rather she play with that than act up?” Mrs. Ramsey stared at her. Mom grabbed my Silly Putty from her desk and said, “I better not hear of you taking this away from her again” and left.

I suppose it’s a little of Mom that led me to bother Michelle and Callie so much when they lie. And some of Dad, the attorney, who was good at arguing. I built entire cases about how wrong Callie and Michelle were about their stories and presented it to them, unspooling fact after fact, leaving them livid.

After Dad died and we were all raw, I got worse to my sisters. Dad wasn’t there to get mad at me when I did it. Before, he’d been angry when I chased them off. Just before Christmas about twelve years ago, Mom said, “You know, your sister Kristen and I just ignore Callie and Michelle when they say things that aren’t true.”

“I know. I don’t know how you do it.”

“Could you try it? Please? For your old mama? I’d just like to have a normal Christmas dinner for once.”

What was normal about our family? Not that Dad and Guy were missing from Christmas now. Not Michelle or Callie’s psychiatric disorders. Not my epilepsy or bipolar disorder. Realizing I’d hurt Mom was far worse than anything Callie or Michelle could say, though. I said, “I’ll try my best.” I didn’t promise in case I forgot and lobbed something their way.

“Thank you. I appreciate that.”

She was more grateful once I actually did it, and it’s become easier every time since to simply let their lies and exaggerations go rather than point them out or argue about them. Neither Mom nor I knew I could do it, but I did, and have continued to. Now I just let things pass unprotested, no matter how badly the insides of me are screaming to say something.

When I decided to move to Ohio for grad school, I felt like I was abandoning Michelle. That she was eventually diagnosed with borderline, which is thought to be brought on by abandonment or fear of it has always made a rock hit my heart and guilt twist my stomach. It was the personality disorder that pushed us apart. When I was in Ohio for two years, I didn’t see her very often. Texting wasn’t around and she didn’t have a cell phone, so I couldn’t reach her when she was away from home. Michelle loved chaos, as does Callie. They enjoy starting it and living in it, and everything is completely evil or entirely wonderful. I began to be in the evil category with Michelle because I confronted her about lies she told.

“I was a kindergarten teacher,” she once told Guy.

“Michelle, you were not,” I said.

She glared at me. “I was.” She yelled it.

“No. You weren’t. You were a preschool teacher’s aide. And you had the job for two months before you got fired.”

“You fucking fat ass bitch.” She was spitting. Her stomach was hiked up above her waistband and she made the same move my dad did when he was mad when she pulled her waistband up. “You cow.” She looked at Guy. “How could you be with this fucking heifer?”

Guy and I exchanged looks and laughed.

“You gross fucking slob.” She picked up the kitchen chair and set it back down hard. “You damn nasty bitch. You never kept a job in your life. You’re the one who always gets fired.”

“I’ve had my job ten years.” I was smiling. I couldn’t help it. I loved seeing her like that. It was like going to the theater.

“So, they’ll fire you when they get to know you.”

“I think they know me pretty well after a decade.”

“They hate you.”

“Okay. Yes, they hate me,” I said. “You’re right. They all hate me so much.”

“Fucking gross pig.” She leaned across the table at me. “You disgust me.”

Guy and I looked at each other again and smiled.

“Stop it. Girls, just stop it.” Mom said as she came in the room.

“It’s fine. I’m leaving. I can’t be in a room with this nasty, fucking, disgusting, gross pig.” She picked up her backpack.

“You’re staying downstairs, Michelle.” I said.

“Fine. Goodbye. I won’t be seeing you again ever.” She stomped away, down the steps to the basement. When I saw her a couple hours later, she was calm, not mad at all. She wasn’t unless things didn’t go her way or someone pointed out she was lying.

I’m scared Callie is going to die. There is no making up with a sister like her, and I know I’d be hurt trying, in part because of the lies she tells about me. She lies so badly that it’s impossible to believe her. Some lies are outlandish. Though our nuclear family knows they didn’t happen, my brother-in-law and their children didn’t know. Callie attempted suicide—not for the first time—about ten years ago after she got arrested for stealing over \$600 worth of dresses from a department store. She cut her wrist with the thick broken stoneware of a bowl she’d angrily thrown because my mom took a few hours to go get her after her bond was posted. After Callie and her husband came home from the hospital, where they failed to mention the cuts were deliberate, my mom finally told him how often Callie lies and how bad her mental illness really is. They’d been married seven years, but his mouth dropped open, then closed and opened over and over like a bass dying on land. He had no idea. He began calling Callie on things, asking if they were true, and not always believing her when she said yes. He called Mom to corroborate truth or learn things were fiction. He kept Callie more stable for a couple years after that, supporting her financially and taking almost total care of the kids because, for some reason, she couldn’t hold a job anymore after Guy killed himself.

As a kid, I wanted nothing more than for Callie to like me and be my friend. She was sometimes when we were at home, but as soon as people were around, she called me names including every incarnation for stupid and fat there is. She did it more behind my back than to my face, but each time I learned of things it would stab me in the gut. One day we were walking in the hall at Chenoweth, our elementary school, and we passed each other. I tried to hug her, but she acted like I was infested with bugs and covered with germs. She yelled, “Ick” and spit, wiping her skin off where I’d tried to hug her. Her friend said, “Is that the sister that’s retarded?” That was the first time I heard that she said that. My eyes filled and I ran down the hall toward my classroom, fell against the wall, and slid down it. I put my head between my knees. Of all the things I thought I knew it was that Callie loved me and looked up to me. I was completely wrong. When the other kids teased me because of my seizures, I always felt like Callie had my back.

It was the end of February 2011 when Michelle died, and we hadn’t talked since Christmas. At Christmas, we made peace for the first time in at least a decade. She was nice; I was too. And though she slept or was outside smoking most of the time, when I saw her, I liked her and she liked me. Kristen went into labor that night and she asked me to watch her three kids at Mom’s house while she and Paul went to the hospital. Though Kristen hadn’t wanted Michelle’s help in babysitting, Michelle did help me feed them dinner and put them to bed. She was kind and gentle with them—and to me. We cared for the kids together while Mom napped since she would have them all the next day.

After the kids were in bed, I sat at the long, solid wood kitchen table staring forward, gathering the energy to go home.

“You did good, you know,” Michelle said.

I laughed. “Thanks. You, too.” I babysat her and Kristen a lot when Mom went back to college when I was an teenager. I was a nanny years ago, and had watched Kristen’s kids some evenings for a year or more by then.

“If you ever want to babysit my son you can.”

“Thanks.” I knew I wouldn’t. They lived out of town, but I also feared what she’d do to or say about me if her son even bumped his head on something, or what she’d make up regardless. She blurred fact and fiction as badly as Callie.

She came around behind me. I stiffened. What was she going to do? I hunched my shoulders and pulled my head in to cover my neck. Michelle had a history of violence; was she going to strangle me? I felt her hands go to my shoulders and begin to massage them, something she wasn’t good at, but that felt good anyway.

“Relax. You’re so tense,” she said. I did. I let her rub my shoulders, tight because we hadn’t heard from Kristen, because I was afraid of Michelle, because Callie had blown up at me earlier that night. Michelle and I talked—about nothing, but it was everything to me when I got that phone call that she died a couple months later.

A few years ago, my mom finally began telling my niece and nephew that Callie’s stories aren’t true. She stayed quiet for years, but finally couldn’t. “No, your mom was mean to Elizabeth, not the other way around,” she said. My niece has told me several times since,

“Mom says you were mean, but now we know it wasn’t you,” then hugged me. Instead of feeling validated that they knew the truth, it made my stomach ache.

Mom was asking me to edit her emails late at night a lot ten years ago, so when she called at 11:30 one night, I answered like I was asleep. I wasn’t, but I didn’t want to edit another email because I had to get up early for work.

“I have some news to tell you. Michelle is deceased,” Mom said. Just boom, like that, and worded in that strange way.

I sat there, my heart beating fast, but no tears. “How? Just her?” I expected Mom to say suicide, which Michelle had threatened and tried so often the family always expected that’s how she’d go.

“Pneumonia. Just her. R.L. and Bobby don’t have it. At least not so far.”

I started. “What?” I had been so sure the answer would be suicide, and that she’d taken her son R.L., and her boyfriend Bobby with her, that it was strange to hear otherwise.

“She’d been sick, really sick, for couple weeks. She almost couldn’t make it to R.L.’s birthday party, but she did, then no one showed up for it.”

“No one? No kids, no adults?”

“No one. She was supposed to go to the doctor Monday but canceled because she was ‘too sick.’ Tonight she went to bed not feeling well. She snores so loudly that when Bobby didn’t hear her anymore, he went to check on her. She wasn’t breathing.”

I inhaled, took a breath like she no longer could. I pictured my little sister dead then. I hadn’t before. Tears began, but quiet ones.

“He pulled her off the bed—you can’t do CPR on one, too much give—and did CPR for the entire forty-five minutes the ambulance took to get there.”

“Forty-five minutes?”

“They live way out, Elizabeth.”

A moment of silence passed between us before I said, “What do I do?” I meant it literally. I didn’t know what to do. I was asking a woman who just lost a daughter what to do. “I guess I should . . . do I go to work?”

“No, call your boss. Tell her what happened. Tell her you’re taking the day off and you’ll talk to her tomorrow.” She was practical, methodical. She wasn’t crying, instead seeming very businesslike. It wouldn’t hit her until her brother died that fall.

I was sad Michelle was dead, sad that we had just come to peace and now she was gone. I knew things wouldn’t have stayed peaceful, though. I no longer challenged her, hadn’t for years, so things had improved, and I think we actually liked each other Christmas night, but I knew it would be short-term. Now, that would be the last time I ever saw her.

A year after Guy died, I got an email from Callie. A long one that when I printed it covered three pages. It told me it was my fault Guy killed himself and then listed the reasons: I was messy; I’d dated his brother; I made more money than him; I held him back and wouldn’t let him get a new job or finish college; I brought in too many dogs; I was disgusting; I was fat. Then it went on a page about how my messiness did it. I was, and am messy, but Guy was at least as messy as I and what was there was *our* mess, not mine. There were eighteen numbered points about how awful I was and why it was all

my fault. Much on the list wasn't true, and none of it led to his suicide, which was caused by depression that traced back many years before we became a couple.

When I forwarded the message to Kristen, Michelle, and my mom, Michelle wrote back agreeing with Callie's email and adding her own additional points of why it was my fault. I'm glad those emails are gone, eaten by a long-ago email server. I'd revisit them too often if they still existed. What they were in my mind is, I know, the mild version compared to how biting and awful the actual ones were. And all of this was on the one-year anniversary of his death after Callie left me at Starbucks.

When Callie's husband died, I didn't know how to be there for her. I couldn't bring myself to go to her house and just be there. I couldn't suddenly be nice after I closed myself off to her following the emails. Her husband had a heart attack at home, getting dressed after a shower, and Mom told me and Kristen by text. It was surreal from that point on. Kristen and Mom went to Callie's house the next day, so I did, too. It was expected. I played with Callie's kids and kept them occupied while adults were talking about adult matters in the other room. My niece and nephew fought like no two kids I'd ever seen. I told Callie that day I would be back the next day and subsequent days until she kicked me out and got tired of me. But I didn't go back. I couldn't. It was too tinged with Guy's death—too much of being two men cut down too young, too similar that Callie and I were both suddenly young widows (widow seems the only word that properly applies to me with Guy), and I am still angry and hurt about what she did on the anniversary of Guy's death. She has never apologized, and though I usually forgive easily, this isn't something I can get over, especially without a true apology. She has only

ever said I was overreacting about it, and has certainly never been sorry for it. If she were to apologize and mean it, would I be able to forgive her? I don't think so. I think that was the final act that pushed me past forgiveness.

Callie says the same thing Michelle used to: that she's going to kill her family and herself. She said that before her husband died and has even more since. So much death. So much death in our family: Guy and Dad killed themselves, Michelle from pneumonia, Callie's husband from a heart attack, now Callie's boyfriend has terminal cancer. When Callie tells Mom about wanting to kill herself and her family, she—as Michelle did—acts like Mom not saying anything is tacit agreement, but what's Mom to say? Reacting too much is playing into it. Callie says, "If I only knew how to do it I would." She wants Mom to supply ideas because Callie doesn't know how be sure they'd all die.

My whole life, I've known Callie will die young, just as I did about Michelle. I'm surprised Callie's in her 50's, but it will still shock me silent when it happens.

When Callie moved back to Louisville twenty-five years ago after living in Rochester, she called me in Ohio; she never called me. "I just called to say goodbye." We weren't close, but were closer then, but I was the person she chose?

She had overdosed and was put in the hospital for a long time, not for the first time. Before moving back to Louisville, she wanted Mom to come and stay with her in Rochester, but Dad wouldn't have it. He didn't like Mom to go out of town, but also saw that pattern, saw Callie's cries for help that would be a lifelong, ongoing series of occurrences.

Something I've never told anyone is what a relief it is that Michelle didn't die by suicide. But what I mean isn't just that *when* she died, it wasn't suicide, but also because she died, I don't have to worry anymore about her killing herself. I worried that she would kill herself, her boyfriend, and her son, and in many phone calls from Mom that began with "Michelle . . ." I was sure it had happened. Every time Michelle stayed at Mom's house I feared she would also kill Mom with all the rest of them and herself. What I mean when I say I'm glad it wasn't suicide, is that since I knew she'd die young, since we all did, not just that I'm glad that once she died, it wasn't suicide, but also that I'm glad I don't have to worry about it anymore.

At Mom's house one Mother's Day, Callie looked at me and said, "I'm alive because of you." She paused, fiddled with her purse. "Why did you save me?"

"Because you're my sister." I looked up at her. "Because I love you."

She frowned.

"What was I supposed to do? Let you die?"

"I just called to say goodbye, not to be saved. Now I have to deal with *this*, this life. This miserable, sucky life. I could have died twenty-five years ago."

Her kids were playing outside. We could hear them through the open deck door.

"Uh, you're welcome?" I said.

"Thanks for nothing." She slammed her purse onto the chair behind her, strode out the door, and called her kids to leave. I was surprised she didn't do it that night, didn't kill her kids and herself. I expected another midnight call from mom, more tears

down my cheek, more questions of what to do the next day. But she didn't. And she hasn't. Not yet.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

ABUTMENTS

That night, Guy was on the top of the Humana building—a skyscraper and centerpiece of Louisville. The roof wasn't fancy at all, though, just a regular one with concrete poured as a floor, fans and air conditioners everywhere, with a three-foot stone lip. He had sat on that short lip wall many times before, which he told me about—times he had wondered if he would do it, thought hard, wondered what the dogs and I would do. So many times he didn't. He had told me about all the visits he made to the roof of the twenty-five-story building, when he sat looking at the skyline, at the Ohio River flowing the color of midnight a quarter of a mile away. He stood on the Second Street Bridge and did the same. It's a bridge with a walkway. He parked his car on Main Street, said I'd find it, know what happened, but I told him if he did it, he better do it to where I'd know because not being sure would be worse than being certain. The night I'm thinking about, though, when he was on the roof at four in the morning, he did it with an 80-pound weight tied around his neck with thick rope that must have scratched on the way down. I come back to that time and again, to the rope instead of the bottom where he'd land on top of another building. The weight was so he wouldn't chicken out, so he could throw it over the edge and have no choice but to follow, to where he would land on the roof of the building where my dad died.

Dad's law office was on Fifth Street. When I was little, he had one where the Humana Building—where Guy worked—is now. He let me walk down the street alone, while he watched, to Ollie's Trolley and get French fries with pepper and a chocolate-dipped soft-

served ice cream cone. That was the best thing about going to work with him. That and the sugar cubes I sucked and let dissolve, feeling the sweetness flow over my tongue and fill my mouth. Sometimes I ate two layers of cubes from the bright yellow Domino Sugar box. I don't know if Dad noticed, but he didn't ever tell me not to do it. He liked when I went to his office for the day because I packed a bag of books, crayons, and a few toys. I used typing paper his secretary gave me to draw on. Even though the drawings weren't good, he taped them to the wall of his office. He didn't take them down until I drew new pictures.

In the evenings, he read books aloud to Callie and me. Callie hated it, hated sitting still so long, being read the classics instead of picture books we checked out from the library each week after going to reading hour. I listened to the woman there read the books as I peered over the heads of other kids to see the pictures; I enjoyed picture books too, but I loved spending time with Dad those evenings. Even though Callie told Mom she hated Dad reading those books, he continued. Eventually he read only to me, but Callie would still listen to "Pooch, Pup, and Pal" stories. They were three dogs Dad made up stories about with him as Pooch, Callie as Pup, and me as Pal. They were my favorites, and even though I was crazy about him reading to me, the best stories happened with those three dogs.

He read like he delivered opening arguments in a trial—with a serious face, but then making intellectual quips and smiling to get the jury to like him, and hopefully by extension to like his client. Callie didn't appreciate his choices of novels, just like she hated days she went to the office. She wasn't a reader and said it was "boring," which is what she has always said about everything. I got lost in books, played in Dad's front

room, which he called my office, and let me set up the desk however I wanted. He stocked it full of pens with his name and office phone number on it, and typing paper I usually ran out of and had to get more. He taught me how to make paper airplanes, but he wasn't very good at it because they would fly a few feet and then nosedive to the ground. "That's why I didn't become a pilot in the Air Force," he said.

I often sat in a dark wooden chair with a leather maroon cushioned seat and back across from his desk while he told me about his time in the Air Force. He was very circumspect, frequently saying, "Well, I can't tell you more because it's top secret." He always said he was in "Intelligence." I mentioned this to my mom recently and she laughed and said he was a clerk.

"Like Radar?" I asked.

She cocked her head to one side, the good side that doesn't hurt when she moves her neck that direction, and said, "He really told you he was in Intelligence?"

I nodded.

"He was only in four years. If he was in Intelligence, it wouldn't have gotten him a lot of clearance for top secret information."

Dad had to move when the Humana Building was built in the block between Fifth and Sixth and Main and Market Streets. He moved down Fifth, though not far. This meant moving thousands of legal books; he and Mom made hundreds of trips with dollies taking furniture, pictures, decorations, but mostly books, to the new office. Lawyers in firms had the sets of legal books he had, but in a library which all the attorneys shared; self-

employed ones like my father usually used the Law Library at UofL. Not Dad, though. It took days to pack the books, and more to unpack them.

Growing up and while I was in college, I spent many days and weeks in Dad's office being his secretary when his real one was sick or on vacation, if I wasn't in school. When I was in high school, he finally found a secretary willing to put up with his sternness and perfectionism, characteristics of his I felt daily but tried to ignore. Dorothy worked for Dad until he died, for about fifteen years. He didn't let her go on a vacation unless I was available to be her stand-in. I answered the phone, typed a few memos and court documents, and leafed nosily through his files to find people I knew. My favorite part, other than all the time I got to read and write, was going to the back hall of his small suite of offices where the new law book inserts were. Each law book had a special pocket for them in its binding. I helped him with this yearly from pipsqueak size until I moved away from Louisville for graduate school. The hall with the inserts smelled like new books—glue, paper, a clean scent I rarely smell anymore except in a few just-issued hardbacks. When I find one, I sniff it in deeply, inhaling the memory of my dad and the long days in his office where I sucked sugar cubes, drew pictures, read, wrote.

It was his secretary, Dorothy, who found him. He wrote a note on yellow legal paper—from the notepad used for his thirteen-page letter to my mom that laid on the desk—to call the police. Instead, Dorothy fumbled to unlock the gate and hurried to the stairwell where she saw my Dad on the bottom. She walked down the stairs; he was surrounded by blood. He was still breathing, and I always imagined wasn't conscious until I met Jane. A gun was in his right hand. Dorothy called the police and then my mom and told her Dad

had broken his arm and an ambulance was taking him to University Hospital, the trauma and research hospital. It's not somewhere one goes for a broken arm.

He must have worked on that thirteen page suicide note the whole day. It shows signs of being written in different pens—him picking up new ones when he had another thought to add. He asked to be cremated, though we didn't get a copy of the note until two weeks after his death, over a week after his burial. I can picture him descending those stairs that he never took, preferring the elevator. They were dark, deeply buried inside the interior of the building and had a thick brown rubberized tread. I can see him at the bottom. He was crying, putting the gun to his head, wondering whether to put the gun in his mouth or his temple, his hand shaking. That comes from too many movies and TV shows, though, because what I really see is him taking the stairs slowly, his heart beating fast from the exertion from the lethargic depression he was in. He took a deep breath at the bottom. He knew he only had a few minutes because he had just sent Dorothy upstairs to make some copies, so he did it quickly. Put the gun to his head, took another deep breath, prayed even though he wasn't entirely a believer, and pulled the trigger. The city erupted. Ambulances came—more than one of them—at rush hour, closing Fifth Street down. Dad was well-respected as an attorney so a lot of people came to see if they could help, strangers came just to watch, TV cameras and newspaper journalists came. It was on the air before I even knew it had happened.

The Saturday before that, Callie, Michelle, Kristen and I had our “sister birthday party” at the house, which we did every year since our birthdays are all two weeks apart. Dad sat with us at the table wearing a white undershirt, jeans shorts, and house shoes. He looked

like he was somewhere else, only his body sat at the kitchen table. He listened to our stories, watched us open gifts, and ate birthday cake, but in three hours he only smiled once, and barely. I had never seen him like that. I knew he was happier at times, but Mom had hidden his depressions from us, which occur more frequently and worsen as someone with unmedicated bipolar disorder gets older. He wouldn't take medicine; he was afraid someone would find out and his reputation would be ruined. I guess he didn't think about his reputation if he killed himself.

The last time I saw Dad, he lay on a metal gurney in the hospital with a white sheet pulled to his chest. Blood pumped out of his temples every time his heart beat. The shot had gone in his right temple and out his left, slicing through his brain and leaving his body alive, but his mind gone. That image is the only way I picture him other than how he looked in specific photos or at the last birthday party.

Seven years later Guy stood at the lip at the Humana building and threw the 80-pound weight over the edge. He followed it down, just as he'd planned. Before he went to the roof, he asked his coworkers there, where he worked security, if they wanted a coke, and one said yes. Guy said he would be back soon, but didn't return. He had taken out his wallet and keys and left them on the security desk in the lobby as he was leaving. "You'll need your wallet for the drinks," a coworker said. Guy shook his head and patted his pocket. I recently learned that Dad took his wallet and keys out of his pockets and left them on his desk, too.

When Guy was taking the 80-pound weight up to the roof, he was on camera several times carrying and rolling it into the elevator, along the long corridors, up the

stairs and out onto the roof, but no one noticed. He would have been winded when he got there—he was fit enough, but not in good shape. The rope and weight were in his car and he had told me what he wanted to do with them, but I thought he threw them away when I asked him to.

When a woman who worked in National City Tower across the street arrived at her office that morning, she opened the blinds, and saw someone lying on a roof of one of the many buildings that abuts the Humana Building where Guy worked. Though my mom knew, it was days before she told me the building Guy landed on was where my Dad's office was, the one he shot himself in, an office that remains empty to this day. People don't trust an office where someone committed suicide, like I don't trust people not to kill themselves.

EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

AUGUST 25, 2020

Yesterday, Jane and I went on a drive. She needed to pick up something she purchased on Facebook Marketplace. Turns out that the pick-up spot for the plaster of Paris Christmas ornament kits for our pets' paw prints was a block from Guy's mom's house. We exited the court and I told Jane to turn left, so that we passed his mom's house. It was upsetting, but not so much as I thought it would be. Since my and Guy's old house was only a few miles away, I asked her to drive that way. The house looked so different, faded from before, with fake shutters that were half as wide as the windows, a huge faux-autumn sign proclaiming Harvest in perpendicular letters. It was always an ugly house, but somehow it was more so.

I got lost leaving the subdivision, and we drove by the house again. This time it was awful. She slowed, sensing I needed her to. Did I reach out to her? Touch her arm? The bushes and flowers were gone. The trees were all missing. The fact that the color of the house—a slate blue when we lived there—had literally faded to a light blue was startling, like it had become less of itself.

As we drove out of the subdivision, I started bawling. I ugly cried. It wasn't for that long, but in those minutes, I could see Guy getting out of the maroon Toyota minivan that leaked a quart of oil every three days, wearing khakis and a fish shirt, pulling up his khakis because he had no ass to keep them up with. I could see him smiling at me, his crooked grin, his blonde hair disheveled like always. I envision him more in that place now, even though it has changed so much. I remember him better now than I have been able to for a while.

On the way back home, after what had been my and Jane's second drive to Stamping Ground, Kentucky that month, the sunset was purple-pink-blue. As we got off the expressway at Breckenridge Lane, traffic slowed. A couple cars went around whatever had stopped traffic in the other lanes after crossing a hard-median not meant to be crossed.

I saw people around a woman lying on the ground, seeming to try to coax her to get up and come on. "There's someone. She's on the ground. She's been hit," I hollered, though Jane was right next to me. She told me to call 911, and that she was going to go see what she could do. She got her good flashlight out. She went to where the woman lay, cleared the other people away from her and off the road, then began to direct traffic with her flashlight to turn around and go through a neighborhood. She was efficient and I could tell she had both seen bodies and directed traffic before.

Police cars soon swarmed the area. There were at least half-dozen, maybe more, plus a fire engine and ambulance. Moments passed. When the ambulance didn't leave, I knew the woman was dead. That was when I cried again. My second ugly cry of the day. This one seemed longer. It was so much.

When we got back to the apartment parking lot, I said, "she was dead."

"She was," Jane said.

"Did you know her?" Jane spends a lot of time reading on her Kindle app on her phone in her car after going to fast food places around our apartment. She always pays attention to her surroundings—one moment looking at the phone, the next looking around, taking everything in—like the police she worked with taught her to, so notices

everyone. “I did.” I waited. I often have to ask Jane to tell me more, but sometimes waiting is enough. “She was a woman who frequented the area around Speedway and McDonald’s. She seemed to be homeless. And she seemed to have a drug addiction of some sort.” She turned off the SUV. “I tried to help her all the time, but she would never take it.”

Jane has so many friends who are cops, and since she’d been a witness of the accident—just after the fact, but a witness—they told her some of what happened. She told me the next day that the woman had a few things with her, and among her belongings was Jane’s business card. She also had a dog—a pittie mix that Jane said was nice. I could remember then Jane mentioning that she took a woman dog food in Ziplock bags since she moved around and couldn’t have a big bag of it. Jane also gave her a lap blanket, a leash, and a collar for the dog. She would take things for the dog, but not for herself.

The dog wasn’t at the accident site, so Jane didn’t mention it until the next day. Then she told me that a man in one of the first cars on the scene told people not to call Animal Control, that he’d just take the dog. He’d lost a dog a few weeks earlier and wasn’t going to get a new one, but there this one was, and it was meant to be. I cried again hearing that.

I had nightmares all night after the woman got hit. Ones with Guy in them. Ones where I forgot to go see one of my clients from when I was a social worker for all these six years, and she was in bad shape and her mom senile. I dreamed I broke up with Guy in horrible

ways, including the way I did—by phone, when he was at work, and I was manic and thought it was a good idea.

But my nightmares weren't as bad as Jane's. Though mine rolled on, all night long, changing and moving from one to another without ending the whole time I slept for twelve hours. Jane slept fitfully, up for a while, then asleep again, always waking to nightmares that when she walked up to the woman's body, it was me there, and Grayzie was with me, sometimes gone and sometimes also dead. She cried in her SUV that day when she took Grayzie to the park, knowing he'll die before long since he's almost sixteen-years-old, and with the fear of losing him.

Usually, our drives are thoroughly nice. We go to Shelby, Henry, Spencer, Bullitt, Franklin, or Fayette Counties. While we drive, we talk. Even that day, before seeing the woman, had been lovely. Despite the tears of seeing Guy's mom's house and our old house, it brought about conversation that Jane and I had never had about Guy before. We talked about living in the blue-gray house, about the crazy neighbor who lived catty-cornered to us and put a four-by-four post set in concrete in Guy's parking spot after I put out a sign advocating for no Medicaid cuts. It hadn't been against the Republican governor as he thought, but the Democratic state congress that proposed deep cuts in the programs I worked with. Guy got hit in the head with a five-gallon bucket by the neighbor that day. I was semi-frightened driving by his house, but I was more taken with my old house. With the memories there. With seeing Guy come home, down the driveway, in his uniform, in his jeans and jean jacket that he wore since high school. I told her so many memories that day after the tears flowed. Jane was surprised at how

ugly the house was, and though I knew that before, I agreed. It had a garage facing forward—like the house on the Simpson’s. The siding was different colors of blue and slate gray where parts had been replaced newer than other parts. There were ugly wooden Welcome and Our House signs in addition to the Harvest one, and that didn’t improve the appearance at all. The maple tree that I so loved was gone, as were the pines next to it—whether because they died or someone just decided to remove them, I don’t know. It made the house starker than it had been before. Before, love lived there. Dogs lived there. I lived there. Guy lived there. We lived there together, bound in love and dedication that despite how Guy’s life ended, meant something, meant a lot. I told Jane these things, and while she listened, her hand touched my knee, a gentle touch of love and understanding. Not that she had lost someone the same way, though she has lost a beloved uncle to suicide. This touch, though, seemed to speak about the loss she had faced of her twenty-three-year relationship because it broke apart.

Julia Cameron wrote in her poem “Words for It,” something I wish I could have told Guy: “I would lay words on your forehead. . . . I would heal the words that were the wounds / You have no names for.” I told Jane that day about the hurt I inflicted on Guy, about his brother, which although she knew, I hated to remind her of. I talked about Michelle and I planting the garden there—which was now missing—of she and I taking down the jungle gym in the backyard, swinging axes like warriors. About hurt I have inside me, deeper than I usually recall, deeper than I’d remembered in years. I spoke of our dog Hopple, how he roo’ed and jumped up and down when he saw me, how he thought everything I did was my own private gift to him. Of how the next-door neighbor said he was going to shoot Hopple if Hopple barked at him one more time, and Guy said

he would kill the neighbor if he did. Guy, the gentlest man I've ever known, didn't take well to threats of our dogs, our family. I'd never known him to threaten a soul before. I told Jane that despite the starkness of the house, and despite how it ended, love had lived there, deep love that continues in my heart to now.

Jane drove on, and we spoke, less and less often of Guy and our time together, and more of my and Jane's lives, and *our* time together. We talked of *our* love and *our* dogs—one of whom I shared with Guy and Jane both—of our dog, who was Jane's first, and our cat, who is ours together. Unusually, we didn't have Grayzie with us, as we do most days that we go on drives. He sits in the back—sometimes with his ears perked up, alert for small changes in our driving, and at other times asleep in the seat behind Jane. He sleeps more and more lately and wakes up half-drunk, but he keeps on going. He's on all the right meds, veterinary chiropractic adjustments help a ton—all the right things keep him chugging along at his age. I've only had one other dog live this long: Kookie Doodle, which surprised me. I thought he would die of grief when Guy died. That Pudgy would, too. It felt like we all would, but we kept going, and Grayzie saved me in ways that I will never forget, by bringing me toys every time I cried, crawling into my lap when I was crying too hard to play. They're ways that led me to get his portrait tattooed on my shoulder.

Jane and I talked of taking Arthur and Grayzie to the beach—travel being something Guy and I never did together. Jane and I made plans that we would go before the boys, our dogs, die. We wondered if it would make Grayzie's joints and back feel better, if Arthur

would lap at the water as it came towards him, if Grayzie would run in the waves. We haven't been yet, but we're still hoping to go. The pandemic diverted our plans. We may take a small trip to somewhere nearby. I hope we do. We would hike, which we enjoy, but every time we try to plan where to go, we get sidetracked about what I'm able to do with my bum foot. I can't hike much at the Gorge anymore. Honestly, I don't even care. Just being there, with the smells of campfire, pines, sand, and moss would be enough. There *are* places Jane and I could hike there, though. We could go to Sky Bridge and partway to Rock Bridge. We could hike on a good part of Auxier Ridge, somewhere I never went with my friends back in college, but did when I volunteered on the Trail Crew. It ended up that I went there with my college friend, Earl, the one who cursed me after the rescue in college, who did, indeed, forget that I was there. We were friends before and after the rescue, despite him getting mad that day. He introduced me to the Trail Crew two decades after college.

Traveling would mean taking Grayzie's diapers, probably putting Arthur in them, too, since he now pees in the apartment like Grayzie does, especially when we tell him to get out of the bed. He's spoiled, though we love that he is. He was a bait dog in a dog fighting ring, and wouldn't let anyone touch him for months after Jane rescued him. It's amazing that he's accepts our love so completely now. He insists on sleeping between us and demands attention by repeated head bumps, sometimes in the middle of the night. He's been in my life now four of the six years he has been in Jane's. We're both his mamas, as we are for Grayzie.

Grayzie loves Jane in his own way, which he shows by sleeping on her feet, by loving on her when they're alone together. I don't know why he thinks I would care if he

shows her love. I praise him when he does. It makes me happy when he shows her affection. It relieves me to no end that I don't have to be concerned about him when I'm not home, that I didn't have to worry about him for the seven weeks I was in the hospital a year-and-a-half ago. I knew he was fine. I knew, though Arthur mourned me, he was also fine—especially after he saw me and realized I was okay. Grayzie took a few days to adjust, but then acted great with Jane.

Jane and I have made a family together, like Guy and I had. Her being with Dad while he was dying draws us together, but we've made a life so beyond that it barely comes up. Sometimes things happen, like the woman dying, when I cry and thank Jane for being with Dad. I'm grateful she held his large, soft hands with her rough, thin ones that are as strong as someone who works outside instead of in an office. Hands I'm glad now hold mine.

I wish Dad and Jane could have known one another. Dad might have initially had a problem with me being queer, but it wouldn't have lasted. They would have loved each other and gotten along great. They'd have talked about history—Jane's major in college and Dad's favorite topic to read about. They would discuss the books they read, recommend titles to one another, compare dapper clothing, both being clotheshorses. Dad would have given Jane ties he didn't wear anymore and shirts that no longer fit. She would have treated them lovingly, worn them with pride. And when I was sad—when I mourn Grayzie in the future or Guy now—she would wrap me gently in his shirts, the well-washed Oxford material soft against my skin.

THE END

CRITICAL AFTERWORD

CONVULSIVE FAMILY DYNAMICS:
WHEN MENTAL AND NEUROLOGICAL DISABILITIES
ENTANGLE AND ISOLATE

CONVULSIVE FAMILY DYNAMICS:
WHEN MENTAL AND NUROLOGICAL DISABILITIES ENTANGLE AND
ISOLATE

The preceding narrative, *Explosive Family Dinners: Bipolar Disorder, Temporal Lobe Epilepsy & Me*, a memoir of 83,500 words, explores my childhood having temporal lobe epilepsy, a bipolar father, two sisters with borderline personality disorders, a sister with unipolar depression, and a mother who I believe has depression, though she likely did not have it during my childhood. I come out as having bipolar disorder myself towards the end of the memoir. *Explosive Family Dinners* also explores being bisexual+ (pansexual), and how that affected my childhood experiences. What follows is a critical look at the themes, sources, and fields of study—New Southern Studies, Disability Studies, Medical Humanities, and Feminist Studies—that informed my approach.

Explosive Family Dinners came into being initially as a series of essays written for creative writing workshops I took with Prof. Paul Griner (two workshops) and Prof. Kiki Petrosino (one workshop). I also attended the Appalachian Writers Workshop many summers during my studies and workshopped and began several essays there also. I was told by both Prof. Griner and Prof. Petrosino and writing mentors elsewhere, especially Jason Howard and Fenton Johnson, that I was not writing essays, I was writing chapters. Prof. Petrosino asked me in a one-on-one meeting why I insisted that they were essays when they were obviously chapters. She remembers not being quite so blunt, but whichever version is most accurate, the truth was: I was writing a memoir and other

people knew it before I did. (She's the one I finally heard, so I'm glad she did say it. Someone had to be blunt, or I'd *still* be insisting I'm writing essays.)

The chapters I had written as I sat down to consider where I was going with *Explosive Family Dinners* included large portions about my nuclear family and significant sections about my partner, Guy, who killed himself in 2008. In fact, Guy was the central person in about half the pages. About six months ago, I realized I had written half of two different memoirs. I had to carve out the sections solely about him that didn't have fuller meaning dealing with my nuclear family or my sexuality within the pages of *Explosive Family Dinners*. That was a very hard thing to come to terms with and then do, but it's a much better memoir for having done it. Guy is, of course, within the pages. He was there after my dad shot himself and died, was one of my best friends from the time we were eleven to when he died when we were forty, and was my partner of over thirteen years. Of course he's in the memoir. But he is a character throughout the memoir and the *focus* of only one chapter, which is in the section, *Kiss Me, Kiss Me, Kiss Me* that deals with a slice of life with significant men/woman in my life.

Memoir Organization

As far as organization, I have played and tinkered with the order of chapters and I may be tinkering with it after this has been sent to the graduate school for publication as my dissertation. I'm workshopping *Explosive Family Dinners* chapter-by-chapter with two different sets of friends and have swaths of notes as well as documents with their notes on it. Both groups are only up to chapter twelve, a third of the way into the memoir. My plan is to continue to work on the memoir another three months or so and then seek

representation from an agent. I am grateful to Prof. Griner for his help in shaping the memoir and giving feedback on individual chapters.

The summer of 2020, I attended the virtual (due to covid-19) Appalachian Writers Workshop. Jesse Donaldson was the instructor of the memoir workshop I was in, and he suggested I split what was the first chapter of *Explosive Family Dinners* into two parts. When I did that and mentioned Donaldson's feedback to Prof. Griner, he said that was a good idea, then reflected upon seeing it in two parts that he saw it as four chapters, forming essentially the spine of the book. He was spot on with that advice. Those chapters are now "Jane's First Suicide," "Jane and Dad," "The 'Accident,'" and "Kristen and Dad." Once I made that change, it opened the format of the memoir up, which helped me see where to put my completed chapters and where there were holes.

Much of *Explosive Family Dinners* is dark and serious. Because I didn't want to leave the writer in a perpetual state of agitation, it became increasingly important for me to convey that my family of origin really *was/is* a family of love, despite the tragedy and deaths, and even with the mental illnesses and neurodivergence. Some of the short chapters are intense also, but the length variances give something of a breather. I also have quite a few short chapters that I have come to call "palette cleansers" to give the reader a bit of a break from the twisty darkness that can be the Glass family. It is these chapters that I have moved around most.

Temporal Lobe Epilepsy

Temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE) is a disease which, in me, causes very strange partial complex seizures. Partial complex seizures mean that one's body keeps going and

continues acting, but it's a seizure and the person is not in control, the epilepsy is. For example, the seizures within TLE that I had until I was twenty-two-years-old and went on anticonvulsants varied from staring straight ahead, during which I was essentially unreachable, to hallucinations in which I saw things that were not actually there, all the way to things that resembled a toddler's temper tantrum, complete with banging my head against the floor, screaming, pulling my hair, and tearing at my clothing. Since I had these until I was twenty-two, I was significantly older than a toddler, and thus not one who would be expected to behave in that manner. These seizures, particularly the big ones, were often brought on by stress.

Explosive Family Dinners

My family had dinner together every night. It was ritual and rule. We were not allowed to leave the table until everyone had finished, and we were often then expected to continue having conversations about our days and other, often mundane things after everyone was done eating. After dinner was also the time that my parents, particularly my dad, brought up things I had done wrong. Since my dad had untreated bipolar disorder, he was often very explosive, and verbally and emotionally abusive. Although he rarely spanked me, the verbal and emotional abuse took a toll and made for very stressful family dinners. At times, he exploded, slamming his fists on the table so that all the dishes jumped an inch or two off the table. He then stood up, pulled up his shorts dramatically, and began yelling—usually at me. I sat across the table from him, so was spatially an easy target, but also someone who reacted and yelled back—something he desperately seemed to want.

Being a child, adolescent, and then teenager, I was an easy mark who *would* react. I didn't know that there was another choice: to ignore him. My sisters sat quietly, and my mom began clearing dishes and went to the other half of the kitchen (it was broken into halves by counters and the stove), where she stood and watched. As Dad attacked me verbally, I began to get heated and stressed. Though they often began as a discussions, they escalated quickly, and quite often the stress brought on the temper tantrum-like seizures with the actions described above. My dad's bipolar disorder and my temporal lobe epilepsy were a volatile mix. Though these dinners themselves are only featured a couple of times in the memoir, they are emblematic of the entire relationship I had with my dad until adulthood.

My Seizures and Geschwind's Syndrome

As such, dinners weren't the only time these things happened, and certainly weren't the only time I had seizures. I had them often. Once I had an EEG at twenty-two, it was found that I have seizures that originate in both my left and right temporal lobes, which is unusual; when not on medication to prevent them, I also have constant spiking, which means continual small seizures or seizure-like brain activity. Along with temporal lobe epilepsy comes Geschwind's Syndrome, which is made up of a variety of personality traits that people with TLE often have. Geschwind's Syndrome as a term is sort of disregarded these days. When I asked my neurologist of thirty years about it, he said that I should focus on the individual personality traits common within TLE patients rather than considering them a syndrome; when pushed as to whether Geschwind's Syndrome is an accurate way to look at the personality traits with TLE patients, he

indicated that it's not PC to say anymore because putting the word syndrome to a group of traits is stigmatizing, but that the characteristics are the same, nonetheless.

When looking at these personality traits in Geschwind's Syndrome (or those common to people with TLE), prior to being stabilized on anticonvulsants, I had them all, including altered sexuality, grandiosity, hyperreligiosity, viscosity (repeating oneself), a sense of personal destiny, loquacity, stickiness (heightened dependency), heightened scrutiny of self, high emotions, artistic, and other unusual traits (LaPlante 160-61). Unfortunately, there is not as much written about TLE as there should be, and Eve LaPlante's book *Seized* is the only full-length book on it that I've found through a great deal of research over many decades.

Bipolar Disorder, Temporal Lobe Epilepsy, & Me: Medical Humanities and Disability Studies

There is a growing interest within the fields of Medical Humanities and Disability Studies about what are termed "patient narratives" or "illness narratives." While writers have been gaining voices to tell their own stories in memoirs, people have also become more empowered to tell illness narratives and disability stories from a first-person perspective rather than leave them for their doctors to tell. Disability scholar G. Thomas Couser writes that since "patients [now] seize, or at least claim, more authority over treatment, they may also be more inclined to narrate their own stories, to take their lives literarily into their own hands in part to reestablish their subjectivity in the face of objectifying treatment" (Recovering 11). Couser is a powerful voice regarding memoirs

and patient narratives that cross through three of the fields which I study: Disability Studies, Medical Humanities, and memoir writing itself.

It is important to consider the memoirs themselves, viewing them through the lens of how to legitimize them as illness narratives. G. Thomas Couser has made his life's work examining the validity and worth of memoirs of illness and disability as patient narratives. Couser writes in "Life Writing and Disability Law" that it is through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that disability has come to mean not only those who are "traditionally disabled," which he defines as individuals who are deaf, blind, or utilize mobility devices like wheelchairs, but also people with stigmatized illnesses like epilepsy, diabetes, and morbid obesity. The ADA also extends protection to anyone with a history of disability, such as cancer survivors, those with HIV, and mental disabilities, such as mental illness and intellectual disabilities (*Life Writing* 75). Tobin Siebers, a disability scholar, concurs, writing that our society prefers able-bodiedness, and doesn't give full "human" status to those who are disabled physically or mentally in any way, which is both exclusionary and discriminatory (8). As people have begun writing their own stories instead of their doctors doing it, illness and disability memoirs have sought to restore full humanity to all persons, regardless of ability. By claiming disability and illness, these writers, including graphic memoirists, hope to improve the lives of others who are disabled and ill. In *Disability Theory*, Siebers expresses that individuals who are comfortable in their disabled minds and bodies are more productive and happier than those who are not (11), which is something memoirists with disabilities and chronic illnesses and seek to show to their readers. Couser continues, "[t]herefore, the contemporary moment is particularly amenable not only to life writing but also to

disability life writing” (*Disability* 230). Our reading moment right now is amenable to reading about ill and disabled bodies, which bodes well for people, like me, who are telling their stories.

My memoir fits perfectly within this movement of disabled people writing about their own lives. This movement has grown exponentially in the past few years. I saw in a recent tweet by a disabled memoirist that a disability memoir cannot *only* be about one’s disability. As such, in the treatment of my disability of temporal lobe epilepsy and later in the memoir coming forward about having bipolar disorder myself in *Explosive Family Dinners*, I write my own story, telling it in my own words, but illness is not the *only* thing I write about. Nevertheless, the memoir fits within the realm of disability memoirs because my main focus is on the temporal lobe epilepsy and later cooccurring bipolar disorder. I explore many other things, though, such as my sexuality and the relationships I have had with my family members, partners, friends.

A Mind Unraveled: Mine or Someone Else’s?

There are a growing number of memoirs about bipolar disorder; there are few about epilepsy, however. A relatively new memoir by journalist Kurt Eichenwald about his epilepsy is titled *A Mind Unraveled*. He has tonic-clonic seizures (formerly known as grand mal seizures), which are uncontrolled, and especially were throughout his early-to-mid adulthood. His memories were evocative of my own. Other than that, there are no mainstream memoirs about epilepsy that I could locate. There are some poorly written self-published memoirs about it available on Kindle, which I read, but learned little because of their lack of quality and their desire to both paint the world without any

redeeming qualities and/or be self-help books. They are, nevertheless, memoirs written by the person with the disability of TLE and not the doctor. My memoir is (hopefully) of higher quality, given, if for no other reason that several chapters have been published in essay form. Additionally, it is full of love as well as trauma, and never ventures into the self-help realm. *Explosive Family Dinners* fits not only within the new(ish) trend of disability memoirs authored by the disabled person themselves, but also furthers the knowledge of both bipolar disorder and TLE—especially TLE with partial complex seizures since there aren't *any* memoirs about it that have been published by reputable independent or larger press (or any that seemed to not be self-published).

Into my research, I discovered Kurt Eichenwald's memoir *A Mind Unraveled*. In the memoir, Eichenwald is beaten and raped during a seizure. He also regularly loses time, seizes in front of people, has his friends come to his aid, and has his life is turned upside down because of his epilepsy. Although he did not begin having seizures until he was eighteen, parts of the memoir were eerily similar to my own experience.

One example of this is that in *A Mind Unraveled*, Eichenwald experiences issues of lost time similar to, though even greater, than mine. In his case, he lost whole weekends through seizure activity. At least I was lucky enough to only lose a few hours, when you count both the time of the seizure and the requisite nap after it. In Eichenwald's introduction to the audiobook of his memoir, which is not in the written version, he comments, "I confronted a large number of enormously traumatic experiences that have haunted me for decades. While writing this story proved somewhat cathartic, it was also deeply challenging emotionally." I can echo this sentiment as well. Looking back at the trauma of seizures, and bipolar disorder, the things I've written about have

been hard to face. I both read *A Mind Unraveled* in Kindle form, and later listened to the audiobook version of it, read by Eichenwald himself. Though I was teased by other kids growing up, my best friend Sandy and some other good friends came to my rescue or didn't mind when I had seizures. Likewise, Eichenwald was cared for by his friends, but there later grew some resentment. Some of my friends when we were adults could not handle the seizures and we either grew apart or parted abruptly due to them.

Eichenwald faced discrimination from his college because he came out about having epilepsy. I never was open about having seizures as an undergrad because I didn't know about them, and by grad school I had well (or well-enough) controlled seizures to not need to involve the school. Eichenwald's seizures are tonic-clonic, which is the type when one's body flops on the ground. Mine are partial-complex, triggering the auras (which he sometimes had), the strange beliefs, and the temper-tantrum type seizure (which he did not). Eichenwald has never gotten complete control over his seizures, whereas I haven't had one since the breakthrough seizure at work around 2013.

Eichenwald had horrible experiences with quite a few neurologists, as I did—as most epileptics do. I wrote about this in my memoir in the chapter “The Illuandas.” The neurologist I saw immediately after the first one who insisted that I didn't have TLE was almost as terrible as the first; it seemed *too much* to put my experience with her in my memoir. Therefore, the one neurologist stood in for both of them, even though none of the experiences with the second one made it into *Explosive Family Dinners* at all. To note, she tried to make me to go on disability, take away my driver's license, and although I already in the process of deciding I didn't want children, insisted that I not. She was all doom and gloom: my life was going to be terrible, all of my relationships

would end, no one would want to be with me; I couldn't drive, I couldn't have children, I couldn't work, and on and on. Since so many things in my life are negative happenings and huge coincidences, it seemed like including what occurred with her would be too much, especially since that's an early chapter. Also, because my memoir, while concentrating on TLE, also focuses on other aspects of my life, I chose not to include this neurologist.

Eichenwald's memoir focuses almost entirely on epilepsy. He masterfully includes many of his encounters with terrible neurologists and even points out how most epileptics have fraught times with theirs. I found this comforting, not only as someone who had bad times with neurologists, but also that someone else had written about it in a memoir. I felt seen and fully justified in my choice to include that in *Explosive Family Dinners*.

He first saw a solely research neurologist who did not see patients, but who worked for Eichenwald's father, so agreed to treat him. That did not go well. Eichenwald's mother eventually ended that doctor/patient relationship. After at least four other bad neurologists, Eichenwald saw a good one who he kept for roughly twenty years. I saw my neurologist—the great one—from 1990 until 2020, when he retired. He often told me I was his “most complicated, easy patient.” We talked about books and joked around while he examined me, tapping my knees and elbows with a small mallet, having me follow a light and his finger with my eyes, and so on. He was amazing. I see his successor now, who is fine, but not nearly as good as he was; she has never questioned that I have TLE, though, unlike that first doctor. She has thirty years of notes

and many EEG reports. She has never painted my life to be terrible because of epilepsy, either. She's very competent, just not wonderful.

Much of Eichenwald's memoir focuses on his epilepsy during college (his epilepsy begins when he was eighteen), the toll it took on his friends, and the care they gave him. I have quite a few times friends took care of me. I had one tonic-clonic seizure that I know of—after I smoked marijuana that was, unknown to me, laced with Angel Dust in undergrad. My friends got me back to a couch in their dorm and lay me down. I talked to the people in a painting, then I don't remember anything else. That's when I had a seizure, but I didn't know until about five years ago when one of the friends who took care of me that night told me. I asked her what it looked like and for more details. She said she couldn't talk about it because it was so terrible. That's another thing in the litany of epilepsy happenings from my life that could have gone into *Explosive Family Dinners*, but was not included.

Eichenwald also writes about how when people with epilepsy fall out of their beds a lot, and when kids do, it can be due to tonic-clonic seizures. I fell out of the bed all the time as a kid, which might have helped me believe the Illuandas came to get me and brought me back to my bedroom floor. I fell out of the bed a lot as a teenager, too, until I was around eighteen. I remember the thud of me hitting the floor jerking me awake, or maybe jerking me out of a seizure. Other times I would wake up in the morning or late at night on the floor and have no idea how I got there. I usually crawled back into bed, but sometimes stayed there, depending on how tired and disoriented I was from what I now wonder was a tonic-clonic seizure. Eichenwald explores this in his own life. It's not something I had heard before and it really made me ponder how it functioned and made

meaning in my life. It's still something I'm working on in my mind, and something I need to talk with my mom about. She isn't crazy about talking about my seizures, though, and will only do it for a short period before she stops.

Reading Eichenwald was a balm and justified a lot of my choices about TLE in *Explosive Family Dinners*, despite it hitting close to home with the issues that arose from his seizures. Other than his book, *Explosive Family Dinners* is likely one of the only memoirs about epilepsy that is not self-published; it is the only one that my extensive research showed. It comes closest being a current memoir about TLE, despite us having different types of seizures.

Epilepsy and Other Art

My own memoir, as well as Eichenwald's, follow the tradition of older *novel* writers generally accepted to have epilepsy, who wrote about epilepsy either directly or in masked ways. These authors include well-known epileptics such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who often wrote of characters with epilepsy; Lewis Carroll, whose Alice drinks and eats things to make her grow and shrink, has very psychedelic experiences, and who, himself, wrote and kept volumes and volumes of correspondence (hypographia); Jonathan Swift, whose Lilliputians and the giant differed so much in size that it is hypothesized that he had TLE because of the shrinking and growing aspect of things during seizures. Even the visual artists Edvard Munch and Vincent van Gogh, who wrote of his epilepsy in his many letters to his brother Theo and others, and whose art was inventive and magnificent, were thought to have epilepsy. In referring to his epilepsy and why he did not want to be treated for his seizures, Munch said, "A German once said to me: 'But you could rid

yourself of many of your troubles.’ To which I replied: ‘They are part of me and my art. I want to keep those sufferings.’” These men are frequently thought to have epilepsy, though van Gogh is sometimes also or alternatively given the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. Either way, I have the same diagnosis. (In probably the most reliable study of van Gogh, *Van Gogh: The Life* by Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, after extensive research, they determined he had TLE.) Epilepsy can be seen throughout multiple genres, even including musical greats Frederic Chopin (Wyckoff) in his despairing and despondent sounding classical music, and Prince’s (Lynch) grinding, gyrating pulses and pounding beats. My art follows in the footsteps of these great literary, visual, and musical artists writing about or depicting their own illnesses in their art in some manner. The paths these greats helped create allow people like author Kurt Eichenwald and me to follow.

Patient Narratives: Medical Humanities

While ideally patients could tell their stories and be heard by doctors and others, such as friends and the public, people who are ill are not always those who tell these stories. In actuality, these life and medical/disability stories are still often told by doctors. To Couser, there are three types of memoirs: “somebody” memoirs—those written by famous people; “nobody memoirs”—those written by people who are otherwise not famous; and “odd body memoirs”—those written by disabled bodies (“Introduction”). Not everyone is pleased with the movement of patients telling their own odd body memoirs. Cultural critic and physician A.M. Daniels only believes in what Couser calls the “somebody” memoir: he only thinks that famous, well-known, and/or esteemed

people should write memoirs (Daniels 31). Couser, though, theorizes it is because Dr. Daniels feels that “sick and disabled people are to be seen—preferably in the clinic—and not heard, and certainly not read,” which “perpetuate[s] the silence of people with aberrant bodies” (*Signifying* 7). The memoir is a powerful way that disabled and ill people can show their lives—their *lives*—not just their illnesses. *Explosive Family Dinners* allows me to tell my disability narrative myself.

In *The Principles and Practice of Narrative Medicine*, by Rita Charon, et. al., Maura Spiegel and Danielle Spencer write that a “literary text . . . takes as its subject the nuances and intricacies of character, context, and circumstance. It draws the reader into a complex relation, inscribing her into its world in a way that the [doctor’s or patient’s] transcript” of an appointment or encounter does not (16). To elaborate on that, in Arthur Frank’s *The Wounded Storyteller*, for example, he defined illness narratives as one’s story when life is interrupted by illness and thereby changed into a different kind of narrative than it was before (164). Illness can be defined from everything from the common cold to major disabilities and long-term health-related illnesses. As such, *Explosive Family Dinners* is this type of memoir: a long-term disability-related memoir focusing on my own temporal lobe epilepsy and both my dad’s and my own bipolar disorder. That two of my sisters have borderline personality disorder features within the pages of the memoir as well. It is significant through the eyes of Disability Studies, and particularly Medical Humanities that I am telling my own story. Where my family’s illnesses and disabilities come into play, it is not a doctor writing it, but one of the members of the family—and I try to write about their psychiatric issues only as to how they relate to specific parts of my life.

Before I was on anticonvulsants, I hallucinated as part of the seizures, which is depicted within the pages of *Explosive Family Dinners*. I believed the hallucinations, which included believing that an ancient American Indian tribe, the Illuandas, was training me to be their medicine woman. I also believed I saw fairies, elves, had invisible friends—taking it a step beyond what small children do when they have them (though I had one then, too)—and other things that seem fanciful, but I believed in because I saw them during seizures and pre-seizure auras.

My father was building a successful law practice, and in hindsight, barely keeping it together. He went through periods of mania and depression that my mother did her best to hide. During his manias he spent extravagant amounts of money on us, but was also explosive and unpredictable. When he was depressed, he didn't talk much, and was exceptionally irritable. Between my childhood and teenage years, those were the aspects I noticed—not that he was especially happy or sad.

My sisters Callie¹ and Michelle were other factors within the family who seemed to make it more unbalanced, rather than creating a sense of stability, due to their own mental illnesses of borderline personality disorder. That has continued to be the case, except with my sister Kristen, who has a calming effect on all of us.

In *Explosive Family Dinners*, I explored my relationships with my nuclear family, especially focusing on my relationship with my father. The time span includes my childhood through young adulthood up to present day. That happened with the inclusion

¹ Only Guy and my Dad originally had their own names used, which I did because they are both deceased, and I don't need to protect their anonymity. My mom's name is mentioned once in the memoir; she asked that I use her real name. In this afterword, I mention only people's pseudonyms for clarity purposes.

of Jane, which was critical since she was with him while he was dying, and later she and I became a couple. She has also meted out the information of Dad's death over the nearly-five years we've been together. She still tells me new information sometimes, but I had to put a stop to including things in the memoir at a point.

Disability as the Grotesque in Southern Writing

Disability has long been seen in southern literature, but it tends to be overdone, bordering on the obscene rather than being seen through a Disability Studies lens. When disability in the south is studied, the authors considered usually come down to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers. Numerous critical books are written on them and their characters, but few, if any, monographs are written on disability in southern novels of the last ten or twenty years.

In southern writing, disability tends to be shown as the grotesque— distorted, exaggerated bodies that provoke disgust and pity. This is true in many documentaries and reality TV shows set in Appalachia, as seen in Jesco White, one of the central figures in *The Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia*, and the family in the reality TV show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*. Both treat the average viewer (or voyeur) to behavior that is wildly inappropriate by “normal” standards (hence calling the watcher a voyeur). Both shows (in the truest sense of the word) depict a main character with at least one disability. Jesco has depression and drug addiction, and Mama June in *Honey Boo Boo* has a disabled foot, which as May Friedman points out, is never explored as a disability, but rather is simply called a “forklift foot” throughout the show. This seems to be to shove it away, erase it, and stop questions about it. The characters from those shows depict

themselves as raunchy and disgusting, but seemingly, not disabled. Both deal with class in a very classist way, as though them being in the working class, or even in poverty, makes them “less than,” particularly when disability is concerned.

Finding disabilities that are not the stereotype of the “grotesque” variety in southern art as a whole is difficult. Photographic montages and documentaries done by outsiders about the south, called “poverty porn,” have the dirtiest of houses, people with mud and dirt covering their clothing and skin, and disabled people who are bedridden, misshapen, or otherwise abnormal looking. Where are the tidy houses? The gardens? Might the people who have mud on them be dirty from tending these? Where are the people with jobs? They tend to be missing, unless the men are coal miners covered in coal, or car mechanics or oil riggers grimy with oil. Consider, instead, what is shown in these and in fiction of the south: the character Lonnie playing the banjo in *Deliverance* who is characterized as “inbred,” slow, and physically disabled; “The Gimp” in *Pulp Fiction*, who is physically disabled, but also seen as both hidden away and silenced (through a BDSM ball gag, by which he is quite literally muzzled); *The Sound and the Fury*’s intellectually disabled Benjy Compson also fits these tropes. Many examples of the southern gothic—strange happenings in unusual, mysterious places—can be seen throughout southern writing, particularly that of the early-to-mid Twentieth Century, and is widely seen throughout William Faulkner and Flannery O’Connor’s fiction, such as in *The Sound and the Fury* and “A Good Man is Hard to Find.”

The problem with this sort of portrayal is that it stereotypes southerners as maladjusted, ignorant, and uncivilized, and the south as a dark place of intrigue and suspense. Only a few critics in New Southern Studies have moved past viewing disability

only in terms of embodiment rather than disability and thought through a Disability Studies lens, which desperately needs to happen. Recent and current southern literature and scholarship are missing both primary works and critical texts about contemporary disability; rather, these continue to see bodies solely through embodiment. Few works of southern fiction and film do not utilize the southern gothic or grotesque. *Explosive Family Dinners* begins to remedy this as it represents contemporary disability in southern writing without using the stereotypes of the grotesque or southern gothic.

Very little criticism exists on disability in southern literature without the tropes of the southern gothic or grotesque. Jay Watson and Taylor Hagood are two scholars writing the most about disability and the south. In *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*, Hagood applies Disability Studies to Faulkner. He utilizes Tobin Siebers's "ideology of identity," which, simply put, is the "preference for able-bodiedness" (Siebers qtd. in Hagood ix). Hagood continues that the natural preference for ability makes any look at disability in literature seem harsh because it appears that the writer is being disparaging toward disability when examining and critiquing it in literature and the arts ("A Before Word on the (De)Form of the Book" ix-xv); Hagood does not do this in his book. He continues that southern literature often changes this feeling when writing about the grotesque as compared to the ideology of identity because, as the scholars Leigh Ann Duck and C. Vann Woodward have shown, "the South not only operates under different value systems but it is very often seen by people in the rest of the country, if not most of the world in the know, as grotesquely different" (9), which is problematic not only because of the way it looks at disability, but that it's also southern exceptionalism and essentialism. Hagood deliberately chose the word grotesque because "of its long-standing association with

southern writing's characters and settings and its undertones of abnormality, deformity, and disability" (Hagood 9), which is a confining, imprecise way to look at disability in the south. Instead of seeing disabled people as regular individuals who happen to be disabled, they are given the air of mystique and deviancy, which is not only reductive, but also erroneous. For that reason, I am exploring this idea within this critical afterword. I also deliberately chose not to do so in my own creative writing.

While the hallucinations and strange beliefs I had, which are depicted in my memoir, could be argued as having the stereotypical "air of mystique and deviancy" of disability, I reject that this is the case because the mystique within my memoir is explained as a direct result of my TLE. Through this explanation, the mystique dissipates and goes from a sense of deviancy to direct manifestations of neurological illness. This is clear throughout *Explosive Family Dinners* that these hallucinations are not magical or supernatural forces being experienced, but are seizures, plain and simple. There are even ties to the land, as is often seen in southern writing, because I experienced many of them outside my house, but there is never a question of the hallucinations being real.

Southern literature and its criticism often rely on the stereotype of the grotesque, the southern gothic, and of decidedly different abnormal bodies than in the rest of the country. Disability itself, in average disabled bodies that are not made bizarre or monstrous, is rarely seen in southern literature today. Duck, Woodward, and Hagood point out the reasons why, which can be boiled down to stereotype and expectation that the south is different, odd, and mysterious. This concept is southern exceptionalism, the belief, held by both southerners and northerners, that the south is unique instead of the fact that people like those in the south can be found all over the country (Lassiter and

Crespino). Disabled people exist everywhere, but within southern literature as well as television, movies, and documentaries, the southern Gothic and grotesque dominate. The disabled are frequently represented as aberrant, and even disgusting, in writing, film, and TV from throughout the country, but only the southern versions of those also contain that mysterious air that make up clichés of the grotesque and gothic. Watson notes that critics of the south's literature and art have "registered the bodily density and strangeness of southern cultural production, often under the rubric of the gothic or the grotesque." He continues that few exceptions exist, but notes that Patricia Yaeger's work, in particular, offers "a more careful, thoroughgoing consideration of the body's complex and prominent role(s) in southern writing has been slow to emerge in southern studies" (9-10). The writing and depiction of southern characters are prey to this stereotyped description regarding disability, and critics are guilty of it as well.

Separating disability from the grotesque in southern novels and primary texts is crucial. May Friedman looks at reclamation and resistance in the reality TV show *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, which is set in the southernmost Appalachian area of Georgia. This show, Friedman writes, "resists dominant discourses" and "moves beyond farce and instead presents a strong critique of normativity" (77). Friedman writes that the little girl and her family are stigmatized and made fun of because they are poor (therefore "white trash"), fat (yet accepting of their bodies), and that Mama June, the mother in the show, has questionable mothering techniques (odd, but fair and reasonable). However, for the average viewer, the family exists just to laugh at and make fun of. Their behavior is absurd and obscene as they curse, burp, belly-flop into mud pits, and can be, as Friedman argues, considered the "new freak show" (80). *Honey Boo Boo* "seeks to present a type of

emblematic ‘Southernness’ that transcends state boundaries” (79). New Southern Studies allows for the examination of such behaviors, but also needs to begin to view disability in ways beyond considering disability and disabled people mostly as grotesque and through the lens of embodiment.

The problem with this depiction of the south is that it goes into the lewd, absurd, and grotesque. It represents disability—from Mama June’s disabled foot that she simply doesn’t take off her socks because of, but is never considered further, to the addiction and depression evident in not only Jesco White, but also his relatives—in ways that become theater, Friedman’s freak show, and the grotesque. Disability can’t continue to be the grotesque in the south. Examples of characters with disabilities that aren’t obscene need to exist. Small ones do, such as Crystal Spangler and her father in Lee Smith’s *Black Mountain Breakdown*, but neither Crystal’s nor her father’s depression is ever acknowledged or viewed as a disability. Crystal’s father’s illness could be argued as being seen as a disability, perhaps, but his depression doesn’t seem to be, and neither is ever named as such. Similarly, the psychiatric disabilities in the women within *The Birds of Opulence* by Crystal Wilkinson are discussed to some degree, and although a focus of the book, the characters often step and dance around the topic. Gracie in Darnell Arnoult’s *Sufficient Grace* is perhaps the character whose disability (schizophrenia) is dealt with most straightforwardly and openly.

Siebers uses Simi Linton’s terms when he writes that

[t]o the reverse of the negative connotations of disability . . . it will be necessary to claim the value and variety of disability in ways that may seem strange to readers who have little experience with Disability Studies. But it is vital to show

to what extent the ideology of ability collapses once we ‘claim disability’ as a positive identity” (“Complex Embodiment” 281). Naming and acknowledging a disability can improve [the] quality of life for disabled people” (Siebers “Complex Embodiment” 281).

The disabilities in most current southern literature are not named or given voice, so can’t become positive identities or empowering. I hope to change that in some small part within *Explosive Family Dinners* by being up front about psychiatric and neurological illnesses/disabilities within the pages. They are named and discussed—even my father’s, whose bipolar disorder was never named to the family outside himself and my mom during his lifetime.

How *Explosive Family Dinners* Situates itself within New Southern Studies: A Look at *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon

I have always read and studied southern literature, but it wasn’t until taking New Southern Studies with Dr. Amy Clukey that I was introduced to the concepts of newer, fresher ways of viewing southern writing. Examining older memoirs and novels through a lens of New Southern Studies allowed me to consider problems within these writings, but also discover gems that I had not previously encountered such as writing by Rick Bragg, Kevin Sessums, and Janisse Ray.

I also read the memoir *Heavy* by Kiese Laymon, which had a large influence within the pages of *Explosive Family Dinners*. *Heavy* is a current southern memoir—published while I wrote my own memoir—and its bravery in facing difficult family dynamics and looking at body size influenced my own writing. In *Heavy*, Laymon writes

movingly about the issues he had with his mother—from love to abuse and back to love—as well as his issues with being a big man. That led him to address his memoir to his mother as a second person “you.” Despite *Heavy* being brutally honest about the physical, emotional, and psychological abuse that Laymon faced, present always is the love of family and the love he and his mother had for each other. I do this in my memoir, with my mother, but even more so with my father. Despite the memoir not being addressed to them, they were always in the back of my mind. In fact, my mother has read it and her one issue with anything that she wanted me to change was to add that my dad drove me to middle school because it was not far from his office downtown. She has said this to me four separate times. I suppose she doesn’t want me to seem favored—a bit ironic given the openness with which there is a family favorite, as shown in the chapter “I’m Not the Favorite.”

Laymon’s mother has spoken often in public about how proud she is of her son, and both have since said they moved beyond their issues discussed in *Heavy*. My parents and I got past the issues of my temporal lobe epilepsy and bipolar disorder before my dad’s death, and my mom and I remain close, despite her oddness with the phone during covid. Once vaccinations came to be, she started using the phone again, and I’ve even seen her in person.

Writing about size, like writing about disability, is difficult in memoir. When one is “othered” by a bodily difference, discussing it is hard. Laymon does that from the very beginning of his memoir, which he begins by writing how he doesn’t want to write “honestly” about “black lies, black thighs, black loves, black laughs, black foods, black addictions, black stretch marks, black dollars, black words, black abuses, black blues,

black belly buttons, black wins, black beens, black bends, black consent, black parents, or black children.” He then writes, “I wanted to write an American memoir. / I wanted to write a lie.” Our outward situations are very different; I have a great deal of privilege by having a white body, growing up with more than enough money, an intact nuclear family, etc. Despite my having immense amounts of privilege that Laymon did not have, we had some very distinct similarities: we are both large folks, we used college to both break away and be pulled home, we pursued careers in academia, and we had tumultuous childhoods.

Laymon lost a great deal of weight—from 319 pounds to 165 during college and grad school. His food intake and the amount of exercise he did were among the few things he could control in his life. While things around Laymon’s family life spiral out of control by having an uncle who is an addict, a mother in denial of family abuses, a grandmother who foregoes medical care because she’s afraid of white doctors, and then once she gets care isn’t given enough anesthetic for a procedure because she’s a Black woman. What he can control are the grades he gets and what he does with his body. The word *heavy* describes not only his body, but also the material he deals with in the memoir, including physical, emotional, and psychological abuse from his mother, and witnessing physical and sexual abuse also.

Similarly, I experienced emotional and psychological and (a relatively small) amount of physical abuse and experienced rape. Everything I read in *Heavy* took me in and made me a witness to what Laymon experienced, perhaps especially by his use of the second-person “you” he directs the writing to. While I’m not his mother, there is an intimacy that is caused by using second-person. *Heavy* is one of the only pieces of

writing in second person that I've read that works, maybe because someone specific is being addressed, or perhaps it's just because Laymon is an exquisite writer.

While writing about his students who had children, he writes, "I will avoid them all because I am ashamed how heavy I've become and how childless I am. I will live and sleep alone, just like you. ... I will want to starve. I will want to gorge. I will want to punish my black body because fetishizing and punishing black bodies are what we are trained to do well in America." The honesty in this passage is astounding, and I could have chosen any part of the book, for they are all equally as fantastic.

I tried to bring some of this frankness, intimacy, and immediacy into my own writing. For example, "1985: 'Shout'" was initially much longer and written in second person, addressed to William, as an essay for Prof. Griner's class. I felt that it was a standalone essay at the time. However, when I submitted it to journals, I got a lot of "almost" rejections. Most felt it shouldn't be in second person because it put the importance on William instead of it being on me as narrator. In the memoir, I took some of the lessons from *my* use of second person that *didn't* work (versus his that *did*) and Laymon's intensity and cut the length of "1985: 'Shout'" by almost half, switched the focus to me as to what happens to me as both narrator and character by changing it into first person, and continued looking straight at violence and did not shy away from it.

Like Laymon, I write of my fat body, the shame that comes from having one (especially in college), and the way having a fat body is represented throughout the interaction that led to the rape. Laymon also includes a scene in his high school locker room where he is ashamed he is fat. Although I had already written my locker room

scene in middle school in “The Problem with Seeing Faeries,” it was validating for someone else to have a similar experience.

Laymon begins most chapters with his age and weight. His weight steadily grows until he decides in college to lose weight. He becomes obsessed with running, weighing himself, and doing exercises. He turns the focus from eating his feelings to exercising them away. Instead, he only does the opposite. He doesn’t fix his problems in his life that caused him to eat his feelings; he just turns them around to meticulously counting calories, eating far too few calories to the point that he passes out while in a grocery checkout line, and running, running, running.

My whole life, I have eaten my feelings. I have watched my weight go up and down, and in the memoir that will be about Guy, the time I became obsessed with counting calories, working out, and hiking, hiking, hiking comes in—largely influenced by *Heavy*. That section was cut to go into a later memoir when I realized that I had two halves of two different memoirs and had to regroup, but it will be in the next book.

Southern Tradition, New Southern Studies Style

I am writing in the southern tradition, though with the knowledge of New Southern Studies and not relying on southern tropes to see me through. I am southern not only by growing up and living in Louisville, Kentucky, but also because my mother was born and raised on a farm in Franklin, Kentucky, which is near Nashville, Tennessee. She was seventeen when she moved away, nineteen when she married my dad, and twenty-one when I was born. I was raised by a very southern mother, especially when I was young, before she became “citified,” as she says, by Louisville. My aunt, Peggy, who mostly

grew up in Bowling Green, Kentucky—where my mom also lived when she was seventeen—lived with us and spent a great deal of time with us during parts of my early childhood. My sister Callie and I also spent a lot of time with her, my grandmother, and great grandmother in Bowling Green and, later, Franklin. My aunt is eleven years my senior, and greatly influenced me when I was young because of the amount of time we spent together. Having that familial influence of a small city and rural area that is farther south than Louisville, helped solidify my identity as southern.

Until I was ten, I grew up across the street from Selma Hall, an old plantation house on five acres in the middle of a subdivision that had sprouted up around it in the 1940s. I played in the yard of Selma Hall daily; it felt like my outdoor home. I was also allowed to spend time with the owners of the mansion and land, the Reeds. Mrs. Reed was often found reading in the porch below the grand staircase to the main entrance. I regularly bothered her for shortbread cookies and homemade hot chocolate while enjoying her company as much as the sweets. Mr. Reed puttered around in an outbuilding that I write in the memoir was hopefully not slave quarters, though I don't think it was because it seemed more of the 1960s or 70's. Some of the sections that this former plantation home appeared in were later cut from the memoir, but will perhaps be individual essays at later dates. Though I liked the writing and content of these chapter, I agreed with Prof. Griner when he said he wasn't sure it belonged in the memoir itself.

Both the Reeds and their house and land do appear in the memoir, though, along with some pondering about the situating of a plantation house and what that meant in the 1970s. While the past forty years has made us significantly more alert to the problematic nature of a plantation home being the playground of an entire neighborhood of kids, there

also exists the fact that it was, and that I didn't ever consider what that meant until a few years ago. Some of that was cut from the memoir, but some of it remains.

Life Writing, Feminist Studies, Performativity, Autobiography

There is a long history of women writing their own lives, whether it is confessional fiction, poetry, or autobiography, or writing memoir as we know it today. *Explosive Family Dinners* is not only a memoir of disability, but also one of trauma since both my father and my long-term life partner committed suicide. Beyond that, I have memories of my mother beating me with a wooden paddle as I came out of seizures. Presumably I was also being beaten during them, but don't remember because one has amnesia about what happens during most seizures. (This is not always true, as it depends on the type of seizure; I can remember déjà vus, for example, but not the "temper tantrum-like" ones.)

Cathy Caruth writes that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely implicated in each other's traumas" (qtd. in Henke 22). Because of my father's blow ups and my mother hitting me, my history of trauma is intertwined with that of my mom's because she hit me during seizures and now feels extremely guilty about that, and about how she and my dad did not take me to see the right sort of doctor to get me diagnosed with TLE before I figured it out in my twenties. My sisters' also experienced trauma because they witnessed all of this, and all of us did because my dad and boyfriend (who was essentially a family member after thirteen years) killed themselves.

Reading criticism and feminist theory regarding autobiography helped me write *Explosive Family Dinners*. Not only that, when I wrote this critical afterword, it also

enabled me to include these works as well as recognize the influence behind my work. Theorists such as Suzette Henke, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson's work on women and autobiography, especially where trauma is concerned greatly impacted the way that I view and write about the trauma inflicted on me by my dad through verbal and emotional abuse, and my mom's physical abuse put upon me. My mom's physical abuse did not appear in the memoir much, which is probably because she is still living and I have a good relationship with her. Focusing on something she is unable to talk about herself would hurt her more than I'm willing to do. The idea of this abuse was not terribly far from my mind during the scenes when I had seizures, though; I don't think it *has* to appear on the page.

Bisexuality, Sexual Performativity, and Feminist Studies

Since I also explored my bisexuality+ in the memoir, I examined sexual performativity, since I tried very hard to not "seem gay" as an adolescent by wearing makeup and trying to be seen as a girl who only liked boys. This is something that followed me through life until I was willing to come out, first to friends, and then to my family also, as bisexual/pansexual². There is an erasure of bisexuals+ in our culture as many people choose to identify only as "queer" rather than bisexual. I am guilty of doing this myself. I have, at various times throughout my life, sought to seem "straight," especially after a rumor would go around that I was gay, which is depicted in *Explosive Family Dinners* in the chapter "The Problem with Seeing Faeries."

² While I know that there is a difference between bisexuality and pansexuality, pansexuality falls under the bi+ umbrella. The term pansexuality is relatively new, at least on my radar, and I'm still growing to accept saying it to people my age who have never heard the term. I usually land on calling myself queer instead.

Most people in our society feel that they know whether someone is straight, gay, or a lesbian based on their outward appearance. However, what about when someone has none of those sexual identities, but instead identifies as something else, as I do? The matter of those who identify as bisexual, pansexual, or other identity who is not strictly interested in men or women always seems to pique people's interest. This is especially true if the person in question has had relationships with people of different genders.

People make assumptions about others' sexuality based on how they present themselves. Gender and sexuality performance can change throughout time with anyone. Those who are not straight, gay, or lesbian—or those whose sexual or gender identity changes—often alter their sexual performativity based the sexuality and gender of their partner(s). Those who do not identify as straight, gay, or lesbian, or who are not cisgender, seem to rarely be written about, and to rarely write about those aspects of themselves.

For these reasons, in my memoir, I explored my own sexuality and sexual performativity based on what gender of person I am primarily interested in dating or experimenting with. This affects what sexuality I *seem* to present as, regardless of my own awareness of this performance. I considered what my sexuality appears to be when I have experimented with girls and boys during adolescence, dated men until I was forty-nine, and now am in a serious, committed relationship with a woman. I also explored how I have either deliberately or subconsciously changed my sexual performance based on these things. Because I “pass” as straight I have to “out” myself frequently. I’m also often misidentified as either straight or a lesbian, and almost never as either bisexual or pansexual, based solely on whether I am dating someone who presents as male or female.

If I dated someone trans, I might be perceived as pansexual, but since everyone I have dated at least appears to be cisgender, I have only heard myself referred to as being a lesbian or straight.

It is through feminist studies that I explored the trauma that has affected me in my adolescence, my gender performativity, and oral history/histories of my mother and sister. I have added to the history of women's autobiographical writing through my memoir and exploring a new avenue of having experienced physical abuse *while having seizures*. This is a new experience brought forward in *Explosive Family Dinners* I have not seen explored in feminist studies or trauma studies.

The Influence of Dorothy Allison and Feminist Studies

My memoir and critical work also follow the tradition of memoirs by women such as Jeanette Winterson's "The Semiotics of Sex," Dorothy Allison's *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. These three women are also queer and identify as lesbians. Their works affect ways in which I wrote my own memoir. Bechdel is straightforward about her own budding lesbian identity, as well as her father's bisexuality and bipolar disorder. Winterson writes vehemently about being a writer who is a lesbian, not a lesbian who writes. Because my writing includes instances of sexual exploration with other girls as an adolescent, and I mention my current girlfriend, I will likely get asked about my own sex life and/or identity, as Winterson does hers. Allison writes unabashedly about being a lesbian. My writing is informed by these and other feminist women writers.

For this section, I will focus primarily on the words of Dorothy Allison, both *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* and the Jim Wayne Miller/James Still Keynote Address at the Appalachian Writers Workshop in Hindman, Kentucky in July of 2019. In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Allison writes that she accepts herself despite familial issues, which is a statement I recognize myself in. My family loves me, but did not always accept me, but I accept myself. Allison further says that she is “the only one who can tell the story of [her] life and say what it means.” This resonates with me because I feel the same way. There is no one else who can tell my story; only I can tell the details in *Explosive Family Dinners*, and that is an important feminist characteristic—owning one’s own story.

Allison says that “to go on living, [she] has to tell stories.” I have written since I was nine-years-old and kept a diary at an even younger age. I must tell stories to keep going. I was unable to write for nine years when I was on the anticonvulsant Depakote. When I was switched to another medication, I was immediately able to write again. This is also something that Ellen Forney fears in *Marbles*. She is afraid that going on medicine for bipolar disorder will take away her creativity. She eventually chooses to take medication and it doesn’t change her creativity. My current meds do not alter my creativity at all.

In *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*, Dorothy Allison writes that she talks to her sister to prepare for the book, and her sister said, “You made me feel so stupid.” My mom has told me several times that it was hard for Callie to follow in my footsteps because I was smart. Nevertheless, Callie called me “retarded” while we grew up. My mom also said that in some ways Callie still thinks that. It’s a dichotomy that only she (or

someone with a similar diagnosis) could believe, holding both the thought that I'm smart and "retarded" at the same time and believing them both.

In the Introduction to Allison's Keynote at Hindman Settlement School, Silas House quotes Allison as saying,

I want to write *hard* stories. I demand them from myself. Hard stories are worth the difficulty. It seems to me the only way I have forgiven anything, understood anything, is through the process of opening up to my own terror and pain and reexamining it, recreating it in story, and making it something different. Making it meaningful. Even if the meaning is only the act of telling.

This is something I believe in entirely and is not true only to Allison, but can be seen in many feminist writings, such as, for example Bechdel's *Fun Home*, in which Bechdel examines not only coming to terms with her own queerness, but that of her father, her father's affair with a teenager, and her father's suicide. Allison, herself, looks at sexual and physical abuse in the novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* and in *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure*. Although *Bastard Out of Carolina* is a novel and Allison has written repeatedly that it is not true, there are many semi-autobiographical aspects to it, such as the young female protagonist being physically and sexually abused by her mother's boyfriend/husband.

In my own writing, I write about my awakening bisexuality+, my father's bipolar disorder and suicide, Guy's depression and suicide, Michelle's death, my own temporal lobe epilepsy and bipolar disorder, Michelle and Callie's mental illnesses, and many of the issues that these things cause. Like Allison, I don't turn away from "hard things." Reading Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* around 1995 made a great impact on me in

this respect. Prior to that, I had barely been willing to look at the dark parts of my life in writing, though they certainly existed. *Bastard Out of Carolina* opened up a part of me that allowed me to write darker, harder work. It was couched as fiction for a long time, but I eventually began writing memoir—ironically in a short story workshop led by short story and novel writer George Singleton.

Allison states in countless interviews, including the new introduction to the copy of *Bastard Out of Carolina* I have that while similar things happened to her—the sexual abuse, the physical abuse—it was *not* the way things occurred in *Bastard*. She specifies that *Bastard* is fiction and not nonfiction. She writes that people who know even a bit of her real-life story believe it's nonfiction disguised as fiction, but that it isn't.

Examining Your Own Soul is Hard

At the Appalachian Writers Workshop in 2019, Dorothy Allison said in the keynote speech, “Many of us come to the page with the deep-seated need for revenge, . . . for righteousness, to correct the record, to make real everything you knew. Sometimes to examine your own soul, pouring onto the page, that can be hard. That can be painful.”

This is something I faced, especially with Callie. She has been so hateful for most of our lives, but especially since her mental illness has gotten progressively worse. I forgave her and forgave her and forgave her for so many years without her ever apologizing or asking forgiveness, until the day I couldn't anymore: the one-year anniversary of Guy's suicide, which is in *Explosive Family Dinners*. The email she sent me blaming his suicide on me was awful. After that I can never forgive her, not fully, not to allow her back in—even if she were to ask forgiveness, which she never will because she doesn't ever think she did

anything wrong. “That Day, One Year Later” was originally much more biting and venomous towards Callie. I toned it down a great deal. I worried I might lose the reader if I were too critical of Callie. The goal is not to be the way she is towards me; it’s to tell my truth, even if that truth must be toned down sometimes. That chapter was hard and painful to write—one of the hardest in the whole memoir—because Callie was so terrible that day. I didn’t want to be vengeful, though, so through revision was able not to be.

It is through reading and studying important feminist writers, some of whom, like Allison, are also critical southern writers, that I found my voice, allowing me to come forward with my own story—telling those hard stories—even though they aren’t easy to do. I find it interesting that one thing that Allison said in the Keynote at the AWW is, “It has taken me my entire life to forgive myself for what I did to my mother for publishing *Bastard Out of Carolina* without first making sure she knew how much I loved her. How much I *loved* her. ... That I knew that love was unending.” Hearing that brought a turn in the writing of my memoir. I was writing the hard things—using her, Bechdel, and others as role models—but it became important that the work also be infused with love, that it be clear that I know my family, especially my parents, loved me and will always love me, and that it is mutual. Before hearing Allison say that, I hadn’t been consciously adding in the love my family members have for one another. I knew my mom would read my memoir (and she has done so, albeit earlier than I anticipated), and I didn’t want there to be any question in her mind about whether I knew she and Dad loved me or that I loved them. I made sure those questions were answered within the text. It was important to show that not only for my mom, of course, but for love to be a guiding principle of my family, no matter its disfunction.

Oral Histories

I completed an oral history of my mother during the dissertation process to see if she would tell me about my seizures and both her and my father's actions during them. I also wanted to know about her feelings about having not gotten me tested for epilepsy or searched out an answer for my "temper tantrums." She thought they were just immature reactions to the stimuli of my father blowing up and yelling at me. She has previously not talked to me about this, but agreed to discuss my childhood and what I'm writing about, which is the TLE. She was not as forthcoming about that as I'd hoped, however, silently shaking her head and said she just can't talk about it. We did discuss a lot of other parts of my/our life/lives, though, which helped solidify the memoir, especially what it looked like when I had a seizure.

I also did an oral history with my sister Kristen, who is a reliable narrator—the Glass sister other than me who is one. She told me a lot about her perspective and memories of the night my dad died, after Guy died, and reminded me of things I already knew, but had forgotten, of those times. I chose not to interview Callie because she is such an unreliable narrator of her own life, much less mine. After consulting with Dr. Catherine Fosl about it, we agreed nothing would be gained by having such an interview. Michelle is no longer living, so cannot be interviewed, though she, too, would have been unreliable. Callie and Michelle are/were unreliable due to mental health issues.

I took oral histories when I took LGBTQ Oral History with Dr. Fosl, who is on my committee. That class and Dr. Fosl's help proved invaluable in pursuing these avenues. For a class on documentary films with Dr. Lara Kelland, in making a documentary about busing in Louisville, I interviewed my mother since Callie was bused

the first year it started. I was also bused in seventh grade, and volunteer bused in eighth, so I wouldn't have to return to the school where I went during the chapter "Eleven and Epileptic." These interviews with my mother impacted my chapters about when I went to Meyzeek Middle School in seventh and eighth grade, such as "1994: 'I'll Make Love to You' and "The Problem with Seeing Faeries." About ten years ago, I interviewed my mom several times about her childhood for a novel I was writing about her family when she was a child. The novel went by the wayside, but material from those interviews impacted the chapter "Gravy Lessons" in the parts where Mom wrote in the diary, the section in the cellar, and that she built the swing and designed chicken barns with her father.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Beyond the theorists examined in this critical afterword, I also looked at the work of theorists writing about women's autobiographical writings, such as Julia Watson, Joan W. Scott, Domna C. Stanton, Shari Benstock, and others. Within Disability Studies, I considered, in addition to those mentioned above, the work of Robert McRuer, Alison Kafer, Bonnie G. Smith, and Beth Hutchison. In New Southern Studies, I looked at the theoretical work of Will Brantley, Monica C. Miller, Jay Watson, and Taylor Haygood. Medical Humanities theorists I explored, in addition to those mentioned above, include Kay Redfield Jamison, Alice Flaherty, and Sayantani DasGupta. Creative Writing theorists and stylists I considered in my writing include G. Thomas Couser, Mary Karr, Brenda Miller, and Suzanne Paola. My writing was also significantly informed by memoirs from each discipline. In the past three years, my focus has been able to be on

writing and reading memoirs and other creative writing; that, with the theory included and considered, formed the solid base for *Explosive Family Dinners*.

Disability Studies impacted the way I approach my neurological and psychiatric disabilities, as well as the physical one I have now that requires me to walk with a cane. Much of the latter physical disability portion of the memoir was cut to save for a future memoir (probably the one about me and Jane). In *Explosive Family Dinners*, how my father's psychiatric disability affect(ed) my family was also explored, as was what happened as a result of my TLE and his bipolar disorder. This is true primarily during my childhood, when my bipolar disorder had not yet shown any symptoms. Bipolar disorder usually begins to show and develop as either an older teenager or in one's twenties. Mine began around my junior year of high school. I explored having bipolar disorder and epilepsy through Disability Studies. I had never considered my epilepsy a disability until shortly before I began the Humanities PhD program when I began learning about Disability Studies.

Through my studies, I learned how to be considerate in writing about my father's bipolar disorder. He was, overall, a good man. Many people told me that at his visitation. I also knew that. He was not *always* yelling at me. He also taught me the love of reading, from which I developed a love of writing. Those with TLE also often have hypergraphia, as I did, that caused me to write compulsively. I do not do that anymore, though I do write. By studying Disability Studies, I am now aware that people talked about me when I was a child and adolescent *because I have a disability*. My seizures created a child with hallucinations, and who had seizures in school, during and after which other students (and occasionally teachers) treated me badly by making fun of me. It is through

Disability Studies that I can look at how my father's verbal attacks and these children's relentless teasing impacted me.

Similarly, Medical Humanities allows me to tell my story with an eye to not being too confessional, but also in owning the story of my disabilities/illnesses and telling my own story. Couser is critical of people who tell disabled people's stories, but he is typically considering the memoirs by the caretakers of someone disabled or who has a chronic illness. Couser, Frank, and Charon's work informed my ability to view myself and my writing as my own disability narrative, which is important in claiming my own story. Medical humanities is becoming something more and more people come in contact with, whether they know it or not. Many patient narratives written by the ill person themselves sell well. Examples within writing about bipolar disorder are *Manic* by Terri Cheney, *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison, and *Madness: A Bipolar Life* by Marya Hornbacher. There is only one memoir available about the partial complex seizures of temporal lobe epilepsy, which is a self-published book called *Surviving Wonderland: Living with Temporal Lobe Epilepsy* by Sharon R Powell. This last is self-published and not particularly well-written. The lack of narratives about epilepsy shows the need for memoirs about it. Even memoirs about bipolar disorder are limited.

New Southern Studies impacted my writing because I was cognizant of making sure I, at no point, portray disability as the grotesque. Although I am critical of the field for not including disability, much less examining disability or illness in current writings to any significant degree, *Explosive Family Dinners* allows for just this. This critical afterword that accompanies my memoir, includes this examination of my memoir within the framework of New Southern Studies. Because it was written in our current culture

and, although I stayed away from the grotesque, I wrote within, and answered the history of writing about disability in southern writing. By writing about disability in a respectful way within my memoir, I explored ways in which New Southern Studies can move forward with consideration to disability writing and stop viewing disability only through older writings that include only ideas of embodiment and the grotesque as ways to view disability.

The craft books, especially Mary Karr's *The Art of Memoir*, about writing have helped me learn more about writing memoir specifically. Even more, though, Couser's work on memoir has impacted me in many ways about how memoirs about disability are viewed and considered. His work greatly impacted both my creative and critical work. Although he can be critical of memoir, I find his writing precise and his memoir theory exemplifies, among other things, how *not* to write memoir about disabilities. I can foresee a time when I would write my own theory about the subject as well, adding to the small amount of literature about this specific consideration in memoir, so much of which is written by Couser.

What's Next?

The next steps in my plans are getting an agent and getting *Explosive Family Dinners* published. I would love for it to be picked up by a large house, but I will also be happy for it to be published by a well-respected independent press such as Sarabande, Hub City, or a university press. Within this memoir, I plan to add photographs, images of diary and letter clippings, yearbook writings, and other memorabilia, similar to the way the novel *The Book of Otto and Liam* by Paul Griner, the memoir *Blood* by Allison Moorer, and the

poetry collection *Nox* by Anne Carson do. It was not realistic to include in the manuscript of the dissertation, but for publication and searching for an agent, my plan is to do that.

After this, I have three memoirs in mind to write. The first—and easiest to complete—is one about my and Guy’s relationship. I have an award-winning essay “Photographic Memory” (Emma Bell Miles Prize) that formed the center of what was the second half of *Explosive Family Dinners* before I realized that it had become the halves of two different memoirs and split them. Roughly half of the memoir about Guy is complete, though not in any sort of order. Many of the chapters are short, though in *Explosive Family Dinners* that has worked well. Some of the short chapters in the Guy memoir are markers for much longer pieces, though; they’re things I didn’t want to forget or was thinking about and have written roughly 600 words about. There are also some long chapters of 4,500+ words, such as “Photographic Memory.” I see using photos, letter samples, yearbook writings, and other memorabilia in it also.

The third memoir I have planned, some of which is written, is about Jane. She has recently been diagnosed with likely fatal cancer (cholangiocarcinoma, stage IV, metastatic). I was writing parts of that memoir prior to her diagnosis, but that ramped up the necessity of writing things to remember them. It will center around our health issues and her potential death or decline, the loss of our dogs, since they’re old, and my own health issues that are not neurological/psychiatric. I put that as writing it after the one about Guy so that I have some distance from whatever happens, but I will work on it while I work on the one about Guy also. I have found it nice to write short things in projects while I’ve written *Explosive Family Dinners*.

The fourth memoir I have in mind is an expansion of the chapter “1985: Shout,” which centers around my college years and the rape. It was a wild time in my life, at least as wild as I ever got. I was innocent in the rape, but I definitely partook of some risky behaviors before and, especially, after it. I was kicked out of being a sorority pledge because of untrue things my roommate, also a pledge to the same sorority, told the advisors. I rebelled after that, acting like the wild child they thought I was. It was the mid-to-late 80’s and HIV/AIDS was such a foreign concept in UofL’s straight (acting) community that we still thought sex was safe if one protected against pregnancy. I think that the things that happened are similar enough to people’s college experiences, but also strangely different from them, that people can relate and would be interested in me exploring the entire story on paper.

My dream would be to write and not have to teach, but I know few reach that pinnacle of writing success. It’s perfectly fine if I don’t. I love teaching. It’s hard to write while also teaching, so teaching at a research school would be ideal where there is a smaller teaching load and the assumption that I will spend some of my time writing and researching. I plan to look for full-time, (hopefully) tenure-track positions for next academic year.

I’m excited that so many ideas have come to me during the writing of *Explosive Family Dinners*, both through writing so much about Guy, knowing I can expand things I’ve written in *Explosive Family Dinners*, and living life while I’ve been writing this memoir. I’m glad to have completed the memoir and the PhD—now on to getting the memoir published.

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25 January 2011. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2011/01/24/133189133/epilepsy-blamed-for-chopins-dark-hallucinations>.

NEW SOUTHERN STUDIES:

Brantley, Will. *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellman, Porter, and Hurston*. University Press of Mississippi, 1993.

Friedman, May. "Here Comes a Lot of Judgment: Honey Boo Boo as a Site of Reclamation and Resistance." *The Journal of Popular Television* 2.1 (2014): 77-95. *ProQuest*. 2 February 2017.

Hagood, Taylor. *Faulkner, Writer of Disability*. Louisiana State University Press, 2014.

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Miller, Monica Carol. *Being Ugly: Southern Women Writers and Social Rebellion*. Louisiana State University Press, 2017.

Watson, Jay. *Reading for the Body: The Recalcitrant Materiality of Southern Fiction, 1893-1985*. University of Georgia Press, 2012.

Yaeger, Patricia. *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930-1990*. University of Chicago Press, 2000.

PERSONAL INTERVIEWS AND IN-PERSON SPEECHES:

Allison, Dorothy. Jim Wayne Miller/James Still Keynote Address: Appalachian Writers Workshop. 26 July 2019. Hindman Settlement School. Hindman, KY.

Dobbs, Catherine. Personal Interview. 18 July 2019.

Glass, Nell. Personal Interview. 19 Jan. 2019.

Glass, Nell. Personal Interview via Text Messages. 31 July 2021.

FEMINIST STUDIES:

Pertinent Essays from the Following:

Caruth, Cathy. "Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival." *Cultural Values*, vol. 5, no. 1, Jan. 2001, pp. 7–26.

Caruth, Cathy. "Violence and Time: Traumatic Survivals." *Assemblage*, vol. 20, no. 20, 1993, pp. 24–24., doi:10.2307/3181682.

Diamond, Lisa M. *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*. Harvard University Press, 2008.

Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

Henke, Suzette A. *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing*. 1st ed., St. Martin's Press, 1998.

Smith, Sidonie. *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*. Indiana University Press, 1987.

Smith, Sidonie, and Julia Watson. *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*. University of Wisconsin Press, 1998.

Stanton, Domna C. *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.

Yaeger, Patricia. *Honey-Mad Women: Emancipatory Strategies in Women's Writing*.

Columbia University Press, 1988.

APPENDIX

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED MATERIALS PUBLICATION PERMISSIONS

reDIVIDER

Dear Elizabeth:

Congratulations! I am pleased to inform you that “Burden of Beasts” has been selected for publication in the Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Redivider*. Please see the **Publication Agreement** below for further details.

Best wishes for continued success in your career.

Sincerely,

Juliana Kruis
Nonfiction

Publication Agreement

The author/artist of “**Burden of Beasts**” attests that this is his or her own creative work and agrees to its publication in the Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Redivider*. The author also attests that this piece has not already been published in any other book or periodical prior to said issue(s). If this piece is published in any book or periodical in the future, the author agrees to acknowledge *Redivider* as the original publisher.

Redivider will edit for grammatical errors, but will not change the content of your work. If you have any concerns with potential changes, you may request to view the your piece prior to publication.

The staff of *Redivider* agrees to print the above piece in the Fall/Winter 2015 issue with acknowledgement to the author, who, in return for use of his or her work, will be compensated with two complimentary copies of the issue.

The staff of *Redivider* also reserves the right to reproduce the issue of *Redivider* including the above piece in any digital, purchasable forms, including an eBook, which are unknown or hereafter invented. This does not include reproduction on *Redivider's* website as the author/artist will decide whether to have his or her piece available online (*see below*). The author/artist retains all additional rights including individual reproduction of the work in digital and print format.

The author/artist either (a.) **agrees** to allow us to place said work on our website (check here) ____, or (b.) **does not agree** to allow us to place said work on our website (check

here) ____.

Elizabeth Glass
author/artist (print name)

author/artist (signature)

author/artist address:
814 Ash St
Louisville, KY 40217

author/artist twitter handle:

author e-mail address: hoppedog@gmail.com
0088

author phone number: (502)552-

Juliana Kruis
[Nonfiction]

Redivider / Emerson College / 120 Boylston St. / Boston, MA 02116 / [Nonfiction]

redivider

Dear Elizabeth:

Congratulations! I am pleased to inform you that "Burden of Beasts" has been selected for publication in the Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Redivider*. Please see the **Publication Agreement** below for further details.

Best wishes for continued success

in your career. Sincerely,

Juliana
Kruis
Nonfiction

Publication Agreement

The author/artist of "**Burden of Beasts**" attests that this is his or her own creative work and agrees to its publication in the Fall/Winter 2015 issue of *Redivider*. The author also attests that this piece has not already been published in any other book or periodical prior to said issue(s). If this piece is published in any book or periodical in the future, the author agrees to acknowledge *Redivider* as the original publisher.

Redivider will edit for grammatical errors, but will not change the content of your work. If you have any concerns with potential changes, you may request to view the your piece prior to publication.

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The author/artist either (a.) **agrees** to allow us to place said work on our website (check here) / _____, or

(b.)
does not agree to allow us to place said work on our website (check here)____.

Elizabeth Glass _
author/artist (print name)

author/artist address:
814 Ash St

Louisville, KY 40217

author e-mail address: hoppedog@gmail.com

author/artist twitter handle: @ElizabethIGlass

author phone number: (502)552-0088

Juliana Kruis

[Nonfiction]

Redivider I Emerson College / 120 Boylston St. / Boston, MA 02116 / [Nonfiction]

STILL THE JOURNAL

Submission Guidelines

Submissions are now closed.

Check back in late 2021 for new open reading period announcements.

Please read our guidelines below for email options beyond fiction, creative nonfiction, and poetry submissions.

We accept submissions only through [Submittable](#). Subs are free. We do have a "tip jar" option, but all submissions receive the same attention and consideration; again: submissions are free. Money we receive through the tip jar is used only to help pay for our web services and Submittable services.

Please submit only in one genre. If you have been published in *Still* before, please wait until one year has passed from that publication date before sending us work again.

We don't mind if your submission is simultaneous as long as you withdraw your piece right away if it's accepted elsewhere. We will be happy for you! Use the "withdraw" function in Submittable to withdraw work.

We are not able to pay our contributors, but we nominate work regularly to annual prizes, and we will help advertise your work on social media.

We try to respond to contributors within three months. Please do not query until three months have passed.

Still: The Journal acquires First Electronic Rights and Non-exclusive Archival Rights. Upon publication, all other rights revert to the author. Please credit *Still: The Journal* as first publisher if you reprint elsewhere; we like seeing our name in print, too. *Still* reserves the right to reprint work at a later date if we have the opportunity to occasionally make a print anthology and want to include your work.

We recommend that you read previous issues to see what we publish before submitting. Our emphasis is on amplifying the voices and creativity of the Appalachian region, and we are committed to publishing excellent writing that does not rely on clichés and stereotypes. We want to feature writing that exemplifies the many layers and complexities of the region. The writing you submit does not have to *be* about Appalachia: We also want to feature work that is written by authors with connections to the region. We encourage established, unpublished, and emerging writers (generally ages 18+) to submit their best work to *Still*.

We appreciate writing grounded in craft as well as experience. We are moved by lyrical writing that is compelling, distinctive, accessible, and finely written. We also like the wild and fragmented, the snapshot, the unforeseen. As a purely editorial decision, we don't consider trite, light verse, genre fiction, critical analyses, inspirational or motivational advice, erotica, pornography, or any writing that purposefully exploits or demeans or enables hatred and bigotry. We reserve the right to remove pieces from our archives.

We don't consider previously published work, including work that has been uploaded to social media or personal websites. Please do not submit any work that has been previously published unless invited to do so.

We will consider one fiction piece (up to 6,500 words) or one flash or micro fiction piece (no more than 1,000 words). We will consider one creative nonfiction piece (up to 6,500 words) or one flash or micro creative nonfiction piece (no more than 1,000 words.) Please double space all fiction and creative nonfiction. We will consider one to five poems (submitted as one document). Poems can be any length, form, style. Poems can be single spaced. Please submit only once in only one genre per reading period.

The title of your submission and the title of your uploaded file should include your name and genre, (e.g. Jane Doe Poetry).

In the "Cover Letter" section, please include a *short* sentence that explains your connection to the Appalachian region. Please also include a five-seven sentence biography. You can include your publications, but please list no more than four journals where your work has appeared. Book titles should include the publisher and year of publication. You can include literary awards and prizes. Include links to your work or

website (if applicable) and your Twitter handle (if applicable.)

If you are interested in pitching a book review, an interview, artwork, collaborations, or a *Still Life* feature, please contact us by email at editors@stilljournal.net.

The Manifest-Station is a place for words. We are looking for honest writing that has heart.

We want to be moved.

We want *Oh Wow...Oh Wow* kind of posts. We want the *I have to put down my cup of coffee (or wine) and give this my full attention* kind of stuff.

We are looking for fantastic writing. Gut wrenching, honest and brave writing. Period. We don't care if you are a well known author or a computer programmer who secretly writes at night.

A few things to note:

1. Include your twitter handle (if you have one) on the cover letter so that we can reference it in any tweets about an accepted piece.
2. Please make sure that your submission is polished, and only submit one piece at a time. Should your piece be selected for publication, any edits or changes you desire will require a new submission.
3. While we do accept previously published pieces, they need to be of exceptional quality to warrant re-publication on our site. Please indicate if the piece has been published before and where. Publication on your personal blog is perfectly fine, but we may ask that you take the post down if we publish it on The ManifestStation.
4. All rights revert back to you. Should you republish any piece after it appears here, kindly reference the ManifestStation.

About Photos: Feel free to attach a photo of yourself and /or feature photo if you want us to consider using it, should your piece be accepted for publication.

Due to the volume of submissions we receive, we cannot offer individual feedback, but we are grateful that you considered The ManifestStation for your submission.

Now Dazzle Us!

Jen, Angela and Francesca

There are presently no open calls for submissions.

The Tishman Review is permanently closed to submissions.

Our final issue will be published in October of 2019.

The Tishman Review pays all of our text contributors, according to the genre. Poems are paid on a sliding scale between \$10 and 25\$ per poem. Prose is paid a minimum of \$10.00 for a piece under 1000 words and for a piece over 1000 words at .01 cents per word. We pay 75\$ for cover art and \$10.00 for each piece published in the interior of the magazine.

We buy First Electronic Publication Rights, Non-exclusive print-on-demand rights to the work in the issue the work first appears in, and Archival rights only in the form the work first appears in *The Tishman Review*, with the copyright reverting back to the author upon publication. We do not buy the right to publish the work in an anthology or a different issue. We reserve the right to keep any work we publish. Should a piece first published in *The Tishman Review* be reprinted in another work, we request the later publication include an acknowledgment of *The Tishman Review*.

Our journal is available in three formats: online, e-book, and print-on-demand.

Please allow 90 days for a response.

THE TISHMAN REVIEW

Beyond the End of the World

WEBSITE CONTRIBUTOR AGREEMENT

MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT made this DATE between Tishman Review *aka The Tishman Review* ("Company") and Elizabeth Glass ("Contributor")_

WHEREBY IT IS MUTUALLY AGREED AS FOLLOWS:

- 1) Contributor has submitted to the Company *Bohemian Birthright* and Company has accepted such article for publication on *The Tishman Review* website: www.thetishmanreview.com within two months of the contributor's final version_ Said article/item shall appear for at least **Seven Days**.
 - a) Company reserves the right to request reasonable correction, revisions, replacements, and rewrites of the Work _ The schedule is as follows: Contributor shall review, complete, and return a **First Round** of edits within 10 days of receipt from Company_ A subsequent review **will** be conducted by TTR staff and subsequent edits requested, if necessary_ Last copy edits **will** be sent to Contributor within 10 days of receipt by the Company _ A **Final Round** of edits shall be completed by Contributor as previously stated, within 10 days of receipt from Company.
 - b) Company reserves the right to revise, modify, abridge, edit, or augment the Work in consultation with the Contributor_
- 2) Company shall also promote Contributor's work on the above mentioned website, and on the social media platforms currently used by the Company for the duration of the time period listed above. This currently includes FACEBOOK and TWITTER
- 3) Rights Contributor hereby grants to the Company throughout the world in any and all languages for the full term of the copyright of the **work**:
 - a) First North American Serial "Electronic Publication Rights" to the Work For purposes of this agreement "Electronic Publication Rights" shall mean the right to reproduce, transmit, make available, display publicly, distribute, syndicate and publish the Work in English on the Internet, in magnetic, CD-ROM, optical, electronic, digital, and other machine and computer readable forms and media now and hereafter known_

- b) Non-exclusive "Print-on-Demand Rights" to the Work. Non-exclusive rights to publish the Work in a print-on-demand format of the Electronic Issue in which the work appears as produced authorized by the Company for as long as the Issue in which the Work appears is available through *The Tishman Review's* website listed above_
- c) Non-Exclusive Rights The Contributor hereby grants to the Company throughout the world in any and all languages for the full term of the copyright of the Works:
 - a) Non-exclusive right to use Contributor's name and likeness in promoting, advertising and publicizing the publications in which the Work may appear_
 - b) Contributor also agrees to acknowledge the Company as the original publisher of the Works in all future publications of the Works_
 - c) Contributor grants Non-exclusive Archival Rights to the Work in the form the Work appears in *The Tishman Review* for as long as the Issue in which the Work appears is available through *The Tishman Review* _
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- 5) Contributor represents and warrants that the Work is original with the Contributor with the exception of materials in the public domain, and will not infringe upon any copyright or be in violation of any right of any party.
- 6) Contributor shall indemnify and defend Company from all claims, damages, and expenses including without limitation reasonable attorney's fees arising out of any breach of Contributor's representations and warranties contained herein_
- 7) Contributor is performing the assignment under this agreement as an independent contractor and not as an agent or employee of the Company.
- 8) Contributor hereby agrees and certifies that all results and proceeds of the services furnished in connection with the assignment are being rendered pursuant to this agreement
- 9) The Company may, by itself or through third parties, exercise the rights granted in this agreement
- 10) The terms and provisions of this Agreement constitute the entire Agreement between the parties and supersede all previous communication and agreements. either oral or written.
 - a) No additional or different terms or conditions of the engagement hereunder shall be recognized unless agreed to in writing and signed


by the Company_

- b) This Agreement may not be assigned or transferred without either party's prior written consent

AGREED TO AND ACCEPTED:

Signature:

Address:


~~814 Ash St Louisville KY 40217-1202~~

CURRICULUM VITAE

Elizabeth Lane Glass
Humanities Department
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292
502-852-0460
Email: Elizabeth.Glass@Louisville.edu
Elizabeth.L.Glass@gmail.com

2634 Whitehall Terrace
Apartment 102
Louisville, KY 40220-6051
Cell: 502-552-0088

Research and Scholarly Interests:

Creative Writing (Memoir), Medical Humanities, Disability Studies, Appalachian Studies,
New Southern Studies, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Education:

University of Louisville
PhD Candidate (Student 2015 – Candidate present)
Completion Date: August 2021
Humanities
Public Arts and Letters

University of Louisville
Graduate Certificate (2018)
Women's and Gender Studies

Miami University, Oxford, Ohio
Master of Arts in English (1997)
Concentration in Creative Writing
Thesis: *Painted Visions: A Novel*
Graduate Achievement Award 1996, 1997

University of Louisville
Master of Education in Counseling Psychology (1995)
Concentration in Community and Family Counseling
Practicums: University of Louisville Residential Life and University of Louisville
Admissions

University of Louisville
Bachelor of Arts in English (1989)
Coursework in Literature, Humanities, Creative Writing

Honors and Awards:

University of Louisville. Dissertation Completion Award, Summer 2021.
Award of GTA wages and health insurance with no teaching expectations through
May to August 2021.

Heartland Women Writers Contest. First Runner-Up, Prose “Family from Boise.”
April 2021.

Chosen as a Scholar by the Kentucky Humanities’ Kentucky Reads! Program.
The Kentucky Reads! book for 2021 is *The Birds of Opulence* by Crystal
Wilkinson. 2021

Carnegie Center Lexington, Scholarships to attend Nonfiction, Freelance, Book
Business, and Writing Memoir/Writing History Winter/Spring 2021
Award of \$132

Women Writing for (a) Change Scholarship, When Normal Goes Away:
Gathering Our Stories of Loss Winter 2021
Award of \$62.50

Women Writing for (a) Change Scholarship, Let’s Be Perfectly Queer Workshop
Fall Session II 2020
Award of \$120

Women Writing for (a) Change Scholarship, Let’s Be Perfectly Queer Workshop
Fall Session I 2020
Award of \$75

Appalachian Writer’s Workshop Scholarship in Memoir, 2020
Full Tuition Award of \$500

Mountain Heritage Literary Festival Scholarship, 2019

Award \$250/250 Full Tuition, Room, and Board

Appalachian Writers' Workshop (Juried), 2011 – 2015, 2019 – 2020 (did not apply 2016-18) Admissions in Memoir, Novel, Short Story

“Faculty Favorite,” nominated by student(s) and chosen as a favorite faculty member,
University of Louisville, 2018

Still: The Journal, Finalist in Nonfiction, 2016

River Teeth Nonfiction Conference Scholarship, 2016
Award \$425/\$425 Full Tuition, Room, and Board

Mountain Heritage Literary Festival Scholarship, 2016
Award \$250/250 Full Tuition, Room, and Board

Kentucky Women Writers Conference Postgraduate Scholarship, 2015
Award \$200/\$200 Full Tuition and Workshop

Appalachian Writer's Workshop Scholarship in Memoir, 2015
Award \$700/\$850 of Tuition, Room, and Board

Emma Bell Miles Prize in Nonfiction, Third Place, 2015
Award \$50

Humanities Endowment Award and F. Zorn Scholarships, University of Louisville, Fall 2014 \$1000, Spring 2015 \$3846, Fall 2015 \$3894, Spring 2016 \$2000

Kentucky Arts Council, Emerging Artist Award in Literary Arts in Nonfiction, 2014
Award \$1000

Still: The Journal, Finalist and Judge's Selection in Nonfiction, 2014

Appalachian Writer's Workshop Scholarship in Memoir, 2014
Award \$700/\$800 of Tuition, Room, and Board

Emma Bell Miles Prize Winner, Nonfiction, 2013
Award \$150

Still: The Journal, Finalist and Judge's Selection in Nonfiction, 2013

New Southerner, Finalist in Nonfiction 2013. Finalist in Fiction, 2013

The Kentucky Foundation for Women, Artist Enrichment Grant, Fiction, 2011
Award \$1312

Kentucky Arts Council, Individual Artist Professional Development Grant, 2009
Award \$500

Work Experience:

Graduate Teaching Assistant
Comparative Humanities Department
University of Louisville
August 2017 – present

Taught face-to-face and online courses
Developed course, its structure, chose course materials, and developed
syllabi

Courses Taught:

Creativity and Arts
Cultures of America

Freelance Editor
2015 – present

Edited novels and collections of poetry for line, content, and organization

PhD Researcher
Transdisciplinary Consortium
University of Louisville
July 2017 – July 2018

Study on the Arts' Effect the Stigma and Stress of and about Elderly
African Americans with HIV/AIDS
In addition to participating in the study framework at large, primary work
was done developing monologues from study participants' lives in dealing
with the stress and stigma of HIV/AIDS. These monologues, titled *I Shall
Live and Not Die* were performed live in a community performance in
conjunction with Black Activism Weekend, wherein HIV/AIDS testing
was also encouraged and given on-site. Monologues were also recorded
for online viewing. Shortened versions of these monologues can be seen at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOqItqaGi8>

English and IDC Instructor
Bellarmine University
2016 – 2017

Courses taught:

Expository Writing: Developed overall course structure, chose course
materials, and developed syllabi

Appalachian Studies: Developed course, its structure, chose course materials, and developed syllabus
Disability Studies: Developed course, its structure, chose course materials, and developed syllabus

English Instructor

Jefferson Community and Technical College

1998 – 2009 and 2014 – 2017

Taught face-to-face and online courses

Developed courses, their structure, chose course materials, and developed syllabi

Courses Taught:

Creative Writing (Screenwriting)

English Composition I and II

English as a Second Language English Composition I and II

Campuses: Downtown, Online, JCTC satellite campuses: Luther Lockett Reformatory (inmates), high school campuses, technical campus.

Developed syllabus and overall course structure; administered all grades.

English Instructor

Georgetown College

2007 – 2008

Taught face-to-face courses

Developed courses, their structure, chose course materials, and developed syllabi

Courses Taught: English Composition I and II

Campus: Luther Lockett Reformatory (correctional officers).

Developed syllabus and overall course structure; administered all grades.

Senior Case Manager (aka Social Worker)

Seven Counties Services

1999 – 2014

Case Manager for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities on the

Supports for Community Living Medicaid Wavier. Wrote yearly plans that were approved by the state. Coordinated services for up to 28 adults.

Services included day programs, residential housing, behavior therapy, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and respite. Made sure services from multiple providers worked for each client with disabilities; worked with these providers to ensure positive care for clients. Core Trainer for Kentucky's Region VI.

Graduate Editorial Assistant

Miami University Press
Miami University, Oxford Ohio
July 1995 – August 1997

Wrote and designed brochures advertising Press. Read poetry manuscripts. Made editing suggestions on manuscripts. Maintained business records database. Communicated with publishers, bookstores, faculty, and Press authors.

Editor
Oxford Magazine
May 1996 – May 1997

Wrote grants and maintained budget. Copy edited. Responsible for layout and design of magazine. Oversaw staff. Prepared advertisements to appear in other magazines. Did layout and design. Sold advertisements. Coordinated distribution. Worked with bookstores in sales and distribution. Nominated for Pushcart Prize. Read submissions. Worked with editing team to make editing decisions and choose pieces to publish.

Assistant Editor
May 1995 – May 1996

Read fiction and poetry submissions. Make editing suggestions regarding submissions.

Publications:

“Stone, Water, Land, Spine.” *Redefining Disability*. Eds. Paul D.C. Bones and Jessica Gullion. Brill/Sense, forthcoming 2022.

“Family from Boise.” *Heartland Women Writers*. Forthcoming.

“‘I Shall Live and Not Die’: Using Monologues Based on the Experiences of Older African Americans Living with HIV to Address HIV-Related Stigma among African Americans in Louisville, Kentucky.” *Family & Community Health*, vol. 43, no. 4, 2020, pp. 257–263.,
doi:10.1097/FCH.0000000000000268. (co-author)

“Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, & Me (2012).” *Disability*

- Experiences: Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Other Personal Narratives*. Ed. G. Thomas Couser and Susannah B. Mintz. Vol. 2. Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2019. p. 458-461.
- “Fading Scars: My Queer Disability History (2015).” *Disability Experiences: Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Other Personal Narratives*. Ed. G. Thomas Couser and Susannah B. Mintz. Vol. 1. Farmington Hills, MI: Macmillan Reference USA, 2019. p. 234-237.
- Rev. of *Seeking Home: Marginalization and Representation in Appalachian Literature and Song* (2016), edited by Leslie Harper Worthington and Jürgen E. Grandt. *South*, forthcoming.
- “Digging for Gold.” Bellarmine University’s magazine, 2017.
- Rev. of *Fading Scars: My queer disability history* by Corbett Joan OToole. *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36 (4), 2016.
- Rev. of *The End of the Mountains: A Lost Account of the Smokies* by Casey Clabough. *Appalachian Journal*. 43 (3-4), 2016: 276-7.
- “A Series of Almosts.” *The Manifest-Station*. Aug 2016.
- Rev. of *African American and Cherokee Nurses in Appalachia: A History 1900-1965* by Phoebe Ann Pollitt. *Appalachian Journal*. 43 (3-4): 272-3.
- “Bohemian Birthright.” *Tishman Review*. July 2016.
- Rev. of *The Heart* by Maylis de Kerangal. *Medical Humanities*. 21 July 2016.
- “Gross Anatomy Lab.” *Green Briar Review*. Spring 2016.
- “Burden of Beasts.” *Redivider* Fall 2015.
- “Rhododendron.” *The Pikeville Review* Spring 2015: 81-82.

- “Peach Tree.” *Kudzu* Spring 2015: 31-32.
- “Surprise Relationship.” *Grease Trap* April 2015.
- “Feather.” *Fried Chicken and Coffee* March 2015.
- “Gold Lamé.” *Grease Trap* January 2015.
- Rev. of *Pilgrimage to Dollywood* by Helen Morales. *Appalachian Heritage* Fall 2014: 118-122.
- “Drawer of Cards.” *Van Gogh’s Ear*. December 2014.
- “Gravy Lessons.” *Still: The Journal* Fall 2014.
- “Digging for Gold.” *River Teeth’s* “Beautiful Things” 28 July 2014.
- “Family Reserve.” *Kudzu* Spring 2014: 57-62.
- “Traps.” *REAL: Regarding Arts and Letters* Spring 2014: 52-59.
- “Feather.” *Conclave: A Journal of Character* October 2013: 69-82.
- “Comic Con.” *Funny Story*. Ed. Ashley Parker Owens. Richmond: Kentucky Story, 2013: 26-35.
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- “Crossroads.” *Danforth Review* August 2013.
- “Catamount,” “A Wish for a Sister,” “Summer Nights,” “Lollipop,” and “False Poet.” *Skeletons* Eds. Shannon Lynette & Andrea Bonacci. Albany: Lady Chaos Press. 2013: 176-182.
- “Midnight”; “Speak Hard, Speakeasy”; and “Shadows” *Poetic Story* Ed. Ashley Parker Owens. Richmond: KY, 2013: 139-154.
- “A Series of Almosts.” *New Plains Review* Spring 2013: 147-151.

“Pawn Shop Jam.” *Appalachian Story* Ed. Ashley Parker Owens. Richmond: KY Story, 2013:

“The Illuandas.” *New Southerner’s Literary Edition* Winter 2012 (Online).

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“Compound Fracture” *New Southerner’s Literary Edition* Winter 2012 (online).

“Compound Fracture” *New Southerner’s Literary Edition* 2012: 74-82.

“Abutments.” memoir in *Still: The Journal* Winter 2012.

“Baddiwad Chellovecks and My Sulee.” *Jumping Blue Gods* Fall 2012.

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“Bicentennial Evenings.” *Forge* April 2012.

“Chrissie’s Parents’ Bed.” *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature* March 2012.

“Creek Rock Wall.” *Freight Train Magazine* February 2012.

“Comic Con.” *Foliate Oak* February 2012.

“Winter Trees.” *Mad Swirl* December 2011.

“Powerful Things Can Happen in Driveways.” *Everyday Genius* December 2011.

“Snow White.” *The Single Hound* Fall 2011.

“The Down and Out.” *The Single Hound* Fall 2011.

“Shadows.” *Mad Swirl* October 2011.

“Stolen Time, Time Stolen.” *Mad Swirl* September 2011.

“Forward Movement.” *Write from Wrong* July 2011.

“Cindy’s Garden.” *Muscadine Lines: A Southern Journal* July 2011.

“Crazytown.” *Motif 3: All the Livelong Day* Ed. Marianne Worthington.

Louisville: MotesBooks, 2011: 76-77.

Creative nonfiction articles (over 20) regarding hiking, environmental issues, and/or the natural world in *The Cumberland* 2007 – 2010.

Creative nonfiction articles (5) on environmental issues in *The Heartbeat* 2009 – 2010.

“Tobias Wolff: Mastering the Memoir.” *Writer’s Digest* July 1997 25-27.

“Tobias Wolff: Mastering the Memoir.” *Writer’s Digest* Summer 1997 49-51..

“Tobias Wolff: Mastering the Memoir.” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Vol. 72, 2003.

Concert (music) reviews, over 40, *River City Music News* 1993 – 1995.

Poetry, Fiction, and Memoir 1987 – 1998:

The Chattahoochee Review, *Alkali Flats*, *Radiance*, *West Wind Review*, *The Georgetown Review*, *Blue Moon Review*, *Blank Gun Silencer*, *The Literary Leo*, *Chance Mag*, *Rag Mag*, *The Northern Reader*, *Atom Mind*, *The Letter*, *The Rockford Review*, *Struggle*, and *The Thinker*.

Conference Papers and Presentations:

Presentation for Kentucky Reads! through the Kentucky Humanities Council on Crystal Wilkinson’s *Birds of Opulence*, Oxmoor Farms, Louisville, KY, forthcoming, August 25, 2021.

Presentation for Kentucky Reads! through the Kentucky Humanities Council on Crystal Wilkinson’s *Birds of Opulence*, Russell County Public Library in Jamestown, forthcoming, June 12, 2021.

Presentation for Kentucky Reads! through the Kentucky Humanities Council on Crystal Wilkinson’s *Birds of Opulence*, Jefferson Community and Technical College, Louisville, KY (virtual), April 15, 2021.

“Hillbilly” in “Keywords for *Hillbilly Elegy*.” Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Fayetteville, Arkansas, accepted for April 2020, conference canceled due to COVID-19.

“Crip Lit & The South: Southern Literature and Disability.” Society for the Study of Southern Literature, Fayetteville, Arkansas, accepted for April 2020, conference canceled due to COVID-19.

“Disability, Nearly Absent in Today’s Appalachian Literature: A Look at Disability’s Presence in Crystal Wilkinson’s *Birds of Opulence*.” Appalachian Studies Association, Lexington, Kentucky, accepted for March 2020; conference canceled due to COVID-19.

“Swimming Hole.” Memoir, Creative Nonfiction. Louisville Conference, Louisville Kentucky, February 2020.

“Disability and Ableism.” Guest Lecturer in Humanities class. University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, October 10, 2019.

“Feminism and Womanism.” Guest Lecturer in Humanities class. University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, November 19, 2019.

“Flash Memoir Essays.” Memoir, Creative Nonfiction. Louisville Conference, Louisville Kentucky, February 2019.

“Stone, Water, Land, Spine.” Memoir, Creative Nonfiction. Appalachian Studies Association Conference, Cincinnati Ohio, April 2018.

“Disability in Darnell Arnoult’s Novel *Sufficient Grace*.” Appalachian Studies Association Conference, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 2018.

“Transdisciplinary Social Justice Research at the University of Louisville.” Graduate Student Regional Research Conference, Louisville, Kentucky, March 2018.

“Flannery O’Connor: Her Body and Body of Work.” Flannery O’Connor Society Panel. Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 2018.

“A Series of Almosts.” Memoir, Creative Nonfiction. Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 2018.

“Let’s Get Physical: Where Disability Studies & Medical Humanities Meet Southern Studies (and Where They Don’t).” Society for Southern Studies in Literature Conference, Austin, Texas, February 2018.

“Stone, Water, Land, Spine.” Memoir, Creative Nonfiction. Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture Since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 2017.

“Writers with Disabilities: We Don’t Have to Meet Your Genre Expectations”
Creative Writing Studies Organization, Warren Wilson College, Asheville, North
Carolina, September 2016.

“Abutments.” Memoir Creative Nonfiction presented at the Louisville Conference
on Literature and Culture since 1900, University of Louisville, Louisville,
Kentucky February 2016.

“Family from Boise.” Fiction presented at the Kentucky Philological Association
Conference, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, Kentucky, March
2015.

“Whisper to a Scream: The Testimonio and Neo-Testimonio in Latin American
Literature.” Paper presented at Twentieth-Century Literature Conference,
University of Louisville, February 1998.

“Feather.” Fiction presented at Twentieth-Century Literature Conference,
University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 1998.

Poetry presented at Twentieth-Century Literature Conference, University of
Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky, February 1997.

Service:

Scholar for the Kentucky Humanities’ Kentucky Reads! Program. The Kentucky
Reads! book for 2021 is *The Birds of Opulence* by Crystal Wilkinson. 2021

Academic Advising, Jefferson Community and Technical College, Louisville,
Kentucky, 2015 – 2017.

Writing Tutor, The Learning Commons, Jefferson Community and Technical
College, Louisville, Kentucky. 2016 – 2017.

Adjunct Academy Participant and Graduate, Jefferson Community and Technical
College, Louisville, Kentucky, 2015.

Blackboard Certification, Jefferson Community and Technical College,
Louisville, Kentucky, 2015.