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UNEVEN-ING

by
Taylor Ivy

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
May 2012

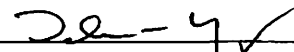


Approved by

Advisor: Professor Tom Franklin



Reader: Professor Colby Kullman



Reader: Professor Debra Young

For my grandma.

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First and foremost, I must thank every wonderful teacher who inspired my writing, encouraged my reading, and deepened my appreciation for every kind of literature; beginning with my mother. Thank you, Mama, for reading to me before bed, and never refusing me a library trip, and shuttling me back and forth to Memphis. Thank you to my whole family for your love and encouragement and stocking my supply of stress cookies while I have been writing this – my brother, Tanner, the funniest person I know; my beautiful little sister, Trace; my grandma and favorite person in the world, Dot Edwards. Thank you, Jesse Kelley, for being the best friend that I have ever had, for living with me and listening to me and telling me to “put my shoes on” when need be. Thank you, Seth Burris, for being there for me always, for being my inspiration, for everything that you are.

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INTRODUCTION

I knew I wanted to write when I was in second grade. My parents had recently divorced, and I dealt with it by writing down everything but what I thought. I would sit outside and watch the neighbors and write about it, and look at a tree and write about it, and play with my dolls and write about it. If I was not writing, I was more than likely reading. I read my way through the “Accelerated Reader” program and won every prize shamelessly. I gloated. I couldn’t play sports, and I was awkward, so I maintained that it was all right for me to do so. My first work of creative writing was a poem for a school contest, and it was called “When I Step upon a Leaf.” It won some kind of state award. I wrote stellar second grade poetry.

I continued on this way, amusing myself with journals and teacher’s pet poetry until the sixth grade. That was when I had really had enough of anthologies – I was tired of being teased by the snippets of books. I wanted the real deal. I told my mother I was bored, and she helped me apply for a writing scholarship to Hutchison School, the all-girls’ school in Memphis. I wrote a story that I submitted with my application; it was a tale of mystery and suspense and romance in the style of a twelve-year-old whose most recent reading selection included John Grisham’s early novels and various adolescent detective stories. Thankfully, I received the scholarship despite my story. I remember they asked me in my interview, “Why do you write?”

I thought Lord, that’s the stupidest question a smart person’s ever asked me.

“I just do,” I told the committee. I was very articulate. “Mostly I want to. But sometimes, I have to.”

My three years at Hutchison were the most formative years of my life. Even now, days away from college graduation, I still attest to the fact that the large majority of the person that is Taylor Ivy was built by those three years filled with yellow uniforms and Wednesday morning convocations. I had the most amazing teachers, English teachers specifically. For seventh and eighth grade I had Ms. Lawrence, who was very young and very smart. She was marvelous firstly because she never assigned a single anthology, and most importantly, because she always let me write about whatever that I wanted on the essays instead of requiring my adherence to her suggested topics. I could even go over the assigned length (a great thing, because I have always been wordy), so long as the essays were thoughtful and pertinent to the literature we were reading. For my final project she allowed me to do a collection of poems and short stories instead of a research paper. My confidence in my writing began in Ms. Lawrence's classroom.

She was a goddess, that Mrs. Lawrence. However, the English teacher whom I will always hold above all other English teachers is Mrs. Newbury. The last year that I was able to spend at Hutchison, I got into the honors section of ninth grade English, which was a competitive thing. I wanted nothing more in the world than to impress Mrs. Newbury. I will never forget our summer reading books – *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte and *Delta Wedding* by Eudora Welty. I loved *Wuthering Heights* and hated *Delta Wedding*. We had to write essays for both. I made an A+ on my *Wuthering Heights* paper, a C on what I wrote for *Delta Wedding*.

I was horrified. I had never made a C on a writing assignment. I think I cried for a day, and then I pulled myself together and went to talk to the formidable Mrs. Newbury. I remember sitting beside her desk, staring at her mug of Shakespeare insults because I was

too ashamed to look her in the eye (and also because I wanted to remember and use the Shakespearean insults). We sat like that for a minute, and finally she asked me a question.

“Did you like the book, Taylor?”

I hesitated. What should I do? I wondered. Do I lie? How can I tell my most admired teacher that I didn't like the book she assigned? I couldn't lie to Mrs. Newbury.

Finally I answered tactfully, “I liked *Wuthering Heights* much better.”

She handed me back my essay and issued the single most pivotal statement of my academic career: “Re-write it. Write what you know. Write the truth, because your readers know when you are lying.”

I went home, wrote a scathing essay about the profound boredom I experienced while reading the novel, and when Mrs. Newbury handed back my A+ paper the next week, she winked.

I was never off the hook with her though – no one was. She expected the best from her ninth grade honors students; we were the youngest bunch she taught and there were only nine of us out of the total fifty girls in our grade. The minute detail of every paper was scrutinized. My grammar and spelling were usually satisfactory; she could find no grievous fault with my sentence structure. I excelled in paragraph organization and thesis statements (funny). My constant pitfall was the tone and voice of my writing – “too colloquial.”

This is still a problem for me, as I am sure you can tell simply by reading this introduction. Even in research papers, I lapse unknowingly into the first person point of

view, slipping into a rapport with my reader as though I'm writing a friendly letter instead of a scholarly work. This is largely why I switched my major to English. I was initially a student in the journalism department. I had spent my senior year of high school and the summer before college interning at a newspaper, *The Panolian* in Batesville; and had become quite sure that I was drawn to print journalism despite its dwindling influence.

I was sent to cover my first story in late September of 2007. I was to attend the Como Opera, document my experience through photography and writing, and present the completed page to my editor, Mrs. Rita Howell. I did all of this with great enthusiasm and trepidation. My heart sank when she first talked to me about the piece:

"Taylor, this isn't a news story you've written," she said. I felt my spine freeze – I just knew that I was about to receive the newspaper equivalent of a C paper. I remember reminding myself to be professional, and to try not to cry until I could get up and hide somewhere. Mrs. Rita then produced a first-draft print out of the first page of the B-section. My writing on the Como Opera was front and center, complete with a large headline and my name underneath.

"You wrote a column," she told me, and my first piece of published writing appeared in *The Panolian* on October 5, 2007. She asked if I thought I could do it again, and I told her of course I could. She left me with the task of producing another column for the next week's paper, and I believe her face registered the same shock that mine had previously when I presented it to her within the next hour. So began the most enjoyable job position I have held in my twenty-two years of life thus far: I was a columnist. It was

absolutely ideal. I was being paid to expound, week after week, on my thoughts about whatever subject I found interesting. Mrs. Rita never restricted my topics, allowing me to write about everything from Ole Miss football games, to my coursework, to my friends and family.

I soon realized that I enjoyed writing my column more than I enjoyed writing any news story. While I liked to interview people and hear their thoughts and experiences, the detachment with which a journalist was supposed to relate their stories was something of a struggle for me. I began to browse the university's course catalog for the English department, and that was what really cemented my decision. I wanted to take all of those classes. I wanted to read all of those books. I switched my major within the first week of classes at Ole Miss, dropping Journalism 101 to pick up English 225.

I have never looked back, and I have never been happier. My four years at Ole Miss as an English major have been spent blissfully immersed in the works of wonderful authors, and truly I'm a little saddened by the thought of graduation. I will miss especially my literature classes within the Honors College, as those have always led to the most enlightening discussions and the most fulfilling writing assignments. I complained, as every student does, about stress and deadlines and citation requirements; but I know that I will think back at this time next year and remember fondly the hours I spent finding just the perfect words to express my thoughts in the latest assignment.

I knew this last year when I was choosing my thesis topic. For this reason, I chose to work on a creative writing thesis. Although creative writing has always been my passion, the part of me that remains a shy and awkward middle school-er has been

perpetually terrified to share what I write. Even in my research papers I feel compelled to explain myself, to speak to my reader – the subjectivity involved in allowing another person to read my thesis, a stranger; practically gave me spasms. I wanted to overcome my fear. I knew that a creative writing thesis would challenge my confidence in my abilities as an English major better than any research project could, and that the culmination of such a project at the end of my tenure as an Ole Miss undergraduate would result in far more personal satisfaction.

I had begun to consider the direction of my thesis during the spring of my sophomore year. No, I am not exaggerating. While registering my classes for the spring semester, I also registered that my time at the university was halfway up. Sometimes I am rather fatalistic. I signed myself up for a beginning fiction workshop, the first step in the direction of my future thesis adventure. My professor was Chris Hayes, and he forbade us to use the word “love” to describe our feelings about what we read or discussed in class (writing this, I am now thinking back to make sure I have not used this euphemism anywhere in my current narration).

“You love your mother,” he told us, “You do not love McDonald’s fries.” I do not remember why McDonald’s fries were the example of non-love, but I am sure there was a reason.

My first story for the workshop was about a man who wore sweatervests and met a young girl who was possibly his illegitimate child on the donut aisle of the Piggly Wiggly. Giving the copies out to my classmates was an exercise in self-control. I wanted to snatch them all back and run from the room, tearing them to pieces and assuring

everyone that I was just kidding before they read my story and asked me themselves if I wrote in jest. I refrained. The story was generally well-received, and I rode around on a high horse for the rest of that semester.

I suppose that I am needy, however. When I signed up for an advanced fiction workshop in the fall of my junior year, I was back at square one as far as self-assurance goes. My professor was Jack Pendarvis, and our assigned reading was Barry Hannah's short story collection, *Bats Out of Hell* – which was excellent, but Barry Hannah's short stories made me want to erase every word I had ever written in acknowledgement that no writer could ever achieve what he could with language. I promptly checked all of his other books out of the library and proceeded to annoy everyone around my household by reading aloud random excerpts at inappropriate intervals and exclaiming about adjectives. One heavily highlighted passage, for instance:

“My head's burning off and I got a heart about to bust out of my ribs. All I can do is move from chair to chair with my cigarette. I wear shades. I can't even read a magazine.” (Hannah, *Airships*, “Love Too Long”)

I believe now that those lines stood out to me not only because of the masterful use of language, but also because of their subject – love. I had not realized it yet, but I wanted to write about love. In fact, I had wanted to write about it even before reading Barry Hannah's descriptions. My fascination with love in literature, in all of its very different forms (excluding any form contiguous to a McDonald's fry) began the same semester as my foray into fiction writing, in a junior seminar on Southern literature.

At that time I was a lifeguard at the Turner Center. I would often have a shift with another guard who was older than me, a former English major at the university who had graduated and gone straight into law school at Ole Miss. He had been telling me to read this author named Larry Brown for over a year, since he had first found out that I was an English major also. He told me what Brown's novels were about and I told him they didn't sound like my kind of novels. He kept on though, he was persistent.

"They'll change your whole perception," he told me, "they'll change the way you think about literature."

I was enthralled with Jane Austen novels then. I was re-reading *Sense and Sensibility* for a third time. I never expected to read the story of a rural Mississippi lumber contractor and enjoy it, much less love it. I apologize to Chris Hayes, if you ever read this, but it is true – I *loved* it. I read *Joe* for my class, quickly followed by *Fay* and all of the others in my spare time. Then I started on his short stories. They were the most exquisite pieces of writing. Larry Brown's characters are simply unparalleled, in my opinion. He takes the most basic, heart-wrenching, and fundamentally relatable emotions and expresses them through relationships between characters so real that I would nearly swear to knowing them.

So many of Brown's novels and stories focus on father and child relationships, which drew my interest not only because of my lack of such a relationship, but also because I was beginning to notice a similar focus in the works of other Southern authors. It was the earliest sign of my budding obsession with Southern literature. My lifeguard friend had been right – Larry Brown had changed my perception and shifted my reading

appetite, and I was voraciously hungry for more dysfunctional father figures and Southern non-quite-so-belles, borderline psychotic mothers and strange instances of love. Shortly before I was introduced to Barry Hannah, I fed this craving with the third writer whose creations I hold above all others in the areas of maladjusted paramours and uncomfortable family dynamics: Mr. Tennessee Williams.

Like many others, my first Williams plays were *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. They are delightful and perfect. As with Hannah and Brown, I read my first bit of Williams and immediately had to read every word that he ever put on paper. I spent a fantastic semester with Dr. Kullman writing many a paper addressing all of the facets I found gripping in the plays of Tennessee Williams and in the genre of Southern writing as a whole – specifically, the relationship of religion and love, the obstacles of long-ingrained Southern prejudices, and the juxtaposition of physical and ephemeral love and as well as other romantic conundrums. I have also been perpetually fascinated by the love/hate emotion that so many Southerners feel toward their home, toward what so many claim as “heritage” and “tradition.”

My senior year arrived much too soon, creeping up to poke my shoulder and startle me from my wonderings about the essence of love and Southern-ness. Though I still experienced ridiculous trepidation at the thought of anyone reading what I wrote, I signed off on my form for a creative writing thesis and stepped ever so cautiously forward into my project with the influential presence of my three most admired authors floating in the back of my mind. I wanted to draw from Barry Hannah’s syntax, and from Larry Brown’s characters, and from the particular poignancy with which a Tennessee Williams romance can blaze and fade.

I wanted, as I mentioned earlier, to write about love. For some reason this was hard to embrace. I felt like my thesis should be serious. I would have an excellent time writing a story, and then when I glanced over the end results; feel inordinately displeased with my perceived frivolity. I was disgusted that I couldn't seem to pull anything darker than a high school romance gone awry from my subconscious. I was forgetting another pivotal piece of advice that I had been given: in my advanced fiction workshop, I was told to "let my goat go." This philosophical wisdom, though somewhat more enigmatic than what I had been told by Mrs. Newbury, nevertheless addressed the recurrent pitfall of my fiction. It was not, as in my scholarly writing, the colloquial tone with which I addressed the reader. It was the opposite, in fact –I was petrified to tell my potential readers the truth. My goat had too many inhibitions.

I finally decided that the only way to overcome my dilemma, to untether my metaphorical farm animal and bring forth the inspiration that my thesis so desperately needed; was to simply make like a Nike commercial and JUST DO IT. I sat down and let the love stories pour out of me, and it was undoubtedly the most cathartic experience of my collegiate education. I embraced the fact that what I wrote could be completely of myself. No one was separating what I had to write from what I wanted to write but me.

"Why do you write?" I had to ask myself.

I just do.

UNEVEN-ING

I am absolutely more attractive than every eager-eyed cheerleader shaking a plastic pompom in time with my stepson, who plays the tuba. I ask Rochester all the time why he would pick such an unwieldy instrument and he says he didn't pick it, the band director did, but I don't believe him because I know it is his mission in life to embarrass me. Why else would he buy cargo shorts behind my back and let the gym membership I spent Phillip's hard-earned money on expire? His spindly arms. I told him that he would never get a date with those gangling appendages.

William Lowry, though. Those are manly arms. Those offensive lineman arms could bench press two tubas, but instead they've been pressing my back against the wall of room 302 at the Days Inn.

He's exorcising his hour of geometry tutoring with the student services troll and I'm facilitating the cathartic release of my marital anxiety. Sometimes we order in Thai afterwards (famished, need carbs), then I bustle over to meet Phillip for couple's counseling at five. The counseling has really helped our marriage, I believe. It's how I realized that I have needs, too. For instance: I need Will to wear those football pants to our meeting next Tuesday.

It's been very cloak and dagger from the beginning, very *noir*. And it was a selfless mission at the start – I wanted to help Rochester, my misguided little misanthrope. He needed a role model since Phillip would rather avoid us most days of the week. I pulled William aside after practice one evening to ask if he would take pity on

my son, bless his soul, and at least pretend to be his friend so I wouldn't have to spend another afternoon watching Rochester be morose.

How could I have ever guessed before then that Axe body spray could be the sexiest thing I've smelled in ten long years? That his 17-year-old stubble brushing my cheek when I whispered in his ear could make my stomach shudder? Oh my God, and his bicep. I heard his breath catch when I squeezed it. Will and I couldn't help our chemistry; I mean what is age anyway? It's just a number and we're neither one good at math.

Besides, I'm more like 25 than 35. This ass has seen too many sessions with the Stairmaster to be a "Mrs. Mae." The other mothers are so hostile about it. Look at Bobbi Ann Frankel over there! She can just go ahead and pretend she didn't see me on her way to the concession stand. The nerve, we co-chaired PTA for Rochester's grade two years ago. Eat that hotdog, you jealous bitch. I'm sorry we had to special order an XL fall festival t-shirt just for you. Whisper about me to Lois Johnson; tell her how my husband showed up late and already dressed for the hunting trip he's leaving for tonight. Pray for me at your Bible study on Sunday. I hope you are appalled when your sexually deviant sons call me the "hot mom." Jesus, Rochester's band friends are so creepy.

I mean, I never asked for any of this. I wasn't desperate like these women, holding onto a high school boyfriend like Jim Bob or whoever the fuck was a god among men. They were planning their wedding before they planned their twentieth birthday, having baby showers while they had siblings still in diapers. I made fun of them. I went to college. They got pregnant in the back of somebody's Chevy while I was meeting Dr.

Phillip Richards, and there's nothing in the world I can say except sorry about their poor decisions and my perfect teeth.

Yes. Sometimes I do feel a little strange about sleeping with someone who only had his braces removed by my husband a year ago. But really, think about how much maturity a man gains between ages 16 and 18 – enough to convince these other women they're ready for marriage apparently. I'd like to think I'm saving Will from being snared by some little slut that has no better future than Bumfuck, Mississippi; he has such great potential if he can pass geometry. I was just like him, and I almost made it out of here. I still plan on it. I'd leave Phillip in a heartbeat, but then there's Rochester. Children are such a fucking obstacle. And Phillip's been asking for "one of our own" since the second day of our honeymoon.

Better believe I fixed that fast. Little once a month visit to Memphis, little IUD wonder device – the miracles of modern society. It's only ever come out of place once: last month after the first time Will and I did the deed, but he pulled out and I'm fine. I never told him it happened. Phillip's never known I had it.

"Baby," Phillip says, "The boys are heading out to Arkansas. I'm leaving at the end of this quarter, all right?"

The buzzer sounds for the end of the fourth and I don't feel the need to answer. Phillip pats my head as he gets up to leave the stands.

"Tuesday, five o'clock?"

“Sure honey. I’ll see you then.” I’ll see my real therapist, then you and Dr. Rogers.

I watch him walk back to the parking lot, broad camouflaged shoulders always held confidently. He nods at the other fathers he only sees at their children’s’ yearly check-ups, then he’s gone. I make my way to meet Rochester at the back gate, making sure to sneer at Bobbi Ann as I shove past her considerable girth. God, is she eating another hotdog?

Rochester emerges pale and sweaty from the band hall, feathered hat clasped in one hand and tasseled jacket in the other. His white t-shirt clings to his skeletal chest, his arms dangle from the chasms of his sleeves. I sigh. I force a smile.

“You did great, Roch. I’ve never heard such magical manipulation of the tuba. Shall we get a hamburger? A milkshake or two?” I’m craving something with mustard. He grins up at me, all cheekbones and braces and handsome potential not yet fulfilled.

“Mae, you know I’m vegetarian. I’ve told you about the exploitation of commercial cows and chickens.”

The pediatrician suggested more protein in his diet to help him “fill out.” Of course, he resists this in the same manner he dismisses fresh air and physical activity. While every other 15-year-old boy is gorging himself on Chef Boyardee, Rochester is nibbling my broccoli and carrots. I can’t imagine the motivation. Prior to my stepchild’s lectures about mutant chickens I thought it was some kind of blessing for a doctor to prescribe fattening food. I’m sure Bobbi Ann would agree.

“Their little legs can’t support their bodies and all they can do is sit there and eat all day, they’re poisoned. Mae, it’s sick. don’t roll your eyes!”

“I wasn’t dismissing you sweetheart: I care about the chickens too.” Truly I wasn’t sneering at my son’s admonishment. Will’s truck is parked four spaces down from my Lexus, and it’s already surrounded by precious rosy-cheeked high school girls that don’t stand a chance. They glance at me and Roch as we pass, so I give them a little wave and a wink. Good luck, girls! Enjoy the taste of striking out and Smirnoff Ice!

Rochester studiously avoids watching this exchange. He’s been madly in love with Anna Grace Moore since maybe forever, and from what I hear she follows Will around like a pathetic cat in heat. She’s a cute little thing, great hair, better skin than most girls her age. I wonder though if she couldn’t legally qualify as a midget, she’s probably not tall enough to ride a roller coaster at the fair. It’s amazing really; her mother played women’s basketball at community college and is practically an Amazon.

“MAE!” Rochester grabs my arm so hard I’m sure that he’s severed a blood vessel. “Mae, my phone! I left my phone in the band room. You have to get it, or they’ll keep it until the end of the semester!”

“Good Lord, Roch, They aren’t going to keep your phone if they find it after a game.”

“You’re going to have to get it, Mae. They’ll only let me have it if a parent comes up there. Please, Mae!”

“First thing in the morning. We’ll go first thing, I promise and I swear it.”

.Appeased, he finally climbs in the car. We head home for a quiet night of carrot crunching and HBO.

I crawl out of bed the next morning and attempt to be presentable. I look at the dress pants and blouses in my closet and feel more than repulsed. It's Saturday. The band director will be confronted in jeans and Phillip's fleece pullover. My breakfast oatmeal repulses me more than my dress clothes, and I shepherd Rochester out the door before the nausea can take hold of my stomach like it did the previous three mornings. I fight it the entire way to the school, trying to keep the sensation confined to my throat, resisting its valiant attempts to slip down my esophagus and wreak havoc.

"You look really pale," Rochester tells me as I park beside the band hall.

"Why thank you, Rochester." I shake my head as I climb out of the car.

A man is working in the flowerbeds as I approach the brown metal doors. Something about him is so familiar that I slow my step, hoping he'll turn toward me. He does, and my heart starts drowning.

He still wears the same ball cap he always donned when we were teenagers, a navy Boston Redsox hat faded gray by myriad hours spent outside in the elements. It still doesn't hide his eyes. They're the most luminous blue I've ever seen, clear and bright and innocent like a sunshine-filled sky in June. The flood is smothering my chest, and I sprint past the only man I've ever loved to throw up the breakfast I didn't eat in the band hall where my stepson plays the tuba.

I want to look at a light blue pool with cracks at the bottom. When I was little I thought that a giant had come stomping through, crumbling the blue cement and unevening the geography of the golf course. Those were the best summer days. Even when it stormed, the thunder and the wind thrilled me, and the rain made lakes at the edges of the worn green turf.

They lived in her favorite house. It was on an older street beside the railroad tracks in the middle of town, and they walked to the church at the end of the street every Sunday. There was a basketball goal in the driveway, and she wanted to learn to play basketball. There was a stump by the driveway – a big, wonderful stump shaded by the leaves of more alive pecan trees around it – and Mae would sit on the stump and write in her journal and crack pecans and eat them.

She'd drawn on the long, cracked driveway with chalk a few days before. She kicked at the faded pictures of flowers and hopscotch with the toe of her pink sandal while the men moved her room into the bed of the truck. The church bells rang down the street, and she knew it was noon, so she told her mother she was hungry. Her mama told her that she'd have to wait, the men were hungry too, and they would all get food after all the stuff was moved out.

The men were from the church. Mr. Tom, the pastor, he was there. He had an excellent mustache. She liked him a lot. There was Zack's daddy, Claire's daddy, and her friend Becca's daddy was there but she didn't like him because once he'd put her in timeout when she didn't even do anything. Her daddy wasn't there. That's why they had to get this done today. She started to pick up pecans and put them in her pockets because there wouldn't be a pecan tree at her grandma's trailer where they were moving. She was glad her overalls had lots of pockets.

She remembered a few fun times with her daddy, like getting snowcones at the place by the ball field and sitting on his shoulders when they walked somewhere, and she

was tired, but she was really getting too old for shoulders anyway. Oh, and there was that time she rode around with him in the warehouse at his job. That was cool.

Mostly he was always mad though, and when he was mad he was mean. When he was mean to her mama, he was mean to her too, and sometimes her little brother. One time he came in and kicked her brother's train over, and then he yelled at her mama so Mae threw her toothbrush at him. He'd got her the toothbrush. It was a Tweety Bird toothbrush. She threw it at him and told him she didn't like it anymore. That was a bad time.

Turned out there weren't any good stumps at the trailer park in Nesbit. She lived with her mama and her brother in the big room, and the big room had a big closet, and she got to set up her stuff in the big closet on the floor underneath all the clothes and her mama's skirt that hung down long and that's where she would go. It wasn't as good as being outside, but she could shut the door and be in there. It smelled good, like Downey dryer sheets.

Sometimes she would have to go see her daddy. Her mama cried every time. They met him in the church parking lot and got in his car and drove a long way to where he'd moved in with her Gran. They had big activity trays in the car with crayons and coloring books, and she would bring other books to read – mostly *The Saddle Club*. She wanted a horse to ride. There were cows at Gran's house, but no horses. She slept on a cot there, and she was always scared she would roll off because it was skinny. It smelled like smoke in the house and made her cough, so she couldn't sleep good anyway.

They had to go see their daddy after Christmas. Her brother cried because he had to leave all the Santa toys he had just opened, and she was feeling pretty disappointed too, but she didn't cry because she had to be the big sister and she didn't want to make her mama more sad. She and her brother rode with their car trays, and when they got there they had some more toys. One toy was a BB gun. She shot cans with it, which was pretty fun. But then it was time to go home, and her daddy wouldn't take them home, and the police came and got them and then her daddy disappeared.

Things got a little better after that. Her mama was taking some neat classes at college and sometimes Mae got to go with her mama to Ole Miss when her grandma had to work. She helped her with her presentations. She helped her paint a potato. She told her friend Katie that lived a few trailers down that she went to college sometimes. Katie said they wouldn't let her into college because she was too young and they had a big fight, but they made up later and played dress up.

Some of her mama's boyfriends were pretty cool. This one guy played in a band; and one time the band played at a baseball game, and her mama's friends that were there watching too pulled her up front and danced with her. That was the best. There was this other guy though who had a daughter about her age, and they were always supposed to "play nice together," but that girl was a brat. That girl made fun of Mae for listening to country music and thought she knew everything better.

That was fine though, because her mama broke up with that man and bought her own new house. It was great, everybody had their own room and there was a big backyard. It wasn't as great as the house with the stump – it was in a new neighborhood

and actually there weren't any trees at all – but sometimes she could go play in the trees in the neighborhood down the street, and she could finally have people over to spend the night instead of just play a couple of hours. And they could go in her room and lock the door where her brother couldn't bust in yelling about Pokémon or something.

Her father came to visit once in the new house. It was the summer. She was eleven, her brother was seven. He just showed up one morning while they were getting ready to go to the pool and knocked on the door. She answered it in her new tankini because she thought it was probably Bridget from across the street, and she was embarrassed because she didn't recognize him at first. His hair was bleached white and spiked up on his head, and his ears were pierced, and when he spoke his voice sounded different. She asked him why and he stuck out his tongue – there was a big stud in it.

He went to the pool with them, and he played with her brother, but she didn't know how to play with him. He didn't seem like her father anymore. He seemed like a strange man she didn't know. She went and sat by the lifeguard stand and talked to the pretty guard named Amber, because she didn't know how to play with the strange man that was her father. Amber always talked to her and told her whether her dives looked graceful. Mae had learned how to dive two summers ago. She'd watched her new friend Jake's dad teach him, and he'd seen her watching and taught her. Jake's dad was nice. She really liked Jake, too. He had these really cool eyes he tried to hide under all his brown hair and that hat with a "B" on it, but she could always see them anyways.

They went home after the pool and her father took some pictures of her and her brother, then he gave them his address and phone number. He asked if they would write

him and call him, and she didn't want to because she didn't know what they would talk about, but she said sure. She wrote him a letter the next day and sent it, but she never got one back. She tried to call him a few weeks later, but the number didn't work.

“He probably dropped his phone in the water.” Jake hypothesized, “my dad did that once.”

There was a willow tree. It was old. Little yellow weed flowers grew underneath it, the kind that can make a dust that stains when you grind them between rocks. I did that then. It was a secret place: one time I kissed a boy there but told my friends I didn't. His name was Cliff and he made me feel like I'd fallen off the edge. He rode his bike to my house, and I wrote his name in a heart on the bottom of my flip-flops, but that summer romance was short-lived.

Maria Simon could do back flips off the diving board and looked like she fit in her swimsuit top. Mae spent two weeks filled with self-hatred and a burning desire to back flip, followed by one afternoon in the emergency room after her first and only successful backward rotation – three stitches on the bridge of her nose after it made violent contact with the cracked blue bottom of the pool. She realized shortly after that she could only date boys with four letter names.

Love: a four-letter word. Like “fuck” and “shit” and “damn” and other words she was scared to say. Like “tuna” – a four letter food. She always ate tuna salad for lunch; ordered it up from the clubhouse. That’s where Mae saw Jake again. They were both ordering a tuna salad. She was fifteen, a lifeguard, chasing yellow-handed children out from under the willow tree at rest break. The clubhouse had round wooden fans with no blades. She stared at them while her sun-strained eyes adjusted to the dim.

“Wonder how they make a breeze?” he asked her. His eyes were blue like the June sky outside and his cheeks were pink from the heat on the ninth hole.

“Mostly I wonder why it takes so long to get a tuna salad,” she said.

He studied her face for a moment. “Do I know you?”

“You should,” she told him.

Then she blushed and he gave her that look: indulgent pleasure. It was the expression his countenance would always assume when she evoked some protective feeling with her discomposure – confusion as to the intricacies of football, an inability to finish a large meal she swore she’d devour every bite of, a constant belief that nothing in

her closet was remotely attractive when he thought she looked good in any dress, or better yet, no dress at all. She didn't know what it was then. Everything about his face was so suddenly masculine, his strong square jaw and high freckled cheekbones; and somehow all his features would soften and coalesce around his June sky eyes. She thought he was laughing at her.

She remembered when they had laughed together, eating peaches by the pool, their fingers sticky with the sweet juice running down the creases in their palms and the soft hair on their arms. The friendship was soon renewed, but tentatively. He was dating an unattractive and unhappy girl with remarkably large facial features who hated Mae. He tried to prolong their romance long after its three-month expiration date. Mae, having become instantly and permanently attached to his best friend, Dean Gaines, found herself trying to prolong her time in Jake's company.

One July afternoon Dean wasn't with her. She loaded up with Jake in his green Chevy, and they rode backroads to the county line singing every song that came on the radio while the day faded. They stole a street sign that was loose on its hinges. They didn't even know the street. Exhilarated by misbehavior, Jake decided to hide out for a while behind a brush pile on his daddy's land. She sat on the tailgate beside him and listened to the crickets, and in the dark he found her hand and took it in his. She didn't swat the mosquitoes nipping her legs. She didn't move at all. She was scared he would let go, and the moment would disappear, and she wanted to memorize the way his hand enveloped hers – rough and strong and soft all at the same time.

“Hey, Mae.” he finally whispered, “It's past curfew.”

“Let’s go swimming.” she answered.

His parents had a pool. They squeezed together in a lawn chair under a willow tree by the pool. The flowers were blooming, they hung in the humidity, and she wanted to drink them and feel him beside her in the skinny lawn chair forever, just the way they were: her hip bruising on the metal armrest. She wanted it to. She wanted Jake to kiss her like his two more years didn’t matter.

“Do you want to swim?” he asked.

“I want to do more than swim.” she said.

There was a willow tree. It was old. Little yellow weed flowers grew underneath it, the kind that can make a dust that stains when you grind them between rocks. I did that when I was younger. He rolled over and held my hand in the sweaty shade, and my heart hurt all the time; but I wanted those memories and their bruise so I could touch it. I didn't know if it would be one month or five years, but I knew it would end and have that good hurtful taste of a sunny day in June.

The sun was burning off the end of the day and the wind was picking up dust and leaves and throwing them when he asked her. "Why don't you move in with me?"

Mae laughed. "I don't think your parents want yet another recently graduated and tenuously employed 20-something living in their house."

Jake concentrated intently on the task of separating a callus from the flesh below his right ring finger. "I meant we'd get our own place. Just us."

Mae put down the book she was studying.

"You're silly," she smiled cautiously. Jake looked up and his June eyes were sad. Mae felt the world shrinking.

"I'm serious," he said. "You always said you wanted to live together before we got married. Why not now?"

"That wasn't supposed to be now. This isn't supposed to be now."

"It is, though."

"It isn't what I want."

"You mean I'm not what you want."

Mae stood up and threw the book. Not at Jake, but in his general direction. She didn't want to hit him, she just wanted him to feel some small moment of the fear that she was feeling, had felt, knew that she would feel for an indeterminate amount of time. Growing up had been easy for him; he'd never had to think about it. She didn't know

where she would go or what she would do, but she knew she wouldn't move back to Mississippi.

"You really just want to stay here forever?" she pleaded. "Your business here? You here? That's fine with you?"

Jake propped his elbows on his knees and covered his face with his hands. He raked his fingers down his face, leaving his June eyes tinged with pink.

"It's not easy to just pick up a business and move it. I don't mind living here. It's small... and there's not much crime. You said yourself last summer that you could see moving back here, but I guess I'm just screwed all the way around now, huh?"

Having already thrown her book, Mae reached down and snatched the beer from Jake's hands. She threw it at his truck and it made a heavy hollow sound. They both watched as it dropped and squirmed and fizzed on the ground. She walked over and stomped on it, again and again and again. She held the tears at the back of her throat and felt the heavy in her cheeks. She wanted it there. She reached into the cooler and threw a second beer, and a third and a fourth, out into the field and closed her eyes. Finally, she slumped against the side of the new silver Chevy.

"It's small because it refuses to grow. Nothing will ever exist here but Bible freaks and hypocrites and the occasional Mexican restaurant. When I said I could see moving back, I never meant back here."

They were both quiet then, Jake clutching his face and Mae crumpled against the truck. She watched the wind blow the green leaves in the trees, the tall grass in the

distance. She smelled the honeysuckle blooming and the fresh cut grass around them. The sky was blue and clear and the lake was smooth and brown, but she couldn't stay there. Jake wished on the stars behind his eyelids. After a while she sank down beside him, leaning forward to rest her face on his right shoulder.

"I want you to be happy," he said, "but it makes me so sad."

Mae took off his cap and put her hands on either side of his face. She lifted it up to look at hers, and when she saw his eyes her heart started drowning.

"Let's go swimming," she said.

He gave her that look. "I want to do more than swim."

They went to his parents' and swam in the dark, and the water was the same as the air outside at the end of June in Mississippi. The bottom was light blue and smooth, no cracks, but she couldn't see it. She could only see the water ripple in the orange streetlight glow, the drops running down Jake's neck. Mae untied her bikini top. He pulled her close and they stood that way, her fingers chasing the drops from his neck down his back, his fingers re-tying a bow in the strings to her top. They stood that way in the shadow of the willow tree.

Other ends taste bad, like bitter wasted time. They taste like why? Why did I do those things with you? I wish it were someone else in the memories because I love everything but you. I love drinking Blue Moon at dusk, dancing to the blues on a dirt road at midnight, but I don't love you - which is strange. I can't look at it. I don't want to. It reaches out from the dark back shelf where I've stored it, where my mind keeps the things I'd rather it never had. It brushes my back where the skin is between my tied up t-shirt and my blue jean shorts, and feels like sticky sweet regret.

They were cooking. They made peas and cornbread. He'd gotten Mae some Blue Moon, it was her favorite beer. She liked to pour it in a cold glass cup and squeeze a big orange slice in it. She spilled something on her shirt, maybe the pea juice, maybe the Blue Moon, either way the pink shirt was stained.

She hadn't come out there planning to stay. She didn't know what she'd been planning to do. He'd asked her to come visit out on his farm, said they'd ride four-wheelers and horses, but they didn't do either. She saw the horses and she rode the four-wheeler once to the end of the driveway, but mostly she got drunk.

He gave her another shirt to wear instead of the stained one. It was one of her favorites for a while. It was from a music festival, and it was just the right color, this kind of drab cream, like it was old even though it wasn't then. It was a big shirt, and she tied it up in a knot over her blue jean shorts. That night she went barefoot with the music fest shirt tied up over her blue jean shorts, and she felt carefree and the Blue Moon tasted like summertime.

It was sometime in late July. It got dark slow, and she got drunk fast. The porch was bigger than the house and they sat on it and smoked a hookah while the sun set slow on the horizon. The hookah smoke was cherry flavored. Maybe they didn't talk. Mae glanced up and saw how dark it was all of a sudden, the immense dark of the deep delta country, the air so thick with Mississippi July that the smoke just hung there and enveloped them in a cherry fog. She couldn't even sense him there, this other boy. There was only the smoke hanging thick in the night and the sound of the cicadas so loud and invisible, and the feel of sticky sweet squeezed oranges between her fingers.

Some boys came over and Mae went riding in a jeep. It was the soft-top kind; they rode with the top down smoking cigarettes and drinking beer and blaring loud blues music. They were telling stories and she laughed, but she was too drunk to know the punch line. The boy driving was older, and he was talking about fights in honkytonks. She didn't know there were still real honkytonks around, the kind with seedy characters smoking inside and jukeboxes and guns pulled in redneck scuffles; but she knew when he said it that he'd been there. He was wearing a t-shirt with the sleeves torn off, and he had a tattoo on his right shoulder that was either barbed wire or rose stems.

They all carried on about Mae because she was so innocent looking, a skinny thing sitting back there trying to act rough; drinking beers out of their cooler and smoking their Marlboros like she knew about it. "Look at Miss Daisy Duke back there," they laughed, "Too good-lookin', shit! How'd you done meet this old boy you're runnin' around with?"

"He knows how to dance," she told them.

One night she'd been out in town a few weeks earlier, not having much fun. She was crawling out of her skin, the restlessness gnawed at her bones every day that summer crept closer to the fall and the decisions she would have to make. She felt like she had fallen down a deep hole, but instead of climbing out, she closed her eyes and threw herself against the walls. She'd drink until she hurt herself, go until someone stopped her. Mae met Cody that night when she was a little bit past the point, a little bit wobbly in her new wedge heels, and he swept her off to dance in time with the live blues band.

Mae loved to dance, but she'd never had anybody to dance with. Jake was too shy. He was always working, and when he wasn't working he didn't want to go out and dance. Cody took her hand and twirled her all around him, her dress flying out around her knees and both of them moving their feet in time and so fast that they were sweating and laughing and gasping and asking for another song. All she'd known in bars was everyone standing around in tight clusters, "backing it up" to incomprehensible lyrics about fucking bitches and getting high. This was real dancing. Nobody danced like that with Mae before except Jake's dad. Maybe her father put her on his feet before they left and spun her around until she was dizzy, or maybe she made up that memory because she liked it. Cody looked her in the eyes, and he held her hand instead of grinding up against her back, and he dipped her gracefully back onto his arm when the song was over.

She lost her mind.

She stayed out late drinking whiskey drinks he bought on his credit card, dancing and doing every wild thing they could think of – one night they climbed up on the tallest roof they could find, just for the hell of it. She stopped eating healthy and running in the park. She slept into the afternoon and drank beer all day and danced all night.

"I'm worried about you going out every night, Mae," Jake said, "I don't like Cody."

"We're just friends," she said, "I just like to dance with him. I just think he's fun, and it's just summer, so what the hell?"

Just.

She was just coming out to the farm to visit and ride the horses and four-wheelers. She was just going to have a couple of beers; it was so thoughtful that he got her favorite. She was just going to try the hookah because she'd always wanted to.

She didn't think they'd be riding around at midnight. She didn't think they would stop on the side of the dirt road and dance to the blues in the dark.

The boys took them back to the house and said they had to be getting' home, y'all kids be good now, and left some beer. They didn't drink it though; they lay in the hammock on the porch and watched the sky. Mae saw five shooting stars. She and Cody got up and danced some more, but it was different. Their feet weren't moving fast in time with the music and he didn't whirl her all around or dip her back on his arm. He put his hand on Mae's back where her skin was, where her shirt was tied up above her blue jean shorts.

She woke up tasting stale Blue Moon and smelling cigarettes. Her hair was wild and tangled, and she was covered all in dirt from riding in the jeep with the top down. Her feet were cut up from going barefoot, and she wasn't just friends with Cody anymore. She left that way.

She drove home while the sun was coming up slow the way it went down. She showered and she called the shy boy who worked all the time and was worried about her. She slept deep and hard, and when she woke up she cried about a promise good and broken. She thought about when something loses what makes it matter. She wondered about how just turns into is, and how long it would take for smoke to dissipate in the thick, dark Mississippi July.

He was wrong. Everything was inverted, subverted, a funhouse mirror reversal of the truth. He was the only place I had ever felt safe from everything. He was all that I'd wanted since I was fifteen years old. I had no other place to go and I wasn't ready to be alone, and I wished that I could stay but I couldn't. I couldn't un-think or undo. Giants had stomped through, uneven-ing what we'd made, but I still wanted to search through the crumbs instead of seeing the end. Why was he so willing to let me go? Why was I so unwilling to leave?

Mae sprang from her pew in the midst of Sunday worship. The preacher's bulbous red face was spewing every sort of damnation and several older church ladies rose in accordance, believing Mae had found the Holy Ghost. Her face was almost as red as the preacher's; and encouraged by this unprecedented appearance of the *Spirit in his service*, Brother Michael moved toward her booming ever more ominously about the danger of sexual immorality.

"SEXUAL IMMORALITY," he yelled, thrusting the well-thumbed Bible at his rapt congregation, "IS NOT ONLY INCEST. It is ANY. SEX. Outside THE MARRIAGE. Of a MAN AND A WOMAN."

Mae was leaning forward as Brother Michael approached, and she seized the backrest before her in such a manner as to startle Mrs. Hart from nodding in continual agreement.

"Amen!" gasped Mrs. Hart as she turned around.

"It is PRE-MARITAL SEX!" Brother Michael admonished, "It is HOMOSEXUALITY!"

"Goddamn it," Mae said, very conversationally, "shut the hell up." And Brother Michael did.

Everyone sat very still and breathed very quietly. Brother Michael breathed a little more loudly than everyone else since he had over-extended his lung capacity twenty minutes before. Mae looked at her friends, but they looked away. She looked over at Jake and he only blinked.

Then she stared up at the dust motes for a minute. She always liked to watch them float around in the colors from the stained glass window. She didn't watch them for long. She said, "Excuse me," and she walked out of the sanctuary. She shut the doors behind her with a respectably soft thud. It was the thud that shook him of it, that little "thwump" that meant she'd pulled those heavy wooden things together in the least auspicious way a person could. He got up to follow her.

Brother Michael snagged Jake's shirt sleeve and brought his perspiring face close to Jake's. He'd put his glasses back on and used his visiting the elderly voice to ask him, "Is Mae...is she ok, son?"

He stayed and reassured them all that Mae was fine, maybe a little woozy from the heat, maybe out of it from sleep deprivation during midterms. When he escaped he found her outside by the truck. She was tracing the letters on a parking sign – "Thou shalt not park here" – while Mrs. Gaines gestured emphatically at the heavens.

"I hope you're proud. Bless your family! As if my son hasn't done enough. Lord help us all!" With a final upward thrust of her palms, she moved in and hissed the heart of the matter with every bit of hate that she could muster: "Y'all were raised better," she seethed. She turned on her tactful 2-inch heel and arranged herself into the spacious passenger seat of the newest Buick sedan.

Jake took it upon himself to intervene at this point. He put his hand on Mae's shoulder, told her he would drive her to his house. She stepped back from him, and that's when he knew it wasn't ok. She wasn't ok, he wasn't ok, and she wasn't ok with him. He tried to take her hand again.

"I'll wait," she said. This time he didn't follow her.

Dean had told her first. She'd come home for the weekend and they were sitting in his room, watching *Friends*. Jake hated that show, but it was their favorite and they had all the seasons on DVD and could quote most episodes word for word. She said that they were laughing about something that happened to Chandler and Monica when they were out on a date, and he turned to her laughing and said, "That's like what happened to me and my boyfriend this past weekend." Like that was something he talked about every day.

She said she laughed back and asked about what happened to them, because it was like that to her. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary. Then he said, "So you know that I'm gay, right?" and she said sure she did, and then he told her the story and all about his boyfriend and they watched *Friends* and she went to bed. She texted Jake about it somewhere in there and told him she was happy that Dean felt like he could talk about it to her; asked him if he was fine with it. He told her of course he was, he loved her, and Dean was still the same shithead he'd known since high school.

It was different with Dean, he thought. They'd been close since Dean was this scrawny kid listening to Cher and the Spice Girls before football practice. They would mess with him about hanging around all the girls at recess, jealous he was getting all their girlfriends' attention. Dean would joke back, like, "What, you mean you never liked the Spice Girls?" and it was all funny and whatever. Jake knew about it, but at the same time, he never thought about it. He never thought Dean would talk about it. He never thought he'd see it, or know about it in any tangible way. So that was fine.

Really, it was still fine when Mae told him he'd come out. Jake knew she was worried about how he would react: he hadn't been exactly pro-homo in the past. He just hated those fucking flamboyant taggots, the ones that talk all lisp-y and act so gay. He wanted to tell them, "Ok, we fucking get it, thanks! You like boys, good for you, talk like a normal person for Christ's sake." She knew he didn't feel that way about Dean though; Dean had never been like that. He'd never flaunted it in everybody's face. Why do people feel like they need to do that? Jake wondered. What is it about being different that makes someone feel like they should let everyone else know just how odd they are in the face of normality? Mae thought that Dean should talk about it, she talked about it; but she would get mad when anyone talked back.

He should have known better than to ask her back to church. She'd stopped attending years before. She had only accompanied him that day to see their other friends home from college on Christmas break. She'd realized when she spoke with them that she had changed too much. Jake followed her down the narrow residential street, hoping she wouldn't stumble in her church heels and fall again; hoping she wouldn't leave to get drunk that night. The more he tried to keep her safe, the harder she pushed away from him. She thought he didn't know about the nights she stayed out in the summer, who she was with and what happened. He knew. She thought he didn't know why she was doing it. He loved her too much for it to matter.

Finally she stopped and sat down on the curb in front of the Chisms' house. He pulled in their driveway and went to her.

"Mae... I'm sorry that happened."

She turned to him and he flinched. "No you aren't," she said. "No one is. They think they're right. They think they're godly and pure and Jesus touches their lives every day."

Jake hesitated. "Let's be real, Mae. We live in Mississippi."

"Is that like a license to be ignorant?"

"No. But you have to acknowledge that you're located in the most conservative, fundamentally religious, backwards state in the nation besides maybe Alabama or Arkansas."

Mae laughed and sniffed in the cold. She wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her sweater; put her hands on her head to take a deep breath. "I hate being threatened with the wrath of Satan," she finally said.

Jake knew that Mae's childhood was even more rigorously religious than his own – she was in the church every time the doors were open after the divorce. Her mom kept the nursery. She was president of the youth group for a record-breaking three years of senior high; they all thought Jesus was going to give her a medal Himself. Jake took her joke as a peace offering and reached down to stroke her hair.

She slapped his hand away. When she turned around her face was unforgiving. "I can't, Jake. I can't handle that. And I really can't be with you if you can."

Mae felt like everything inside her had been scraped away, and the cold made her fingers hurt. She popped them anyway, and then she stood in front of Jake. She couldn't look at his eyes.

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“I can’t be with you. I can’t be here.”

“What are you saying?” he asked. “Are you breaking up with me?”

“I’m leaving.” she told him.

Her feet crunched the icy dew on the grass as she closed the last few inches between them. She put her arms inside his coat and laid her face against his warm neck where it smelled like him, like fresh cut grass and clean cotton, and they stood that way and cried together in the shadow of the December clouds.

I couldn't see. The world surrounded me unevenly; valleys I fell into and hills so high I didn't want to see the top. I heard he started drinking, got arrested, met a woman. The part I really couldn't see was the woman – how could he be with anyone but me? Even if I was with another man, I thought that he would stay himself forever, stay apart until I found enough of myself to come back and give to him.

Sitting next to him was a woman chewing gum of the wintergreen variety. He smelled it and he could hear it. She moved her jaw and made the most abhorrent popping noise after every sip of vodka water (2 limes). Jake had bought her this beverage because he is a gentleman. He'd begun to wonder if that is his downfall, perhaps.

He didn't meet Mae at a bar; truly he's not a drinker. They met when they were so young, at the golf course where he worked as a landscape apprentice, a glorified grass-cutter essentially. One time they planted the most beautiful spruce tree together. The root bag was pristine. He knew then that he loved her in that indulgent protective way, he wanted to always be the one to use the heavy shovel. He should've told Mae to use her own damn shovel.

"She pruned me like a crepe myrtle," he told vodka water (2 limes). She giggled and popped her gum.

"You're a silly thing," she said.

"We were like lichen, but not symbiotic," he told the woman.

She nodded; the chewing ceased momentarily. "Sweetheart, speak English."

Jake turned and ordered two shots of whiskey. He liked that it was brown. He liked that it burned.

"Both of those shots are for me, because I'm an asshole," he informed his neighbor.

She smiled then, and looked at him kind of sideways like women do when they think they're being cute. Mae loved to do that. She would always leave one little bite of

food on her plate, no matter what it was or how much had been on the plate to begin with. She knew it bothered the shit out of him. But she would look at him like that, say “I’m full!” and think she was just adorable.

Mae was attractive. Jake, being of average stature and possessing a last name that sounds like the chuffing noise a horse makes, knew that he wouldn’t do better. She had really great arms, first of all – dainty, elegant little arms. She also had soft hair like a tiny baby rabbit or something. Once in a while he’d get the urge to pet her, just reach out and caress her head in the middle of the Mexican restaurant or the bread aisle at Wal-Mart.

“Would you mind if someone wanted to pet your head?” he asked his neighbor.

“Baby, I think you’re drunk,” she told him. She winked at Jake and shouted for two more drinks on Valentine.

Valentine Vinson. He respected the alliteration. She was a compassionate person besides popping her gum. Her arms were sort of manly and she probably only liked roses, but Jake was feeling absolved when he’d ask her to dinner the first time and perhaps a little inebriated the second.

“You know,” he said to Valentine, “you get involved with a person. And it’s not even then you get attached to. I’m only 25.”

Valentine patted his arm. At least she was sympathetic. He knew she could never make him feel the way Mae did, but even with Mae sometimes he’d be alone with her and think, Wow, I hate that stupid way you giggle and why the fuck do you leave one bite of food on your plate?

"I forgot how she giggles like a stooge," he said to Valentine.

Jake realized he was once again intoxicated. A two week streak! He was suddenly exhilarated by his inebriation, by Valentine being a good listener. He'd heard before that chewing gum helped people remember things. He decided she was forgetful; the popping was probably a nervous habit. Bless her heart.

"Valentine, you sensitive soul. You psychiatrist in disguise." He stroked her head, it felt like craft yarn. "I want to give you something," he said.

Valentine clasped her hands over her heart, leaned forward in anticipation. Jake produced a tulip bulb from the breast pocket of his jacket. Valentine screamed.

The bartender asked, "The hell is that, an onion?"

"This is a perennial!" Jake declared.

Offended, he vacated the bar. The alley outside was crowded with couples buying each other corndogs, and they watched Jake walk in right angles toward the parking lot, clutching his tulip bulb. He stopped midway through his journey, considering an object against the wall of an establishment. He had a notion.

One Samaritan in slacks and an unfortunate sweater vest asked, "Hey guy, do you need a ride?"

"Momentarily," said Jake, "You're a responsible individual. Hold this." Having placed the infant tulip in protective care, he set about his task.

The object was a planter. It was round and black. It contained a green leafy vine which Jake removed in its entirety with a convicted tug. He set this aside.

He proffered his hand to the Samaritan. "Thank you for holding that," he told this caring person, taking back the bulb. "This is important." Carefully Jake placed his tulip in the furrow. Gently he buried it – not too deep. Mae always said he smothered angiosperms, but that was untrue. He just knew how arbitrary the elements could be, erratic rainfalls and erosions and haphazard passerby. If he were planted, he would want to be well-insulated with loamy soil. That's the only way he'd come out of his homey flower ovary.

Satisfied, he picked up the vine. His responsible friend said "Hey, I don't think you should take that," but Jake assured him it was necessary. They hurried to the Kia Soul waiting at the end of the alley.

The Kia was brimming with intoxication, every crevice was occupied. The interior was surprisingly spacious – Jake wedged comfortably between a blonde who smelled exactly like a wax myrtle and a man with a mullet. Jake supposed it was a man, but it very well could have been female. Its effeminate posture made him uncomfortable.

"I think you smell like a candle," he said to the blonde, "They make some out of wax myrtle needles." She pretended not to hear him and Jake pretended the mullet wasn't bothering him. None of the passengers inquired about or named a destination. Their driver counted three Mississippi's at stop signs and used his blinker fastidiously. They arrived at a Waffle House.

That's where they got him, while he was sitting in the window eating bacon with syrup –the waffles just weren't that great. The mullet saw the blue lights approaching; it had an acute awareness for law enforcement and a crumpled cigarette package in its possession that did not contain crumpled cigarettes. It ran from the booth as the policemen converged on the hostess station, three or four of them, and the burliest one retrieved Jake.

"Sir," he said, "you vandalized a planter."

Jake felt very offended. He also just didn't like the officer's tone, or even his countenance. He scooted out of the booth and stumbled forward, assaulting the policeman's hateful visage with his last syrup-y piece of bacon.

Jake was quickly tackled by the assisting men in uniform as their comrade stepped aside to remove the maple syrup from his face. They bundled Jake into the back of the car, and during the ride he was vaguely fascinated by the grate separating the back from the front and the occasional squawk from their scanner. He had never been taken to jail.

At processing they took his possessions before they put him in a cell to dry out. Coming upon the vine, the portly police officer held it between two rubber-gloved fingers and sniffed it. "The hell is this?" he asked.

"Devil's ivy," said Jake, "for my ex-girlfriend."

Mississippi is my mother. All the time she says and does things that embarrass me, make me cringe; and I love her unconditionally when I shouldn't. "Come back and live with me," she said when I told her I was leaving. "You'll always have a home with me." I felt her disapproval tugging at my feet as I walked away, the guilt pulling my at my hair and fingernails scratching my arms as it tried to wrench me back. "Think of my food," she said, "Your favorite. Think of your bed and your blanket and what makes you feel safe and warm."

"Remember what you love?" she asked me.

She was out for a run, vaguely enjoying herself, trying to think not about the running and the panting and the sweating; but about the delightful playlist she had earlier made and the sweet smell of honeysuckle that meant spring had arrived (quite prematurely, in fact). She reached the end of her drive and considered turning right to take on the impressive hill that wound up to the lovely neighborhood she liked to visit, but today she felt led to the left.

Unfortunately, the left presented an incline as well, though not as steep as her usual course. As she crested the top, she noticed a drive she had never seen before despite the fact that she traversed this road, the road she lived on, very regularly. Her adrenaline spiked by her spontaneity, she sprinted down the gravel path.

Her running shoes were not made for gravel. Rocks squeezed into the grooves on the soles and made her stride uneven, and she stopped with a grunt to search for a place to sit and pick them out one by one. The surrounding trees were surprisingly intact – not a stump in sight. She leaned against a well-adjusted maple and made note of nature as she picked. Although she knew the road she turned off of was just around the curve, she seemed to be very much secluded. Even the sound of cars from the nearby highway was muffled into silence; the only noises were the soft thwick of the rocks dislodged from her shoe and the intermittent rustle of an invisible woodland creature.

Her shoes successfully unencumbered, she set off at a more leisurely pace to places unknown. The woods grew denser, the shadows lacier, until finally the gravel gave way to softly packed soil and she emerged at a clearing. The area was small, no more

than a somewhat circular five-foot piece of ground. She stood on one side, a bridge on the other. She crossed.

The bridge reached over a dry creek bed, the sand still lined from the rivers of muddy water that must have flowed the last time it rained. Jake would love this. When she would visit him in college they would drive out to the nature reserve and walk, and he would tell her everything about the trees and the tracks and the slant of the sun that time of year. She missed his hand in her hand, rough and strong and warm and soft all at once, yanking her away from holes and fallen limbs like the one she'd just tripped over at the end of the bridge.

Cursing, she sat down in the dirt to examine the elbow she'd thrown out to break her fall. She scarred easily and fell often. She pushed up from the ground, trying to avoid dripping blood from her elbow onto her white tank top. She was turning to head back the way she came when she heard footsteps on the path ahead of her.

Her first assumption – a serial killer. He lured girls down his picturesque “running path” to his layer of doom. She was scared to plunge into unknown foliage to escape, and at any rate, it would make too much noise. She tried to appear intimidating and move stealthily towards a suitably bludgeon-like stick.

It was a man, but she'd known that. His dark blue shirt was unblemished, his breathing unlabored. Thick black hair hung over his forehead; so long it brushed his formidable eyebrows. She was suddenly aware of her matted hair and dripping elbow, her running shorts surely stained by their encounter with the ground. She heard her ragged breathing hitch as he came closer – he smiled. Dimples creased the sides of his dark

heard. He looked different in a way she couldn't have articulated, foreign somehow and mysterious and wonderful.

She tried to return the smile, but her face was numb, and the earth had that sway it gets after two shots of whiskey. She put her hands on her head and turned away to take a breath, and then she faced him.

"Um, does this lead back out?" Her voice sounded too loud in the quiet that followed his footsteps. She felt all the blood rush to her cheeks, and thought gladly that perhaps it would cease leaking from her elbow.

"Sure," he said, "I'll show you." She heard in his voice what she saw in his features, some quality of strangeness, not quite an accent. He turned and she followed.

His shoulders were broad and he bounced like a cat when he moved. She couldn't stand to walk in silence.

"Do you run out here often?" The dimples in his beard.

"Every day. Are you ok? Your arm?"

She had forgotten. The blood had clotted to make a mahogany scab; the skin around it already tinged a faint blue.

"Oh, I'm fine. I fall all the time. I could trip again any minute."

"I'll catch you."

"Do I know you? Should I know you?"

“Don’t think so.”

The path came to a juncture and widened considerably in front of them much the way it had narrowed before. She slowed her pace. She wasn’t ready to reach the end. Up ahead, however, was not the road but a small yellow house with blue shutters. The yellow paint was faded and peeling, the white trim crumbling in spots, but the house was lived in. Signs hung on every surface – the rails, the walls, the edge of the roof – metal signs with rusted edges showing their age, street signs with names she’d never heard of, paper signs that advertised a room for rent, a kitten for sale, a red jump drive lost. The biggest sign was black with white letters, hanging just to the left of the front door. A Tolkein quote: “Not all who wander are lost.”

“Want to come in?” he asked.

She did. She let him take her hand and lead her inside, through the door with stained glass panes and into a den full of other people. They sat on overstuffed chairs and couches, holding drinks and conversations, their feet propped on mismatched ottomans and the well-worn coffee table. They talked amongst themselves and didn’t look at her. She had the feeling of being inordinately taller than everyone sitting down, as if she’d just been led into munchkin land and she and her companion were silent giants.

He took her arm and led her past the crowd of sitting visitors through an archway into the kitchen. It was small but seemed much used – the smell of bread lingered in the air and on every surface sat small jars of spices. He cleaned her elbow in the sink with peroxide. She flinched when it started to bubble, but he held her arm still.

“Sorry,” he said, “I won’t do that again.”

“It’s ok,” she told him, and it was when he looked at her. She had loved a man with blue eyes, but his were brown. They made her think of chocolate, and coffee, and the lake on a sunny day. They looked like the tree trunks and the soft soil and the silt after the rain.

Then he was bandaging it, rubbing the gash with ointment and wrapping it with gauze.

“Gotta do it with gauze,” he said, “A regular bandage won’t stay on the joint.”

“What’s your name?” she asked him.

“Phillip Richards,” he answered, and proffered his hand for her to shake. His grip was firm and friendly and his long fingers engulfed her much smaller ones.

“I’m Mae. You have a neat house.”

“You want to stay awhile?”

“Sure,” she said. She wanted to sit beside him on the overstuffed couch and feel his leg against hers and think about what his beard would feel like against her cheek.

The others had made a spot for them. She sat down close and breathed in Phillip – old hardwood floors and honeysuckle, musty and sweet. Smell was important. She’d read something somewhere about memory and smell, and attraction and smell. Her favorite smell was Jake. He smelled like cut grass and clean laundry and sunshine, or maybe sunshine smelled like him.

Phillip introduced her to his roommate and the munchkin people who were not actually munchkins, except for one: a little boy with Phillip's dark hair and sweet brown eyes, his son. The others were friends of his roommate – Alice was a dancer from Alabama, Tyler was an accountancy major from Kentucky. Martin was an exchange student from Germany. He taught her how to say “I love you” – *Ich liebe dich*. She'd always thought that German was a scary language, but when Martin spoke it was beautiful. He sounded lyrical.

Some hours later, restless, she rose and walked out to the porch. The sun was setting and everything was pink – the sky, the clouds, the air around her and the light glinting from the signs on the house. It was cooler outside, and she felt a shiver take hold of her shoulders.

“Mae,” she heard from behind her.

She turned, and Jake walked stood in the doorway holding a yellow flower.

Shock vibrated through her body and she grabbed the porch railing. It was not Jake. Phillip handed her the flower and laughed, believing her reaction was an expression of pleasure originating with his gift.

“Can I take you to dinner?” he asked.

Mae went to dinner. She soon became a fixture at the well-posted house in the woods, spending days and nights shut away with Phillip; putting aside her moving plans and the past six years. She immersed herself only in learning the little things, like whether or not he put the cap back on the toothpaste and if he stole the covers on a

nightly basis, and she knew that he would ask her to marry him. She knew that she would say yes. He had spent most nights up studying for dental school, and she liked when he read aloud to her from his books. His voice still entranced her, different and deep and slow.

You can get involved with a person, Mae thought, but it wasn't even really them that you were attached to. It was the way Phillip made her feel – like she'd really accomplished something. In private, she would think, "Wow, I hate the stupid way you giggle, you're really a shit." But in public, everyone would look at her as though she'd gotten the winning lotto numbers, so she forgot how he giggled. She would only remember his brown eyes and more eyelashes than she had hairs on her head, she would only think about the way he said "thank you" and the victorious feeling of his hand on her lower back. Lower back is it. Lower back is possession; lower back is I've seen you without clothes on, or I want to at least.

She took him to walk on the beach of the lake. It was the most gorgeous fall afternoon. He never took off his shoes to feel the sand. She took him horseback riding because he'd never been. He wore tight jeans and suede boots, bless his heart. He reached over and touched her knee in the car on the way home; and he rolled over and held her hand that night, and she knew. He had a son already and was ready to be settled. She was ready to forget.

She knew Jake took another girl to the ranch where they rode horses. She hadn't cried. She wasn't going to.

“Let’s take the time we have,” I said. It had started to rain. Jake put his yellow-stained hand on my lower back, and we jumped together into a light blue pool with cracks at the bottom.

I sit shaking on the floor of the girls' bathroom while Jake knocks quietly at the door.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" His voice is muffled through the door. Did he not recognize me? I pull myself up in front of the mirror and cringe. No wonder. I rinse my mouth and fluff my hair, but when I turn to the door my stomach clenches again. I know then that I'm pregnant, that it is a 17-year-old boy's baby; that I don't want it and I don't want to be married to my husband. I put my hands on my head and breathe as deep as I can – then I open the door.

His first expression is concern for the sickly lady who ran to puke in the bathroom. The next is confusion, do I know her? Then I see it as he realizes. He gives me the look. Purple starts creeping in the sides of my eyes and I grab for the wall to steady myself. He leans in close, no longer unsure.

"Mae?"

"Hi."

He doesn't say anything. We stand there and remember one another. Suddenly he pulls me into a hug, and he still smells the way he always did, and I'm taken by a longing so profound I consider that I am hallucinating. We break apart, but we can't stop touching each other. He keeps my right hand in his and I grab his left arm by the elbow.

"I think I'm still mad you," he says.

"Me too," I answer.