

SEX AND JESUS: NOTES FROM A PASTOR'S DAUGHTER

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by  
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# SEX AND JESUS: NOTES FROM A PASTOR'S DAUGHTER

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of nonfiction and poetic works that represent the author's output as a candidate for Master of Fine Arts. These personal essays and poems are interested in intersections and unlikely combinations: sex positivity and feminism through a progressive Christian lens; the complicated relationship between body, health, and body image. The goal in many of these pieces is to challenge the American conception of both Christianity and Jesus—who we think he is, or was, and what he is about—and to hold the American church as institution to account.

Young adults of my generation who were raised Christian are stepping away from church and/or undergoing a radical transformation of their faith en masse. While my experience of growing up a pastor's daughter was generally positive, my adult life has been a process of questioning what I know and opening up to the reality that I do not have all the answers. I believe my thesis, in both form and content, reflects this uncertainty and the reality of “living in the tension,” a concept coined by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and a tenet of how I aim to live my life and to write my truth.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Sex and Jesus: A Pastor’s Daughter Questions the Christian Institution,” presented by Anna Elizabeth Stokes, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## Critical Introduction

In my application to UMKC's Creative Writing MFA three-plus years ago, I declared that "I am a writer of identities, intersections, and reconciliation, uniquely situated by a lifelong and authentic love of Jesus, fatness, feminism, and way more casual sex than the recommended Christian quota (which, to clarify, is none)." From that list, Christianity and sex are particularly central to my writing. My thesis reflects that the thematic importance of religion and sex in my nonfiction work haven't changed during my time in the MFA. But my approach has changed and my understanding of myself as a writer has changed as I've learned, and developed, and worked on my craft.

I began writing nonfiction as a college senior. My first published essay, "I Am Fat," appeared in my university's magazine on gender and sexuality, *Wetlands*. On my relative newcomer status in the genre, my application to UMKC also read, "Nonfiction ransacked fiction's core place in my heart about four years ago... I have a strong voice and plenty to say, but one of my primary goals is to deepen my knowledge of nonfiction as craft and learn how to wield its formal elements well." Before considering how I have deepened my knowledge during graduate school, I first want to examine my journey with nonfiction in the years leading up to my time in the MFA. I graduated college four years before joining the MFA program; during that in-between time, I was inspired by the candor of authors like Lindy West, Lena Dunham, and Melissa Broder. Their respective essay collections, *Shrill*, *Not That Kind of Girl*, and *So Sad Today* reflected the kind of writing I wanted to do—although they did not, for the most part, apply a religious lens. Essays like West's "Why Fat Lady So Mean to Baby Men?" or Broder's "My Vomit Fetish, Myself" were hilarious,

devastating, and vulnerable in turn. I wanted to write like that, both funny and raw. Laughter and crying, after all, offer the same release.

I had a unique opportunity to write humor—and to test it in front of a live audience—when I became a regular performer with F\*ST! Female Storytellers in Tucson, Arizona in 2015. I had moved back to my hometown after college and was devoting a lot of my personal time to my love of writing. F\*ST! (pronounced “fist”), a group of women, queer folks, and feminist allies, held monthly shows for contributors to tell stories from their lives, stories with that confluence of vulnerability and humor. Contributors submitted written versions of their stories, which, if chosen, were performed orally, sometimes read aloud but often memorized or extemporaneous. When I wrote my first piece to be performed for F\*ST!, about how I had no idea what I was doing with my life after college, I added some jokes for the hell of it. When I performed the piece, I got big laughs. Not only was the feeling addicting, it taught me that I could write funny. Although “fun” does not necessarily equal “funny,” Professor Whitney Terrell recently gave me the important reminder that my writing is best when I have fun doing it.

Katherine E. Standefer, author of the memoir *Lightning Flowers: My Journey to Uncover the Cost of Saving a Life* and my writing mentor before graduate school, spoke often about the idea of psychic distance, and how it informs how we write what we write about. In classes I took from her about writing and sex, we read essays by authors who came across as still in close psychic proximity with the wounds and traumas they wrote, and we read essays by authors like Lidia Yuknavitch and Cheryl Strayed, who were clearly further removed from their subjects by the passage of time. Unsurprisingly, authors with a greater psychic distance



had more of a bird's eye view of the written-about parts of their lives, a more expansive perspective that allowed them to be more in control of how they framed personal events.

When I started grad school, one of my biggest fuels was my anger towards men, exacerbated by a close psychic distance to the past few years of fuckboys who flaked on me, ghosted me, and saw my consent as negotiable, as well as my trauma from being assaulted by a stranger in Paris. Now, however, I have a greater psychic distance from those events, in part because time has passed, in part thanks to therapy, but, more than anything, because I am in my first-ever healthy, long-term relationship, which has taught me so much about relationships, love, communication, and sex. (I want to take this moment to express my gratitude to my boyfriend; without him, I'm not sure I would have gotten through grad school during the pandemic.) While the subject matter of my writing has not changed drastically, my writing now is less driven by a compulsion to tell the events of my life and the thoughts and feelings around them than it used to be.

Nonfiction—especially nonfiction written by women—is often accused of simply being therapy on the page, not adding anything new to the literary canon. In Standefer's trauma-writing class, "The Other Side of Fire," we discussed the validity of this accusation. Some therapy writing is personal and private to the writer, but trauma writing as a genre is important and deserves its place in the canon. In her essay "The Heart-Work: Writing About Trauma as a Subversive Act," Melissa Febos asserts,

It is not gauche to write about trauma. It is subversive. The stigma of victimhood is a time-worn tool of oppressive powers to gaslight the people they subjugate into believing that by naming their disempowerment they are being dramatic, whining, attention-grabbing, or beating a dead horse. Believe me, I wish this horse were dead.

It is worth noting that while much of my sex writing has been a way to process trauma—and, I hope, a calling out of the ways in which we are all complicit with rape culture (See “As We Forgive Our Trespassers”), trauma was not necessarily my motivation to start writing about sex. The reason I became interested in sex writing, in my early twenties, was because I felt empowered in my burgeoning sex life, and, surprisingly, having sex brought me no sense of guilt. I was raised Christian, and therefore raised to believe that sex outside of marriage was a sin. Even if my church didn’t elevate it to the level of cardinal sin that some congregations do, it was difficult not to infer, from taking in Christian culture, that having casual sex was one of the worst things I could do. And then I had casual sex, and the cognitive dissonance of Christian messaging and what I actually experienced was so great that I had to write about it.

While my feelings about my assault, and other sexual experiences I did not fully consent to, have not gone away (nor should they; they are informed by the real rape culture we live in, and they help protect me from it), being in a relationship has offered me a more nuanced lens for my sexual and relational experiences as a whole. This is not just because of the positive aspects of my relationship, but because the act of being in a relationship has shone a light on the ways in which I am an imperfect partner, and the ways in which longing never really goes away. I believe that this greater level of psychic distance is especially reflected in my more recent essays “Index of Sex and Love” and “Index of Desire.” “Index of Desire,” in particular, is not entirely absent of anger and trauma, but both of these pieces show a greater understanding of the complexity of sex and love and desire, making space to explore queerness and infidelity, and to play at the borders of want.

It is notable to me, as I reflect on my own writerly psychic distance in this critical introduction, that I have only discussed the sex side of my writing, and not the religion. In a

way, I have a greater psychic distance from my religious upbringing because I have spent so many years—really, my entire adult life—on a journey of questioning, transforming, and reaffirming my faith in new ways. But one of the more traumatic events of my life, and one I have not yet written on in the way I want to, though I have attempted it here, is how I left the church that I grew up in. Leaving my childhood church meant the end of many relationships that were deeply meaningful to me; it was a great loss. I feel it is an important story to tell, not just for my personal healing, but because it deals with racism and sexism in the church, and the hypocrisy of the Christian institution. On a bodily level, however, I am not ready to write about it; even acknowledging it here makes my breath feel shorter. (I do want to note, here, that my parents had nothing to do with this split and had already stepped down from leadership before I left the church. They support me and/in spite of my hedonistic sex writing, and I would not have survived the MFA without them, either.) This strange combination of feeling like my faith is “resolved,” but also that I still have an active wound from it, means that during the MFA program I have spent less time developing my religion writing than I have my sex writing. However, I still feel compelled to write in a way that calls the American Christian institution into account, and I do have some ideas for how I want to do so moving forward (including a podcast, as I have obtained podcast and sound editing experience at UMKC).

So, I came into this program with humor and vulnerability, and have developed some psychic distance from my subject matter. Another strength of my writing I want to highlight, before shifting focus to some of my weaknesses, is the quality of my prose. It is important to me for my writing to feel fresh on a line-by-line level. During college I read David Mitchell for the first time, and there was so much that enchanted me and intimidated me about his

writing, but, more than anything, I envied his prose. He never resorted to cliché, never reused the same word or phrase. His prose has a kind of energy and body to it that reminds me of the “sprung rhythm” of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poetry. I wanted to write like Mitchell; I wanted my readers to feel like my prose was so juicy they could take a bite out of it, to laugh in delight at the aliveness of my words. Years later, I am no longer jealous of David Mitchell. I do not consider myself to be anywhere near the same galaxy as him in terms of my writing, or research, or ability to structure a narrative, but my infatuation with and jealousy of his language motivated and taught me through years of practice. Now, I am confident that I can write, on a line-by-line level, just as well as anybody.

Graduate school has equipped me with an understanding of where my writing needs improvement. Professor Terrell introduced me to the concept of the “arc of discovery,” or “arc of inquiry,” and Dr. Christie Hodgen reinforced it. The arc of discovery is the single question at the heart of any personal essay; the entire essay should be driven by it. Often, Professor Terrell and Dr. Hodgen’s feedback on my writing have had to do with that one central question. Sometimes I ask too many questions in one essay. Sometimes it’s unclear what I’m asking at all. For much of graduate school, I’ve questioned why I struggle so much with the arc of discovery.

The one academic essay I have included here, titled “Jesus Stands with the Vulnerable: A Gospel-Based Ethic of Sex,” makes an argument for my proficiency at the academic essay—namely, my ability to follow a thesis statement from start to finish with no unnecessary tangents or fluff. Why, then, has the arc of discovery proved so elusive for me? For one, I’ve been an academic writer much longer than I’ve been a creative nonfiction writer, plus I’ve taught composition. It makes sense that I am more familiar with the form.

Second, it's only recently that I've come to think of the arc of inquiry as a creative thesis. A thesis question, rather than the traditional thesis statement. If I can treat an arc of discovery the same way that I treat a thesis—if I can approach my creative writing with this academic sensibility—it will, at the very least, be a good exercise in clarity.

During grad school, I have also overcome a reticence to play with form. I do not consider myself a particularly form-savvy writer, and in the past I feared that if I wrote an essay as, say, a numbered list, I'd be accused of being too derivative. However, reading works like Maggie Nelson's *Bluets*, *A Lover's Discourse* by Roland Barthes, and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House*—all formally inventive works—for class, I felt inspired and empowered as a student of writing to experiment with form. You will see form come into play in several of my essays, including “The Five Deadly Sins,” “The Family Tree,” and “An Incomplete Timeline of the Trump Presidency.” You will especially see it in “Index of Sex and Love” and “Index of Desire,” which were inspired by Barthes' “fragments” in *A Lover's Discourse*, in which he defines a diverse terminology within the discourse of love, from the perspective of a lover. I now realize that, just like I saw nothing wrong with taking prosaic inspiration from David Mitchell, I can take formal inspiration from the writers I read. The practice can only make me a better writer.

I've confronted my inner critic many times throughout my writing life. I have the tendency so many of us have, to sit paralyzed in front of the blank page, to get stuck writing and rewriting the same sentence, because I need my work—I need my first draft—to be perfect. It was only during my third year in the MFA, faced with the 180-page requirement of my thesis, that I realized I had been obeying my inner critic again, for all of the past two years. I hardly ever let myself sit down and just write anymore, which is often when the

really interesting stuff comes out. I saw a wonderful counselor through CCAS this year who helped me work through my feelings of perfectionism in relationship to my thesis, and she encouraged me to just write, to just let out whatever wants to come onto the page. It's liberating to return to that kind of drafting.

I want to loop back to Professor Terrell's affirmation that my writing is best when I have fun with it. He told me this during our meeting to discuss the first draft of my thesis. When he said it, "fun" seemed like a foreign concept in relation to writing. To be honest, as much as this critical introduction has been an opportunity to reflect, I've really struggled to write it; for the past three years, I feel like I've just been putting my head down and trying to barrel through grad school. It's been hard. I haven't been reflective in general; I don't have the time or the emotional energy. Graduate school has been an amazing opportunity to receive the most insightful feedback from professors who I respect and like a whole lot; to make connections with other developing writers and have long talks about sex and faith and everything else we care about; to makeover my CV with a list of robust professional development opportunities. I am as confident as I was on day one that I am in the right program. But grad school has also done significant damage to my physical and mental health (see "Land of the Living"). In a way, I forgot the entire concept of fun during grad school. I know that my critical introduction is not the place to call the entire system of academia to task, but it would not be honest if I did not at least acknowledge my reality. It took me aback, to think that I could have fun with my writing—then I remembered that I could, and that I had.

Professor Terrell also observed, of "Diablo" and the "Index" pieces, that in them I was not afraid of boring the reader. I lingered in scene, developed characters, and used

dialogue, and it all made for more engaging writing. I can be reluctant to get deep into scene in nonfiction, because I don't want to write what I don't remember. Sometimes, the remembering itself is painful. But often, the memories are simply not all that distinct, and I don't want to knowingly fabricate them. The MFA has taught me that that is not how nonfiction writing works. Filling in dialogue where I need to is not dishonesty or misrepresentation. I even truncated a scene in "Index of Desire" (Kayla and I actually had the whipping conversation in gridlocked traffic on the drive back from Natural Bridges beach, not at the beach itself). It's not just what I've learned from academic writing that can be applied to my nonfiction; I can also apply what I know about dialogue and scene from my years of writing fiction.

I am still chasing the same questions that I was three years ago. I am still interested in the same subject matter. But my position towards, and perspective on, these things has changed in quiet, nuanced ways. In addition, I have brought new tools into my toolkit thanks to the instruction of my professors: I've learned about the arc of discovery, I've been encouraged in my experiments with form, and I am coming back around to spending time on scene and dialogue and characters. I don't know where my writing will take me next, but I know I am equipped for whatever comes—and I am so grateful and privileged to have had this opportunity.

# The Five Deadly Sins

## I. Touch

When I was a kid, my mom kept a tub of Quaker Oats in the pantry, labeled “Anna.” The tub came out when I wanted something tactile. Mom emptied the dry oats onto the kitchen tile, I rolled on the floor, and the oats whispered against me, grainy and crisp. Then, when I was satisfied, Mom swept the oatmeal back into its container and shelved it for the next time. I was too young to wonder if it was wrong to ask for pleasure.

We lived in California back then, Mom and Dad and I, and weekends were spent at the beach. Along the gray Pacific coast, I rubbed the back of my head in the shore. My hands worked sand into my scalp, until miniature hills of it lived in my hair. Nothing rivaled the gratification of scratching it back out again; sand in the car, sand in my bed, shed in the pleasurable night.

\*

My senses were sated during childhood. Closeness to the beach and to the San Francisco Bay meant that I wanted to be a marine biologist. We took regular class trips to the Bay; those days were marked by seabirds with feet in the mud, and the Port of Oakland far away and white. Along the Bay’s shores, tubular, deep green plants grew in clusters. Our teachers encouraged us to suck on them, but not to swallow. In the mouth, they juiced out salt.

When it was time to report on a sea creature for class, I chose the hagfish. Hagfish, according to consensus, are disgusting. They are slimy and eel-shaped; their skin is loose,



velvety, and phallic. They feed on fish carcasses that sink to their seafloor dwellings; sometimes they live inside corpses while they feast. In revisiting the hagfish recently, I learned that their meat is considered an aphrodisiac in the Koreas.

I was so excited to present on the hagfish that I shared my whole presentation with my classmates at recess. When I realized I'd played my hand, and would have nothing new to share when the project was due, I decided to switch my topic to cuttlefish instead. Researching ocean life was no chore to me, but a fascination.

## II. Taste

The childhood pleasure that taught me shame was food. If I wanted a second, or third, slice of banana bread from my parents' Bible study spread, I had to be sneaky about it.

The body that delighted in oats and sand and fish was already fat. There is a picture of me on my parents' bookshelves, two or three years old, tree-legged and lanky. I am grinning, in sunglasses and a t-shirt, leaning on a foam baseball bat. But that is the only time I know of that I resembled thin. In another bookshelf picture, from a family trip to Singapore when I was five, my young parents laugh, and I am so shy of the parrot on my shoulder. I have a toddler belly, fat arms, and a rosy round face.

As childhood gave way to adolescence, I learned all about not just the act of feeling, of using my body to feel; I learned how I should feel *about* my body. In middle school, I looked in the mirror, and something inside of me woke up, as if it had been latent all along. My eye was now sharp, and it hated the pooch below my stomach, and how my t-shirt did nothing to hide my fat.

The only thing to do with a body like that was to be ashamed. Mom, whose body has fluctuated like the phases of the moon, signed the two of us up for Weight Watchers. Later, we tried Jenny Craig. I scooped tuna from a can onto flavorless crackers. I learned how to count calories before I was a teenager. I tried making myself throw up, but in the end I couldn't stand to. On the day before I began a new diet, I ate everything good I could find in the kitchen; I knew that I was entering into deprivation again.

By my teens, we'd relocated to Tucson, Arizona, and I could no longer bury the back of my head in the beach. And yet, in those same years when I was dieting and picking at acne and hating myself, my scalp began to make dandruff. On the one hand, this was embarrassing. But it was also familiar. Exploring my dandruff became a bedtime ritual. Slowly, my fingers ran between the roots of my hair, interrupted by a bump or a flake. In the hush of the night, I read my skull like braille.

I always picked my scalp in solitude; I knew, by now, what to feel shame about. Most of my binge-eating happened alone, too. Our kitchen was a *mélange* of diet attempts (the soda I grew up on was Diet Coke); staples like cereal, meat, produce, and peanut butter; and, inevitably, junk food, either kept in the pantry or hidden away. Mom picked me up after school, and when the two of us got home, she would sometimes be on the other side of the house – resting in her room, or working on the desktop. I'd cross the sun-baked saltillo tile from the Arizona room to the kitchen. Quiet as I could, I inched open drawers, snuck Pop Tarts, chips, Nutella by the spoonful. Crumbs crunched to the floor, and I eased the lid of the trash can shut.

The eating was pleasurable, but there was pleasure, too, in knowing I'd gotten away with it. There were times when I knew that Mom heard me rustling with wrappers. That wasn't good enough; I wanted the perfect crime. Sometimes she walked past before I was done foraging, and it was as if a spell lifted. I'd learned to fuse pleasure with shame, and the hidden away-ness of my shame heightened my pleasure.

\*

For a time, I resented my mom for the role she played in my dieting. She sat with me in the doctor's office when I wasn't even ten years old, and listened to my pediatrician berate my health—and she said nothing. Mom told me, “It feels so good to be thin,” pining for her smaller self. My body came from her body, and she was trying to make it recede.

I remember telling her that I'd rather be thin than healthy. I remember how Mom sucked in a breath, said “Well...” regretting how far gone I was. In my teen years, I daydreamed of a skinny me. She was beautiful, and extra-suave, and got lots of attention from men. She finished her novel and became a bestseller. I didn't want to be me anymore, I wanted to be her.

### III. Sight/Smell

In college in Tacoma, Washington, I took an introductory geology course to fulfill my science requirement. By then, I didn't believe I was good at science anymore. In class, I sat next to one of the baristas from my favorite local spot, and we talked before the lecture started. One time, he told me about being trapped in an elevator during a major Seattle earthquake. I listened, rapt, then realized with horror that the shoulder of my black shirt was

covered in dandruff. I started using medicated shampoo once a week; it was thick and brown and smelled awful.

I went to a dietician at the student health center. When I told her how young I was when I started dieting, she shook her head. “No one should diet before their brain has fully formed. It’s destructive.”

I began to interrogate my relationship with my body. I became vulnerable with my friends. I read feminist, body-affirming, sex-positive writers, like Lindy West and Virgie Tovar. Tovar, who I met at a reading in 2017, while trying to be a chill fangirl, has a quote that I absolutely love. Reading it in college resonated with how I’d been living. She says, “When a person is fat they’re meant to live in the future, diet ads and the diet industry create this future-centric goal-centric self and existence. We’re kind of told as women that we can live once we’re thin, we can love, we can have sex, wear bikinis, go horseback riding. Once we’re thin, and there’s that conditional clause.” I began to embrace that I have the body I have.

We carried pocket magnifying lenses for geology class, and broke them out on field trips to the Puget Sound, or the cemetery where we inspected gravestones. One night, I was alone in my room with the lamp on low and golden. I picked at my scalp, and caught a bit of dandruff on my finger. The magnifying glass was in my bag, at the side of my bed; I dug it out. The small, white flake was almost stucco, brittle and mottled. Or maybe its whorls were like a fingerprint. My dandruff had pores, the tiniest pinprick holes that a sewing needle could barely pass through. I told myself that these were the places where the hairs grew

through the flakes. With pleasure, I spent minutes studying myself, hushed and in awe of what my body had made.

\*

About six months after graduating college, I went back to the San Francisco Bay Area to look for work. One of my best friends, Kecia, had moved there, and after a lonely internship spent in the Chicago winter, I wanted to be with the people who knew me. Kecia lived in a studio apartment in Redwood City, with a square footage of around four-hundred, and paid double that in rent—dirt-cheap for the area. So, I couch-surfed among old family friends, staying for long spates in beautiful Silicon Valley homes that were bought by the early days of the tech boom.

I spent a few nights in one family's RV, parked in their front drive. On Easter evening, I was eating the internet like junk food when I came across a comment thread on a fairly innocuous post. People were posting links to hentai, Japanese animated porn. I wasn't sure about porn, but I clicked.

I had touched myself before, but I hadn't yet claimed my sexuality. I was still working to claim the idea that I have an inherent beauty, a body that deserves to be seen. I remember finger-fucking myself in college, ignoring my clit, frustrated that it didn't feel better. I'd been detached from men, too, though I was trying to get over that hangup; I had my first kiss as a college senior, at twenty-one. The bed in the RV took up the entire master bedroom, and I lay by myself in the night, bingeing on hentai.

There were women stuck in walls, so that their top and bottom halves were on opposite sides. Women who were powerless against molesters on the train. I was on fire while reading a comic about a high school girl who was blackmailed by a lecherous, foul old teacher. My body told me what it wanted from me, and I moved my hand, obeying. Like that, I felt a wave overtake me, and another, and another. They slowed and rippled me back onto shore, and I laid my head in the sand.

\*

During that season, my longest California living arrangement was house-sitting for a friend's neighbor, a seventy-year-old redhead named Chuckie. Before she departed on her months-long Americana road trip, with a grand finale in Vegas, Chuckie told me about the lover she'd taken a couple of years back. The two had met, years before, on some kind of backpacking trip, when Chuckie had a husband and young children. They spent a night in his tent, taken with each other, but she ended things in the morning. After her husband passed, Chuckie and her lover reconnected. All bets were off. They went to Hawaii. Chuckie was most excited to recount that she'd met Pierce Brosnan on the islands, and he looked as handsome as ever.

After Chuckie hit the road, I wore her lingerie as overclothes on nights out in San Francisco. All sorts of dudes grinded up on me, and one guy wanted to photograph me and Kecia. I kissed three men in one night: Pierre, super-hot, celebrating his birthday; another guy that Kecia called a miniature chippendale, since he was ripped but at least four inches shorter than me in my heels; one of the bartenders, who the chippendale insisted was gay.

I wasn't happy during my time in California. It was my first year in the post-grad world, and I had no idea what the fuck I was doing, or even what I wanted. I walked to Philz Coffee every day, and religiously ordered their mint mojito iced coffee. I applied for work sporadically, listening to at least three languages being spoken around me on the patio. I made new friends through Kecia, and we talked about art and God.

My stuff lived in my car. I hauled around a tupperware full of baking soda, and a jar of apple cider vinegar. These were my hair regimen, since I was trying to go shampoo-less. I had heard, from people who stopped shampooing, that at first their dandruff got worse, but then it went away. I liked the idea of my hair, clean and natural and more voluminous than ever.

I walked around Lake Merritt in Oakland and ate sushi and danced to the Spanish Harlem Orchestra at Yoshi's. I heard gunshots in Oakland, too; cops firing rubber bullets at protestors. I kissed a guy at a club who I wasn't really into, and he tried to reach into my shorts. I went to the beach, but I no longer enjoyed how cold it was. I got lots of job interviews, even multiple rounds, but never got an offer. I laid in bed for a month.

Still, I stayed in Chuckie's house, and I tended her garden. Chuckie's garden was her love, thick and verdant and just as eclectic as she was. Everything from cacti to birds of paradise grew in her yard. I trimmed back her roses, added mulch, drenched her plants every other day, per her instructions. Chuckie had one plant I can't name, or find online, which hadn't yet bloomed when she left. It had dark green leaves and sat in a short pot. I found a flower between the leaves one day, when I came out to do the watering. The flower was black. It looked like a rose, but it was sturdier, almost like it was made from paper, or

sculpted out of tin. Within a few weeks, the flower had grown a puffy pink stamen. Then, more of the weird buds bloomed. I let the hose rain in the yard, in the perma-perfection of the Bay Area weather. Water glinted like copper in the sun. There was nothing like a plant blooming under my care. The satisfaction of it was almost guttural, one of the things that kept me going. There was nothing like a plant I cared for suffering, either, which a few of them did. I left the Bay Area not long after.

\*

Back home in Tucson, I started dating in earnest, and I quickly learned to ask for what I wanted. I wasn't honest with myself about this, but I wanted sex more than anything. I was only eleven when my hormones stirred and I went totally boy-crazy. Now, I was twenty-three, and the sex life that had eluded me for more than a decade felt almost mundanely available.

The first schmuck I slept with was a goofy, cynical Satanist with a brand on his arm (which, to be honest, was about par for the course in the Tucson dating pool). We met for drinks at the Tough Luck Club, a dim-lit basement bar. He was okay; I knew I wasn't in danger of falling in love with him. We agreed to reconvene at his place, and before we walked to our respective cars, I asked "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

I used variations of that move many, many times. I was impatient for touch. I wanted saliva by date two. One guy sat in my car, and I asked if he wanted to kiss me, and he leaned in while the local radio played frantic mariachi. I went over to another guy's house and, when he was too shy to make a move, I asked if we could lay down. When, on the first date, a guy



overshared about the DUI he still had to do time for, I told him that I didn't really want to get another drink, but I did want to make out.

Sometimes, I wonder if so much of the trouble I cause myself is because I ask for pleasure. When I make a move on somebody I truly like, I fear that it might be the kiss of death. Part of me is afraid that it turns men off when women are vocal about their pleasure, or when we initiate sex. Another part fears that I can either have sex, or I can have the person, but I can't have both.

What does this say about pleasure? Women's pleasure, in this culture, and in the endless advertisements that use us, is supposed to look more like eating a cup of yogurt, or a miniscule cheese wheel. In movie depictions of sex, thin cis women cum from vaginal penetration, simultaneously to their partners. I think this is more about male gratification than anything, a punctuation to the cis male orgasm; men like knowing that they can get women off.

Women's pleasure is not supposed to look like scratching out dandruff, or rolling in dry oats, or wallowing in sand at the beach. It's not the squelch of mud underfoot in the Tucson riverbeds, creosote hung in the air. It's not picking your nose, or biting your nails, or popping a zit (although content creator Dr. Pimple Popper has over four million subscribers on YouTube). Our pleasure is not supposed to look like making the demand that sex be good for us, too. Our culture imagines pleasure as experienced and enacted by perfect bodies, bodies compliant to norms. Like the thin me I used to imagine, those bodies are fictions. My body is real.

\*

For a while now, I've wondered why humans are so opposed to being called animals. We are constantly building on arguments that we are separate from animals, for this reason or that. I'm not convinced that we're the smartest species, the most compassionate, the most durable. Still, we consider ourselves not only distinct, but superior.

I see this as nothing more than fear of our animal nature. We, too, are made of flesh and blood. Our bodies will fall apart, and we will die. Our desires and pleasures on Earth are not un-animal: although our culture politicizes sex—and our own takes on sex are therefore political—I see it as a biological compulsion. We don't like to admit the power of pleasure, but even humans, on some base level, want to wallow in the mud.

#### IV. Sound

I'm a little older now, and my life is a little more together. I'm trying to be choosier about who I have sex with, and how long to wait before going to bed. My mom, who I've forgiven for the diets because she is my best friend, and because I've grown up, tells me to always carry condoms in my purse. I switched back to medicated shampoo, but I still enjoy scratching out dandruff.

Of all the animals in the ocean, and on land, whales have always been my favorite. They are ancient, wise, communal. I picture the hard, rubbery ridges on a blue whale's back, the grooves of the barnacles on their underbellies. I remember looking up at a whale shark, and a thirty-foot wide manta ray, in the Atlanta aquarium, both slow and graceful and on an impossible scale.

Fat women are sometimes called whales as an insult, because we are big. But really, we humans are small, and strange, and imperfect. I would like to know what it's like, being a whale. I'd like to walk into the ocean, free in my human woman body. My skin gets thicker, blends with the water. I trade my teeth in for baleen walls. Once I've reached the open water, I open my mouth, and eat, and eat, and eat. And when I've had enough, I sing.

## One Body, Many Parts

In Saint Mary's Episcopal, the air wears incense like a second skin. Christmas has passed, but in anticipation of Candlemas—a holiday I don't know—the sanctuary's stayed green with pine, and red carnations leap up from the altar. I sneak in during the opening hymn and flip through the leaflet to catch up with the service.

Saint Mary's is the second oldest church in Kansas City. They hold a solemn high mass on Sunday mornings. I started going a few months ago with a friend; it's the first time I've gone to church semi-regularly in about two years. Everything about the Episcopal church is different than what I grew up with: the kneeling on prayer benches, the frantic flipping through hymnals as the organist starts up, the crossing of chest and head with holy water. In the contemporary church that was mine for fifteen years, communion was Hawaiian bread and grape juice. With respect to the large portion of the church in recovery, we never used wine. Saint Mary's sources wine from Napa with such a high alcohol content that the vintner only sells in bulk to churches—the alcohol kills the germs of a room of people all sipping from the same chalice.

A man in robes—I don't know his title—brings the gold Bible that lives on the altar forward for a reading. He reads a well-known passage from 1 Corinthians: “One Body, Many Parts.” I know the premise of the passage. We are different from one another by design. We are like parts of a body; no body can be all ears, all eyes, or all big toes. But as I listen, I realize that I'd forgotten how it ends. As translated in the New International Version, “Those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts we think are less honorable we treat with special honor... God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it.”

Today, this passage is what strikes me. God doesn't just dignify all of creation. God doesn't just dignify all people. God is most fond of what we see as lowly; he takes pleasure in elevating the disenfranchised, the oppressed. The people who clearly don't have their shit together.

~

The church I grew up in was full of such people. I should tell you now that my dad is a pastor. When I was seven or eight, Dad was in search of a new placement. Of all his options, I was, for some mystery reason, ardent that we go to Tucson, Arizona. The church he was meant to take over was already established, and had a congregation of about a hundred. That's what he was told.

Dad arrived in Tucson before we did, lived in a hotel by the highway, and bought our new house before Mom and I had seen it. On our first Sunday at church, there were twenty people in the room. Most of the established congregation had left with the old pastor.

The church met in a seedy building downtown, a walkable area in a spread-out city. On our third Sunday, the congregation grew by thirty percent, because a guy named Ernesto, who called himself "the king of the homeless," had come the week before, loved it, and invited his people. Ernesto, as I remember him, was full-bearded and wiry. After getting out of prison, he vowed never to sleep under a roof again. When Dad spoke at a multi-church conference in town, Ernesto was in the crowd, flashing gang signs and yelling, "That's my pastor!"

I love Dad's stories from this early time of the church's life, when things were a big gritty mess. The time Dad embraced a newcomer, and the man cried. "I just got out of prison," he said. "I haven't been touched with kindness in ten years." Or how young,

suburban families, visiting for the first time, took a step back when they saw the smokers outside the entrance.

I grew up believing that church should be come-as-you-are, a place for people to be real and love each other. I've signal-boosted Dad's narratives because I believe in them. But as an adult, looking back, I have to take a more critical look at my experience. I remember being left at home all day one Saturday, because my parents had found out that the bookkeeper was skimming off the church's already limited finances. I remember a lot of time spent alone, although my parents deeply loved me.

Another thing I remember is a homeless man approaching me after the service, the same one who pushed around an empty stroller and talked as if a baby was inside of it. He offered me a plastic Rugrats watch with an orange strap. It might have come with a happy meal, or from a gumball machine, or, more likely, the trash. Confused, uncomfortable, but smiling for him, I took the watch. The man turned to Dad, as if he was satisfied he'd held up his end of some unspoken deal. Then I understood he wanted money. He'd used me.

There was the time when an alcoholic veteran with a thick New England accent asked, point blank, "Are you scared of me?" I guess he was dissatisfied that I hadn't greeted him lately. I was thirteen or fourteen, and more interested in my friends. But I was also the first daughter of the church. There was the handsome young married man who always paid special attention to me, gave me a kiss on the cheek, said "If I wasn't married..." Teen me loved the attention, considered him a friend. It was nothing I thought to bring up to my parents, and nothing that escalated beyond what I've said. They trusted him. And they had a lot on their plate.

~

My dad is a tall man—six-foot-five—with long legs, the frame of a former basketball player who’s filled out. Even though he’s completely silver-headed now, I will always see him as blonde—the same blonde he passed on to me. Dad loves spots and fine arts alike, and admires beauty without fear for how his masculinity will be perceived. He loves his La-Z-Boy recliner, too, which eases his fibromyalgia and neurological issues a bit. He charms people with his sociability, his intelligence, his thoughtful sermons. Dad is a wonderful, complex person, but the word that seems most relevant to describe him here is long-suffering.

The church was always understaffed, because we were poor. It took years to find a building to call our own. The denomination we belonged to, the Vineyard, stressed congregation size as a measure of success for a long time, and for a long time we were lucky if our Sunday morning head count broke one hundred. Dad took everything personally. I wonder if a part of him resented God for bringing him to Tucson.

Dad visited me towards the end of college. I remember driving him around after dinner. “I don’t know how much longer I can keep doing this,” he told me. “I’ve been thinking of taking a leave of absence.”

The night was cold—sundown already—and I drove us unrouted through neighborhoods, like Dad used to do on weekends when I was younger. We’d look at the adobe houses the colors of baked clay and sunflowers, and the yards full of many-armed saguaros, or ocotillo with their red flag flowers.

“If you need to take a break, Dad, or even if you need to quit—it’s okay.” It felt like he wanted my permission.

“Thanks, hon,” he said. He always put on a smile for me.

Dad decided to take a sabbatical. I moved back to Tucson after graduating college, and continued attending my old church. But while Mom and Dad were away, people never asked me, “How are you?” They asked, “How are your parents?”

~

Though I didn’t acknowledge it then, I knew my belonging in the church was over when I started having sex. I was unmarried, non-monogamous, and didn’t feel guilty at all. Well, that’s not exactly right. I was a late bloomer to dating and sex; I started both at twenty-two. The first time I took a man home with me, things escalated beyond what I’d planned, but a part of me was so ready for sex—had been ready for years—that I thought I was having an amazing time. It would take another essay to unpack that night. But I remember his cock wriggling in my hand. I gave my first blowjob, and he went down on me. That was as far as we went.

Finally he fell asleep, but I lay in bed with my eyes open and everything in me abuzz. I feel like I looked at him all night. But daylight hit like it would in a fairytale. I woke up from a spell, like gasping from a dream, even though I hadn’t slept. *Oh, shit*, I thought. *What will people at church think about me?*

That was my guilt. It was nothing internally motivated. I didn’t feel God convicting me of doing something wrong. I felt beholden to the people at church who didn’t even ask me how I was anymore. I fantasized, perversely, about standing at the pulpit and publicly confessing my sin. I would have to feel remorse to do so. That morning, I pushed my lover out the door as fast as I could.

I wound up telling a couple of close church friends what had happened. They were compassionate, non-judgmental - but of course, they believed that casual sex could only do



more harm than good. My mom found out—of course she found out—and told me not to tell anyone else what had happened. She was pissed, but her punishment was the opposite of what I'd feared.

There was trauma in how shit went down that I didn't fully realize at the time. I was more interested in sex; I had more and more of it. Ironically, the first guy who fucked me was a self-proclaimed Satanist. But this essay isn't about sex, it's about church. Or, almost all I write about is both, but this is about church more. Now there was this secret part of me I couldn't share with anybody from church, where my church had been a place of openness, of realness, before. That was when the divide began, when I realized I couldn't feel bad about this thing I was supposed to regret.

~

Even when Dad came back from his sabbatical, he was burning out. Now the leadership of the church, the elders and volunteers who stepped up while he was gone, handled him with kid gloves. They didn't want him to feel like he had to shoulder everything alone again, but because of that intention, they also didn't let him lead, not really. It was a gentle coup. After a year or two of that dynamic, Dad stepped down for good.

I wanted to be involved in the new pastor search. I was now the longest-standing member of the congregation, and I knew what our heart was about. So when the leadership picked three candidates to fly out to Tucson on the separate weekends, I was there for all of them. I asked the first guy, who pastored a church on a reservation in South Dakota, for his thoughts on the Dakota Access Pipeline. Bashful, he gave a backpedaling answer about trying not to take sides. *Jesus would side with the oppressed*, I thought.

It was the third candidate, though, who catalyzed my leaving the church, even though he didn't get the job. I noticed on his resume, which had been sent out to the congregation, that he had once been a police commissioner. After an open Q&A, I approached him privately.

"I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the dynamic between police and minority groups in the U.S.," I said.

"Well, being a cop is a dangerous job," he said. "I think both parties are responsible. Black people are just as racist as white people, and they need to learn to forgive."

Racism is not a feeling of prejudice, but a system of oppression that beleaguers racial minorities in all areas of life. The onus should not be placed on black people to forgive. I'm truncating what was a less coherent answer from him that included the above statements, but after a few back and forths, I said, "It's clear to me that we don't see eye-to-eye, and that this is an unproductive conversation. Thanks for your time." I walked away, shaking. There was no way this man could be our pastor.

Back at home, I wrote an email to the leadership detailing what had been said in my conversation with the third candidate, and why it was racist. "He's not for us," I wrote, compelling them to think of the people who made up our church. I clicked send.

It's hard to write about what happened in the weeks following. I have to give my church credit for assigning the two young, woke women in leadership to follow up with him, assess if he was really racist. My email made an impact, and they thought long and hard. They didn't hire him. They hired the DAPL guy instead.

But one of the older leaders, a lifelong pastor, forwarded my email to the candidate that it was about. How gauche can you be? I have to admit that I smile, a little wicked, when

I imagine him reading it. I wrote an email to the Benedict Arnold of email-forwarding, objecting to his action (I know, all of this fucking emailing is a total mess). I know that the rest of the leadership was horrified by his action. Benedict wrote me back defending himself, and accused me of gossip and slander—although all congregation members had been invited to share their thoughts on all candidates. He came to the defense of the third candidate, too: “He is a man who grew up, played with, and was a friend of young people from a variety of races and ethnic backgrounds. His ministry has involved him living with (even sharing a room with), black and brown peoples.” Have you ever heard a more racist defense of a person’s racism besides “I have black friends?”

I had a long, heated talk, and a series of emails, with my godmother, who also belonged to the leadership. We were very close before. She called me immature for the way I handled the situation; to her mind, it would have been more mature had I publicly confronted him in front of the congregation. Email Gate continued between me and her. She, a licensed counselor, decided that she would summarize the original conflict between candidate three and I in bullet points, in an email that was inexplicably all italicized. Her list began with summarizing things I said he said. It ended with this:

- Anna knows all of these things as 100% fact without exception
- Therefore, being on the wrong side of racial issues as Anna defines it, [the third candidate] must be disqualified from pastoring [the church].
- If others disagree with Anna’s position, so be it, but she will leave the church.

When I read her email, even now, what I hear her saying is “Anna is a young, bratty upstart who thinks she knows better when she really doesn’t know anything at all.” My godmother has known me all my life. We held endless long conversations at coffee shops, or over dinner at her house in the foothills. We loved and affirmed each other deeply. I know it meant a lot to her when I attended her son’s wedding to his husband. I look back at her email and I feel defeated. My family visited hers in Singapore when I was just five. She was there for my birth. Maybe that’s the problem; I’m still a kid to her.

My godparents and my parents used to be close. Maybe that’s the problem.

Maybe what I did was wrong. I still don’t think so, though. I was trying to protect a church that had seldom protected me. I was also trying to stand up in a way I believe that Jesus would have. He wasn’t afraid to stir shit, or to speak truth to power. I’m tired of churches not talking about racism, sexism, homophobia, or transphobia because they fear division. Jesus never feared division. I still care about church, about my old church. What that means now, though, is that I hate about ninety percent of American Christianity.

~

I like that Saint Mary’s has nothing to do with what church used to mean to me. I like that my priest, a married gay man, said during a sermon that Episcopalians are known for asking questions. I like that once a month after church we hold a discussion forum, and that one of those forums was on faith and sex, and that I could talk openly of my sexual experience without judgment or condemnation.

I think about all the reasons why I’m not a “good” Christian. I’m not a virgin, or married. I’m not straight. I’m not apologetic, and I don’t believe that forgiveness is always

the answer. I'm witchy; I pull tarot cards sometimes. I believe that the Bible is meant to be wrestled with, not blindly taken at face value without knowledge of cultural context.

When Dad ultimately found out about all the sex I'd been having—I came home from a breakup, furious, and blurted it all out to him and Mom (I am a chronic oversharer)—he was bug-eyed. I mostly remember me yelling that night, because none of my relationships had been going well, and then storming out to go for a drive alone. The next morning, I thought Dad would be mad at me. I thought he would look at me different. He knocked on my door, softly, around 8 a.m. “Can we talk, hon?” We went and sat on the couch.

“I feel responsible for how you're feeling,” he said, crying. “Because I passed on my depression to you.”

He didn't have anything to say about my actions. He was sad because I was sad. I had no idea he carried that burden with him.

In the quiet morning, I laid my head on the soft cloth of his bathrobe. “You've given me so many great gifts, too, Dad. I'm a more empathetic person because of you. Creative and deep-thinking, too. We share all these wonderful things in common, because of who you are.”

I always wanted him to understand that it was never about having the biggest church. I want to sit Dad down and read him 1 Corinthians. God isn't most at home in a megachurch, or the church where everyone wears a spotless mask. God wants churches that look like ours did.

# The Family Tree

## *I. Grandma*

It goes without saying that the Christmas when I prayed for my grandma's death was a bad one.

The day was innocuous til dinnertime; in the morning, we followed the family script. I was thirteen, but a die-hard fan of Christmas, and never too old to observe family tradition. The rule was that I couldn't leave my room in the morning until Christmas music played from the stereo: Bing Crosby, Andrea Bocelli, "We Need A Little Christmas" sung boisterously by Angela Lansbury—we had a library that played all day long. During the years when Grandma's home was an assisted living center ten minutes from our house, the Christmas music didn't play til Dad picked her up. That morning, I waited in my room a long time.

Grandma was a dainty unwrapper, always picking at the tape and the crinkly seams of paper, saying how pretty it was—whether or not it was true. "We're not going to reuse it, Mom," Dad told her, exasperated.

After presents, Grandma dozed in Dad's purple La-Z-Boy. She looked so small; she took up just a third of the seat. Her little body had shrunk with scoliosis, which hadn't quite bent her over, but had made a curve of her back. In my memory, Grandma always wore pajama-soft white stirrup pants and pink button-up shirts. She liked to put herself together with a brooch, cheery berry-colored blush, and her perfect perm, which her hairdresser styled every two weeks. In Dad's recliner, Grandma's face looked so pale.

The smell of ham unpeeled through the house, and the cheese sizzled on the scalloped potatoes. “Anna, tell your grandma that dinner is ready,” Mom said. I probably rolled my eyes.

“Grandma,” I said, maybe tapping her lightly, “it’s time for dinner.”

Grandma opened her eyes. She wouldn’t look at me. “I don’t know you people. You’re trying to kill me.”

Thirteen years later, I can’t remember if I shot back with something logical, or held my palms up and stepped away. I had very little patience for my grandma and her Alzheimer’s. What I remember is Grandma in the driveway, Dad’s voice reminding her that he was her son. I prayed, then, that this would be the last Christmas we spent with her.

~

When I was very young, I feared my maternal grandparents. We visited them in Larned, Kansas, pulling up to their converted trailer on a dirt road just out of town. Grandma and Grandpa Lane stood on the stoop, smiling warmly. Their eyes smiled into squints, too, behind their thick prescription lenses. Their smiles scared me. Their proximity, their wrinkles—it was all too much. They were so old, and it was terrible.

I never felt afraid of Grandma Eoto. She had the fun house in West Lafayette, Indiana, the same one Dad grew up in with Grandma and her parents. His room, where I slept when we visited, was unchanged, full of adventure books and great big windows. Hers was the house with the green and orange floral carpet, the porcelain clowns with lace frills at their collars, and the basketball court out back. More than anything, the house was filled with tokens from Africa, things that reminded her of her growing up in the Democratic Republic of Congo. There was the wood-carved rhinoceros; the long, flat cylindrical drum that people

used to communicate up and down the Congo River; the massive metal anklet that had long ago been sliced open. The anklet was heavy, maybe ten pounds, and was said to prevent wives from leaving their husbands.

Beyond anything physical her family could have brought back, Grandma kept her name. She hated her birth name, Pearl Alice. “Paralysis,” she joked. Her name, Eoto, came from the tribe they lived with when her grandparents were missionaries. “A-oh-toe” is how you say it. Eoto grew up in the DRC but moved to the U.S. for high school, and, to my knowledge, has lived in America since. But when Alzheimer’s made her forget how to turn on the TV, or that there was a step down into the great room of my family’s house, or the names of loved ones, she still remembered Africa.

When Grandma still lived in the house in West Lafayette, and I was still young enough, she always joined me for playtime. I remember the first time I snapped at her. We were playing on the floor with some of her trinkets; her slim hand brushed the smooth-carved rhino. Grandma wasn’t diagnosed with Alzheimer’s back then, but the presence, the feel of the rhino, prompted a rambling story of Africa. I cut her off. “Just play, Grandma!”

We used to lay on her bed with the lights off and the curtains closed, each of us holding a flashlight. We called the game “flashlight tag,” and chased each other’s lights around the ceiling. Those were moments when the room became the world, and we giggled in the dark, like two same-aged girls at a sleepover.

~

The Christmas when I was fourteen, Dad left in the morning to pick up Grandma. The waiting for Christmas music that would let me leave my room was even longer than the year before. When he finally came back, she wasn’t with him. “She had no idea who I was,” he



said, smiling but worked up, shaking his head. “She thought that I was out to get her. I couldn’t change her mind.” We spent Christmas without her, and in February, she died.

It was always a fall. A fall on the Indiana ice motivated my parents to move her out to the nursing home in Tucson, Arizona. A fall at 88 years old broke her hip and further fast-tracked her decline.

In the act of recalling my grandma, I remembered a piece I wrote for a college fiction class about the time she tore black lines of stitches from her arm. The stitches may have resulted from the hip-breaking fall; I’m not exactly sure. The piece I wrote was thinly-veiled nonfiction told from her perspective, one of my efforts since her death to glimpse her mind. I don’t know what, posthumously, is pulling me toward her. I don’t feel like Grandma is “with” me, in the sense that many people do when they lose loved ones; I was horrible to her.

“I’m so proud of you,” she used to say. I saw it as a moorless pride, something she said without knowing the reason behind it. Instead of saying thank you, I asked, “Why?”

~

Here’s what I can tell you about Grandma Eoto: she was a nurse, then a professor at Purdue University’s nursing school. She belonged to Mensa, and loved crossword puzzles—things that, according to the common wisdom, should have kept Alzheimer’s at bay.

Grandma was engaged three times and married twice. The first fiancé died in World War II; the first husband, Ted Champion, was a love as good as his name. He came back from war but died in a car crash. Resigned, Grandma married my grandpa, John Stokes.

Here’s what she left behind: money that helped me pay for college. Three engagement rings; one was given to me, though I don’t know which man it came from. And

when we address Christmas presents “to” and “from,” we always attribute a few “from” lines to characters or celebrities or other idiosyncratic answers, a tradition that started with her.

## *II. Grandpa*

Grandma Eoto didn’t cook, which, my parents say, is one of the reasons Grandpa left her. He left when Dad was a baby, and never came back. Dad used to exchange letters with Grandpa, but they were sterile, focused on sports and sometimes the stock market. Dad asked if they could meet; Grandpa said no.

Eventually, Dad gave up; they stopped corresponding. But when I was born, Mom reached out to Grandpa without Dad knowing. “You have a granddaughter,” she wrote. She included my photo, billfold-sized; a towheaded, smiley baby.

Suddenly, Grandpa wanted to meet. My parents made plans to visit him in Florida, after the holidays—it would be easier logistically. Dad was in his office at the church, in November or early December, when a private investigator knocked.

“Are you John Stokes?”

“Yes,” he said, although he went by his middle name, Gary.

If the P.I. was wearing a hat, he now removed it. “I’m very sorry to tell you that your father passed away.”

I have no framework to understand that moment. The thud of expectations that were so long built up, frustrated for good. The close of a thick, dusty book, the clanging shut of a door. An angry, final sound, maybe echoing once or twice, but shortly over. After all this time, Dad was going to meet his dad. And then his dad died.

A trip meant for a first family reunion became a trip to put his father’s things in order. Grandpa had lived on a pebbly nowhere road someplace in Florida, a property we rented and

eventually sold for good money. When we entered his trailer, we learned he was a hoarder. (I say “we,” but I was two, more occupied with the neighbor girl and my Polly Pockets than the family tragedy.) The tub, or sink, I’m not sure which, had flooded the house. The Florida days consisted of cleaning and sorting, of unanticipated discoveries—like the Purple Heart in the strongbox at the bank, which explained the cane Grandpa left behind. And there were papers, and papers, and papers—Grandpa’s favorite thing to hoard—which they searched through, trying to find a will.

Beyond the neighbor girl and the pebbles, I don’t remember Florida, but I remember my mom’s telling. In the midst of all that mess, there was a little table in the front room, the one neat surface. My picture sat in a frame on the table, with seashells placed around it.

I can’t explain it to you, but something about that fact undoes me. Where was my grandpa’s photo of Dad? Why did he love me so much?

### *III. Dad*

So often, it seems, people harden as they age. Alzheimer’s can harden a person, too. You can see why: the slipping away of what was just said, of where you are, of who is with you, all without even knowing why. Grandma wasn’t like that, except at the very end. Through years of muddied memory, she remained cheerful and sweet.

However, Grandma was an anxious person. When Dad was still a baby, she left him with her parents for a year. “I don’t know why, or where she went. What she was doing,” said Dad. “She was just always so nervous.”

She kept things from him, too; she was a private person. When Mom and Dad started dating, Mom asked Eoto if she had a picture of John Stokes. “Yes,” she said, and pulled his

picture from the desk in the living room. Dad had never seen Grandpa's picture, had never known that the possibility of seeing was there in his own home, feet away.

It's strange that, despite how the faultiness of memory is a given, the absence of memory—part or all—makes a life in society almost unbearable. I don't remember my dad's reaction to my grandma's death. Though he must have cried, I only remember seeing him cry a few times in my life. There was the time he accidentally recorded over video of my toddler years. There was the time he yelled "Shut up!" at me in the night to stop calling for Mom, then came in as I wept as quietly as possible, laid his head on my bed, and sobbed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry."

I think about how families go through cycles, reenacting the same dramas, becoming the generations before. Dad could have left my mom and I—and yet, nothing in him would ever do that. He had his grandpa, the missionary, as a father figure. He had his grandma, who had Alzheimer's too. He had his mom. I wonder what, from his dad, was planted in him.

#### *IV. Me*

At church a few years back, back when I still attended my childhood church where Dad was pastor, I sat with one of the elder women after the service. We were praying. The woman, Mary Anne, had grandma's perm, but chestnut rather than gray. At eighty years old, she was quick-witted and energetic, loving and fiery—a wise woman and a leader, who worked closely with my dad. Her hands, thin and long like the rest of her, clasped my hands.

"You know I love you, and your family, and your papa," said Mary Anne. "Papa" was a name I never called him. "You and I both care about him, which is why I say this: your family, on your father's side, has a cycle of depression. Is that fair to say?"

I nodded yes.

“I believe that cycle will end with you. That you are meant to heal your father and his family by healing yourself.” With my consent, she prayed those words into me.

Now, thinking back on her words, her intensity of faith, it feels like she put something heavy on me instead of something healing; an impossible commission to stop being depressed. It feels like she took my family tree and fenced it in, acknowledging only the bad, acknowledging only the illness.

~

I used to say I’d rather die than live with Alzheimer’s. My parents, who might have felt the same beneath their reassurances to me, told me that there would be better medications by the time I got old, and maybe a cure. The science is already moving that way. But with two consecutive generations of Alzheimer’s in my family—my grandmother and her mother—it feels like an inevitability that I can’t heal. The act of breaking the cycle implies backward motion, transforming a family history retroactively. Genetic disposal, on the other hand, marches forward.

That’s why, when my dad tells me the same stories sometimes three or five times in the space of a week or a month, and I feel the same impatience I felt towards Grandma, it’s more than annoyance. I get angry. I get grim. Whether his forgetfulness points towards Alzheimer’s or not, he is aging. I still look at him and see blonde, even though he’s completely silver.

My parents are in their sixties, and I am their only child. “Your dad would never tell you,” Mom said once, “but he really wants grandchildren.” Even if that were to happen, what would their last name be? Does Dad *want* to hold on to Stokes, the name of a man who abandoned him? What does that name mean, and what will it mean, moving forward?

I picture myself taking care of my dad when he's old. If Mom is anything like her mom, she'll stay hale, stay lucid, for a long time. She'll be a caretaker again, like she was for Eoto. I won't have to go it alone. He'll tell me his stories a million times over. I hope, as I age too, that I'll smile, and pat his hand, and take the chance to be better to him than I was to Grandma Eoto.

## Land of the Living

In the first year of grad school, I learned to hate myself again. I moved to Kansas City, Missouri for school, turned 26, gained forty pounds. That year I worked a second job in addition to teaching college composition, woke up at 4 a.m. to open the Starbucks on the Country Club Plaza. At that hour, when the snowplow operators still sat on beds' edges, nursed coffee in their kitchens with only the oven light on, I coasted through slush, not stopping for red lights, dodged the torso-sized pothole near the art museum.

That year, there were frantic homework sessions between work and night classes. There were college freshmen in my care who acted like high schoolers, whispering to each other until I sent them out of class. There was fried chicken in plastic bags and boxes, crinkle-cut fries that warmed my face like a kiss. There were five-hour naps on Saturdays, the working Friday of my six-day work week. There were fourteen-hour days on campus. There were twelve-inch pizzas, eaten whole, the best way I knew, at the time, to say "I love you," to say, "I will take care of myself."

In the second year of grad school, my doctor asked if I was okay, and my tears fell out like a mess I'd shoved into a closet. It had been a year of denial as the blood pressure cuff wringed my arm, and during this visit, she finally advised that I begin taking medication for high blood pressure. I had always been fat, but since gaining 40 pounds the previous year, I felt fat and ugly. Now I was fat and unhealthy, too. No "good fat" tropes to hide behind, to justify my existence. When we look at fat people—"we" meaning America, the world, my former pediatrician—we imagine that they are unhealthy. "Imagine," because we have no evidence of this. You cannot gauge a person's health by their appearance. Recent studies have evidenced that fat people who exercise and eat nutritious foods are, on average,

healthier than thin people who do not. I was healthier than some thin people then, and I liked subverting people's expectations. I liked being a good fat.

In the days before grad school, I moved back in with my parents in Tucson, Arizona. That girl in her early twenties wore pink velvet dresses, leopard-print slides, dated lots of men, got told "You're so fucking hot" again and again as her breasts and belly pressed against men's bodies in the dark. She ordered McDonald's on the late-night drives home, found euphoria in the stretching of her body at the yoga studio. After years of writing and talking about bodies, of following hundreds of body-positive accounts on Instagram, she—I—thought she had it all figured out, that she would love her body forever. I had come to believe that because I no longer dieted, the thing that had always led to me losing weight and then gaining significantly more, that my body would now be static. Healthy, fat, unchanging.

But now, I have to ask for a seatbelt extender on the plane. During one of my recent trips on Southwest, I asked the flight attendant for an extender after indicating I would sit in the emergency exit row.

"You can't sit there with an extender," she said.

"Really? I just did on my flight before this. On Southwest."

She shrugged, uninterested in explaining further. I took the extender, huffed, walked to the back of the plane.

The attendant was thin, blonde, middle-aged with a painted face. The stereotypical stewardess; maybe she'd been in the industry since the days fat women were never hired for the job, believed to be too big for the aisle. I thought dark thoughts about her every time she passed by, and when I got home, I googled seatbelt extenders and exit rows. On one forum, a poster who claimed to be a flight attendant wrote that fat people couldn't sit in emergency



exit rows because they wouldn't fit out the exit. "What are we supposed to do in a plane crash?" I thought. "Die?"

\*

The desert can kill you if it wants to. It seems that every summer in my Tucson, the desert claims its share of tourists. They die of sunstroke, or dehydration, miles into mountainside hikes. Some victims of the desert hike prepared; others set off without hats or sunscreen or water, making easy work for the 100-plus degree sun.

A 2016 article by a local news station, KGUN9, reports that three German tourists died in a single day on a hike into Ventana Canyon, a verdant, windy entry into the Catalina Mountains. "The hikers took the common advice of setting out early in the morning," writes reporter Craig Smith. "They still got in deadly trouble."

Smith continues: "The sheriff," who oversaw the search for the missing hikers, "is urging people to stay inside no matter what time it is. 'Get your exercise in your living room. Go to a gym. Do any number of things but don't get outside.'"

It's morbid, and heartless, but locals tend to scoff at these tourists' bad ends. An easily avoidable fate, we think. They didn't show the desert proper respect. It's heartless, but maybe prideful, too: we love our deadly desert. We love the hooked spines of the saguaro cactus—the tall, armed cactus that everybody knows—the sunny, arid days that ease arthritis, the prowling of wildlife in an ecosystem rich with all kinds of fauna from scorpions to mountain lions. As woven into the desert as we feel, Smith ultimately reveals that "the Sheriff and the Health Department say more than 80 percent of heat illnesses happen to locals." The sun might not kill us, but we take its brunt.

\*

The desert almost killed me once. My family moved to Tucson the summer before fourth grade, just before I turned nine. The next summer, we took a road trip around the state to get to know Arizona. After all, Tucson was as foreign as the moon when we first arrived from northern California.

At Wupatki National Monument, a historic hub in the high desert of Northern Arizona, we walked among pueblo ruins that had once been inhabited by Northern Sinagua, Cohonina, Kayenta, and Hohokam peoples. We'd been out all day, starting at Sunset Crater, a great black dent in the earth. Now it was afternoon, and the sun hung high but felt like it was right on our necks.

We took a short, unshaded trail through the desert. "I'm hot," I complained. "I'm tired. I want to go back to the car."

"Just a little further," said Mom. "We're almost to the end of the loop."

But then, my parents looked back at me, and my face was as red as the adobe. It was the desert that saved me, too: at the far end of the trail was a naturally occurring blowhole rising up from the earth. Mom and Dad sat me on the bricks that fenced the blowhole in, and I put my sun-red face in its stream.

\*

Mom was the one who encouraged me to diet alongside her, who took me to Weight Watchers each week, where I stepped on a scale in a strip mall and prayed there would be less of me. I started dieting when I was only eleven; when, in college, I told a nutritionist this, she blanched. "Children shouldn't be put on diets," she said. "No one should even *think* about dieting before their brain has fully formed."

But all my pediatrician wanted in those childhood days was to see me thin, and my mom's own weight had fluxed like the moon all her life. Mom's personal desire to lose weight and the pressure she felt from my doctor bled into me, and I spent hours on hours dreaming how my life would be different, would be better, if I had a different body. Once I declared, "I would rather be thin than healthy," and Mom looked at me strangely, like I had told her I hated her.

On the day before I started a new diet, I went back an old ritual of pleasure, one that had been with me since childhood in California. On the day before a diet, I'd come home from middle or high school and sneak as much food as I could without getting caught, while Mom napped or worked on the computer on the other side of the house. I was involved in theater and dance, choir and visual art, but covert binging was my steadiest after-school pastime. If neither of my parents were home, the game became how much I could eat in the hours before they got back. I knew the places where food was hidden: chips in the cupboard in the great room, chocolates or Pop Tarts in the shelf next to the fridge, where Mom kept her cookbooks. Sometimes I baked a cake batter halfway—cocoa and Coca Cola and butter melted in a saucepan, poured over flour and sugar—and ate the whole mixture before Mom's Dodge Caravan or Dad's Camry pulled up in the carport. *This time, the diet will work*, I told myself. *I will be thin, and I will be beautiful, and I will never get to eat like this again.*

\*

In the second year of grad school, I wept in the frigid campus parking garage after being prescribed blood pressure medication, slumped against my steering wheel. "I feel like I'm back at square one," I told Mom on the phone. "All those years of work to love myself, I can't access that anymore."

“I know it feels that way, honey,” she said, “but that work isn’t gone. You still have it in you.”

As an adult, I’d made it clear to Mom that my childhood dieting was harmful. She took the blame and apologized. I knew that, but still, to hear her say those words I quieted, a kind of reverent surprise.

Author Amanda Martinez Beck, a member of a fat-positive group I’m in on Facebook, *All Bodies Are Good Bodies*, shared this sentiment with me: “Sometimes it feels like you’re going around and around like it’s a merry-go-wheel and getting nowhere... you’re more like a screw, going deeper with every rotation.”

\*

Heatstroke and dehydration are not the desert’s only weapons. July and August are our monsoon season, when rain pounds the earth and nearby lightning forces us out of the swimming pool. I always wondered, during my undergrad in Tacoma, Washington, why I never smelled that lovely after-rain smell that I did in Arizona. “It’s because the ground is never dry,” a friend posited. Then I learned that smell was also the desert creosote that rose up after rain, like the earth was coming awake.

Monsoon season has forever been my favorite, and when I was younger, I always anticipated the runoff gathering in the neighborhood wash, a manmade riverbed. The wash walls are thirty or forty feet high, enclosing a world made of sand and mesquite trees. Walk the path beside the wash, and you’ll see horses stabled in ranches, the craggy, purple Catalina mountains—sometimes in a blanket of winter snow that melts and becomes runoff, too—maybe even coyote pups in the brush. You aren’t supposed to wade in washes—there could

be a flash flood—but every summer, I would leave my shoes at the low, graffitied tunnel that served as my entryway to the washbed, and sink my feet into water and mud.

Once, my friend Winnie came with me to the wash, and, as a joke, she dropped her glasses into the silty water. It seemed almost magic that she caught them a second later, after an instant of loud teen girl panic.

Another summer, after a heavy rain, Mom and I drove home in the dark, over the bridge that crossed the wash. The shadow of a treetop stared at me, just past the bridge wall, peeking like a giant. *That wasn't there before*, I thought vaguely. The next morning, Mom and I took a walk beside the wash. The water reached almost to the top of the walls. It had uprooted the trees and carried them downcurrent.

There are signs in Tucson, wherever there's a dip in the road, instructing drivers not to pass when the dip is filled with water. Any particular dip could be an be easily forded puddle, or you could hydroplane, car and driver carried away down some side artery of a major wash. If the latter happens, and you require rescue, you will be fined under the Stupid Motorist Law. Fees also apply to pedestrians, neighborhood teenage girls included, who wander right into wash flash floods.

\*

Mustard ribboned out in hot water like a tapeworm. It was the one time, in high school, when I felt brave enough to try and make myself throw up. I sipped the mixture, which I had found the recipe for online, grimacing each time I swallowed. I think I was supposed to down it all at once; nothing happened, just a girl in front of a TV waiting for permission to start living.

\*

Also punishable by fine is the transplant or removal of a saguaro without the proper permit. The legend goes that those who have shot or chopped saguaros are crushed by the weight of the falling cactus, red bleeding into the dirt.

Saguaros are Tucson's sentinels. In Sabino Canyon, a hike near my parents' house, you are walled in by choruses of saguaro on the canyon rocks. A saguaro cactus starts to grow arms between 50 and 70 years old and has an average lifespan of 150 to 175 years, though they can live past two hundred. Their roots are relatively shallow, but wide, anchoring them despite whatever impossible heights they may grow to. "By the time a saguaro is four feet tall," says the website of Saguaro National Park, "its roots have been growing for 55 years." Saguaros bear witness to the fact that while death happens fast in the desert, growth is slow and enduring. They grow nowhere else on earth. They are the heart of the desert.

One of my summers in Tucson after college, my friend Angelica came to visit me. Her timing was horrible: the heat that week broke records, most days reaching 116 degrees Fahrenheit. We woke up early so that she could see the desert, driving across town at 7 a.m. to the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum, or up the mild peak of Mount Lemmon with its crown of pine. One afternoon, I took her to the loop drive at Saguaro National Park East, so we could see the saguaros without getting out of the car. At one point, though, we saw a behemoth, pulled over, and walked into the desert. The saguaro was hundreds of years old, at least two stories tall, with a full set of arms for each story. We craned our necks like we were beholding the Sistine Chapel, took pictures that couldn't fit the whole saguaro, even when I backed way, way up.

We were out of the car for maybe ten, fifteen minutes when I noticed the heat again, the sun with its hand on my shoulder. “We should go back,” I said.

“Oh. Yeah.” Angelica, a tourist, felt the heat now too. We drove the rest of the loop, stopped at Javelina Rock for the only shade in the park, and left for something cold to drink.

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Kansas City winter is not the harshest I’ve ever felt—I spent one winter interning in Chicago, and every day I dreamed of leaving—but this third and final year of grad school, I am in an October that feels like December in the midst of a pandemic, and I wish I were a bear in hibernation. I live alone, no one to help cook or clean or comfort me. I believe that I can’t take care of myself, so I don’t even get a cat. I wish for a purr on my chest, or a little furry head brushing my hand, wish I was home with my parents and my big fluffy Siamese who is theirs for now, until I know where post-grad will take me, until my shit is together. During quarantine, I didn’t see my boyfriend, who lives in Iowa, for months.

All I want to do is eat. I dream of chicken tikka masala nightly, order it once a week, throat warmed by its tomato-y, savory sweetness. I buy party-sized bags of chips, because my body-positive dietitian wants me to demystify the foods my body tells itself are forbidden. I turn into a robot with Dorito dust on my metal grabbers, avoiding the homework and grading and thesis writing to be done. I go into a trance state in front of Chips Ahoy, in their blue, hypnotic package.

The best nights are the ones when I stand over a stove, sometimes for hours. Simmering the soup I ate at my Tucson home, the one Mom made with sausage and potatoes and leek. Wilt kale for eight to ten minutes, add cream at the end. Or dicing jalapenos and shredding chicken for tortilla soup, a comforting flare of heat. In quarantine, I make chicken

pot pie, marinade salmon in honey Dijon, or a lemon garlic sauce. I am surprised that I can cook more than ramen and macaroni and cheese, that I can love myself in this new way.

This past summer, I got an email from my doctor that I am pre-diabetic. I stood with my hands on the kitchen counter, choking out the same self-hating tears I had cried in the parking garage the winter before. Although I didn't resign myself to diabetes, the crowning stereotypical fat illness, I knew by now that I would never have the body I did in my early twenties. Even if I shed weight and it looked the same as it once had, it would *feel* different. And then, I felt a resolve in my gut that I thought had become a stranger. Not a resolve to diet. Not a resolve to lose weight. A resolve to care for my body, just as it is, until it feels loved again.

\*

Why do we always look for someone to blame? Blame rises up like breath; it has to go somewhere. We blame the tourists who come to Tucson, Arizona in the summer to hike. We blame the locals who are stupid enough to drive through standing water. One of my high school friends and her single mom lived in a neighborhood that could only be accessed through one of those puddles on the road; during monsoon season, they had to pull over and wait for an oversized pickup to brave the water, then follow in its wake. What if they'd received a massive fine just because they were trying to get home?

It doesn't come easy to blame a monolith, a faceless institution like the diet industry, or the health care system. The finger doesn't know where to point. Instead, it falls on fat people, and our hatred goes to them instead. So, because I am the one with the health issues, I become the scapegoat. In the same way, because grad school is too much for me, the



individual—let alone grad school during a pandemic—the formula follows that I must be blamed.

There is no one else.

\*

People think that a fat body is an inhospitable place to live. They think the same about the desert. That death is a feature of the habitat; if it doesn't come swiftly, it looms, a constant, moral fact. We haven't fully admitted, as a society, that yoyo dieting—which, more often than not, results in weight gain—is far worse for a person's health than just being the weight they are. We aren't interested in realizing that fat and healthy cohabit the same Venn diagram. Yet we are comfortable in the knowledge that dry, 100-degree heat, potentially lethal, is better for the joints and for allergies and the heart. But that won't persuade us that health, wellness, bodies—living—have as many variables as the planet does ecosystems. Saguaros reflect that life flourishes in the desert; the planet reflects that there is no one, sanctimonious story to tell us how to live, and live well.

\*

I tell my therapist that I feel trapped. I can't quit school now, even though one of my cohort members, a year ahead of me, quit at the end of his second year because it was too much, because life was too much. Now in the pandemic, especially, my professors are understanding, and the administration puts out compassionate messaging. But what does it actually do? The stress weighs down on me like a clamp, pins me into place. I have to prove myself; I can't let my teachers or my classmates or my students down—I have no choice but to barrel through.

I have already lost my health to grad school. “I feel like I’m on the Titanic,” I tell my therapist. “It’s sinking, slowly. By the end of school, it will just be me, in my cap and gown, balancing above the water on the tip of the prow, the last little bit of the boat that hasn’t sunk.”

“When grad school is over,” she asks, “what will you dive for?”

## The Implanon Diaries

I lay on the exam table in the Margaret Thatcher Health Center, the only Planned Parenthood in Tucson, Arizona. In the next room, I'd been through a long consultation with a nurse. Now, the doctor numbed my arm with a shot and made a small incision. She placed the matchstick-sized birth control into my upper arm and sealed me up with tape. It was a month, at most, after Trump's election.

Implanon, or Nexplanon, is a fine clear rod that will live in my arm for another two years – a four-year lifespan in total. It does its work by thickening the vaginal mucus, creating a sperm-blocking wall at the cervix. It can also bar eggs from leaving the ovaries. I told people that I wanted to take advantage of Planned Parenthood's services before it got defunded. I wanted a birth control that could see me through Trump's presidency. "What if you can't get it taken out in four years?" I've been asked. "What if no one will do it, if there's no Planned Parenthood left?" I don't have an answer for that.

No matter how male legislators might try to control my body, I didn't want to give up my casual sex life. Before Implanon, I'd been on the pill for a while, but I hated it. I complained to my former gynecologist that it was giving me two periods a month. With a haughty superiority, she informed me that that wasn't a second week-long period I was having, just additional bleeding caused by the pill. What difference did that make to me, I wondered?

The gynecologist had a brown perm, and reading glasses, and a little round face. Her office was like a grandma's house; she sat in a wooden chair with a needlework cushion. "I thought you were worried about PCOS," she said, in protest to my desire to quit the pill.

“You told me that I don’t *have* PCOS. My dermatologist thought I might, because of my chin hair; you debunked that.” I had no dark hair on my stomach, none of the other symptoms of polycystic ovary syndrome.

“Well,” she said, and pursed her lips.

I should have told her that the pill was making me fatter; she was desperate for me to cut out soda and adopt a diet, even though I’d informed her of my traumatic experiences with dieting in childhood. Instead, I allowed myself to be shuffled back out to the receptionist’s desk, to schedule another appointment. Her office left me a voicemail later, saying they’d accidentally booked me for Labor Day, and could we reschedule. I never called back.

\*

Ironically, I haven’t had sex since starting Implanon. Penetrative sex, I mean. After Implanon, I got vaginosis from a guy named Seth’s tongue. Seth was a quiet person at first, funny in an idiosyncratic way. His face was so pockmarked that I wasn’t sure if the cause was cystic acne or burn scars. I was lukewarm on our first date, but he endeared me enough that I was open to seeing him again.

On our second date, I asked if we could go back to his place. His shotgun house was full of posters from previous tenants, and a mural of parrots in a tree that his landlord forbade him from painting over. We moved from the living room to the kitchen when the cat wouldn’t stop shitting. I laughed and teased that Seth kept inching closer to me. “What? I’m not smooth,” he said, laughing too. So I asked if we could lay down.

We had several nights like that: slow, sweet kisses when I’d open my eyes and look at him, eyes closed and smiling; breathing in each other’s ears; slow-roaming hands and mouths. I liked Seth because we could gaze into each other’s eyes, and I felt from him a

warmth that men didn't often make me feel. But Seth was an anxious person, and was always diving into crisis mode about his job. Ultimately, he was more into his stresses than he was into me. But at least the vaginosis meds were affordable; a five day-run. I only had to stop drinking for a work week.

\*

"I was on Implanon, years ago," said the nurse practitioner at my primary care's office. I'd told her my current meds, and she smiled with recognition. "It fused to the tendons in my arm. *That* was a pain to get removed." She chuckled.

The nurse wasn't the only one who had an Implanon horror story. A dear friend of mine told me about its brief life in her arm. After getting it inserted, acne invaded her face, so she decided to have it removed. The doctor didn't numb her arm fully, and the rod was entangled inside of her. "I should have asked them to numb me more," she told me. "They asked if I wanted to stop, but I said no. I had to have it out of me."

If Implanon is left in the arm longer than four years, it can throw off the hormones of its host. You're supposed to go to the doctor if you can no longer feel it when you press against your skin. Every now and then, I'll poke around for mine. But I can't remember what it's supposed to feel like.

\*

The next guy I hooked up with cooked dinner and bought me roses. When he opened the door for me, jazz was playing. He swept me up with a three-course meal, cocktails, unexpected kisses. After dinner, we moved to sit on the couch, but he caught me from behind, put his hands on my hips. We swayed, slowly, to the jazz. "Why don't we go straight

to the bedroom?” I said. He was a teddy bear, with warm eyes and massive fingers. In bed, he stuck one in my pussy and one in my ass and I was full.

He said, “I’m intoxicated by you.”

What he failed to tell me was, he was married with a young daughter. I found the mug that read “World’s Greatest Dad,” and he told me that his wife and toddler, who were living with her parents, were moving back in soon. He missed his daughter. He and his wife would sleep in separate rooms.

I left his house without my earrings, and never got them back.

\*

I never liked tampons. Despite encouragement and advice from other people who menstruate, I can never insert them in a way that feels comfortable. I remember swimming on my period in my teen years; it felt like a wooden dowel was driving up within me.

Similarly, I’ve never wanted an IUD, or intrauterine device, although it is a form of birth control that can last for up to five years. I don’t like the feeling, or even the thought, of anything being up there. I have zero interest in the menstrual cups that people swear by, and although I’ll use a dildo on occasion, I much prefer my bullet vibe.

It’s strange to me that I want penetrative sex. I don’t even enjoy it much. It’s a lot of inelegant thrusting, and sometimes, irresponsibly, the subsequent fear of an STI. I think it’s the idea of sex, more than anything, that I’m into. Growing up Christian, sex was forbidden fruit, a sin redeemed only by marriage. But it was always one of my appetites. Long before I ever had sex, it was a siren’s call.

\*

One of the recent men was Michael. He was... underwhelming, but I wanted to have sex one last time before leaving Tucson for the Midwest. To speed things along, I asked him at the end of our first date, "Do you want to kiss me?" Michael was a reserved person whose life was defined by his heart issues. During our first date, he told me the abridged saga of his pacemaker. Later, in bed with him, I could hear his chest ticking. There was a limited area of chest I was allowed to lay my head on.

Michael's health problems prevented him from holding a job, or driving, so he lived with his sister, her boyfriend, and her daughter. We had a mutual friend, though, who spent much of that summer out of town; Michael housesat for her. I spent hours with him at her place, eating his cooking, watching movies, but mostly lying in bed.

He was a cautious person, cautious about sex, too, so we kissed sometimes, I went down on him once or twice, he watched me masturbate. Not much more than that. Still, I started feeling close to him. I feel pathetic saying that now; he had no prospects. I was moving soon; we had no long-term potential, and we'd acknowledged that. But when our mutual friend came back for a few weeks between summer trips, Michael caught a ride to his parents' house in Sierra Vista instead of going back to his sister's. We texted about how much we wanted to have sex, how he was ready now. When he went back to house-sitting, he said, he'd finally go inside of me. He told me how he did this humming thing during oral that drove women wild. I was ready to feel it. But he kept pushing back his return date to Tucson. He must have postponed five times.

Finally, I got fed up, told him not to bother letting me know when he got back in town. It came out of left field for him. We had a quick text fight; I blocked his phone number and Instagram. My normal fiery tactics; endings were the other torrid part of most of my

encounters with men. But I wanted to feel like I was growing, like I'd learned something from all my stupid relationships. I wanted an amiable ending, for once, as a matter of pride.

To close out my Tucson chapter.

Over the next week or two, we made up and fought several times, over phone calls and texts. We weren't talking the night that I was out near our friend's house. But it would be so easy to stop by. Have a good, face-to-face conversation. I could cry a little, and he could stroke my hair. From there, we could fall into the sex at the heart of my wanting. I texted him to say I was nearby. To ask if I could come over. There was no answer.

I drove down our friend's street. I drove past her place. I made a u-turn.

I didn't know if Michael was there. The pebbles of the empty drive crunched below my wheels, and I shut off my engine. The porch light was on. I rang the bell.

No answer. I stood for minutes. *He's in there*, I told myself, *and he's shutting me out. Waiting for me to leave.* Furious, I rang the bell again, several times in a row.

This was a pretty well-trafficked street, not far from the University of Arizona. If I sat at the table on the front porch, I could seem like I belonged. I waited, and willed what I wanted to happen. It was a summer night; the darkness had cooled the day, and cicadas scratched their songs into the air. I must have sat there, fucking around on my phone, for half an hour, ringing the bell now and then.

When I was about to send Michael an incriminating text, he finally responded. All I read was "I'm not there right now," and I bolted to my car. That, essentially, was the end of us.

\*



I picture the Implanon fusing into my arm, becoming a part of my body as awful to remove as any other part. It's suspended in a shadowy cavern of flesh stalactites and stalagmites. Or, I picture the Implanon coming unlodged, and receding through the highways of my body into some dark, unfindable cavity, where it will dwell til I die. My hormones will be in flux throughout my life. The thing that was supposed to protect me will become another way that I am broken.

I've told myself that I'll demand as much numbing agent as I need, when the time comes.

\*

I wasn't honest, earlier, about the married man. Not completely. I knew from our first date that he was married, when he slipped up and mentioned his wife.

"Wait a minute. Your wife?"

He smiled, bashful. "My ex-wife. Sorry." He moved the conversation on, but I came back again.

"So, how long have you been divorced?"

He was chagrined. "Separated, not divorced. I'm helping her get through school. Then we'll split."

"And when is that?"

He bit his lip, sheepish. "Two years."

Later, when I pressed him on it, he assured me that there was no way he and his wife would reconcile. And then, when he told me she was moving back in, he said he wanted to keep seeing me. His wife was involved with another couple, after all.

I'm grateful that at least, at least, I finally walked out on him that day. He lied to me about being married, about having a child, about the status of his marriage. And, worse than being totally left in the dark, I chose to believe him. I chose to buy into what I wanted to hear.

\*

Implanon is supposed to protect me. I'm supposed to protect me. But is that really my M.O.? The rejection of dieting, the soda drinking, the random, low-standards casual sex that I rush into—is that protecting myself? Coping? Is it all just a big “Fuck you” to the people who told me what I could and couldn't have? Is it simply base desire?

Maybe Implanon was a free pass for me to do whatever the fuck I wanted for the next four years. Maybe, because I had the birth control, I felt pressured to take advantage. Was I actually excited to throw myself at mediocre assholes? Was I simply insistent on getting what I wanted, even if it would do me harm?

How had I gotten to this point, become so crazy that I would literally stalk one of my exes? But this had nothing to do with becoming. This was who I always was, underneath; the primal core of my longing. No amount of control, birth or otherwise, could completely remove this part of me.

## Dick Sorceress

He said it in the car, after pulling my mouth off his crotch. “You’re a fucking dick sorceress,” he gasped. “You know what you are? One of those high-class courtesans who reads, and eats grapes, and debates with noblemen.”

I preened, mouth boggy, feeling highly praised.

Did he think he was the nobleman? In reality, he was an unemployed lawyer who fought with me like it was netting him an hourly rate. He had a massive cock, but I never got to feel it inside of me—our relationship was short-lived. Thinking back, I’m both grateful and disappointed that we never had sex. A dick that large, puffed up like a balloon animal limb, has a mythology to it: one can’t help but to wonder, “What would it feel like?” But on the other side of my curiosity was the knowledge that his cock would hurt me.

For me—and for a lot of people with vaginas—penetration is uncomfortable at best. A blowjob, on the other hand, has always been a safe bet. The first man to fuck me, when I was in my early twenties, was a thirty-something Satanist who taught me to work my hand in a figure eight around the shaft while I went down on him. That was the first trick in my repertoire. Later, after the would-be lawyer called me a dick sorceress, I proudly reported the title to all future partners. Then I suctioned myself to them like a remora to a shark. They always agreed that the lawyer, in this respect, was right.

\*

The Margaret Sanger Planned Parenthood waiting room was agitated; the sun hushed the pale walls. Outside the banks of windows, there were no protesters—just saguaros, and a suburbia sidewalked with dirt. This was the only Planned Parenthood in all of Southern Arizona; most Google reviews cited frustration with wait times. It was winter in Tucson, November or December 2016.

I was here to make a commitment. It would outlive my dating relationships, which flared out quick. It would, I hoped, outlive Trump's presidency. The years-long commitment was to Nexplanon, a form of birth control inserted in the arm.

In my memory, Margaret Sanger is a ghost of a place: it was my first time there, and I spent it with a keen awareness that it could be my last. Called back from the waiting room, I sat through a long consultation with a nurse, then lay back on the paper crinkle of an exam table.

The doctor, brisk and sure, numbed my arm and made the small incision. She placed the matchstick-sized birth control between sinew and tendon and sealed me up with tape, no stitches required. No recovery time, just a bit of bruise.

A voice in me asked, *What will happen if Planned Parenthood gets defunded, and there's no one to take the matchstick out?*

I had no answer. I went out into the world, defiant and ready for sex.

\*

The Satanist had had a vasectomy. He was in me well before I was on birth control. He worked for a company that sold Western shirts to old people, and he'd recently broken up

with his long-time girlfriend. Besides the first night, we never met at a bar or a restaurant. I always went straight to his place.

When he first pushed into me, I grimaced. “Okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just go slow.”

While he moved his hips, getting me used to the dull iron throb of sex, we sang folk songs. It was, perhaps, our only moment of intimacy. No, there was another moment like it—the time he showed me his thesis from art school. It was all about his father, whose hoarding had somehow gone undiscovered until after his death. We cuddled like he was reading a bedtime story.

I didn’t like or dislike him. He never asked questions, didn’t seem curious. It was only exciting to be bound up by him, and spanked with a crop that said “Love” in the negative space. It was a kind of sex that kept me safe from feeling.

Until the newness wore off, sex with him seemed like what sex should be all about: kinky and covert, as much about fantasy as physicality. The moment of being thrown face-down on the bed, ass stroked; the moment before being spanked, the moment the handcuffs came out of his bedside drawer. Those moments were like a held breath.

He was one of two men to make me come. It’s never happened through penetration alone. But when he was fucking me, choking me, and fingering me all at once—that, I liked.

I went to the bathroom, after that first time, and saw the faintest blood on toilet paper.

\*

The irony was that after the Nexplanon insertion, I didn't have sex—at least not the kind that would get me pregnant. I sucked a lot of dicks. It was rarer that the men reciprocated. I met them online, charmed and flirted through first dates, went back to their tiny shotgun duplexes, or the houses they were watching for friends. I seduced, undressed next to their throbbing. They called me dick sorceress. Then, inevitably, we started fighting, or they ghosted, and all that was left for me was me, still unpunctured. I wanted the pain of a man between my legs again.

According to *The Washington Post*, “In a nationally representative 2013 survey, 1 in 5 women reported vulvar pain or discomfort during sex in the previous 30 days, and about 30 percent of women in a similar 2012 survey reported pain during their most recent sexual contact.” For me, sex tends to be uncomfortable more than it is painful, but some people with vaginas experience serious pain. The *Post* describes one married woman's experience, that “during and after sex, pain would shoot through her abdomen or radiate from her bladder. Sometimes, uterine polyps led to painful bloating after sex. And vaginal dryness made seemingly pleasurable acts feel more like torture.”

I began hearing horror stories about Nexplanon removal. The nurse at my primary's office, grinning, told me how hers had fused to the flesh of her arm. A friend of mine explained how it invaded her face with acne, so she chose to have it taken out early. But the doctor didn't numb her arm fully, and the Nexplanon was, like in my nurse's case, entangled. “I should have asked them to numb me more,” she told me. “They asked if I wanted to stop, but I said no. I had to have it out of me.”

Also possible is that the matchstick will move from its original placement in the arm. If that happens, it can be impossible to find. You're supposed to go to the doctor if you can no longer feel it when you press against your skin. Every now and then, I would poke around for mine. But I couldn't remember what it was supposed to feel like.

Again, the question came: *What if you can't get it out?* My hormones would turn against me. I would have taken a health risk just to get fucked down, and I would have nothing to show for it.

\*

Earlier in my dating life, I got a message from a man on Tinder: "Hey, Anna." I had a policy around "Hey" and "How's your night" messages, the kind you can send without reading a word of the other person's profile; in accordance, I blew him off.

He wrote again. This time it was a wall of text. "Here's what I want to do to you," he said. "First i'll kiss your mouth then work my way down, kissing you until I reach your pussy. I'll start to lick, so slow, and suck on your clit so you squirm and shiver." He went on. Even though I knew better, the fantasy of my pleasure prioritized drew me in. The only other Tinder message I'd received of that length was from a dude desperate to find a woman who wouldn't kink-shame his foot fetish. This message was all about me, as much as a message from a stranger could be. "I'll give you the best orgasm of your life," he said.

We exchanged less than a handful of messages, and then I drove all the way across Tucson for a dick appointment.

He met me on the sidewalk in front of the house. He wasn't really my type: hair close-cropped, widow's peak, athletic where I tend to go for husky. We embraced, then went up to the bedroom.

On the bed, we made small talk, pretending to care. "Why aren't you making a move?" I teased.

"I'm shy," he said. The same man who wrote me erotica, shy.

We moved into a kiss, and then we were laying down, and then everything came off except his socks. The small, sublet room was dark, except for a slash of daylight at the curtain's edge. In the blandness, the guest bedroom of a space, we tried to be animal, to want one another, pushing into each other.

Then what I remember is going down, ready to wow him. I busted out the figure eight hand and sucked like his cock was a chocolate malt. But, after a minute or two, I choked and pulled off—and in the same instant, the room was showered with an Old Faithful of cum.

It took him a while to get hard again, while I daubed my hair with a wet paper towel. When he did, he slid into me, and I gripped his shoulder blades. "I like your back," I said. It was smooth and strong, and it felt important to me to like something, anything about him. I clung to his rhythm. And then, he rammed into my cervix.

"Ow!" I said, pushing him off me.

"Sorry," he said.



He got behind me and we tried again, making slick sounds in the dark. Again, he hit my cervix. Now I was crying. And all I could do was cry, while he made a half-assed attempt at comfort, all his reservations around hooking up with a stranger confirmed.

He walked me to my car, and we hugged goodbye. I knew I would never see him again.

He had gone down on me in that little room, but I can barely remember it. Still, I know that after a while, I must have said, “Come back up here”—not because I wanted him close, but because I, too, like him in the smut he’d written me, had elevated the female orgasm to a near-unachievable point. I antagonized my own discomfort, so much so that attaining orgasm felt like part of a performance.

Other men would tell me how they wanted to make me scream, but my orgasm has never been loud. “You’re pretty quiet,” the Satanist said to me, when I quaked, chest barely rising, from his fingers on my clit and around my neck. Sometimes I think that men like the fantasy of pleasuring a woman more than they like the act. My silent orgasm will never be enough for some partners. They want the screams for themselves, a testament to their lovemaking—not, instead, for my pleasure.

\*

I moved to Kansas City, Missouri, for grad school before the Nexplanon was ready to come out. I was told that if you park at the Planned Parenthood here, your tires will be slashed, so when it was time for the removal, I went to my nurse practitioner at the school clinic. She is my favorite medical professional I’ve ever seen, receptive and warm. But when I entered the clinic on the day of, and one of the staff asked, “Nervous?” I was gripped in a cold hard

hand. The horror stories of friends, acquaintances, friends of friends, bricked up in front of me. I heard the voice again: *What if it's lost in your arm? Swallowed up by a cave of flesh? Or what if it screams when she rips it away?*

“Do you feel it when I do this?” asked my NP after the first shot of lidocaine, pressing gently against my skin with the needle.

“Yes,” I said, hyper-alert to its sharpness. She gave me shot two.

“How about now?”

Still yes. A few taps of just pressure, which was fine, but then a glinting point. She administered the third shot; my inner arm looked for the needle.

“I can still feel it,” I said.

I was numb after four shots. “I don’t want you to see this,” said my NP, preparing to cut, so I turned away and played games on my phone. Once I couldn’t feel, she invited the other nurse practitioners in; they wanted to learn to perform the procedure themselves. Three women leaned over the medical theater of my body. One of them, with an oaky, soothing voice, brought my NP forceps and talked shop. The other, small and perky, dabbed the blood and, when the Nexplanon came into view, joked, “Is that an alien?” I laughed politely.

“I’ve got it!” my NP said, and all of us cheered. She patched me up, no stitches required. No recovery time, just a bit of bruise. I left feeling light and relieved. This time—for now, at least—I had finally succeeded in protecting myself.

## As We Forgive Our Trespassers

I sat in the emptying church, weeping, held by a matron of the congregation as she prayed. This wasn't the first time I'd sat with her, a wiry, fiery woman with a perfect perm, in the church I grew up in. In the past few years, she'd stayed late to pray with me several times, or tell me her hopes for my life. As I sobbed into the mess of our held hands, she asked, "Do you forgive him?"

Weeks before, I had been in Paris, visiting my friend Camille, who I studied abroad with in Edinburgh during college. We'd gone to the Eiffel Tower that day, where I posed for a photo in a sundress, and let the afternoon light fall on my face. After, we walked the curving, quiet streets, then took the Metro home.

In the Metro station, the two of us were alone, except for a middle-aged Frenchman walking towards us, towards the platform. Everything happened slowly. He veered toward me, but there were so many vendors in Paris, assaulting my space with selfie sticks and wooden trains carved like alphabet blocks, that my tactic had become to ignore them. I looked dead ahead, and he closed in and fondled my breast.

It was an instant. He sauntered away, leaving me frozen as if he was Midas. When I could move again, he was gone, around the corner and down the stairs.

"You piece of shit!" I screamed, echoing off white tile. "Pig! I hope you die on the tracks!"

"What happened?" asked Camille.

"He touched my breast!" I sobbed. "That fucker."

Her pretty brown brows sloped together. “Oh, my god.

“I wish I had seen it happen,” she said. “I would have kicked him in the face.” Her accent, like date butter, made everything sound deep and sweet and low.

“I have to find him,” I said, so we took off, around the corner and down the stairs. It had been a minute, maybe, but he wasn’t there, platform after platform. Maybe my screaming had spooked him. He might have caught the Metro. But, more likely, he’d only come into the station to do precisely what he did. Then, he was gone, to beat off wherever he called home, or touch women in some other public space.

“Do you forgive him?” asked the matron, back in the church.

“Yes,” I gasped. “Yes.”

\*

Camille asked if I wanted to go to the police; I said I did. So we went to a bleak, gray, stories-high station, and waited in the front room. A young administrative worker came out and took my story, relayed in French through Camille. Courteously, he discouraged us from filing the report, since I was international and that made things complicated. I refused. We waited some more.

We were taken back to the office of a middle-aged policeman. Lit by fluorescent overheads, the man looked jowly and overworked. I spoke no French, and he spoke no English, so Camille explained what happened.

His eyes got an edge to them; he fired something off at Camille, and she shot back. “He asked why we didn’t go to the station authorities,” she said. We had seen none. He insisted. “He says they could have found the camera footage.”

I described the man as best I could. In my memory now, he was Robin Williams from the neck down: short for a man, ambly, wearing a short-sleeved button-down. He was gray-haired. But his face—I can’t remember his face.

During the interview, I thought about my dad. The way he cried, years before, when he accidentally recorded over one of my childhood videos. One less piece of tow-headed, adorable me. Hearing what had happened would break his heart. I cried harder.

“She’s thinking of her father,” Camille translated, and a bit of steel left the policeman’s eyes. He could have been a father to a daughter; that was the only thing that made my assault matter to him.

Because of bureaucracy, and the amount of cases in front of mine, it was unlikely they could track down my assaulter before I left the country. I would have to identify him in court in order to win a conviction. When Camille asked if the policeman would take my email for further communication, since calling out of the country was not an option at their office, he said that was a good idea; he hadn’t thought of it before.

The sun set late that night; after the interview, we wandered the streets until we found a sushi place at 11 p.m. It was a beautiful night, balmy and still, and the act of a stroll and a meal was one of rebellion. But every time we passed a man on the street, I moved far, far out of reach.

\*

“You seem lighter now,” said the matron, handing me a Kleenex. “Now that you’ve been able to forgive. It’s like you knew that was exactly what you needed.”

There is a passage recorded in Matthew, a book of the Bible, where Jesus gives his famous Sermon on the Mount. It’s the one that begins with the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” And so on. In which Jesus turns convention on its head.

This is also where the Lord’s Prayer comes from, an instruction from Jesus. I know it well; I’ve been going to church my whole life. On forgiveness, it says: “Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” Or forgive us our debts. Or forgive us our sins. One interpretation of the line, which I learned growing up, has never sat well with me: God forgives us when we forgive others. God’s choice to forgive is conditional on our choice to forgive. And, all Christians know, God’s forgiveness is the one way to heaven.

It follows that such a mindset would make the impetus towards forgiveness a given. It follows that, sooner or later, I would have to forgive my assaulter.

\*

Camille’s parents’ flat was in the heart of the city, a five-minute walk from Notre Dame. To enter the complex, you had to unlock a big, broad door which opened into a courtyard. The flat was full of paintings and sculptures, with high ceilings and wood-paneled floors. For the most part, we were there alone—hers was a family of travelers—but her sister crashed one night, between destinations. We stayed at home, mostly, the day her sister came, the day after the Metro and the police station and the assault. I stayed in bed, mostly, but when I came out

from my room, I told the sister what happened. I would have felt like I was making it nothing, if I said nothing.

Expressing her sympathy, she said, “The same thing has happened to me. On the train. Men grabbing at me.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay,” she said, then realized her mistake. “Well, it’s not *okay*.”

I was too free with the women I chose to confide in, after it happened. When I went home from Paris, I told the sweet sixty-something who frequented my coffee shop and gifted me a yoga mat. She laughed. Minimizing seemed to be a knee-jerk reaction. The women I told all described similar experiences; later, I realized that they minimized my story in order to minimize their own.

\*

Why was it so awful to be touched on the breast? Why does that one touch make me feel less safe, every day? To the minimizers, it was “just” a touch. He didn’t go below my clothes. I was not raped. It could have been worse. I know it could have been much, much worse.

It’s not about the act itself—not just about the act. His touch conveyed that to him—and by extension, all men like him—my bodily autonomy is a farce. On the street, I am up for public consumption. I do not belong to myself. I belong to a stranger whose face I can’t remember. I belong to any hand that wants to grab.

\*

The church matron offered to counsel me. She knew that my dating life had been rotten; my mistrust of men didn't just come from Paris. I agreed.

We met once, what was supposed to become a regular appointment. We were to itinerary, exhaustively, the men who'd ghosted me, lied to me, failed to tell me they were married. And, once I'd bled out all the details, to forgive them, one by one. The idea was that forgiveness would afford me a kind of freedom. I would feel better than I had since the traumas happened. I went to her house and sat in a quiet room, her across from me.

I started to tell her about the first man, the one who thought he was a philosopher but was really full of shit. The one who said to me, "Maybe I'm too advanced for you." The time before he said that, he came home with me to watch a movie, which of course meant to make out. We sat on the couch, moving hands over bodies, while the TV played, unwatched. He pulled at the collar of my shirt, peering over it to look at my breasts.

"Don't," I said, trying to keep him away.

"Why not?" he said, laughing. "Are you embarrassed or something?"

While we kissed, he kept testing my boundaries. I didn't want his hands near my breasts or my pussy. At twenty-two, a late bloomer, I had never done more than kiss before, and he was still a new prospect. I wasn't ready to go there.

"Forty-nine percent of me is saying yes," I told him, "but fifty-one percent is saying no."

He said, "It's that forty-nine percent I'm interested in."



Over my clothes, his hands flitted everywhere. He pulled me into a slow dance and traced the crack of my ass.

“No,” I said. It came out a whine.

“You know how sometimes, some women’s ‘no’ sounds like a yes?”

The push and pull went on for what could have been hours. “Fine,” he said eventually. “Let’s just go to sleep. We can just, like, sleep in the same bed, right?”

“Sorry,” I said. “You should probably go soon.”

He leaned away from me, at last, seemingly resigned. “When I was in college, there was this girl I was friends with for a while,” he said. “One night, she kept pushing me, saying she wanted to have sex, and finally, we did.” He let out a breath, looking at the ceiling. “If I was a woman and she was a man, wouldn’t we call that rape?”

He was doing the same thing to me that she had done to him, but at the time, I didn’t see it. I felt a swell of pity. “Okay,” I said, “let’s go to bed.”

We changed into pajamas. He wore a pair of my sleep shorts and an oversized t-shirt. As I brushed my teeth, he went under my shirt. I was braless now; he fondled my breasts, and I let him, even though I’d tried to stop him earlier. He grinned like it was just a little mischief, like we were a couple and this was a normal night for us. We turned out the lights and spooned.

While in little spoon, curious, I began to rub my ass against his groin. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I demurred. “Just trying to make you feel good.”

“You want to make me feel good?”

I paused. “Yeah.”

Like that, the shorts were off of him, and he put my hand around his cock, which he was wriggling on its own. It felt strange and small and alive. I had wanted this from someone for a long time, but my Christian upbringing, which dictated no sex before marriage, wouldn’t let me. In the dark, he had me stroke his cock, then swallow it, and then he jacked off until he came into my mouth.

My pants came off, then both of our shirts, and he crept mouth-first between my legs. I held my breath as he licked. “You taste so good,” he said, and I soared at the compliment. But he didn’t make me cum.

We didn’t go all the way; we stopped at oral. He fell asleep, but I stayed up the rest of the night, staring into his face, pounding with life and disbelief about what I’d just done. I would see him once more. Later, after I’d blocked his phone number, he would message me over WhatsApp and LinkedIn, even though he had a girlfriend by then.

\*

Afterward, when the high of a new thing, of a boundary broken, dulled, I wondered what had happened to me that night. It did not align with the concept of enthusiastic consent, where consent is only consent if all parties are fully on-board, if no cajoling or pressuring or guiltling takes place to get one to sigh, and say to the other, “Okay.” By his own admission,

pushing and pushing someone into sex they don't want is rape. I now believe his own account of rape was an emotional manipulation, and he shared it to soften me towards him. But to say he had forced me didn't get to the truth of it, either. Wasn't I the one, ultimately, who rubbed my ass up against him, and wasn't that an invitation? Didn't I want to make him feel good?

And then there was the purgatory of oral sex. Rape requires a penetration, doesn't it?

These questions always seem to come up in the shower, when I'm naked and alone. I was twenty-two then; I'm twenty-eight now, and I still don't have the answers.

\*

"I've gotten to the point where I'm able to say I was raped," I told the matron, trying out the word.

"Well, I wouldn't say you were *raped*," she said. Seeing my face flash, maybe, she said, "In a way, what happened to you was even worse than rape. He was deceitful."

I don't remember how the conversation went, after that. I just know I checked out, even when she tried to walk back her minimization. And I know that was the beginning of the end, and I would never fully trust her after that. She would have asked, during that conversation, if I was ready to forgive him. I don't know what I said. But I know that, raped or not, I still hate that motherfucker, and I don't have any plans to let that go.

\*

This is the Christian instruction on forgiveness, as I learned it: after the trespass, forgive. When that doesn't work, meaning you still hurt, forgive again. And again. Forgiveness happens daily when necessary. I've heard an analogy that the act of forgiveness is like picking up a heavy rock—rock as offender, as offense—and throwing it. It won't get far the first time, but maybe, over time, you can throw it farther. That makes me wonder now: does forgiveness make us chase the hurt, again and again? If the rock still needs further casting, that means you have to go after it, and take it up again.

Forgiveness no longer feels like the solution. As I realized that, I began to consider different modes of being, after wrongdoing. I thought a lot about anger. I felt a lot of anger. Cersei Lannister suddenly became my favorite character from *Game of Thrones*; one scene in which she orchestrated an explosion when her enemies were gathered at an event seemed almost beautiful. For a while, I debated trying to curse the people who pissed me off, until I googled “casting curses” and read that they always come back to you. I had a powerful anger, but nothing to do with it.

I watched a BBC video on grief that stuck with me. The narrator draws a circle while explaining that everything within it represents your life. “When a bereavement happens,” she says, “there isn't an area of your life that isn't affected by grief.” She draws dark, hectic squiggles within the circle. The word “bereavement” makes us think of death: the death of a loved one, but maybe the death of feeling safe and respected in your body. The death of a version of the self that has not been assaulted.

The narrator says that the grief never goes away. “This stays the same,” she says, indicating the squiggly mess, “but our life grows around it.” She draws a bigger circle around the first.

What has been done to me cannot be undone; I will carry it forever. Life is a transformation, and if anything, we should forgive ourselves for changing. I do not plan to forgive those who assaulted me. I do not plan to trust men fully, ever again in my lifetime. The man who coerced me into sex reached out once, much later, under the premise that he owed me an apology. It was just after Prince's death, and he wanted to take me to a tribute concert to "apologize," which sounded awfully like a date. I told him I would only meet him during the day, and then I didn't hear from him again. The times, much later, he tried to flirt with me on WhatsApp or LinkedIn cemented that he didn't want reconciliation, he wanted to fuck me. And if he wasn't interested in forgiveness, why should I be?

Christianity sees forgiveness as a freedom, but the quickness to forgive is a distraction from the necessary processing of pain, betrayal, and loss. You can't forgive those things away. To me, forgiveness does not acknowledge the complexity of our hurt. Sexual violence is systemic. It's bigger than me; to forgive my experiences of it simply wouldn't feel right.

I don't have a good answer for what should replace forgiveness. Holding anger and grief, growing, and sharing our stories without minimizing all seem to be a part of the solution. A culture that does not tolerate sexual assault must be part of the solution. A culture where the onus is on the person who must ask forgiveness, not the person wronged.

## Jesus Stands with the Vulnerable: A Gospel-Based Ethic of Sex

In conservative American Christendom today, it is taken as a given that sex in any context other than marriage is a sin, an assertion understood as Biblically founded. However, this belief overlooks the cultural context of both marriage as an institution and the treatment of women during Biblical times. This paper will not and cannot deal with the scope of the Bible in its entirety; instead, I am interested in what Jesus—the foundation of the Christian faith—had to say about sex, marriage, and women, and what motivated his dictates and his interactions with women. Notably, when Jesus talked about sex outside of marriage, he was specifically talking about adultery; today, Christianity superimposes Jesus' condemnation of infidelity onto casual sex between consenting adults, sex within loving, long-term, monogamous (but unmarried) relationships, and other sexual situations that simply would not have looked the same in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus' life. Girls were married very young, and girls and women did not have the social protections that they do today (although today's protections remain limited). Marriage was a woman's best option in life, but even so, not an enviable one. Therefore, Jesus did not condemn unmarried sex as a sin across the board, but in order to protect and uplift the women in his cultural context.

### **The Character of Jesus**

To understand why Jesus' stance on sex was a choice to stand with the women of his time, we must first substantiate two claims about his character. The first is that Jesus' overarching, abiding concern was for the disenfranchised, the social minority, the vulnerable. This is epitomized in Mark 2:15-17, the passage on the Great Physician:

When Jesus was having a meal in his house, many tax-collectors and sinners were

seated with him and his disciples, for there were many of them among his followers. Some scribes who were Pharisees, observing the company in which he was eating, said to his disciples, “Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?” Hearing this, Jesus said to them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick; I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners.” (*Oxford Study Bible*)

In a pious culture where Pharisees held authority, Jesus focused the efforts of his ministry on those deemed sinners. Time and again throughout the Gospels, we see Jesus align with and dignify societal outcasts—tax collectors, lepers—and advocate for the poor.

The passage on the Great Physician shows that Jesus’ mission is directly reflected in those he spends his time with. It is significant, then, how often Jesus is recorded interacting with women, many of whom were friends and followers. “Jesus’ relations with women seem to have been remarkably free, given the reserve that Jewish custom in his day required” (420), says Monique Alexandre in the essay “Early Christian Women.” If Jesus’ ministry was for the vulnerable, and he spent his time with the vulnerable, this simply reiterates that women in the Roman Empire were vulnerable. Will O’Brien, in his article “Against Patriarchy: Reclaiming the Christian Doctrine of the Virgin Birth,” says as much while grounding Jesus’ ministry in a longstanding tradition of the Judeo-Christian God: “The Virgin Mary of Luke 1:48-55 speaks directly out of... prophetic tradition in magnifying the God who casts down the mighty and lifts up the poor and oppressed. Might this not include women oppressed by patriarchal religious traditions?” (18).

The second claim we must establish is that Jesus was deliberately socially subversive—and that therefore, whatever he had to say about sex would have gone against the spirit of the times. Jesus’ subversiveness is perhaps most evident in his Sermon on the

Mount—specifically, the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs... Blessed are the gentle; they shall have the earth for their possession... Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of right; the kingdom of Heaven is theirs” (Matthew 5:5-10). A modern reader can understand, nearly as well as a contemporary listener would have, that here, Jesus completely upends the societal perceptions placed on certain groups—the poor, the meek, those who hunger and thirst—and turns them on their head through deliberate rhetorical parallels. We see Jesus consistently follow this pattern of subversion through actions and parables alike, in a way that—like the Beatitudes—favors the vulnerable. So, then, what were the norms surrounding marriage and the status of women in the Roman Empire, and why might Jesus have opposed them?

### **The Treatment of Women at Jesus’ Time**

In “Body Politics in Ancient Rome,” Aline Rousselle considers the concept of “biological destiny:” “For the women... responsible for the reproduction of Roman society, maternity was destiny” (297-8). Sex, therefore, was embedded in a Roman woman’s biological destiny; in other words, sex was destiny rather than a choice. “In the ancient Mediterranean world there was no room for choice: a woman did not choose celibacy, she did not choose marriage, and she did not choose remarriage after widowhood” (Rousselle, 302). If a woman was unmarried, she was most likely a courtesan or a slave, although these castes often did not receive the designation of Roman citizen. Regardless, women in the Roman Empire were not expected to choose sex, but to have it foisted upon them in adherence to their social structure.

It is important to understand that the Roman Empire defined not only marriage, but women, differently than we do in a contemporary American context. Yan Thomas says, in



“The Division of the Sexes in Roman Law,” that “women did not form a distinct juridical species” (83). While the Roman Empire recognized a dichotomy of gender, women were not a legally designated class, which meant that they did not have the same legal protections as men. At a time when familial lineage was foundational to society, marriage and property were intrinsically tied, and succession reflected authority, women could not name heirs—unlike their male counterparts. “When women still married under the so-called *manus* system, which subjected them to their husband’s authority, they entered their husband’s household as daughters... and became heirs” (Thomas, 96). Moreover, Alexandre notes that “a woman’s testimony was not admissible evidence in court” (417). In the Judaism of the time—noteworthy, since Jesus focused much of his efforts on the Jewish people—women were sequestered after their periods and childbirth, and married women spent a great deal of their time secluded in the home (Alexandre, 416-7). Jewish women’s religious participation was extremely limited, and they could only enter the outer recesses of the temple (417).

When Jesus spoke of sex, he spoke specifically of adultery; therefore, we must further focus in on the mechanics of marriage in the Roman Empire. Says Rousselle:

The women of antiquity—not only Greeks and Romans but also Jews—were destined to marry and become mothers... before the age of Christianity very few women remained unmarried. Women did not choose when to marry. Marriage contracts were concluded between the bride’s father and future husband and originally did not require her consent. (302)

Women were often married off when they were still children. Girls became “matrons” at twelve years old, “recognized spouse[s] with all the privileges set forth in marriage law” (Rousselle, 302). Although average life expectancy for women of that time was notably

shorter than in the United States today, this was largely due to the dangers of childbirth. Rousselle thoroughly examines the realities of childbirth in Rome, and how, due to both infant mortality and the risk of the mother dying in labor, it was status quo for men to have children via several women. This was in order to more widely distribute—and therefore, hopefully lessen—the risks of childbirth, while at the same time increasing a man’s household. Married men were expected to have affairs with concubines and slaves; says Claudine Leduc in “Marriage in Ancient Greece” (a culture that had great influence/overlap in the Roman Empire), “Recreational sexuality remained unfettered (large households were full of concubines and captives)” (243). Sex with slaves was even considered a standard “perk” of slave ownership.

Conversely, married women could be punished or divorced for suspected adultery. “Fidelity was required of married women in all societies known to have been under Roman domination,” says Rousselle, who goes on to note that one consequence of infidelity was “loss of dowry for an unfaithful wife” (314). And, beyond adultery, “Jewish women could be divorced... for nothing more than immodesty or a disagreeable appearance” (Alexandre, 416). While Roman women could ask for a divorce, Jewish women could not. Therefore women—particularly Jewish women—may well have lived in fear of divorce, which men hardly needed basis to request. Rousselle observes that “Roman divorces were a matter of public notoriety, reported in the chronicles of the historians” (317). For a woman of that time, a divorce would have been a cause of great shame.

In some cases, married women were even looked down on for having sex with their husbands: “The practice of continence by upper-class women became a mark of distinction. A pregnancy as ‘late’ as perhaps age twenty-five was taken as a sign that a woman had not

mastered her desires” (Rousselle, 321). Through this entire examination of women and marriage in the Roman Empire, it is clear that women were held to a starkly different moral standard than men when it came to sex. As is unfortunately normal even today—in modern Christian circles most of all—women were expected to marry, have children, *and* retain a far greater level of sexual prudence than their husbands.

However, it is worth noting that for women of the time, marriage was the most desirable of their limited options: “As a duly recognized “part” of the household, this woman, the mother of the household’s legitimate offspring, enjoyed a social existence denied to other women” (Leduc, 242). Widows, in the New Testament, are depicted as living impoverished lives; for concubines, sex would have been a necessity for survival (even if childbirth could kill them), and seldom a choice. It is clear, then, that despite the difficulties women face today, we are far freer than the women of the Roman Empire—and that therefore, women now do not necessarily need all of the same protections that they did then.

### **Jesus Condemned Adultery, Not Sex**

Jesus’ most direct, well-known statement on sex comes from the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that they were told, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But what I tell you is this: If a man looks at a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart... They were told, ‘A man who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of dismissal. But what I tell you is this: If a man divorces his wife for any cause other than unchastity he involves her in adultery; and whoever marries her commits adultery.’” (Matthew 5:27-32)

In order to interpret this passage, we must synthesize the cultural context we have already established. Perhaps most noteworthy, Jesus addresses the male members of his audience, although, famously, he had both men and women followers. We must keep in mind both that Jesus was subversive, as well as the double standard that men were permitted to philander while their wives were expected to be loyal. We can safely assume that Jesus is being subversive here because subversion is a consistent mark of his character; however, we can go further and confirm it by looking at the language of the passage: “You have heard that they were told... but what I tell you is this”—“they,” here, referring to the Jewish people exhorted in Old Testament law. While divorce and unacted-upon lust may have been considered acceptable treatment *by* men, *of* women in the past—and again, we know Jesus means men, because Jewish women could not request a divorce—Jesus rejects these norms. It would not be subversive if Jesus discouraged women from adultery; rather, it would be the order of the day. And even if the men in Jesus’ core Jewish following did not necessarily participate in adultery to the same degree—Jewish wives often had more than three children, suggesting that there were not multiple women sharing the load of childbirth—infidelity was still the standard for men within the predominant Roman society.

Because women did not choose marriage, because their positionality was fused to their biological destiny—and therefore, women were valued first and foremost for sex—because men could cheat and women were not even defined as a legal class, Jesus’ directive to men to be loyal to their wives was actually something radical for the time. Women were vulnerable, and Jesus’ condemnation of adultery was designed to protect them. Jesus made no other recorded, explicit judgement on unmarried sex.

Still, modern Christian readers tend to interpret some of Jesus' interactions with women as implicit condemnations of sex outside marriage. One such interaction is recorded in John 4:4-42, the passage on the woman at the well. This tells the story of Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman, an interaction that, even with no further details, would have verged on scandal, not only because she was a woman but because she was a Samaritan. Modern Christianity understands that the relationship between Samaritans and Jews was a deeply prejudicial one. However, even though "Jews do not share drinking vessels with Samaritans," Jesus asks her for a drink (John 4:7-9). She is all the more incredulous when he proceeds to tell her, at first somewhat cryptically, that he is the source of "living water," a metaphor for the Holy Spirit. The section that follows is the reason why this passage is included in the Christian discourse around sexual morality:

"Go and call your husband," said Jesus, "and come back here." She answered, "I have no husband." Jesus said, "You are right in saying that you have no husband. For though you have had five husbands, the man you are living with now is not your husband. You have spoken the truth!" "Sir," replied the woman, "I can see you are a prophet." (John 4:16-19)

The article "Jesus' Attitudes Towards Sex" sums up the two chief readings of this section: "Some theologians interpret this passage as a rebuke of [the Samaritan woman's] unorthodox past and present marital status." However, "Others suggest that Christ simply wanted to demonstrated [*sic*] his knowledge of her personal life so that she would recognize that he was no ordinary individual" (*Religious Tolerance*). Here, there is no equivalent to "Go and sin no more," a phrase that sometimes appears in Jesus' interactions with women, and one that conservative Christendom loves to taut as a direct admonition of unmarried sex—as if the

only “sin” within a woman’s agency was sex. However, sex-negative Christians still read this passage with the same tone: that Jesus condemns the Samaritan woman’s sex life. But we have already established the extreme unlikelihood that her marriages and current living situation were her choice. A modern Christian reader tends to interpret many of the societally vulnerable women that Jesus encountered as hedonistic and morally depraved, just for doing what was perfectly acceptable for men at the time; however, it is most likely that whatever agency she had, she simply used to survive.

Therefore, the second interpretation laid out by *Religious Tolerance* is more relevant: in divulging that he knew her story, Jesus also reveals something about himself, a glimpse of his omniscience. The woman at the well clearly has a positive reaction to his knowledge of her, since it is her testimony: “He told me everything I ever did” (John 4:39). And even though the phrase “everything I ever did” sadly reinforces the rigidity of women’s then-biological destiny—her sexual relationships as her defining characteristic—the Samaritan woman’s testimony shows that Jesus transformed what surely would have been a stigma for her. His knowledge of her sexual history ultimately becomes the thing that dignifies her, as, through her witness, she leads the majority of her town to believe in Jesus. Moreover, in her commentary on the passage, Angela N. Meyer makes note that “Jesus reveals himself for the first time in the Gospel of John as the Messiah ‘I am’—and he reveals it directly to a woman of a ‘rejected people’” (*The Woman at the Well: The Radical Revelation of John 4:1-42*). The Samaritan woman, according to the Gospel of John, is the first person to be entrusted with secret, sacred information about the godhood of Jesus. To read this as a passage about sex as sin is to miss the point. She is not a woman condemned, but a woman uplifted and dignified.

Alexandre chronicles how, again and again, Jesus leveraged subversion in a way that lifted women out of their social standing:

The traditional hierarchy was overturned in favor of the despised: ‘The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you,’ Jesus tells the high priests and elders of the temple. In a well-known passage he forgives the many sins of a woman who ‘loved much’ because she, to the horror of the Pharisees, is willing to anoint his feet with ointment. The pardon granted to the adulterous woman and the disarray of her male accusers can be seen in the same light. So can the Samaritan woman who has been married five times and is now living as a concubine. Even female impurity is transcended: a bleeding woman touches the hem of Jesus’ cloak and is cured. (420)

Through his relationships with women, Jesus both modeled and argued that women were far more than what was understood as their biological destiny. Take his friendship with Mary and Martha: the passage in which he visits their home is often preached as an imperative to rest, to not base our worth on productivity, to “Be still, and know that I am God.” While Mary sat at Jesus’ feet and listened to his teachings, Martha “made him welcome” and “was distracted by many tasks”—but, after Martha expresses exasperation that her sister has left her to prepare alone, Jesus tells her, “Only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is best” (Luke 10:38-42). What if, instead of the modern interpretation, this is a passage about how domesticity is not vital to womanhood? What if Jesus is freeing Martha to come, to sit and listen, to follow him, just like the men did?

On another occasion, the Sadducees questioned Jesus:

“Teacher, Moses laid it down for us that if there are brothers, and one dies leaving a wife but no child, then the next should marry the widow and provide an heir for his

brother. Now, there were seven brothers: the first took a wife and died childless; then the second married her, then the third. In this way the seven of them died leaving no children. Last of all the woman also died. At the resurrection, therefore, whose wife is she to be, since all seven had married her?" Jesus said to them, "The men and women of this world marry; but those who have been judged worthy of a place in the other world, and of the resurrection from the dead, do not marry." (Luke 20-28-34)

Marriage was, and remains, such a convention that it becomes a point of debate when speculating about the afterlife of this woman. But here, Jesus challenges the centrality of marriage to the woman's identity. He makes clear that a woman in heaven is not to be defined through her partners on earth. Through his words and his interactions with women, we see that Jesus' intention was never to control their sexuality, but to set them free from their societal bonds. Jesus' vision for women—to elevate their lives—changed the world, and the ripple effect continues even now.

### **A New Vision for Women and Society**

Jesus' vision for women's lives began to permeate the Roman Empire, but backlash also spread. In "The Social World of the New Testament," Wayne A. Meeks outlines how the freedoms of women developed during the First Century C.E., and the cultural response:

Marriage came to be regarded more nearly as an agreement between equals, and the woman as well as the man could initiate divorce. Though single women still needed guardians in law, they were now free to choose them. Women owned property, conducted businesses, appeared in public, became benefactors of cities and patrons of clubs. Among the lower levels of society, women frequently labored alongside their



husbands in crafts and trade... Still, the society remained fundamentally patriarchal in its organization and sentiments, and the changes just mentioned brought a backlash of extreme misogyny from some traditionalists. (83)

Within the structure of the early Christian church, women were effectively equal to men. Alexandre details the presence of women missionaries throughout the New Testament. However, pushback on Jesus' precedent of female equality came quickly, and remains constant. For one, as marriages became monogamous, wives bore a greater risk of childbirth, a risk that was further amplified because, hand in hand with monogamy, abortion took on a new moral weight. "So exalted was the Christian idea of marriage that adultery, along with the abortion that was its sign, was considered a more serious crime than murder" (Rousselle, 333). Abortion was automatically assumed to be a signal of infidelity. Women had no desirable choice between the social consequences of abortion and the risk of death in labor.

O'Brien observes how Christianity soon departed from Jesus' vision for women: "As the institutional church gained social sanction from imperial Rome, its character increasingly aped the power dynamics of the dominant culture—including a regression from the revolutionary egalitarianism of the early Jesus movement to a reinvigorated male patriarchy with its subordination of women" (15-16). For example, the early church had a moral imperative to aid the widows among their population, and, at first, honored the widows that chose to remain unmarried and celibate after their husbands died. "This ideal of chaste renunciation at first seemed to make these widows a model for virgins, with whom they were sometimes associated... Soon, however, the luster of virginity would outshine that of widows, not only in merit but also in competition for precedence within the Church" (Alexandre, 430). This goes to show that not even marriage—in Christian culture, no less—

can completely absolve a woman from blame for her innate sexuality, that having sex in any context will always be a mark against a woman. “A pernicious formula [took] root in Christendom,” says O’Brien: “virginity equals holiness, and sex equals sin... From that distortion, blended with the Marian tradition, is birthed the dichotomous paradigm of women as virgins or whores, saints or sexual sinners, with little in-between” (16).

“When the early Christians tore sexual morality away from the familiar outlines provided by the civic background,” says Kyle Harper in “The First Sexual Revolution,” “the repercussions were not confined to one discrete section of the moral code. Sex came to occupy a place in the foreground of moral instruction in a way that it simply never had in Judaism, or even the most stringent pagan philosophies” (44). What Harper sees as a positive, I question: is it really for the best that Christian discourse has firmly foregrounded the morality of sex? Or, does the Christian framing of sex obscure Jesus’ vision for women, and enforce patriarchal control? The Bible warns against idol worship, but I wonder if, in modern Christian culture, marriage and married sex in and of themselves have become idols. There is an obsessive quality to the way modern Christianity deals with sex and marriage. Marriage is an expectation in today’s church, and every modern Christian has heard a patronizing sermon on the gift of singleness—a talk that wouldn’t be necessary if single Christians were not viewed as incomplete without a spouse. While women in the U.S. today are far better off than they were in the Roman Empire, that fact says more about the extreme sexism of Rome than it does about our progress, which is still deeply wanting. In order for Christians to participate in building a more equal world for everyone, we must allow our preconceptions about women to be transformed by Jesus’ example.

## **In Conclusion**

I have always loved the image of Jacob wrestling with God; it informs my Christianity and how I engage with the Bible. In a sermon delivered on May 10, 2020, pastor Susan Van Riesen considers that Jesus often spoke in parables, and that the core messages of those parables were obscured by surface layers. She explores what Jesus means in Mark 4:10-11, when, after explaining one such parable to his apostles, he references “the secret to the kingdom of God.” The secret, Van Reisen argues, is that “you have to ask... If you want to have these mysterious, confusing, unfathomable, perplexing things of God explained to you, then you have to want to know more, and you have to have confidence that Jesus can give you more, and you have to act on that desire to know more.” The disciples who questioned Jesus about the parable were the ones who received an explanation. Christians sometimes think that the most faithful way to read the Bible is by taking it at face value, but this is not what Jesus invites us to do. For a richer faith, and a deeper understanding, we must wrestle.

In the same way that Christianity is currently wrestling with the ethics of homosexuality, we must grapple with the morality of unmarried sex. However, we cannot, as modern-day Christians, have a conversation about the ethics of sex until we have a conversation about the ethics of sexism. We cannot consider whether anything about sex is inherently sinful without first untangling the power dynamics of heteronormative sex and relationships. Therefore, we must reframe our understanding of what Jesus’ comments on sex, and his interactions with women, were all about. Sister Joan Chittister suggests exactly the kind of paradigm shift we need to make around sex, in a quote on the failings of the pro-life movement:

I do not believe that just because you’re opposed to abortion that that makes you pro-

life. In fact, in many cases, your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed, not a child educated, not a child housed. And why would I think that you don't? Because you don't want any tax money to go there. That's not pro-life. That's pro-birth. We need a much broader conversation on what the morality of pro-life is. (*Now With Bill Moyers*)

Jesus' stance on sex did not come from a sexual ethic that existed in a vacuum; it was a response to the real conditions of women's lives in the Roman Empire, and an effort to deliver them from their oppression. The Gospels of Jesus are the foundation of Christian faith, and Jesus' example gives us no basis to argue that unmarried, unadulterous, consensual sex is ever a sin.

## The Waterfall and the Well

How does a person become Sherlock Holmes? The answer is not at the surface; I sink into the wingback's winter green and tartan red. Is it a problem that the closest I've come to cocaine is through an acquaintance with some party boys I knew in Chicago? It was New Years' Eve when I met them, at a house party where one of them played the host. On another occasion, ensconced at the Violet Hour in Wicker Park—where dress clothes are mandatory and cell phones disallowed—I listened as they claimed that coke was not addictive; more of a monthly habit. Sherlock rejected the addict label, too, but that may be all he and the boys have in common. Charlie, the one I thought was cute, told me how he once got caught on a fence by the pants, and he was so drunk he mouthed off to the cop who came to help. He spent that night in jail, bleeding from the leg and pants-less. No Sherlock-level smarts there. Well, maybe it depends on the Sherlock.

I don't play violin, although I did once play the cello: Bach's Cello Suite No. 1 In G Major, Haydn's Cello Concerto No. 1. My bow bounding from string to string, vibrato tripping through the air. Another disparity: my head is too big for the iconic deerstalker. Honestly, though, can Benedict Cumberbatch's head really be smaller than mine? His Sherlock must be custom-fitted.

Cumberbatch, in BBC's *Sherlock*, is far from the only actor who's had to grapple with the question of how to become Sherlock Holmes. Sherlocks over the years have included Ronald Howard in *Sherlock Holmes*, Jeremy Brett in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Jonny Lee Miller in *Elementary*, and Robert Downey Jr. in the *Sherlock Holmes* films. Even Will Ferrell has thrown his hat in the ring. But this is a tip of the iceberg kind of

list, one that doesn't acknowledge Sherlock in board games, or comics, or animated series – like my childhood favorite, *Sherlock Holmes in the 22nd Century*.

At the start of it all is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, frequenter of seances, the first to know Sherlock. Or, the first to put him down on paper.

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On the twenty-first anniversary of the actor's passing, The Birmingham Mail published an article titled "Did Sherlock Holmes kill Midland actor Jeremy Brett, the man who played him?" The Mail described how Brett became wholly immersed in the role, and it quoted him as saying: "Some actors fear if they play Sherlock Holmes for a very long run the character will steal their soul, leave no corner for the original inhabitant. Holmes has become the dark side of the moon for me. He is moody and solitary and underneath I am really sociable and gregarious. It has all gotten too dangerous." The danger of Sherlock, suggested the Mail, caused Brett's "wild mood swings," had him smoking sixty cigarettes a day, and, in the end, stopped his heart. While the decline of a great actor is tragic indeed, what's really interesting here is how a real news source pinned a real death on a fictional character.

In writing this essay, I don't care about the method actors of the world, the Daniel Day Lewises and Christian Bales. This is an essay concerned with the nature of what's real, the border between reality and fiction. Like other major fictional figures grounded on factual Earth—King Arthur, for example—Sherlock Holmes has gained purchase in our world; he is a fixture of London and a storytelling archetype. Holmes verges on real. The question, then, is not just how do *we* become *him*; how does, or has, Sherlock come to inhabit us?

Let us perform a thought experiment in pursuit of this question. Specifically, let us bring our focus to an episode of BBC's *Sherlock*, "The Abominable Bride." The episode

bends space-time: it starts with the typical serial recap, but then presents us with a screen that reads “Alternatively,” displaying the current year below. The years start ticking rapidly back, like a win at the slots in reverse. They never land on a date for good; we cut to another shot somewhere in the late 1800s. Of note is the word “alternatively”—will this program be a fiction within a fiction? A parallel fictional world?

Certainly, “The Abominable Bride” does not shy away from itself as a fiction. Once we’ve moved backwards in time, we start with a shot of *The Strand* being sold on the street, the newspaper in which Dr. John Watson writes about Sherlock Holmes. Watson’s stories quickly come under critique by his and Sherlock’s landlady, Mrs. Hudson, who complains that she never has any lines. “I’m your landlady,” she declares, “not a plot device.” Characters banter about quoting Sherlock from the paper, while he protests he doesn’t talk that way; Watson has shaped his public image. Again, the presence of *The Strand* suggests another meta-narrative, self-reference: the characters know themselves as characters.

The initial premise of “The Abominable Bride” is that a woman in a wedding gown with a lipstick smear on her face shot herself on a balcony, in view of a busy street, then proceeded to return from the dead to murder her husband on the same night. Threats and hints of the woman have haunted other murders since, but it isn’t until Lady Carmichael calls on Sherlock to protect her husband from the bride that he becomes invested in the case. Sherlock and Watson stake the Carmichael manor, the bride appears, and by the time they find Lord Carmichael it is too late; he is gone.

Here, however, space-time begins to bend. Sherlock’s arch-nemesis James Moriarty, who is meant to be dead, signals his return with a note on Lord Carmichael’s corpse. We are transported to the Diogenes Club, which Mycroft Holmes belongs to. We are getting the

sense that something is not right, that reality is warping for Sherlock. In acknowledging Moriarty's return, Mycroft uses the phrase, "the virus in the data," despite the context of the 19th Century. We jump to the present day, and back again, more and more rapidly as the episode comes to its last act. At the climax, at the waterfall, are Sherlock and Moriarty, where they always return to, where their natural state of conflict runs its course.

The chief function in "The Abominable Bride" is the concept of the mind palace. We come to understand that we are not in reality—the external, fictional reality of *Sherlock*, anyway—we are in Sherlock's mind palace. Also known as memory palace or method of loci, the mind palace is a centuries-old, real-world remembering strategy that relies on recalling, rebuilding the memory of a physical place in one's mind in order to access information. When we are in the past of the episode, we are really in the mind palace. But if this method is used to trigger memory through places we've already been, does that mean that present day Sherlock is remembering his late 1800s iteration in order to crack the case?

"You're in deep, Sherlock" says Mycroft, within the mind palace. "Deeper than you ever intended to be."

\*

In Haruki Murakami's novel *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, the protagonist Toru Okada spends several chapters at the bottom of a well. At first, he is trapped there: the neighbor girl, perversely mischievous, closes him in. But the well becomes the place where Toru can dive deep into thought. He revisits the well during the action of the book; he is searching for his wife, who's gone missing. In the complete darkness of the lidded well—dark as the other side of the moon—Toru can drift from the physical world into his own mind palace, a place of memories, but most consistently a shadowed, labyrinthian hotel. It is not



the physical realm, the real world, where Toru will save his wife. She is trapped in the confines of the hotel. His mind is where Toru will put things right, just as Sherlock's mind is where he'll solve the case.

\*

At the waterfall, Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty face each other. "This is how we end, you and I," says Moriarty. "Always here, always together." Always. The two engage in a brief, fierce tussle, until Moriarty has Sherlock at the precipice.

Sherlock and Moriarty are at the edge of another cycle. Water careens overhead. But instead of one pulling down the other, Watson appears with a revolver aimed at Moriarty.

"That's not fair," says the villain, "there's two of you."

"There's always two of us," says Watson. "Don't you read *The Strand*?"

It is Watson, per his request, who boots Moriarty over the waterfall ("It was my turn," Watson says, again signaling the cyclical nature of this story). But it is time for Sherlock to resurface. To leave the mind palace, he, too, must throw himself over the edge and into the water.

"Between you and me, John, I always survive a fall," Sherlock says.

"But how?"

With a smirk, and the tossing away of that custom-made deerstalker, Sherlock says, "Elementary, my dear Watson." And with that, he dives.

Sherlock is being reborn. He will move from this iteration of his past to the present iteration. And how does he do so? By uttering one of his most iconic phrases. By participating in one of his most iconic scenes, at the waterfall. These, indeed, are the waters

of birth. Sherlock lives again by reminding us of who he is, of who he's always been. And with that, the present-day Sherlock awakes.

\*

Have you ever been trapped at the bottom of a well? I have. I remember: it was deep, and dark, and the air clung like a wet cloth, and I was so desperate to get out. I can picture myself, crying out of fury, balling and shaking my fists, raging until fire came out of me.

The power of my own fire lit up the bottom of the well. It was wide at the bottom, warm now; it felt more like a cave. But for all that fire, I was still trapped. My heat and decisiveness could illuminate the situation I was in; they could confirm what I suspected to be real, but that was all.

Later, I would learn to use water. With water, the well began to fill. Instead of trying to save myself from the well through brute force, or sheer will, I let the well be what it was. I let the water flow. And I began to float upwards with its geysering power, and finally I went free.

\*

During the long, pre-witching hour waiting of Sherlock and Watson's stakeout at the Carmichael manor, Watson expresses concern for Sherlock's lack of a love life, for his strange personality. "What made you like this?" Watson asks.

And Sherlock, with incredulity and a deep knowing: "Nothing made me. I made me."

\*

Perhaps Sherlock Holmes came to Conan Doyle during a seance. The lights were low, and a ring of candles wrote wax down themselves like wrinkles. Air from a cracked window

circled the table; the light before Conan Doyle's eyes flickered. Suddenly, there was a man in the room, not seated at the table with everyone else, not clasping the gloved hands of the other guests. He paced, leisurely, half-alooof and half-bemused as he considered the seance. Only Conan Doyle could see him. In shock and fear, he did not move, but stared, near-foolish, at the apparition. The man outside the circle, in turn, studied him.

“You are a writer; anyone can tell from the ink under your nails. Wash up, sir, you're in high society.” The ghostly man smiled softly, as he berated his author.

I realize now that it is not the role of a writer to become their character; that is an actor's lot. I am a writer. A writer's role is to pull back the veil, to glimpse their subject, to endeavor to know them and witness what they do. It is not for me to become Sherlock; it never was. Instead, I see him as I never have before.

\*

I know how Moriarty came back to life. All of you have been clamoring for answers, but you've had to wait. I can only write so many words each week. When he was knocked from the waterfall's precipice, Moriarty fell, down, and down, and down. He fell right into the well.

Moriarty awoke in the well water, and while it purified and cleansed him, it was not a baptism of the religious kind. The waters would not redeem him, or bid him walk the straight and narrow. This was something truer and older than even that pillar of humanity. The water made him even more essentially himself. As Moriarty said in “The Abominable Bride,” “dead is the new sexy.” And he stepped, for the umpteenth time, into the place between being and nonbeing, dead and alive.

\*

My leg has been aching lately. I can't say why; maybe it's the rain, maybe I've been walking more, maybe I'm just getting older. In any case, I settle down with a cup of tea, knead my thigh a time or two, and get back to writing.

\*

I'm getting tired of that word, "real." People ask me all the time if Sherlock really said those things; did he really solve the impossible case, win the daring fight, make the astonishing observation? And I always say yes, but that's only to the best of my understanding. That's who I know Sherlock to be.

I wait, at 221b Baker Street, for Sherlock, and I mind what he does, and I do what he cannot. But it's him, not I, who will always be the great detective.

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## Quarantine

I.

The pothos twists itself brown  
towards the sun. I give up  
on open blinds; now  
it prays to slats.

Last summer, the man who gave me  
the pothos said, “Are you seeing anyone?”  
He said thumbs pressed hard  
on ex-girlfriend’s arms, said  
now he only sleeps with friends.

Smoke passed our lips  
on the stairwell, and  
ran toward the highway.  
We did not touch, just felt

the shift of then-green leaves.  
If that was what he wanted,  
I’d be less than friend, just a number  
in his phone that sometimes answered.

Now, the pothos roots into water  
in his old beer bottle.

II.

For some time, I lived with a mouse.  
It whispered in my corners,  
told my countertops I could only keep  
the things I didn't want.

I tried so long to catch it, once  
found it dancing  
in a glue trap. I've heard  
that trapped mice eat off  
their feet to be free.

Outside my apartment, past  
the dumpster, I lavished the mouse  
with olive oil, like Mary perfuming  
Jesus' feet with a whole rich jar,  
released it from the glue.

The mouse, wet as it was born,  
saw this as a sign of love—  
before long, it came home to me.

III.

When quarantine started,

I saw a spot in the dark  
of the hall, turned on the light.

The mouse bowed at my feet  
like it was praying, or dead.

I wondered if it seemed old, seemed  
grayer.

It used to pinball through the apartment;  
now it let itself be caught. I sliced  
breath holes in tupperware,  
drove twenty minutes north, past the river,  
to a park where trees hung like mesh  
over the city, mouse free  
to go outside.

I go home, shut myself in.

“Finally,” I think

to me alone,

after I pull the pothos’

knobby stem into the trash.



## Last Date

The bar on the strip, Che's, is a Tucson institution,  
woman-owned. I sip watermelon,  
lick tajin off rim, and swelter on the patio,  
wedge of sky pressed down on skin.

I tell the fuckboy, late-thirties academe,  
that his writing is just okay, that mine  
will take me everywhere. He did not have the strength  
to make me muse.

I get up and stomp away,  
like the beer-sticky floor is a catwalk.  
Leaving, I gleam. I have found a way  
to hurt a man.

As I step from bar to afternoon,  
a woman says, "I like your outfit."  
Her approval teaches me  
to be powered by my anger.

Later, I learn that he is not just  
my story to tell. His warning song

lives in the mouths of many women.

I learn what he took

in someone else's bedroom. What he took

from his ex-wife. What he did

not take from me when he pulled away.

What I wanted to give, love,

but now, will give no man.

One time, on the Tucson Girls Chorus tour bus,

ambling through long desert day, brush,

knot-limbed saguaros, dust devils

that whisper if you turn your back,

we watched *Mr. Holland's Opus*

on the box TV. When it got to the part

when he kissed his student protégé,

all of us girls went “Eewww!!”

Ms. Kersey, our director, sturdy woman

with steely perm, leaned back and laughed

and laughed, said, “You’ll understand

when you’re older.”

I can’t say what the others thought,

in their cummerbunds and sequins.

Now, at 27, I wonder

if I should know yet what she meant:

I’ve lain under the tent of a forty-year-old body,

a man tarped over me with sweat,

whose bedroom walls, in the attic

of a storage space, did not meet the ceiling.

I've pressed against a married man  
in his compact pickup, believed him when he said  
his wife was leaving. I should understand,  
by now, that a kiss means to want,

that sex has as many meanings  
as occasions. Still, I have  
a feeling I am not as old  
as Ms. Kersey's "older."

On learning that my favorite youtuber's girlfriend proposed to him,  
and not the other way around, I peep her Instagram, stare  
at the weight of his arm around her, the tender line  
of his hand. He is a charcoal figure study, his body  
is soft, like mine; hers is too small. I linger  
on the picture where he's crying until  
jealously brands my chest.

"Men hold more power," my best friend,  
a girlboss, says, "They need to step up.  
I would dump a man who didn't propose  
in like two years. He wants wifey benefits?  
Make that shit legally binding."

Am I not woke enough, is that the problem? I'm turned off  
and pissed off and choked from the inside  
with wanting. I think of my own boyfriend  
of a year-plus, try to picture him on one knee,  
to see him with a diamond.

He, too, is soft, the only man  
who's cared about not hurting me.  
His smile is lamplight and crinkled hazel eyes.

Why is it so embarrassing, as a woman,  
a straight woman, to want more  
thank you're wanted?

I cannot picture either of us kneeling down.

## Diary

In my cocoon apartment, I watch Cardi B's Mother's Day vid. Roses crowd  
tile, enough to cover a coffin, baby pink and cream under the green of her  
neon mani.

She drinks oysters for breakfast, says, "I love you, Offset," films the haze of his eyes under  
braids. He grumbles back, "I love you." Cardi is 11 days younger than me. I am 27 now, and  
thinking about my high school reunion. It's set for December: I imagine ribbons like foil,  
spiked punch, a sorbet haze fuzzing everybody's smile. I could go home with Colin Garand,  
fuck him once for every free chef's board he's sent me at his restaurant gigs. Or I could stay,  
lick sweet mustard off the classmates who never left Tucson, suck prosciutto from the  
mouths of the ones who went to Stanford. I could follow Offset onto Cardi's stage the day he  
bartered his cheating for a ring, tell her she's too good for him. Rip Colin's pressed  
chambray, feel his man bun fall like wool into my air. Step outside my gluttony, and finally  
see them all as much as I see myself.

## On Starting Blood Pressure Pills at 27

I wanted my body impermanent  
for other reasons, wanted it  
to give way to the body I dreamed  
as a teen: thin  
body, boy-catching body.  
Imaginary body  
without need,  
no freezer-burned  
Jenny Craig creamed  
spinach, dull tin  
of tuna on crackers  
to be small. I told Mom,  
diet curator, I would rather be thin  
than healthy. I tried  
to manifest that body by hating my own.

At the doctor, the blood pressure cuff

does not loosen.

My early twenties self, the one

that fought for me,

learned to see fat



as the moon, and cellulite

as seeds in the field,

feels crushed in the cuff,

waning as I fill.

“Think of the pill

As self-love,” I am told.

I assent to the prescription.

Palm spoons pill into mouth

nightly. Now, I think, more than healthy,

I would rather be free.

## Like Thread

Back feels the ghost of an old job,  
right shoulderblade's a hard bar.

Backstroke prescribed, but  
there are no pools in quarantine.

I walk backwards and swivel my arms  
past the neighborhood mansions,  
a Doberman watches  
like a shadow, the summer air  
thrums the leaves like bass.

I have tried the chiropractor's table  
that cracks like body,  
I've tried frozen peas on back,  
tried Bengay's peppermint heat.

I have learned  
that a muscle in my back is like thread,  
pulled so thin from minimum wage  
that even a year after my two weeks',  
I ache  
every day. I spent years  
reaching frappucinos out the window  
like God stretching for Adam.

Now, I lean forward for everything,  
work, school. In my apartment, I throw my arms back  
twenty, forty times,  
hoping the repetition is enough  
that this won't be forever.

## Commuting Home on the Red Line, Chicago

The woman on the L  
is small and taut, looks  
like she works on  
her feet, says “Fuck this”  
when I sit beside her,  
gets up and stands by the door.

Like her, I stand all day,  
left calf pulled like a string  
and singing like flame, but

in this city            home            I take up too much space.

The L floats above the city.

The build  
ings stretch up,  
blue streets crunch  
between skyscrapers.

I dream myself in the widest penthouse rooftop in the metro,  
I dream the air Lake Michigan, and me buoyant, but

waiting for my bus    home, I am just

fat

and my feet sink to the concrete

red-bitten in a bath of snow

Likemy

fatlegs

onfive

degreedays

wearing

twolayers

stillburned

whenI

finally

undress

at

home

## Home Brew

A poem composed of beer names

Tucson blonde,

city a hipsterville.

Brunch vibes, patio daydrinker,

agave and prickly pear.

Alt pueblo privilege

identity crisis, smoked soberish

off-color miscelania.

Comb the desert,

check, please.

Night shift. OHAYGRRL.

Moon master rant mode

queen bitch blonde. Do not reply.

Summer dream, blazing world—

don't fuck it up, lonely blonde.

Sunsoaked haze;

furious surly sunshine.

Two hearted blonde. Zombie summer:

Channel surfing. Flatiron. Rain

crow lay low,  
bad weather ominous.

Juicy monsoon,  
love child of Arizona wilderness,  
elemental mad stratter.  
Dirty double blonde rain dance.

*Outside my Window, April 27<sup>th</sup>*

Water warps off a slat roof, slashes air  
like a tossed coin. The cars in the townhouse lot sit un-  
disturbed midday. Birdsong masks  
some upset child with spring.

At first, I thought the tears were laughter.



## Diablo

Growing up a mostly well-behaved Christian girl, my run-ins with weed were few and far between. They began in college: the first was when my already-stoned roommate thought it would work to microwave some uncooked pot with a piece of mashed-up carrot cake. Uninitiated as I was to weed and weed culture, I downed the so-called edible and waited for the high to hit. My roommate went to bed; I sat in the dark eating chocolate, decidedly sober.

Another time, some stoner friends and I made the forty-five minute drive from Tacoma, our college town, to a sushi joint in Seattle. One of them passed back a blunt from the front seat, and I took a long drag, but didn't realize I was supposed to inhale. At the restaurant, I nabbed a tower of tiny plates from the conveyor belt. (I'm pretty sure my faux-highs were just an excuse to binge.)

After college, during an aimless post-grad stint in the San Francisco Bay Area, I accepted a vape pen from a stranger in Oakland, a girl who'd taught herself how to code and was about to begin a fabulous gig in Silicon Valley. (Not that I was jealous she had her shit together.) The pen didn't really hit, but I still took the freeway home at about thirty miles per hour.

Through a handful of sporadic encounters like these, I came to believe that weed and I didn't really mix. It just didn't seem to affect me. I even thought this after a recent night at a friend's house, when I stared, vaguely, at one of his bookshelves for what felt like minutes, and thought to myself, "Whoa." It was a high that lasted maybe half an hour; I still felt in control. So you can imagine my surprise when, during a work event at the Power Play in Shawnee, Kansas, I accidentally got stoned out of my fucking mind.

~

If you've never been to a Power Play Family Entertainment Center, allow me to paint the picture: you step inside a massive, windowless warehouse, and are instantly transported to the eighties. The carpet is an homage to shapes, but only the most basic ones: mustard yellow triangles, teal squares, deep plum circles. You feast your eyes on a sea of arcade games, everything from classic Ms. Pac-Man to VR, Guitar Hero to skeeball. A thousand pixelated theme songs hole-punch the air unendingly, and the lighting swerves and flashes. Ah, but that's not the half of it: at the perimeters of Power Play's arcade are go-karts, bumper cars, laser tag, a bowling alley, and even a bar.

Don't think I'm dragging Power Play; I love it there, in all its garishness. I love playing games and getting stuffed off its rows-upon-rows-long buffet. But I ask you: does Power Play sound like the right kind of environment for getting mega-stoned in? Especially when your boss is in the building? Yeah... it wasn't.

This was my second work event at Power Play, meaning that my coworkers and I all had an expectation of how things were about to go down. We would eat four plates apiece from the buffet, then use the play cards our boss dispensed on an hour of free games. Imagine like twenty-five adults, ages twenty up to sixty, going bonkers over free mediocre pizza and Dance Dance Revolution. That was us. Our first Power Play work event had been a pre-holiday meeting; tonight, we were there to celebrate surviving the holiday season. No joke, November and December can be a grueling time when you work at Starbucks.

Dinner was first. I sat with my work bestie, Connor, noshing on pizza and fries. Connor is tall and slim and well-groomed, and he wears his second job as a server so well

that I sometimes picture him as head butler in some Downton Abbey-esque setting. Poised is the word. Despite it all, he's a big-time stoner.

Haley, a new friend who'd recently transferred to our store, came and sat with us.

"You guys," she said, "I am so baked right now."

"I thought about hitting up Connor before this to smoke," I said, "but I didn't."

Haley leaned forward. "Girl, we still can! Let's go get some 'fresh air' after dinner."

The three of us kept winking at each other about "fresh air" over our third and fourth plates. When we'd eaten our fill, we wound up meandering over to the Laser Room. This wasn't laser tag, but a separate situation lifted from Mission Impossible, which required sneaking through horizontal, room-length lasers. As we snaked our way through the room, touching red lights on the far walls when prompted, I said, "What about that fresh air?"

"We can just do it in here," said Connor. He handed me his pen.

Because I thought I knew how weed affected me, I took a gargantuan hit.

And coughed. And coughed. And coughed.

There I am, in the corner of the room, doubled over, sounding like I'm hacking my insides out. "Are you okay?" asked Haley and Connor. I couldn't answer them because I was coughing so fucking much. My coughs reverberated through Power Play, shaking the pucks on the air hockey machines and rumbling the earth. And these two motherfuckers (still love them), who'd just hit the pen themselves, finished another round in the laser room.

"Anna, hit the last red light!" called Haley. I was standing right next to it. Still not upright, I flung my arm out and hit my target. "Yayyy!" the two of them cheered.

"Are you okay?" Connor asked again. "Let's get you to a bathroom."

We proceeded across Power Play to the bowling alley bathroom. As we made our way, though, Eric, my boss, approached us. Eric is a genuinely good manager; I like him a lot. From what I can tell, he's pretty straight-laced. A little reserved; blonde, blue-eyed, and baby-faced; wears a nice, tucked-in button-up. Before taking the too-big puff, I'd told him I was ready for a Guitar Hero rematch: last time at Power Play, he schooled me.

"I'm gonna get started on Guitar Hero," he told us. I tried to voice my excitement, but wound up coughing instead. "Hey, where's the bathroom?" he asked.

Connor pointed him to the other bathroom, the one we weren't headed to. I kept my eyes on the prize, looked directly ahead, not stopping for anything. As I neared the bathroom, I heard someone behind me ask, "Is Anna okay?"

~

My best friend is a Virgo, which in part means that she likes control. She has a horror story about getting way too high after smoking a bong in college. Her hands and feet fell asleep, and everything moved in blurry slow-mo. She felt like she was the only person in the room; at the same time, she felt paranoid, anxious. For a person who likes control, a high can be more torture than pleasure. Anything that rips your control away can.

Back in eighth grade, I was the first chair cello of my middle school's orchestra. I remember one day when we broke up by section to practice – which made me in charge by default – when Esther, the second chair cello, called me a control freak. I guess I was being too bossy. It's true, though; even though Virgo is nowhere on my charts, I have a thing about control, too. Even when I drink – and I love a cocktail – I'm pretty moderate. I keep a planner, obsessively sometimes; I stare down at its pages and try to master my days. Food is really the only substance I consume with the aplomb of Dr. Pimple Popper popping pimples.

Unless we get more metaphorical, in which case you can add YouTube and worrying about everything ever to the list of my addictions. I won't say I'm not curious about weed, and maybe a few hallucinogens, but a part of me *likes* feeling in control when I smoke.

I felt the high first in my lower eyelids. They were suddenly tingly as shit. We were at the bar now, still near the bowling alley. I sucked up the water Connor and Haley got me while I was in the bathroom. I looked over at them; they stared like I was missing a front tooth. "What?" I said. "Are my eyes red?"

"No," said Haley. "They're just really squinty."

"Here, try my eyedrops," Connor said.

I hit each cheek with about three drops before getting them in my eyes. Connor and Haley ordered lime-a-ritas. "Would you like anything?" the bartender asked me.

"I think I'm good with water," I said, trying to sound like a normal human.

After drinks, Haley panicked, thinking she'd left her play card in the Laser Room. The two of them sprung up from their stools, and I followed. It couldn't have been more than a minute or two that we were on our feet, walking across that loud, geometric carpet, past the sound of Donkey Kong throwing barrels, the assaulting spaceships of Galaga firing shots, lights flashing, children running and yelling. In reality, it was only a minute or two, but I suddenly found myself in a loop. I felt like I would never stop walking behind Haley and Connor. To make things worse, I had no control over my legs. They were moving normally, but I almost felt like I was riding them.

*This is just a dream, I thought. You just have to wake up.* Then, with a rare feeling of impending doom, I realized that this was no dream; this was real life, baby, and I was going to have to ride it out.

As soon as I realized how fucked up I was, I rushed up to Connor and grabbed his arm. I must have looked pretty intense, because his eyes got big, and again, he asked, “Are you okay?”

“No,” I said. “I’m not fucking okay. I feel like I’m in a dream and I can’t wake up and none of this is real and I’m riding the robot pants from Wallace and Gromit and I need to sit down.”

Haley’s eyebrows flew up. “Oh, shit. I’ve been exactly where you’ve been.”

~

“Is Eric going to find out?” I asked them as they sat me on a bench.

“No, of course not,” said Connor. He disappeared as Haley settled in with me.

All of a sudden, there was Eric, with Connor trailing behind him. “I heard you’re not feeling well,” he said, taking a seat next to me.

“We think she’s a little lightheaded from the laser room,” said Haley. “It was smokey in there. She’s probably just dehydrated.”

“You do look a little pale,” said Eric.

Alarmed by this, I put the back of my hand to my forehead like a fainting Victorian heroine. I looked to Haley, distraught. “You’re fine,” she said.

“It’s probably just the lighting,” Eric backtracked.

There was a tilt-a-whirl by the benches that Connor and Haley wanted to ride. They left me on the bench, those fuckers, with Eric to babysit. We sat side-by-side in the quiet. I had no idea what I was supposed to do: how would a sober dehydrated person act?

“Have you been to Knott’s Berry Farm?” I asked. Bingo.

“I’ve heard of it, but never been.”

“I’m going to tell you three fun facts about it. One: it actually started as a berry farm.” I waited for his reaction.

“Oh, wow,” he said, a little delayed. He was definitely humoring me.

“Two: it’s halfway between the extremes of Disney and Six Flags in terms of ride intensity.” I held my hands out to show how far apart the theme parks were. “And three…”

Suddenly, I had no idea what I was about to say. I watched my hand fall in slow motion. *This is it*, I thought. *This is the moment when I can no longer hold my shit together, and Eric’s going to find out. I’m going down.*

“Charlie Brown!” I cried. “They’ve got, like, Charlie Brown as the mascot, and all those characters.”

“Oh, like Peanuts?” he said.

“Yeah!”

I proceeded to tell him about the horrible roller coaster at Knott’s made all out of wood, how when I rode it my vision went red. But my trial was over. My friends came back not much later. Haley grabbed me to get more water, and we sat and shot the shit so I could get off my robot legs. Then, when she had to leave because she was opening at work the next morning, Connor took me to Sonic, with the hope of food sobering me up.

“I should have told you this before,” he said, “and I wanted to refrain while you were super-high, but the weed you smoked is really strong. It’s literally called Diablo.”

I processed for a minute, then said, “Connor, why did you go get Eric?”

“I couldn’t help it, dude,” he said. “I had to tell him that you were stoned out of your mind.”

I felt like I stared at him in horror, but later he told me that my smile barely changed.

“I’m just fucking with you,” he said. “I told him that you weren’t feeling well, so I couldn’t play Guitar Hero. He wanted to check on you.”

“Connor!” I said, hitting his arm.

One cherry limeade, an order of tots, and two Oreo Cheesecake Master Shakes later, Connor dropped me at my car.

“I’m going to become a D.A.R.E. counselor after this,” I told him. We both cracked up. “Scratch that, I’m too funny for D.A.R.E. I’m going to be a stoner comedian.”

~

A month or two before the Power Play incident, I sat in a crystal shop for a one-night class called “Writing the Story You Need to Tell with Oracle Cards.” The power was out, so we gathered around a jumble of candles with our coats on.

The shop was an airy white space, filled with potions and spellbooks, plants and cozy seating. I pulled out my tarot deck, shuffled the cards well. The first question the teacher prompted us with was, “What is the story I need to tell as I begin 2019?”

The card I pulled was The Hanged Man. He hangs not from his neck, but from a rope around his ankle, swaying from a tree branch. I pulled the card upside down, which for some people impacts the meaning. In reverse, though, I could see his soft smile. His eyes are closed – he could almost be sleeping. This is an image of a person not in control, but still accepting of their situation.

I look back over what I wrote that night, and come across this passage: *I’ve been thinking lately what a control freak I am, how I need things to be just so. Maybe I need my meds adjusted. Or to focus on controlling only what I can. Maybe I need to smoke more weed.*



Well, shit. At least I gave the smoking tack a shot. As I think about it now, though, my control freak-ness is not just about myself. I must have thought I had some power, some control over weed when I smoked it. That I could inhale and be, in a way, invincible. That my mind was stronger than substance, and that's why I stayed sober. Diablo forced me to think differently.

At the Oracle Card teacher's next prompt, "What am I forgetting, or overlooking?" I pulled a second card: The Chariot. This card was the Hanged Man tonal opposite. It's an energized, turbulent card, with a red sky, and an armored stallion bucking in the foreground.

I read from the book that accompanied my deck: "The Chariot card signifies victory over your opposition. Through strength of will, determination, self confidence and control you will succeed in your campaign." There was the idea of control again, this time framed as a positive.

I still don't fully know what these experiences can teach me about control. I know that my desire for control and my anxiety are the same thing, manifest two ways. I know, too, that I will never fully be in control, no matter how hard I try. In control of what, exactly? My obligations, the people around me, the weather – it could be anything. I'm not sure if I can – or should – even fully control myself.

The funny thing about being way too stoned on Diablo is that everyone (as in, the few coworkers I divulged my high to) told me I seemed normal. "I wouldn't even have known if you hadn't told me," Connor said. When I felt completely out of control – of my body, my words, even reality – nobody saw me that way. I think I'm expecting too much of myself; nobody has that kind of power, to exert their will and ensure that all stays calm. And besides, control is a lot less interesting than getting high at Power Play.

# An Incomplete Timeline of the Trump Presidency

## Prologue

I have shot a gun exactly once. The gun was propped in a truck bed in Larned, Kansas, in the lot beside my grandma's house. The men, my uncles and cousins, having had their fill of daytime fireworks that pop and stay close to the earth, took turns crouching or flattening their bodies behind the shotgun. They had filled a stash of apples with Tannerite, the same kind of explosive that caused wildfires outside of my hometown, Tucson, Arizona, thanks to a gender reveal party in 2017. Apple after apple was set on a stump; they fired, missed, hit, the gore of apples shattering in smoke.

“Want a turn?” my Uncle Tommy asked me.

I was fifteen, visiting Larned for the Fourth of July. Mom and Grandma watched from the porch and cicadas wrote their thrums on the air. I crawled into the truck bed, slow, like the gun was a tyrannosaurus rex, like I didn't want to wake the gun. If I got anywhere near the front of it, I thought, it would go off like a motion sensor, and I would be dead. I knew this was irrational, but the animal part of me sensed death nearby.

Larned pushed its muggy air down on me. In position, I eyed the apple through the crosshair. When I shot, it hit. The apple exploded like a rain of autumn leaves.

That night, we celebrated the Fourth with hundreds of dollars' worth of fireworks strapped to an unhinged door, a fuse threaded between them so they would all go off at once. I turned my face up towards the falling ash, the burnt bits of paper, that afternoon's fear replaced with wonder. And when the police came out because it was illegal to shoot fireworks in Larned, the men made a quiet, hostile line before them, saying, without speaking, that they would celebrate this country however they saw fit.

### Primary election cycle, 2015

At Vineyard City Church in Tucson, Arizona, Dad paced behind the podium. During all his years as a pastor, he had made it a point never to talk politics. The Vineyard was a scrappy church; when we moved to Tucson in 2001 so that Dad could be its senior pastor, we discovered that most of the congregation had left with his predecessor. So we were a church of twenty in a repurposed YMCA downtown, and we worshipped in a comically large gym. In those days, the church grew because people experiencing homelessness found us, because formerly incarcerated people found us, because people found a place where they didn't feel judged, where they could smoke by the front door. Dad needed everyone to feel welcome; it was important to him, and it was how he understood Jesus. In those days, my tween and teenage days, he wouldn't even tell me how he voted.

Now it was 2015, I was 23, and I had moved home after college, struggling to start my career. The church retained its come-as-you-are legacy, but we finally had a building of our own, and the congregation was a healthy—albeit smaller than Dad wanted, always—one hundred or so. The room was full that morning, and Dad had a sheepishness that was unusual during his sermons.

“I would never normally do this,” he said, “but I have a call on my heart.” At that point in the primaries, it was clear that Donald Trump would be the Republican Party's candidate for the presidency. Dad quoted, ““When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists.””

Dad quoted, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and

you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.”

Dad went on like this, reading a quote from Trump, then a quote from Jesus. He did not smile. As he read, a Mexican American woman whose family had been part of the church for years stood and left, and never came back. Later, I learned that the only member of her family who’s not a Trump supporter is her daughter, who is queer, and married to a woman, and who I thought the family supported.

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Flying home after a Vineyard pastors’ conference in Colorado Springs, Mom and Dad happened to be on the same plane as Bernie Sanders. He was en route to Tucson for a rally the same evening at the bandshell in Reid Park. Dad shook his hand in the aisle while boarding. “My daughter will be at your rally tonight,” he said. We would laugh, later, teasing Mom: Bernie proceeded to shake her hand, and she returned it, but she didn’t recognize him in person, wondered why this random man was greeting her.

At the back of the plane, in line for the bathroom, Dad approached him again. “I just wanted to let you know that I’m a pastor, and I’m praying for you,” Dad said. At baggage claim, Bernie found him again to thank him.

Later that afternoon, my longtime best friend Lyric and I stood in line to enter the roped-off grass in front of the bandshell, to stand at the top of that gentle slope and peer across the crowd. In line, we watched a guy our age lope parallel to the line, his dark hair to his ears, wire glasses, olive skin. “Is that David Fan?” I asked. He waved.

I had gone to middle school and high school with David—gifted programs and A.P. classes—and Lyric had gone to our high school, too. I had a massive crush on David in sixth

and seventh grade: one of the most thrilling moments of middle school was when he danced with me at Audrey Zeldin's Bat Mitzvah afterparty.

We greeted him. "I haven't seen you in ages," I said. "What are you up to?"

He told us he was living in an apartment by himself. He had a programming background, but it seemed like he didn't have a job, although he didn't say so explicitly. David waited with us in line for half an hour at least; we played word games, inched forwards toward the gates. There was a sadness to him that I felt whenever certain high school friends came across my Facebook feed: the ones who'd stayed in Tucson for college, who dropped out midway through, who were working at sandwich shops and smoking weed. They all seemed duller now, and meeker, like they had squandered their potential and they knew it. The stakes were high for former gifted children.

I knew that same sadness. After graduating college in May of 2014, I had spent a miserable six months interning in Chicago, cold-bitten at bus stops and the platform for the El, riding an hour one way just to work at a coffee shop. Then I tried—and failed—to find work in the San Francisco Bay Area. I came home to Tucson defeated. Then, one day, I was grabbing coffee with a friend when I overheard the women behind me say "writing," say "journalism," say "arts."

"Excuse me," I said, turning. "I'm sorry for eavesdropping, but I'm a writer."

"I run a new local newspaper," one of the women said.

We exchanged info, and after sending her a sample of my work, she enthusiastically onboarded me as an arts and culture journalist. *I've made it*, I thought. I interviewed local filmmakers, cabaret performers, storytellers; drank craft cocktails and ate artisanal pizza. I saw my work in print. It had taken me a year, but I'd found a job that mattered to me after

college. And then, within months, the paper's funds ran dry; we had failed to sell anything close to enough ads, and the seed money that the editor in chief had been given was spent.

"Fuck it," I said, after a good cry. "I'll go work at Starbucks." And for once, the career goal I'd stated was prophetic, and I wound up at the place where English majors go to let their dreams die.

I remember many days, within that first year out of college, that I laid in bed all day and wanted to die. Days when it was almost impossible to eat, let alone cook. I had gone to a college prep high school, I had been conditioned since middle school to believe that I was gifted, to expect myself to be successful. Everyone at my school had been through that. I had massive privilege: I was white, I had parents who supported me financially and emotionally, I had gone to a pricey liberal arts university. But the job market was still horrendous. In those miserable post-grad days, I forgot everything about myself, except that I had failed to secure a career.

Once we were finally standing before the bandshell, David split off from us to find some friends. There was mariachi music; a young child spoke about his parents' deportation; Congressman Raúl Grijalva introduced Bernie Sanders. And then Bernie came out, and I heard his voice for the first time—a lower pitch than I'd expected—and he spoke of universal healthcare, of taxing the rich. I felt a near-spiritual geysering when he named that U.S. unemployment figures did not account for how many Americans were underemployed, many of them young. I felt so acknowledged, and truly, for the first time, politically energized beyond my cynicism. The crowd cheered and applauded Bernie under the depths of a night-black desert sky, and I felt like maybe there could be a future for me, after all. After hours of

standing, Lyric and I dipped out for five-dollar margaritas at Chili's, both of us thrumming with hope.

### Interlude

In those miserable days, when I hated myself because I did not have a career, I heard a voice in my head, clear as day, say, "Remember who you are." Maybe my subconscious was just dredging up an old *Lion King* quote (later, I would get the words tattooed on my thigh, and a friend would ask, "Are you going to get Mufasa, too?"), but it felt like a message. Because I had forgotten. I had forgotten that, from infancy to age 21, I was a person who did not care about the idea of career. I had forgotten that I was fiery, smart, funny, creative, and talented. I'd forgotten the choreography I'd done for high school dance class, the times I'd sung solos with the school jazz band and the Tucson Girls Chorus, the novels I wrote as a teen. I'd forgotten that I was loved by my friends and family, that I had a big heart, that in college I'd learned to be vulnerable and a good listener and to make space for my friends' emotions. I'd forgotten that I'd traveled, and dreamed, and cared, that I had friends in Paris and Korea and Scotland. I had forgotten the first two decades of my life, thinking they didn't matter.

I hated Starbucks at first, but then, I came to enjoy the people and the work. I made friends with my coworkers, laughing riotously or swapping stories of fuckboys and bad sex during our 4 a.m. opening shifts, all the while charging whipped cream canisters or lining the display case with pastries.

Under the care of my doctor, I began my ongoing journey with antidepressants. I got involved with a local performance group called F\*ST! Female Storytellers, started taking community-offered writing classes with a woman who became a mentor. Lyric and I began

hosting a weekly radio show, played dreamy, synthy, sexy R&B. I began to feel alive again, because my life was no longer all about work.

### General election cycle, 2016

“You have to vote,” I told my coworkers on a day when our boss, the optometrist, wasn’t in. “Not voting is as good as voting for Trump.”

There were five of us, two vision therapists and three primary care coordinators, including me. We had a friendly dynamic when the doctor wasn’t around. I hadn’t even questioned that my coworkers, two of whom were Latinx, would not support Trump. But my imperative quieted the break room.

“I’m certainly not voting for Hillary,” Shannon said, careful.

“She’s not my top pick,” I admitted. “I was hoping for Bernie.”

“I like him,” said Rick, who was always jokey, smiling out of habit even now. “If he’d

been the nominee, I would have voted democrat.”

“I certainly don’t love Trump,” said Veronica, “but I feel good about the people around him.”

I had been working as a patient care coordinator at the eye doctor’s office for the better part of a year by then; I considered it my first big-girl job. I was still at Starbucks, too. My work weeks ran Monday to Saturday; I woke up at 3:30 a.m. on the days I sold coffee. I was torn whether I should keep both jobs or quit one—and if so, which one. With my degree and my limited work experience, there seemed few jobs with better benefits than Starbucks: health insurance at half time, stocks that vested immediately, free food and drinks, and, most importantly, free Spotify Premium. My office job paid better but came with no benefits.



There had been an office manager at the optometrist's, but she was fired before I started, and the doctor clung to authority like a drowning person grabbing at a lifeboat. Although she owned the business, she had no MBA, no business savvy, and supplemented her own income by working at Costco Optical part-time. She specialized in vision therapy—essentially, physical therapy for vision—a field largely unknown to the general public. On top of that, she charged exorbitantly, which meant that securing new patients was forever an uphill climb. Insurance was resistant to cover our costs. A friend from my church, a colleague of the doctor's, had recommended me for the job, knowing how inadequate I felt in my professional life—not knowing how the doctor conducted herself with her staff, how she cried in front of us at least once a month because her business was always in the red.

There seemed a constant rotation of people quitting or being fired. Amber, another PCC, had quit and then come back, shortly before I started, and was essentially doing the work of the office manager, but without the authority or paycheck. For some reason, the doctor hired two PCCs in addition to me and Amber. One was a vision therapist who had just moved to the area, and had been misled in interviews about what her job at our office would actually be. She quit within a week. The other new hire, Veronica, was going to handle insurance, a facet of the job I struggled to understand.

There were many of those facets. The doctor wanted us to totally rework a new patient portal system, to essentially use it in a way it had not been designed; Amber stayed late and got headaches trying to make it happen. I was good at triage, fielding phone calls, sorting and handling basic paperwork, but I hated the work and most of the time I had to pretend that I knew what I was doing. Once, when Veronica and I made a scheduling mistake, the doctor called all three of us into her office, sat silent and hunched over, her

hands in prayer like she was posing for the Gram, face red, until we all arrived. Then she yelled at us for minutes about how we “dropped the fucking ball.”

When she was over, I spoke. “I own the fact that I made a mistake,” I said. “It’s one I haven’t made before and that I won’t make again. But I won’t be sworn at in the workplace. It’s unprofessional.”

Later, when I was fired, I wondered if it was because I stood up to her.

## November 8th, 2016: Election Day

The people around me thought that Hilary would win, but in the days before Election Day, I had a bad feeling that I couldn’t shake. On Election Night, I couldn’t stand to watch the slow totaling of the results, ticking towards Trump. I texted Lyric. “Meet me at Sidecar.”

Of course it was empty on a Tuesday, only a patron or two at the barstools. One of Lyric’s and my favorite Tucson bars, Sidecar—sexy, dim-lit, and blue—was the site of many of my first dates, and also the only place I ever stole something: on impulse and a dare, I put a little matcha-green bowl in my purse. Lyric and I opined the state of the country over cocktails, knowing without knowing that Trump would win, had won. We were so bleak, so livid that the next time we went to Sidecar, the bartender said, “Weren’t you here on Election Night?”

We drove home. Lyric, who’d distanced herself from a toxic family, lived on and off at my parents’ house, with me. Mom and Dad, grim-faced, held us as we cried, tried to hear and reassure us. It was unreal, but a man who was foul and narcissistic and incompetent had secured the presidency, despite having lost the popular vote.

I remember laying in the guest room, which had become Lyric’s room, the both of us red-eyed on her bed. I remember that there was no hope.

November 9th, 2016

Shortly before I was fired from the optometrist's office, she gave me a performance review. I scored well overall—of note here, I was given a perfect score on attendance. The doctor didn't actively supervise us, so her assessment largely consisted of guessing. There were three of us doing the same job, so if one of us couldn't make it to work, the arrangement had always been that we communicated that to the other two, even if it was a phone call or a text the morning of. It was an informal system that had been informally approved by the doctor.

So, on Election Night, I texted Veronica, who, along with Amber, I considered a friend. "I can't do this," I said. "I'm not coming to work tomorrow."

The next morning, I received a call from the doctor. I didn't answer. So she sent me an email announcing my termination. She wrote:

I need employees that I can count on to show up to work and do their job. I need employees that have the ability to separate their personal lives and their work lives. I also need employees that have the [business'] best interests as the main priority in all of their actions.

Your inability to come to work today because you were upset over an election outcome and also your inability to tell me directly what your actions were to be has caused me to doubt your need to return to work at all. I have called your cell phone to try to discuss this issue with you and have not received a response yet.

There is no need to bring in your key. I will be changing the locks this morning.

If you have any questions, please feel free to email me. I would prefer to have all future correspondence in writing.

I laid in bed and felt myself emptying out. I didn't speak, didn't cry; for hours, I didn't tell anyone, including my parents or Lyric, that I'd been fired. "This might be the worst day of my life," I thought, blindsided even though—just as Trump seizing the presidency had become an inevitability—it was an inevitability for all of the doctor's employee's that they would either quit or be fired. I wondered what Veronica had said. For a while after, I thought about bringing my case to the EEOC, particularly since I wasn't the only person who'd had a toxic experience working under the doctor. And she'd said other things, like a crass comment when I came home from a trip to Paris where I'd been groped, which Amber and Veronica had learned from a Facebook post I wrote because, for my own well-being, I had to pour it out. But I was also motivated by baser feelings, ones that I felt a lot those days, ones that tented over our country like storm clouds and sticky humid air: deep, black, ugly anger. A desire for vindication, for justice, maybe even for revenge.

### Primary election cycle, 2018

Lyric and I put our feet in the pool while Dad swam laps. "I'm still for Bernie," I said. "Or Elizabeth Warren. If Biden wins the nomination, I'm not voting."

"Yeah..." said Lyric. "I don't know if I'll vote for him, either."

"Like, if it comes down to him or Trump, it's like, 'Which rapist am I voting for?' He's been creepy with women. With girls."

"Creepy how?" Dad asked, an edge to his voice.

This was not long after Biden had gotten in trouble for planting his hands on a young girl's shoulders, hovering behind her.

“It’s not okay to touch women that way,” I said. “Even if it’s just a touch.” Dad knew about my assault in Paris, but I saw him get uncomfortable, get angry—get defensive.

“It’s not the same thing,” he said bitterly.

I swung my legs out of the pool and walked inside without another word.

\*

Dad knocked on my door an hour later, asked if he could come in. “No,” I said.

The next morning, I sat on the couch across from him, finally ready to talk. “That conversation,” I said, “It brought me back to Paris. To the man in the Metro station... coming up to me, and... It’s not just a touch, Dad.”

He didn’t seem as taken aback as I thought he would, when I made that connection. I thought that, had taken my assault into consideration yesterday evening, he wouldn’t have said what he said. He was sorry, but still guarded. “I just wonder,” he said. “All the years I’ve been in ministry, did I do something to creep a woman out? And then, she never told me?”

“No! There’s no way,” I said, knowing my Dad—not only his heart, but his rigid sense of propriety. But later, when I relayed what he’d said to Lyric, she said, “I wonder what he meant. Like, if he was referring to anything.”

I wanted to ask him, but I also didn’t.

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I was happier, mostly, in my life than I was that first year after college—although dating often made me miserable—but there were still times when I felt like I was spinning my wheels, wasting my potential. One day I sat with Mom, sobbing on the couch. “What am I supposed to do?” I asked. “I don’t know how to get started with life.”

Mom looked at me, the one daughter she'd brought into the world, with warm blue eyes. She was an opera singer; she knew the painful path of a career in the arts. "You go to grad school," she answered. "You're a writer, honey. You need to write."

### Summer 2019

I had finished my first year of grad school at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Mom was flying out to visit her Larned family, so I drove out to meet her. I stayed two nights with her in a motel, where I waited at the front desk for minutes before someone came out and gave me a room key. One of my Kansas City friends, a coworker at Starbucks, found something about the idea of small-town Larned hilarious, and so I looked at it with new eyes, nosing out a perfect little souvenir for him at Fort Larned and nearly peeing myself with laughter when he texted me the "Larned National Anthem," which he had just composed, that declared "How brave are thy corn" and mentioned noteworthy town destinations like Pizza Hut and Sonic. When my mom and aunt suggested, on an afternoon drive, that we "drag the gut," I was incredulous. Apparently Larned high schoolers, in their day, had nothing to do but drive down the two-minute stretch of Main Street for hours.

Did I see myself as better than my Larned family, just because I happened to have parents who moved away? Mom and Uncle Charles were the ones who left, Mom and Dad to Chicago and California and Tucson, Charles to Oregon. Tommy moved to another Kansas small town but wound up in Larned again. Loren never left. I was conscious of this, but not fully conscious of my white liberal prejudice against cloying small-town life.

On the day I was to drive back to KC, we ate lunch at Grandma's house, an old converted trailer with an added-on basement. It was me and Mom, Grandma and Loren and his son Dave, who had moved in with Grandma after problems with his marriage and

drinking. Loren was the second oldest of the four siblings; I had long considered him one of the wisest people I know; he's soulful with great depth. I already knew he was conservative; demographically, it was a safe guess, but the picture of him as conservative formed in my mind a few years prior to this visit, when I passed through Larned on the way to Chicago. Loren and Grandma and a couple of my cousins and I got dinner at Pizza Hut, one of Larned's few restaurants, and I told them how I was headed to intern with The Marin Foundation, a nonprofit whose focus was reconciliation between the queer community and the American church. Loren was visibly uncomfortable.

So it surprised me when, on this visit, he mentioned that he'd read the Quran.

"What did you think of it?" I asked, my first mistake. The question put him on the defensive, and he spiraled into political territory, until we were, as we all had been the past few years, at Trump.

"He's David," Loren said of Trump, referring to King David in the Bible. "He's adulterous, and flawed, and he's our leader." Loren had not been perfect; he had great griefs of his own (the biggest difference, of many, between him and Trump: a conscience). Maybe this analogy brought him comfort.

"But David had a great love of the Lord," Mom said, diplomatic. "To liken them overlooks so many of Trump's wrongs."

"What has he done? What is he guilty of?" he demanded.

"Rape" I said. At which point, Loren swung to me, rattled for a moment, before quickly and purposefully forgetting what he had just heard. I don't know how much Loren—and Tommy—read the news; I knew they weren't particularly computer-literate and didn't

need the internet for their work. Loren had surely never heard before that Trump has accrued literal dozens of rape allegations.

At some point, Tom and his wife Casey walked in the front door, and then it was Mom arguing with Loren and me arguing with Tommy, Dave sometimes chiming in on Mom's and my side, Casey chiming in on theirs. After all his fierce defense of Trump, Loren finally cried, "I didn't vote for him!"

"Neither did I," said Tommy.

"I don't think he's very good," Grandma said, leaning towards me with a conspiratorial smile.

Tommy and I had somehow come to the topic of reparations, probably because I was trying to stir shit. "You really think the government is going to put your tax money towards reparations?" he asked. "Even if they say they will?"

"If we hold them accountable, then yes."

"I tell you what," he said, his tone somehow kind. "You pay a little extra in tax money next year, see where it goes. You're swinging for the fences, kiddo," he said. "I'm just trying to do what I can, here and now."

I knew that he and Loren did good in their community. I knew they believed that they faced the same struggles as poor Black people in Larned. I knew they helped their Black neighbors when they were in need. Yet for all their goodness, I thought, for all their wisdom, they couldn't see the forest for the trees. They could only see Larned. They could only see themselves as two old dogs in what they felt was America's underrepresented rural sector.

"We should be taxing the rich," I said. "Jeff Bezos is a billionaire. You don't think it's corrupt to hoard money like that?"



“No,” Tommy said.

At some point in the conversation, I started crying, and cried violently even as I got into my car and started the drive back to KC. The fighting died down, and Mom commended me to her brothers; how eloquent I was, she said. I said my goodbyes, heaving. Uncle Loren held my shoulders, smiled into my eyes with a great warmth. “You’re everything we could have wanted,” he said.

“I love you,” I said.

I haven’t been back to Larned since, in part because of the pandemic, but I have spoken to Loren a few times, on the phone and, even more begrudgingly, on family Zoom calls. I see a distance I never noticed between him and Mom. It isn’t about Trump, not directly. Loren and Tommy stayed in Kansas, worked mechanic and electrician jobs, and now take on the burden of caring for Grandma as she declines into senility. (Once, on the phone, she struggled to describe what the family had eaten for lunch; something rolled and stuffed that sounded Eastern European. Later, Mom and I learned she meant burritos.) Mom and Charles left, many years ago: Mom for the big city and Charles to become a geology professor. They were well-off. They had opportunity that Loren and Tommy did not. As Mom worked to figure out Grandma’s situation with them by phone, speakerphone sometimes, I heard a weariness in Loren’s voice, noted his short answers. I thought about how he and Tommy saw nothing wrong with the existence of billionaires.

#### November 3rd, 2020: Election Day

I had been alone in my apartment for months. I was scared to be alone on Election Night, so I drove four hours north to Mason City, Iowa, where my boyfriend lived. I’d been planning to visit for Halloween anyways, but asked him if I could tack on a couple days

extra. Jared is a journalist; he told me he would be at the office the night of the election and that I could come with. After a night class, I drove to meet him at the Globe Gazette.

The Election Cycle had been busy for Jared all along. He interviewed Biden, Booker, and Buttigieg, covered the state caucuses and the Wing Ding in Clear Lake, one of the many events at which all the Democratic candidates courted Iowa. Since March, though, it felt like he wrote about the pandemic forty hours a week, and he was spent; in that way, election coverage was a welcome break.

At the office, a stable of journalists, all young, sat at their desks, throwing the newest counts back and forth, making phone calls for statements. There were pizza boxes on every available surface, and a TV announcing the unfolding results. I put on my mask to go pee or use the water fountain, stepped in the other room to call Lyric; she lived in Flagstaff now, and her new boyfriend's politics were still in question, and I didn't want her to be alone, either. I played my favorite farming video game to self-soothe. We would be in the office til midnight at least.

Jared went out and walked, smoked, came back, went out and walked. At midnight, we went back to his apartment and slept. We still didn't know, but I was so glad not to be alone.

## Index of Sex and Love

### 1. Longing

a) Recently, a memory from my college days surfaced, seemingly out of nowhere:

I'm at Point Defiance Park with a couple of friends, walking a pebbly narrow stretch of beach. Vashon Island is a chia pet full of pine trees across the Puget Sound. On the flat gray water, jellyfish that look more like over-easy eggs float where the current takes them. Octopi lurk in the depths.

We cross paths with a silver-haired woman accompanied by two friends—or maybe they're her children—who are closer to our age. We exchange hellos, but her eyes stay on me. "Nikki?" she says. "Are you Nikki?"

I shake my head, smiling an apology.

It's not that she's senile; she's not old enough for that. I don't remember her face, but I remember a vibrancy that shot out of her skin. "You look just like my old friend," she says.

Our groups exchange pleasantries—maybe talk about the day, how nice it is to get sun in Tacoma, Washington—then when we say goodbye, she asks, "Can I give you a kiss?"

Drunk off of nature and sun warmth and pleasantness, I agree, and our lips reach towards each other for a peck. She goes her way and I go mine, to bask on Seal Rock and dodge jellies in the freezing water.

- b) That, I suppose, was my first real kiss, although I don't think of it that way. I was a late bloomer, a pastor's daughter, taught to fear sex outside of marriage. I was a fat kid who dreamed of sex and love. I had wanted a kiss for so long.

The kiss I consider my first happened in Greenwich Village on New Year's Eve when I was 21, maybe six months after the kiss with the silver-haired woman. I was with friends, and a friend of a friend tagged along. He was a bartender from Long Island; he gave me major New York Italian vibes—thick black eyebrows, swarthy, that unabashed accent—in spite of his Polish last name (which I know because I Facebook stalked him). Before the night began, our mutual friend Megan told us all about him. Megan had dated him, years ago; he was a great guy, he had a wonderful girlfriend, she was excited to see them both tonight.

He was waiting for us at the cocktail bar; we were much later than we said we'd be. He was drunk. I ordered some rye concoction with a skewered cherry on the rim. His girlfriend was nowhere to be found. He was flirtatious. At midnight we kissed—another peck—and he lifted me up in a hug. Then our group changed locales to a dive bar down the street.

In line for the bathroom, we touched tongues to a Miley Cyrus song. Not a French kiss, just tongues stuck out like she was famous for doing at the time. When I got back from the bathroom, I pulled Megan aside and whispered, “I think he likes me.”

“That’s great!” she said.

“What about his girlfriend?”

“He told me they’re having a rough time right now.”

“Oh. Are they on a break?”

The look in her eyes told me she had no idea. “Yeah!” she slurred, enthusiastic, a beat too late.

I didn’t believe her about the break, but still I let myself be pulled close to him in a slow dance. I kept waiting for the kiss. It was going to happen. He kept complimenting me—in retrospect, I think he was testing the waters, seeing if I wanted it. Clumsily, drunkenly, I pulled away and professed, “I like you.”

“We can work with that,” he said. “I like you, too.”

And then, his tongue was in my mouth, and it tasted whiskey-sweet, and his stubble scratched at me like a flame, and tasted salty, and my cells absorbed every second of sensation, because this was totally new, a man wanting me, a man acting on wanting me.

The bartenders got up on the bar and sprayed champagne across the crowded room. The DJ fired up “Call Me Maybe” and my friends and I screamed, jumped up and down. New Year’s Eve in New York, far away from Times Square, where diapered, dehydrated people who hadn’t moved in eight hours watched the ball drop. It was a perfect night—idyllic for a first kiss—but for days after I felt like the vixen, the temptress, the homewrecker. I wondered if he woke up the next morning, the first day of 2014, regretting what he’d done the night before. I wonder if he told his girlfriend.

c) There’s a bricklayer who is contracted with my property manager, here in Kansas City. He works at my complex now and then. He has eyes like a basset hound’s, brown and wistful, and his sandy hair is thin on top, revealing a patch of skull. I always chat with him, friendly but brief. I don’t know what it is about him—about the attention of a man, which can be terrifying or intoxicating or both—but I fantasize about him stealing up to my apartment. He knocks, softly. I let him in; I’ve been waiting. We spend the whole afternoon in bed. He covers me in the sweat of an honest day’s work, and I banish the suspicion that he probably owns a MAGA hat.

I am twenty-seven now. I have a loving boyfriend of almost two years. I've longed for a boyfriend ever since I was eleven and my hormones exploded. But I still have this dream about the bricklayer. When I was eleven, I fell in love with every other boy I saw—and, every now and then, a girl. I still do.

Any excitement the bricklayer makes me feel holds hands with guilt.

## 2. Trouble

- a) “You’re trouble” is what people say when they’re horny for someone they know they’re either going to leave or be left by. “He’s trouble,” I think, watching an episode of *Dating Around* in which singer Deva Mahal goes on five first dates with five different people in the interest of choosing one person to see again.

*Dating Around* is one of Netflix’s highly produced dating shows, the sexiest on its docket. There’s no narrator, just a lo-fi soundtrack, purple-pink lighting, and seamless editing between the five dates. In the interest of editing, the person doing the dating around wears the same outfit to each first date, meets each suitor at the same restaurant, relocates—if both parties agree—to the same bar. Deva is tall, curvaceous in a high-necked Ulla Johnson dress, aura near-visibly warm. She has a slow, “hee hee hee” kind of laugh that would feel thirteen if she didn’t have a bit of a rasp.

True looks like he might be biracial. He wears a white three-piece suit and a peppery beard—his head is bald. He looks to be in his forties, maybe ten years older than Deva. At first glance, he could be the bari saxophonist in a jazz outfit. When you've heard him talk long enough, he seems like he likes Star Trek. It's his sense of humor, I think.

True's stare is warm, focused on Deva as he listens to the places she's lived: Hawaii, the Pacific Northwest, New Zealand, now New Orleans. He asks about her music. He always has a whisper of a smile. I find him palpably magnetic. If I was the one on a date with him, we'd be in the darkness of his bedroom by the end of the night. He's trouble.

At first, Deva seems like she's into him, but as the conversation progresses you can see her reservations. "I think everybody on the planet is crazy," he says, "and crazy breaks down into two categories. You have homicidal crazy, and suicidal crazy." She looks at him confused, like she's waiting for a punchline. "The best you can hope for is that you don't have a partner that will harm you."

She tells him that she's at a point where she embraces her attraction to women, as well as men. "Mm-hm," he says, with the wickedest little lift of his brow, trying to hide his pleasure. He asks if she would call herself bisexual; she says she doesn't deal in labels. "What about you?" she asks.



“I only date bisexual women,” he says.

“Oh, interesting,” she says. “Why do you think that is?”

True sighs, and it’s clear he’s choosing his words carefully. “Because my attraction to women is such an integral part of who I am, and how I think, and how I see the world, that if you don’t also find women as beautiful and sexy as I do…” He shrugs. It’s a charming answer, but also a crock of shit.

True and Deva share an Uber home; we don’t get to see their time at the bar.

“Another challenge for me is that, in addition to, uh, finding women who are bisexual, is that I’m poly as well,” he reveals.

“You know, I could have pegged you for that,” Deva says.

He goes on, a bit hesitant. “My poly dynamic is myself and some number of women, but no other men.”

Deva scoffs a bit. “So if you’re in a poly relationship, can the women that you date date other men?”

“No.”

“Well, don’t you think that that’s, like, a bit one-sided?”

“No.”

“You don’t think that that’s sexist?”

“No.”

Deva closes her eyes, rolls them, scowls. On a spiritual level, she is escaping this cab and transcending to some kind of queer paradise where polyamory is only ever ethical. She doesn’t think he’s trouble. She thinks he’s a chauvinist pig.

And yet, I think, there’s a dangerous appeal when you know right away that you’re attracted to someone who throws up red flags left and right. There’s a thrill to knowing that your connection to them, like everything else in the world, is impermanent. Maybe it’s a freeing feeling: even though you want this asshole, you won’t be hitched to them forever.

At the end of each episode of *Dating Around*, we get a glimpse of who’s been chosen for the second date. Deva waits on the corner with her bike, in sneakers and jeans. A breath of suspense later, we see she’s picked Maria, a blonde, petite

artist who's low-key and funky. Maria, the only one Deva hugged at the start of their first date. They seem so happy, and so uncomplicated, and from the jump they seem like longtime friends, and even though Deva tells one of the men she's not a kiss on the first date kind of girl, she agrees to a kiss when Maria asks. They touch their hands to their own faces with bashfulness and delight.

### 3. Lust

- a) The other night, my boyfriend J and I watched *The Age of Innocence*, a Scorsese film (based on an Edith Wharton novel) set on the lip of the 20th Century, in which Daniel Day-Lewis' character marries out of obligation but lusts for another woman his entire life. It is unclear why he chooses to marry the woman he does, other than that she seems to represent polite society; a perfect, vacuous (in the protagonist's eyes) ambassador. "They did Winona Ryder dirty," I think. The woman he lusts for—they call it love, but I am not convinced—is his wife's cousin, played by Michelle Pfeiffer. Both edges of her mouth are smirks, an argument for her casting as Catwoman. They liaison a handful of times. The camera always goes to their hands, jeweled, gloved in velvet, a wedding band on Day-Lewis. The few brief moments that lust plugs into its socket. J's parents watch with us: his father snores and his mother keeps calling Day-Lewis a piece of shit. When his father, a guileless Vietnam vet, awakes, he barks, "What tangled webs we weave." J and I laugh.

b) Lust is a yearning that does not want to be filled. Lust is escapism. Lust is, I suppose, its own kind of innocence: the naivety to live an inner—and sometimes, outer—fantasy without ever fully accepting that it can never be made real. When I began flirting with lust—or, more accurately, inviting other people to participate in my lust—I understood lust as the thrill of betraying my Christianity, and with it all the nice, upstanding people I'd attended church with for years. Because when you're the pastor's daughter, you belong to the whole church.

Christian lust must internalize sex as dirty, and for a while I did. I lied to my parents about where I was going, as if I was a teenager again and not in my early twenties. I kept quiet in dark rooms and savored the irony that the first man to penetrate me was a Satanist. I played the role of a coquette, one who made an art of giving head, eyes gleaming lust and innocence together. Unlike the prodigal son, I loved rolling around in the mud.

## Index of Desire

### 1. The Birds and the Bees

- a) I learned to hate men early, though back then we called them boys. It was kindergarten, and the popular girl in the daisy-dotted romper stood atop the jungle gym like a preacher. “Girls and boys can’t be friends,” she declared. “Stay away from boys.” Descending, she invited me to play Spice Girls. I would have to be Scary Spice, though; the others were already taken.

This introduced a problem: my best friend in the class was a boy named Archer. He was a perfectly adorable little boy, although it was his friend Steven who I like-liked. Steven was tow-headed and more of a concept. Archer had a round, olive face, dark hair that curled close to his head, and a warm, gap-toothed smile. Mom took me to Archer’s house often for playdates. Once I peed in his bed and refused to get up, not wanting anyone to see what I’d done.

In the hall one day, I told Archer we had to pretend not to like each other. And yet I was surprised when, a week later, I returned from recess and found my drawing all ripped up. I don’t know how I knew that Archer had done it. *Maybe he’s playing the part*, I thought, but still I felt betrayed. It didn’t occur to me that maybe I had hurt him; it wouldn’t occur to me that I could hurt any man at all for many, many years.

b) Just as early as hate begins, so does desire. Not long ago, I remembered something I hadn't thought of in years: a sleepover at my fourth-grade best friend Cecily's house. My family had just moved to Tucson, Arizona from the San Francisco Bay Area, so I was particularly pliable, and Cecily wound up being one of the bossiest best friends I ever had. We spent that night in her bed, where she initiated some kind of nighttime play—it probably had to do with Sailor Moon—where we were kidnapped by goblins, or maybe orcs. We took turns being the orc and being the kidnapped maiden. The main thing I remember is her simulating oral sex on me, her tongue lapping the air in a loud, slurpy way. I couldn't tell you for sure how far we went, if we actually touched each other, but I remember the air hung sweaty and smelled like sex.

c) I think, sometimes, about the day my friend Kayla and I drove from Redwood City to Santa Cruz, spent the afternoon lolling in the sand at Natural Bridges beach. A college friend, Kayla had relocated to the San Francisco Bay Area after graduating a year before me—although she was a few years older. Kayla was one of the wilder, more charismatic people I'd ever known. When she was fifteen, she ran away from home and lived in Colombia. She knew her mind, could hold her own against the strongest debaters, was obsessed with a Russian man she'd met a month before who kept trying to pressure her into sex.

At the time, we were both still Christian—we had met through a campus Christian ministry—but our minds were digging new rivets in the sand. Under the gray sky,

we drank wine we'd smuggled into the park and watched the waves slap the fat legs of the rock bridge.

"If you could have sex with anyone in the world," she said, "who would it be? No consequences, no questions asked."

"Oh, god. I don't know. Tom Hiddleston? Andrew Garfield?"

"Come on," she said. "Don't be boring."

So I said, "My friend Danae's husband."

Kayla took a long sip of wine. "That's more like it."

"He's so hot," I said. "Like, stupid hot. He's kind of got that dark-haired, New York Italian look that I like." I squinted against the sun. "It doesn't help that they've had marriage problems for like, years."

"What about you?" I asked. "Would you choose B?" B was the Russian.

Kayla sighed with a horniness that was uniquely marriage-aged Christian. "I don't know. Yeah, I probably would. All the times he's moved my hand to the crotch of his jeans while we kiss... sometimes I just want to give in and let him fuck me."

I was a pastor's daughter and, at twenty-two, a virgin. Unlike me, Kayla had not grown up in a Christian household. Her family background was turbulent, and, as far as I knew, she found Jesus in her early adulthood. She had been engaged once, had already had sex. But that was almost a decade ago. What I'd always heard from Christians who used to have partners was that it's much harder not having sex when you've already had it. As if sex is a Pandora's box. As if having sex changes you and you can never change back.

"Okay," I said, my turn to ask a question. "What are your fetishes?"

She thought for a moment. "Bondage. And being whipped. Even when I was a kid playing pretend, I wanted my friends to tie me up and whip me. Like, even before it was sexual—or I knew that it was sexual, rather—I wanted that."

"I wanted to be tied up as a kid, too," I admit, telling Kayla how I used to daydream about a body going rigor mortis on top of me so that I couldn't move. We laughed, tipsy now. "Oh my god," I said, "do you remember that cartoon *Jungle Book*? The snake, Kaa?"

Kayla nodded.



“I used to imagine, like, on the regular, that Kaa was hypnotizing me, or maybe just some stand-in woman, and then he’d kidnap me—her—and just... constrict her.”

“Yeah?” Kayla said. “Were you into that?”

“I was, although I didn’t recognize it as sexual, either. When my mom would turn out the lights, I would always daydream until I fell asleep. Usually it was fantasy worlds that I made up. But if that took too long and I still couldn’t sleep, I would imagine Kaa.”

We talked like that for hours, about sex, about how big and unmet our wants were. At some point, I finally stood and walked into the ocean, let the waves toss me around for a while until a particularly surf-worthy one dragged me across the sand like an eraser on a chalk board. I wasn’t hurt, or taken away from shore, but my bikini bottoms were so sand-filled that I threw them out.

## 2. Fight or Flight

- a) Four years earlier, as a college freshman in the Pacific Northwest, I got involved with the blues dancing scene in Seattle and Tacoma. Blues dancing was a cousin of swing, slower and sultrier, and it happened both in clubs and in the homes of strangers. That year, I drove the forty-five minutes from Tacoma to Seattle most

weekends, slipping into the hardwood-floored living room of some computer engineer, or the hundred-year-old home (clawfoot tub in the upstairs bathroom) of a retiree, where torsos pressed against each other as a test, a kind of speaking. The air sang with good-smelling sweat and Fiona Apple-esque selections from somebody's iPhone. I would fall into someone's arms, man or woman, leading or following, forgetting, ideally, for a moment, my own 18-year-old awkwardness, the strained relationship I had with my own body, the way I felt undesired.

I didn't recognize yet that what I felt on the dance floor was arousal. Sometimes this arousal felt good, like when, mid-dance, a man with a pink baseball cap and stubble pushed me up against a wall. Sometimes it felt cloying, poured in the same petri dish as my fight-or-flight response. The time I danced with the lithe, Eastern European man in his forties or fifties, a regular on the blues dance scene, and he stroked my neck for the entire song. Or another older man who always seemed to find me as soon as I arrived, sliding up in his socks like he was twenty years younger, to smile and greet me and ask me for a dance. Too uncomfortable to say no, I let him put his hand on the part of my back that was bare and breathe into my ear. Those moments were horrible and inescapable; he disgusted me; still, I think of him from time to time when I touch myself.

Sarah was one of the first friends I made in college. We bonded first over our mutual homesickness; everybody else was trying their damndest to have fun so loudly the whole campus would know, but we were melancholic. We bonded

further because she loved social dancing. Sarah came to blues events sometimes, but with a formal dance background, she favored more established forms like swing and tango. And tango is where she met Demetri.

Demetri didn't breathe in her ear, and he was certainly more charming than the man who always tracked me down at blues dances, but he was forty-something, and aggressive. Whenever Sarah talked about him in the student union, sitting beneath the massive painting of Paul Bunyan, she winced. I empathized, but didn't know what to say, and the conversation moved to younger men. Neither of us had ever had a boyfriend.

"I just feel like, once you and I start dating, we'll suddenly have men all over us," she said. It felt true, so I agreed.

Sarah was tall and elegant. She had a habit of shifting her part from one side of her head to the other. I would watch her hair drape into place in slow motion—the pace a flower opens—and settle, sun-gold.

She came to my dorm room after winter break. "I have so much to tell you," she said, splayed on the bed.

“I went to tango this weekend,” she said, “and I saw Demetri. We wound up talking, in his van, and he told me that he wants to date me. And I want to date him, too.”

I said nothing, stared at the post of the flat pack bed, its blondeness in the warm light.

“Then we had sex. He has a mattress in the back of his van.”

“How could you do that?” I asked, crying. “He’s old. He’s a creep. I thought you hated him!”

She hardened, something callous in her that I didn’t recognize. “I feel powerful with a man between my legs.”

### 3. Hindsight

- a) This is what I learned in the following years: when the object of your want doesn’t see you, doesn’t want you back, then desire is a game with no stakes. Girls and young women play it often and innocently, as we are taught to. It’s fun—and, even more than that, intimate—to confide your deepest desires to another girl, another woman. But when the object of your affection sees you back,

you might find yourself the object. Desire is suddenly complicated. And rarely, if ever, does desire remain safe.

- b) In the years between college and grad school, I went home to Tucson, Arizona. Not wanting to spend my social hours with the people who went to my high school—to do so, I thought, was to regress—I entrenched myself in the downtown scene. There is a phenomenon in downtown Tucson—and, I’m sure, a similar one in every city that feels like a small town—called being “Tucson famous:” If your yacht rock band headlines at Hotel Congress, you’re Tucson famous. If you’re forty years old, dress like a rockabilly, and own a barely-scraping-by mom & pop on Fourth Avenue, you’re Tucson famous. I became Tucson famous because I performed with a group called F\*ST! Female Storytellers, hosted a radio show on a local station, and participated in readings around town. Tucson was also where I started my sex life outside of sex with myself, where I not only desired, but became the desired object.

In the thick of my return to Tucson, I was invited to a private Facebook group called “I Don’t Fuck with You.” There were hundreds of local women and queer folks in the group, all warning each other about the predators in our community. One after another, Tucson famous men were implicated. The head of my radio station was one, though I already knew that; he’d said disgusting things to a friend and fellow DJ—she was the kind of woman who’d jack off a coyote and drink its piss, he said, whatever mythical kind of woman that is—then fired her when she

tried to retaliate. I questioned, many times, if I should quit the station, or if the presence of more female DJs on air was worth silently co-signing his abuse.

I already knew about one of my exes. After we broke up, I learned that he'd raped a friend of a friend of a friend in the darkness of that person's apartment. Friends and acquaintances commented on the post that called him out, describing their own instances when he was creepy and persistent. His ex-wife chimed in and affirmed all the stories about him.

This particular ex fancied himself a writer: an MFA dropout (which, now that I'm in grad school, I no longer fault him for), he ran a blog and called it a newspaper. When he grew cold to me, suddenly, and we broke up—well before “I Don't Fuck with You”—I told him he would only ever be a just-okay writer, and I would go on to do great things. I think about that moment and still feel powerful, because I know I hurt him. I think about how, after we broke up, he came to one of my storytelling shows, and then one of my readings. How, when I asked him to steer clear for the time being, his texts back got very “poor me,” even complaining that he'd had to remove himself from other spaces based on exes' wishes (his lack of self-awareness was thick as mist). And then, he texted what a talented writer I was, which was probably just a ploy to get me to rescind my boundary—but in the moment, his words sunk into my shoulders, deflating them like balloons. “Why is he being kind to me?” I wondered. One part of me was touched, another part disappointed.

He hadn't raped me, I thought. Or if he had, I never recognized it, because I wanted sex imposed on me, had always wanted sex imposed on me, to be dominated and objectified and subjected to the selfish whims of a man. Now, though, reading through other women's stories about him, I thought about the time I rode his dick, and he put his finger up my asshole, waited minutes before asking, "Is this okay?" "Yes," I answered, although the feeling was strange at best. He took that for consent to fuck my ass later that night, no further permission or communication required.

- c) In Kansas City, where I now live, I'm scrolling Instagram in bed when I see an account called "Surviving Romo." Romo was one of the men I casually saw during that Tucson chapter, although "saw" is the wrong word for it: we sexted, but never went on a single date. He was Tucson famous for his live monthly late-night talk show at Flycatcher bar, playing drums in a few local bands, and bartending all over downtown. It's not that I didn't want to go out with him back then; we never did because he was incredibly flaky and, as I later discovered, had no respect for women and their time.

I click on the account, read through the stories, which are all submitted anonymously: stories of being pursued by Romo even though he had a girlfriend (he always had a girlfriend, or two, or three), stories of him getting drunk so he'd be brave enough to all but force someone to take him home with them. How he

pushed them to cuddle, then turned cuddling to rape. How he shared naked pictures and video of women without their consent. I learn that he has been evicted and lost his license because of a DUI. He moves quickly into relationships so that he can have a place to live and someone to drive him to band practice. “Tucson shouldn’t be a safe space for local celebrities to abuse women under the radar while [their] boys have [their] back,” one contributor says. Story after story after story.

I don’t consider myself his victim, but he probably still has my nudes. He probably shared them all across downtown, since that is a pattern of his. He wasted my time. He made me Tucson famous, maybe, in a violent, violating way: men at bars on Fourth Avenue and University Boulevard taking lingering looks at my breasts. I messaged “Surviving Romo” with my story.

- d) I removed myself from “I Don’t Fuck with You” after 24 hours because it was too triggering. The group apparently didn’t last much longer; some group members were going to the men who’d been named as predators, warning them, so the woman who created the group, a local activist, archived it days later. The radio station owner threatened to sue her; that was his go-to move whenever unfavorable information about him spread. Learning from that whirlwind, I never subscribed to “Surviving Romo,” but I still check the account from time to time.



The thing is, whenever I learn about men who are predatory, men who move remorselessly through my circles, men who, most importantly, I've dated, I observe an awful thought, an awful impulse, in myself: "Why not me?" This is really two questions in one: the first, "Why did they treat me better than they treated their victims?" is a relative question; I wasn't ever treated well. The tacit, darker question is: "Why didn't they want to rape me?" What is it about me that wasn't desirable enough to overtake whatever better, moral side they had, to flick on some animal part of their brain where sex and morality live in separate spheres? Rationally, I understand that this is a fallacy about rape: that at its core, rape is not about being overcome by desire or attraction, but about exercising a delusion of power over another, autonomous body. Rape is not a rapist going into a fugue state; it is a choice they make. A rapist is not out of control; their aim is to control.

When I look at porn, it is usually hentai, Japanese animated porn. There, I can read comics about women being raped without having to wonder what conditions were like for the actresses on set. (I almost always consume male rapist-female victim porn, which is not to say that that is the only rape fantasy scenario—and certainly not to say that rape can only be perpetrated by men, or only happen to women.) Taking in drawings of bodies instead of real bodies on film, my own rape fantasies stay separate from reality. I don't like rape porn where the woman being raped isn't experiencing physical pleasure; I find it distasteful. In the narratives that light me up, speak to my deepest fantasies, the women feel ecstatic,

orgasmic in spite of themselves. The men find power not just in taking pleasure for themselves, but in forcing pleasure onto the women.

I look back at my conversation with Kayla, about wanting to be bound and whipped and choked from childhood on. How we were both still deeply entrenched in systems of conservative Christianity on the day we went to Natural Bridges beach. I realize that the fantasy of rape removes me from having to make the immoral choice to have sex outside of marriage. Maybe the women in these rape fantasies secretly *want* sex—maybe it’s the thing they think about most—but, for one social reason or another, they can’t. Maybe some of them are pastor’s daughters.

- e) Danae, whose husband was stupid hot, divorced him after he began a relationship with a woman from his work. Danae liked to say her then-husband was “a David in every sense,” a reference to King David of the Bible, who was passionate in both his love of God and his adultery. David and Danae were church friends of mine, they belonged to the congregation I grew up in. They were about fifteen years older than me, but I had always been drawn towards friendships with older people. Back then, when I was in my early twenties and she was nearly forty, I spent hours in Danae’s apartment, praying, commiserating about her troubles and mine (mine largely had to do with fuckboys and not knowing what to do with my life).

Once, when their divorce process had begun, she reminded me of a Fourth of July party they had hosted at their old house in the foothills: at sunset, the brunt of our Bible study members sat on the back patio as fireworks shot over the desert. I sat on the porch swing next to Danae's daughter, who was six or seven then, and she laid her head in my lap.

"I kind of thought, when that happened, that you might marry David," Danae told me with a conspirator's smile. "That you could be a stepmom to her."

It was one of the most perverse things I'd ever heard, and it was thrilling. I matched her grin. "Maybe in an alternate universe," I said, and she agreed; I pictured David pushing me up against a counter, David eating my face and holding me tight, David in the throes of passion for me.

#### 4. Awakening

- a) What I didn't say is that I followed Kayla to California. I was fresh out of college, lost; she was always so brazen, which was one of the things I admired most. And she wanted me to come to the Bay Area, to chase a high-powered career, to go out drinking and dancing with her (never to enter her studio apartment, though; it was too much of a mess). I couch-surfed with family friends and responded to job openings.

On that Natural Bridges beach day, I told Kayla that I wanted to write a story in the style of *The Great Gatsby*, in the sense that the narrator isn't the main character, not really; that sometimes I thought it was more interesting to be the observer, the Nick Carraway, rather than the object of observation, however eccentric and intoxicating a life the object lead.

"I don't agree with that at all," she said.

- b) The Bay Area is an unreal place. On my neighborhood walks in Silicon Valley, not far from the Google headquarters, I probably saw more self-driving cars than people. At gentrifier beer bars in Oakland, I met people my age or a few years older who were getting rich after teaching themselves how to code, or with small businesses they operated on Instagram. One of my couch surfing stops was with a family who'd made billions from the husband's early involvement in Netscape; he was their sixth employee. I slept in their RV in the front drive—which is where I first discovered hentai.

The RV bed was the size of the bedroom. I closed myself in for the night and scrolled Imgur, burnt out on the job search. In the comments of one post, someone had linked hentai of the "hole-in-wall" variety, in which, traditionally, a woman gets her midsection stuck in a hole in the wall, so that her head and torso are on one side, and everything below the waist is on the other. I didn't know the tropes of the genre—or anything about hentai, then—but I clicked.

Clicking led me down the rabbit hole of a full hentai website. I scrolled covertly, as if one of the many Christian mentors of my life was going to pop up from behind some curtain and yell “Repent!” Soon, though, I was too horny to really be worried. Besides the women in walls—surrounded by men who would rather fuck them than help them—there were women who were powerless against train molesters, some who even offboarded with the men, coerced to love hotels. I was on fire while reading a comic about a high school girl who was blackmailed by a lecherous, foul old teacher. Like I wanted that to be me. More than anything.

Although I’d experimented with masturbation before, I had never got it right (if there is a “right;” if masturbating to orgasm is the one goal, the one “right” way to do it). Now, though, my body was so on that it was easy to know what to do. I touched myself as the teacher fucked the student on the high school rooftop, and I rode a new wave, my body coursing with elation from the ceiling to the bed.

- c) The next morning, I woke to discover that I was tingling on the brink of arousal, just as immediate and distracting as it had been the night before. I touched myself again—in bed, in the shower. I spiraled, journaling pages on pages as if I was solving the moral quandary of the universe; I paced the RV and prayed to God and swore I would never masturbate again. I pressed my crotch against the edge of one of the RV’s dining chairs, but then decided I couldn’t do that to my family friends’ property, use it that way. I Googled terms like “arousal won’t go away”

and read about a woman with some condition that made it so she couldn't drive; could, at any public moment, suddenly come without prompting. She lived with her desire permanently activated, like a threat. I was supposed to attend a small group at a local church that afternoon; I got myself off right before heading over, hoping to abate the tingling.

Kayla and I met for drinks at a sexy red-toned bar in Redwood City. I whispered to her over the table what had happened the night before. "You're going to be fine," she said, bemused. "Honestly, I wish that would happen to me. Enjoy it while it lasts."

Merging onto the freeway afterwards, I inched my hand between my legs—then yanked it away, paranoid, like someone could see me. I guess that in the land of self-driving cars and drone deliveries it wasn't such an irrational fear to have.

It would be years before I bought my first sex toy—a bullet vibe at a sex shop in Atlanta, Georgia—but it took much less time for me to accept masturbation, to shrug off the moral framework around it. Kayla was right; the loud, ever-present wave of desire subsided after a day or two, and never came back in the same way.

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## VITA

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