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How Do You Squash a Cricket? A Collection of Essays

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How Do You Squash a Cricket? A Collection of Essays

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

December 22, 2016

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How Do You Squash a Cricket?

🎵 “Hey, I hear the voice of a preacher from the back room, calling my name and I follow just to find you. I trace the faith to a broken down television and put on the weather...I wanna get better, better, better, be—”

Thump.

I turn down the radio as my hands clench the wheel, forcing the whites of my fingernails to turn red in the death grip. I try in vain to drive forward, but am thrust back. Losing the war with my mind, I am brought back to the site of the *thump*. *It was a pothole. Just a pothole.* Logically, I know this is true, but a miniscule voice in my head overpowers: *Turn around. You just hit someone. They're lying there dying and it's all your fault.*

I circle back, stretching my neck out to survey the area. My heart stops and sweat pours as I catch a peripheral glimpse of a red flannel shirt lying on a front lawn. The voice in my head screams as it mutates into a full-blown demon, grabbing the wheel and pulling the car to the side of the road. I cautiously approach the scene, taken aback by the display of the figure's insides strewn across the lawn. This victim, a tattered and forgotten autumnal scarecrow, laid half-buried in snow. *It was a pothole and this is a scarecrow and I'm nine minutes late.*

It's not because I watch too many horrifying Lifetime movies and it's not because I'm an incompetent driver. There is something alive inside of me that ignites flames of unwarranted guilt and paranoia that burn me to my core. Pinnochio got Jiminy Cricket and I got his overly-critical cousin who cannot stop chirping, Finicky Cricket. We have countless daily conversations that proceed as follows:

Me: *“Ok, I had nothing to do with that, no need to worry...”*

Finicky: “But are you sure? Is there any unreasonable doubt? That's what I thought. It's your fault. Fix it.”

Me: *“Why can't you be more like Jiminy and sing me feel-good songs about how I should just whistle when I need you?”*

After every “Finicky flare up,” I ask myself, “Why am I like this?” I have spent years turning the car around, saying “sorry” for things I don't cause, and swimming in a

deep sea of paranoia. This question has driven me to formulate plausible theories to explain Finicky's origins and actions.

Theory #1: Science

I have an over-active guilt gland that emits paranoia and acts up in situations that induce anxiety. Perhaps some of gland can be removed surgically. Surgery would induce anxiety and release paranoia of dying on table. Surgery is no longer an option. I hypothesize that the guilt chemicals in my body are so plentiful that they cause the over-activity.

Theory #2: Reincarnation

I once took a "Who Were You in a Past Life?" quiz, a questionable, half-asleep decision that seemed right at the time. Nevertheless, it told me that I was a rebellious princess born in Newcastle in 1578, who liked to fence with knights. The specificity of this answer was both alarming and confusing, and whoever runs that website should probably be reported, but I am led to assume that this past version of me must have accidentally killed a knight while fencing, permanently infusing the guilt within my conscience.

Theory #3: Family Curse

A medium once told me that my dead grandmother is sorry that I have to worry so much like she did. She might have had Finicky as a conscience as well, but the medium did not go into specifics. The location of this dead grandmother reading took place in a room made to look and feel like heaven. Admittedly, I had someone take my pulse to make sure I had not *actually* died somewhere between the floating doves and the elderly man strumming the harp. But my pulse was strong and I am led to assume that Finicky has haunted and plagued generations of my family and that I am merely his next host.

Theory #4: Finicky Acts Out in Rage Over The Time I Tried to Extinguish His Powers

In April 2006, I was a fourth grader in Catholic School, and the halls were alive with the hums of the High School Musical soundtrack. Religion class was about to begin

and I was feverishly completing an Easter Bunny portrait that would undoubtedly make its way to my refrigerator.

“Hello, class. Since it is Lent, we will be going to Confession. Please write the sins you would like to confess on a piece of paper to bring with you tomorrow.”

Oh, Lent. Not only would I have to pretend to give something up, but I would have to confess my juicy, ten-year-old indiscretions to a stranger.

“Remember kids, Confession wipes your conscience clean! And be honest- the priest cannot tell anyone what you say to him -- no matter what.”

Please. I can absolutely see those priests gossiping at lunch about the latest “Confession Closet” stories. “Alison didn’t invite Suzie to her party!? Sinfully scandalous. How many Hail Mary’s did you prescribe?”

The whole “purification of the conscience” aspect greatly appealed to me, however. A clean slate would have been a relief. With the ideas of mortal sin and the threats of eternally burning in hell casually being tossed around in religion class, I walked around thinking: *Was that a sin? Shit. Shit, saying “shit” is a sin. SHIT!* My guilt glands pounded rapidly in this environment, staining my slate. At certain points I wondered how I was able to stand upright with so many sinful splotches inside of me.

I reluctantly flipped my Easter Bunny masterpiece over. My hand quivered as I took pen to paper, breathing life into my moral offenses. *What if I forget something? Will only some of my conscience be wiped clean?* I began to dig into the epicenter of my being to unearth every ancient sin imaginable.

That night I tossed and turned, struggling to produce a mental film of my sins from the past year. A montage of my scandalous little life panned out to the song “Bad to the Bone.” Scenes of me swearing (*B-B-B-Bad*) faded into scenes of me fighting with my siblings (*B-B-B-Bad*), which turned to a dramatic scene involving the heist of a local candy store that ended in a blaze of fire and a lifetime supply of lollipops (*B-B-B-Bad to the bone*). My thoughts fortunately drifted to sleep as my mental film became PG-13.

I roamed into school the next morning, replaying what I could recall from the montage and feeling guilty that I even dreamed of robbing the candy store. I dug into the pocket of my sweater for my Easter Bunny paper, stained with sin and lint. I went over the game plan: walk into the room, look at the priest square in the eyes, and confess.

Easy. Breezy. Beautiful. I stood straight up, pushed my shoulders back, and struck a pose that suggested confidence.

“Ok class, time to go! Single file line to the chapel. No talking.”

The bench creaked as I took my seat in the back of the frigid chapel. I slouched and shifted my right shoulder against the adjacent brick wall. The radio silence of the room intensified my anxiety, causing me to resort to self-distraction. Instead of dealing with my nerves, I employed my favorite defense mechanism to avoid self-confrontation: “WWNDD?” (What Would Nancy Drew Do?) I slithered my fingers across the uneven bricks, half hoping one secret brick would push inwards to reveal some sort of secret, luxury “holy roller hangout” spot. However, my attention shifted as a priest materialized out of nowhere, and I came to the unfortunate realization that I would not crack the code. The priest then delivered an opening prayer that might as well have been in Latin.

“Amen. Now Confession will begin one by one as soon as you are all ready.”

He then disappeared into a crevice, which both impressed and frightened me. One by one, my peers began to take turns confessing their pre-teen debaucheries as I fidgeted in the back, stewing in sweat. My head moved on a swivel as I attempted to count the bricks. 58, 59, 60 --

Is he looking at me? I feel like he's definitely looking at me. He looks angry. Did I do something wrong? No, he must be looking at Tom. Tom never does his homework. Did I do all my homework?

I could not help but to make some seriously heavy eye contact with the larger-than-life, crucified Jesus at the front of the chapel. His stare multiplied my guilt, as if it were the loaves and fishes. Finicky must have been full for days. Fortunately, the thick gaze was broken by my cheerful classmate.

“You’re up Kel!”

My shoulders jumped as the chapel silence was broken. Compared to Dying Jesus, my classmate’s eyes were filled with joy and excitement. Must’ve gone well. I had officially been tagged into the soul-cleansing relay race. The archaic floor groaned as I resurrected from my pew and travelled past Dying Jesus. I stared at my shoes to avoid eye contact. *I’m sorry I’m such a sinner, Dying Jesus. Also, I’m sorry you had to die. You*

were an incredible person from what I hear. If it's any consolation, your abs look great. Shit... Sorry... I mean...Shoot...

I took my seat in the confessional room that reeked of the lingering body odor of the sinners that came before me. Beads of sweat trickled from my forehead in the frigid concrete closet. *Oh God, here it is -- the early onset of eternal burning...* Across from me sat a new priest, different than the one from the beginning. *Seriously, where is that guy? A new Nancy Drew mystery! Possible titles: "The Mystery of the Disappearing Priest", or, "Father Phantom", or --*

"Ok dear, are we ready?"

"Sorry, yes. Um.. Forgive me Father for I have sinned. It has been...last time we were here... since my last Confession. These are my sins:"

"...what are your sins?"

"Um..."

I froze. I desperately wanted to clean my slate but there was a miniature statue glaring at me from behind the priest's shoulder. The tiny, judgmental eyes of Mary, the Mother of God, punctured my soul while guilt bled out. *Dying Jesus must have sent word to you that I was coming in. Shoot. Listen, about that whole abs comment...*

"Are you alright? Why don't you read from your paper?"

No, your majesty, I am not "alright." This is a lot a pressure. This is the-wedding- has- run- out- of- wine- and- everyone's- leaving -unless- Jesus -turns- the- water- into- liquor kind of pressure. I need a miracle. I need Nancy Drew. First of all, where is that other priest and does he have magical powers? Second, if he does, let's get him in here ASAP - I have some guilt that needs to disappear. Third, let's go ahead and move Mary, the Virgin Mother of God. She's looking at me as if I carved in her hideous wardrobe and double chin. It's not my fault they made Dying Jesus look like an "after picture" from a P-90X commercial.

"I'm sorry. Ok, ready. I fought with my siblings, I disobeyed my parents, I lied, I swore..."

"I'm sorry, you'll need to be louder."

"Sorry. I fought with my siblings, I disobeyed my parents, I lied, I swore..."

"Louder!"

“Sorry. I FOUGHT WITH MY SIBLINGS. I DISOBEYED MY PARENTS. I LIED. I SWORE.”

Surely all of my peers outside had heard my screamed indiscretions. Maybe screaming your sins was like saying them twice?

“I see. Is that *it*?”

I don't know... WWNDD? I stared down at the Catholic plaid covering my bouncing knees as if interpreting a piece of abstract art. My eyebrows slouched closer and my eyes squinted, searching for a clue in the yellow and blue intersecting squares.

I found nothing besides dog hairs. His question mostly made me feel like I was ordering lunch to go. “Is that *it*?” I felt an instinct to order a side of fries. Maybe I should order a kid- sized exorcism? No, those definitely don't come in a Happy Meal.

My desperation to answer spiraled frenetically out of control and I began to contemplate admitting to a higher-level sin I did not commit to cover all of the smaller ones I was forgetting. This would undoubtedly give the priest some future lunch gossip material. I'm sure a ten- year-old mafia boss who pays her cohorts in stolen lollipops would rouse the attention of the other priests. Unfortunately, my trembling hands and shaking voice disallowed me from channeling my inner Robert DeNiro.

I let out a disappointed sigh and muttered, “Yeah, that's it...”

“Okay. I absolve you of your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Please say ten Hail Mary's when you return to your seat.”

I hurried back to my seat and knelt down to utter what I hoped would be the secret code to detonate the guilt staining my conscience. After my tenth Hail Mary I expected to feel different. I was not struck by lightning, there were no fireworks, and I didn't pass out cold. I was exhausted, but still felt like the same sweaty sinner that initially meandered into the chapel's chamber of secrets.

That day I walked around with a heavy chest. Literally – I actually thought that the fact that my soul was not wiped clean meant that there were still heavy remnants of guilt stuck inside it. I walked around hunched over for hours. I attribute this psychosomatic condition to both the intense symbolism used to describe the process of Confession to fourth-graders and my dramatic tendencies at this age. I was undoubtedly

suffering from post-confession depression, the result of a failure to purify a conscience in an unsuccessful confessional attempt.

I imagined the priest looking at an ultrasound of my dirtied conscience in the “holy roller hangout” with his friends and remarking, “*Poor girl, no amount of Hail Mary’s could clean that hyperactive conscience.*”

He would be right. Even with magical priests and screamed admittances, my conscience would not be altered. Finicky had nested too deep within my being and had no intentions of moving out. His spacious abode currently lies on a corner, conveniently located between Logic Lane and Anxiety Avenue.


It is indeed possible that Finicky acts out in rage due to my attempt to extinguish his powers and evict him from his home. More importantly, however, the attempt provides for me the realization that my conscience, angry or not, will exist inside of me indefinitely. Therefore, it is up to me to summon the strength to silence its chirps when necessary, because it is here to stay.

As a result of this ten-year-old epiphany, I have learned to live with Finicky. I can’t step on and kill him, but I can quiet him down. I don’t like to brag, but I believe that I do an excellent job of pretending that nothing phases me, even when the chirps are loud. My veins could be pulsing, threatening to burst from the anxiety, but I rarely show it. If there were an Emmy award for “Best Performance in Pretending to Not Be Anxious 24/7,” that trophy would have my name on it. I have even written my acceptance speech:

Wow. What an honor this truly is. I am not nervous at all right now. I believe it was Dr. Dolittle who once said, “Sometimes it’s okay to step on insects.” I am here to say that I have stepped on the cricket that lives inside of me. His chirps are a lot less piercing now that he has been mildly injured. I want to thank the Academy, my wonderful family, Nancy Drew, and of course, Jesus. Now everyone get out there and step on your own crickets!

This speech would undoubtedly be met with accusations of drug abuse and a lawsuit filed by PETA. Nevertheless, it proves that I possess the ability to suppress the

unwarranted guilt and anxiety that explodes out of my conscience. I don't have to turn the car around after every *thump* or trespass on people's lawns to look for scarecrows. Maybe I have over-active guilt glands, suffer from a family curse, had a murderous past life, or angered my conscience. It's probably all four. However, I've learned that although these theories are very plausible, they only prove my conscience's origin and actions. I can exhaust myself by attempting to discover its derivation, but while I'm doing so, Finicky is just nesting deeper. Therefore, what really matters is that sometimes you just can't be late for things and you have to fight that little cricket until he quiets down.

 "That's me sitting in the bathroom with the lights off. Nobody knows the kind of stuff I gotta fight off. I wash away my sins but I can't get the white off. What made you think that you could ever take the night off? I can't stand to be alone when the—"

Thump.

I turn down the radio as paranoia flows into my skull and down to my arms, causing my elbows to quake. Ugh, here we go. I slow the car down as I imagine the miniscule cricket who lives permanently in the depths of my being. But I've gotten better. My head jolts back as I speed forward, the tires screeching as they leave black skid marks on the gray asphalt.

"Not today."

My sister's phone flies under the passenger seat as the car bursts forward. Glaring at me, she demands, "What the hell, Kelley? Who are you talking to?"

"Finicky."

"Yeah, you really are with the radio –turn it back up."

 "– You fake me out, you say you care, you break me down, I go nowhere..."

I slow back down to a normal speed, as I am paranoid that there is a cop nearby. I had to compromise with Finicky somewhere. Nevertheless, I chalk this triumphant burning of rubber up as a win.

Imagine That

According to my mother, I had an internal clock that woke me every morning at 5:00 to watch *Pappyland*, an ecstasy-induced, live action children's show featuring Pappy Drewitt, a suspicious yet enthusiastic hillbilly with a real knack for drawing and interacting with small children. Pappy and his peculiar friends inhabited Pappyland, which he created using a magical pencil and the free time his failed art career allowed for. When they weren't learning life lessons from a talking paintbrush, a turtle fresh off the boat from Italy, or a beaver in a propeller hat, children were encouraged to draw along with Pappy. He would often start out with merely a squiggle on a piece of paper, which could turn into anything from a snake, to a rope, to a full-blown but slightly wobbly circle. Anything was possible in Pappyland, which is something Pappy said roughly twelve times per episode. In this land, you could color outside the lines. You could create and recreate with reckless abandon. You could even tell someone it was "blue after two" and it would be received as a legitimate measurement of time. I became immersed in this intoxicating Eden of imagination, inspired by the limitless possibilities and thrilled by the genuine disregard for the objective bounds of reality.

Our refrigerator soon became cluttered with the pencil-drawn tour de forces I myself deemed worthy of public acclaim. "Wow. Look at that detail!" my mother would exaggerate, shooting a smile in my direction before taking the milk out. I began distributing my artwork on the street, meaning I would put drawings in my elderly neighbor's mailbox without her asking. I watched from my window as her car pulled into the driveway, anticipating her excited reaction. She would bring the illustration over to the house later in the evenings for me to autograph.

"And who should I make this one out to?" I teased, pretending that the scribbles somehow translated to my name in cursive. For all intents and purposes, I was Van Gogh on the verge of an ear slicing. I drew everything I could possibly imagine, and would often accompany the drawings with even more absurd stories. *The Mystery at the Museum* was my debut novel, which chronicled the curious case of missing bones at a dinosaur exhibit. My readers, who consisted of four family members and two neighbors,

praised the work, unanimously noting that they *never* expected the culprit to be the unassuming, purple-polka-dotted Dalmatian with three prior arrests.

Whether I was doodling along with Pappy or making clay figurines to go along with a short story on talking mice oppressed in a world geared towards humans, I was creating and imagining, chronicling it all in a handmade journal. Thanks to Pappy, I walked through my very small world with my head somewhere between the clouds and the aliens that most definitely inhabited Mars. I saw a world with dragons and imaginary friends and flying pigs. Reality was merely a suggestion and the limitations were endless. However, around the fourth grade, a wicked being stormed my whimsical world, waging war against my imagination with the power of the Narnian White Witch, pre getting murdered by Aslan, the talking lion. She came in the form of a perpetually angry and presumably constipated art teacher, Mrs. Dell.

Mrs. Dell was a crayon-wielding Gestapo officer, dedicated to using art as a vehicle to curb children's creativity. An interesting approach—cleverly attacking the practice from inside the system. I am not sure what happened in her life to induce such a deep-rooted disgust for children, but students like me did not remedy her condition. Her patience teetered on the line between non-existent and the Soup Nazi on his very worst day, the perfect combination of mean and meaner that constitutes an amazing teacher.

She drew everything in meticulous detail on the board, with each line measured precisely to scale, using a yard stick that I always feared would end up on the wrong side of someone's face. "None of you know what you're doing! It's not that hard!" she would scream at a class of eight-year-olds, pointing hopelessly at the three-dimensional hexagonal prism on the board that none of us could seem to recreate. She would circle the room like a flesh-starving shark, ready to pounce on the unfortunate soul who drew a four-inch line instead of a three-inch one. This was a severe offense in her book, which undoubtedly featured a hit list of shaky-handed children.

She would scream with the intensity of a soap opera murder victim over menial things, such as someone using the wrong color or sketching outside the lines. "WHAT. ARE. YOU. DOING?" she would howl, spatting in our faces and speaking to us like we were hearing-impaired toddlers from a foreign country. If you wanted to borrow a pencil during class because, hypothetically, you snapped yours accidentally out of fear

beforehand, you would have to give Mrs. Dell your shoe for the duration of the period in exchange. “You’ll get this back when I get my pencil back,” she scoffed, creating the warden-prisoner dynamic that the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks was clearly lacking.

As much as I feared Mrs. Dell and genuinely believed she was in cahoots with some malevolent force, I could not bring myself to follow her instructions. During one class, we were commanded to recreate Monet’s *The Alps Seen from Cap d’Antibes*. A simple task, if we were world-renowned impressionist artists instead of nose-picking eight-year-olds. I attempted the feat, but with some minor adjustments. I added snow, skiers, reindeer, and an Abominable Snowman waiting for an opportune time to strike. Just before I began to sketch the peppermint mine for Yukon Cornelius to uncover with Rudolph, I felt a warm breath puncture the back of my neck. “WHAT? STOP! STOP WHAT YOU’RE DOING NOW!” she roared, snatching my paper with her spiny hands.

With steam threatening to spew from her ears, she crumpled the paper and then slammed it back onto my desk, her bony fingers pointing out the obvious errors. “YOU ARE INSULTING CLAUDE MONET!” she announced, before giving a lengthy explanation of the fact that we need to have respect for art, and not do what I was doing, which apparently was the art class equivalent of spray-painting profanities on a public building.

“EXPLAIN HOW YOU GET *THIS*,” she yelled, pointing to my paper, “FROM *THAT*,” she exhaled, motioning towards the board. “Um, I just—the mountains reminded me of skiing, which reminded me of snow, which reminded me of Christmas, which reminded me of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” I offered anxiously as if I were on trial. “ARE YOU ALL RIGHT IN THE HEAD? FOLLOW DIRECTIONS!” she screamed, marching to the front of the room. On her way back, she scanned the other creations, determining that they lacked the innovation and signs of early-onset schizophrenia that characterized my work. She grabbed another girl’s drawing and held it up to me. “THIS IS WHAT YOUR PAPER *SHOULD* LOOK LIKE! IT’S NOT DIFFICULT! START OVER!” A sudden rage sizzled in my chest. Instead of erasing the extraneous details on my paper, I added more, filling every available white space with whatever popped into my piping hot head.

“The reason I want these to come out perfect,” she said, in a slightly calmer tone, “Is that they will be put on display at the art fair next week.” Our classroom erupted in an excited chatter, with students whispering, “Let me see your paper!” and “Will the best one win a prize?” and “Do you think Mrs. Dell will actually give me back my shoe this time? Because it’s snowing out and I have to walk home and frost bite is a real concern but I don’t want to ask her.”

“SILENCE,” she bellowed, prompting everyone to sit upright in unison. “I will determine which papers go on the wall and which ones do not. Start finishing up.”

As an anxious student who strove to achieve perfection, it was uncharacteristic of me to rebel against a teacher. However, with a firm grip on my Number 2 pencil, I pulled a full-blown Pappy. I now decided that one of the mountains would become a volcano in mid-eruption, spewing molten lava all over the fresh-fallen snow. The other students in my group were amused by this lack of regard for Mrs. Dell’s authority, and in what felt like a peasant revolt against a tyrannical czar, they began to veer from the instructions as well. One boy drew himself standing on the mountain with his friends. The girl across from me included the entire cast of *Spongebob* on her mountain range that she now decided would be a coral reef. Another girl thought it would be funny to draw faces on the mountains, which honestly just looked like a deformed Mount Rushmore, but her attempt was duly noted.

Two minutes remained in the class and Mrs. Dell announced that she would be going around the room to collect our papers, assuming they were good enough for the asbestos-ridden cafeteria wall they would be so elegantly hung on. She picked up at least ten acceptable papers, forcing face-cracking smiles at the students who had followed her directions. This unnaturally pleasant demeanor shifted as she approached my area of the room, picking up the first boy’s drawing as if it were covered in feces. She quickly dropped it from her grasp in disgust, sniffing out the other recalcitrant artwork before it could float back onto his desk.

“DO YOU PEOPLE THINK YOU’RE FUNNY?” she hollered in disbelief. We looked at one another and then at the floor while she berated us for daring to have a spark of creativity in the children’s art class.

“It’s you,” she said, pointing directly at me. “You think you can just draw whatever you want. It’s poisonous behavior. Your mind is in La La land.” Our three masterpieces were not chosen for the prestigious gallery. And, to make matters worse, I was now a pestilential creature, infecting the innocent minds of those around me. Choking back the tears I refused to let stream down my face, I got up to sharpen my pencil, all the while avoiding eye contact with Mrs. Dell.

“We are drawing *mountains*,” she stammered. “Not what you *think* a mountain should look like, but what the mountain *actually* looks like in the painting. We are drawing reality, not your daydreams. Get it?”

I turned to look at her with my freshly sharpened pencil, blowing the shavings off and staring back at her. I wanted to call Pappy and see if he might take a break from frolicking around to summon his band of creatures together. They could all sharpen their pencils, crayons, and maybe a pitchfork or two. The talking beaver would yell, “CHARGE!” and with our razor-sharp pencils and hearts teeming with passion, we would advance valiantly forwards, ultimately cornering her until she raised a white flag, screaming, “Fine! I don’t care anymore! Draw whatever!” The gang from Pappyland would of course never resort to actual violence—this would merely be an intimidation tactic. Nevertheless, we would fight for the right to doodle.

“Hello? Get it?” she snarled again. The battlefield in my mind faded just before we could celebrate our victory via an outrageous parade through Pappyland. The classroom came back into focus.

“Answer me right now!” she added, for good measure. I felt the weight of twenty frightened eyes on me and, in one of the more badass moments of my elementary school career, said, “No. I don’t get it.”

This moment came in a close second to the time I stole a flat, year-old Coca Cola can from the refrigerator in the teachers’ lounge and then drank it in the safety of the girl’s bathroom.

A simultaneous gasp seemed to suck in all the oxygen from the room. “Sit in your seat right now,” she stammered. I obeyed, doubting my decision to be insolent with every step back to my seat. “Do you want me to tell your homeroom teacher about this?” she

asked, very close to my face, which now undoubtedly bore a resemblance to the “torch red” Crayola crayon she held.

My audacity began to evaporate, however, as I thought about Mrs. Dell reporting my concerning behavior. “Yes,” she would sigh loudly, her hand on her forehead as if she might faint. “To a Monet piece nonetheless! She’s dangerous!”

My homeroom teacher never approached me, so I was not sure if Mrs. Dell refrained from ratting me out or if the teacher discounted it, chalking her outrage up to some severe personality disorder. Nevertheless, it struck me that acting on my imagination would be considered dangerous. I was no child psychologist, but I reflected that perhaps meandering into walk-in closets half hoping to reach Narnia—something I did alarmingly often—was a red flag.

We did not have a walk-in closet, but I had several friends and family members that did. “I’m just going to the bathroom,” I would lie, and within minutes find myself knee deep in some forgotten Christmas decorations, headed for what I hoped would be the snowy, magical land. As a logical being, I of course knew that disappointment inevitably lied at the end of the closet. But, it was that irrational shred of a belief that there *might* be something that thrilled me to no end. And, what granted me some sense of solace, was that someone even more “dangerous” than me created the wondrous world, inspiring my wandering mind a to fall down its rabbit hole. And, try as she might, Mrs. Dell could not suppress my urge to imagine.

A couple years ago I went to the Museum of Fine Arts, mostly due to the fact that it was mandatory for a college art history class. My friend Katie and I strolled around the different galleries of the museum, pretending to be drawn to tears by abstract art. It seemed, however, that no matter where we wandered, there were overly-dressed groups of people sipping wine, titling their heads to the side, and squinting at paintings as if impairing their vision might offer some meaning. They were scattered throughout the museum, and I found myself studying them more than any piece of art.

The most unbearable group was in the Art of the Americas wing, crowded before a grotesque painting of a solemn woman holding a baby who looked to be suffering from Benjamin Button syndrome. Each and every one of them spoke from the sides of their mouths, as if they all had suffered strokes from being so tragically cultured and wealthy.

They shared a distinct, uppity gargon undoubtedly picked up while summering on a private island void of any interaction with locals. They said things like, “And what’s your take, Gregorious? Fascinating. I, however, feel the bold brush strokes exaggerate the grandeur, which truly reminds me of my own amazing life.” The term “brilliant” was tossed in as the sole word given a British accent, but no one ever commented on it besides Katie and me, who were keeping a tally.

There was one member of the group, however, who seemed to lack the pretentious vibe the others wore like a fitted mink fur coat. His name was Frederick, which I knew from the number of times people said, “And Frederick, what *do* you think about the brush strokes on this portrait? Even from across the room, I could feel the pain of Frederick’s feigned interest in everything they said.

“It’s so simplistic yet undeniably labyrinthine if you look at it through the lens of an extremely educated and wildly wealthy connoisseur like myself,” I could have sworn I heard one of the WASPy women say as Frederick strained to nod. We slyly followed the group around the exhibit, stopping next to them as they paused to critique a painting of a wealthy family in the early 1800s.

“Ah, an exemplary Rococo piece by West. The man at the lower left is the patron of this stunning work of utter genius. And did you know that he was born in Quincy, Massachusetts?”

“Yes,” said Frederick. “It says it on the plaque.”

“Well, of course it does, Frederick,” the other said, lowering his thick-rimmed glasses to convey intelligence. “I don’t look at the plaque. That information is for *others*.”

“The grandmother in this portrait looks absolutely miserable,” Frederick remarked. “I imagine her thinking, ‘I hate all these people.’” This analysis was met by a painful silence mixed with some looks of pure concern.

“Frederick,” one woman whispered. “Are you trying to be funny? That’s just inappropriate. We are not here to insult artwork.” The group was not tickled by Frederick’s very accurate observation, which they made visible by looking him up and down and stomping in their Italian suede shoes to the adjacent piece. He followed slowly,

like an elderly dog on his last walk to the vet. He combatted his embarrassment by staring at the wooden floor and stood on the outside as they began to dissect the next painting.

Katie and I followed them as if some large, invisible rope connected us all. We found ourselves in front of the family portrait, which was still dripping with the residue of Frederick's insult. I felt a misplaced hatred for the group even though they had not even noticed us, thanks to our very subtle, CIA-like demeanor. Perhaps it was my traumatic relationship with art that triggered the anger I felt on Frederick's behalf. Had the "no touch" policy not been very much in effect, I might have punched a hole through the "Rococo" portrait and watched as tears flowed from their Botox-injected faces.

As a convicted art slanderer, I felt a kinship with Freddy, whom I now felt close enough to silently grant a nickname. Instead of using the info given underneath the painting to evoke a false sense of artistic intelligence, Freddy imagined something. He thought outside the gold-encrusted frame in a way that was viewed as uneducated and proletarian. And so, without thinking, I began to speak loudly enough for the group to hear.

"Katie, did you know that the grandmother in this portrait *hated*, with every fiber of her being, everyone else in the picture?"

"I am utterly stunned!" she said, her phony gasp catching the attention of Freddy and the snobs.

"Listen, you won't find this info anywhere because it's pretty, you know, hush-hush, but she actually put a hit out on them all, including the very small boy, if you can believe it. But the whole thing got botched by the hit man she hired because he became engaged in an affair with the man on the far left."

"Fascinating!" shouted a small, middle-aged woman who had seemed to materialize out of nowhere, but whose undivided attention I now held. The group was now glaring, piercing me with their carnivorous eyes, perhaps concerned that Freddy might have been right.

"Are the two young girls in the middle twins?" the woman asked, assuming I must have worked at the museum, a very justifiable assumption based on my fraudulent confidence.

“No,” I said. “But that’s a very interesting question. You see, it’s actually the same girl, just painted twice. She struggled with multiple personality disorder, so the artist was attempting to symbolically capture her different sides. And, if you ask me, he succeeded.” At this point, the entire group slowly gravitated over. At first I began to regret my decision to act as the museum’s expert, but their tilted heads alerted me to the fact that they were taking this seriously.

“I think I remember reading that,” the Versace-clad man noted, placing his chin on his fist to convey in depth-thought. Katie placed her hand over her mouth to stem the road wave of effusive laughter.

“So, how long have you been working here? We’ve never run into you,” the man then said.

I made painful eye contact with the museum guard who stood roughly five feet away.

“Anyways,” I said, changing the subject, “It’s really a powerful piece.”

“Oh, indeed,” one of the women confirmed, adjusting her pearl necklace.

“Tell me,” the woman then said. “Did the family ever find out that the grandmother had attempted to have them all killed?”

In that moment, I knew I had gone gloriously too far. I failed to contain the smile that stretched across my face.

“Only the man on the far left knew, as his lover was the hired hit man. But, to my knowledge, no one else knew until the grandmother died. She left them a letter. She wanted to meet death with a clear conscience.” They all nodded, studying the painting harder than ever before.

“Imagine that,” the woman in glasses commented.

“Yes,” I said, beaming. “I did.”

The Night of Their Lives

With little means of currency and an abundance of free time as an obviously popular middle-schooler, I resigned to immersing myself in the torn paperbacks that were stacked next to my parents' bed, which created a diverse literary tower intermixed with gory nonfiction novels that sensationalized local mobsters and Nicholas Sparks-esque romances wherein imperfect characters overlooked many a red flag in order to maintain their adorably unhealthy relationships.

I became hooked on the latter, which inevitably involved a church-going man who mysteriously emerges from the fray, presumably from an unnamed tragedy or a local Abercrombie & Fitch. He was burly but sensitive, poetic but nonverbal, and clean-shaven but somehow shaggy in all the right ways. He was from “the other side of the tracks”—gasp—and yet he had the audacity to possess a blinding adoration for the Victoria's Secret model who was fully aware of her beauty but pretended she wasn't because that's not how her kidnapers raised her.

Just by reading, I could see that she was in full hair and makeup at all times, even when milking the cows or sloppily making out in violent rain. She was ready for when she would meet the perfectly tanned stranger in an organic setting imbued in predictability. Grocery store soup aisle, late afternoon: She smiles quietly. He blinks. She plays with her hair. He breathes. She licks her lips. He blinks again. A second time! Either he has a nervous tick or he is completely in love with her. It's the latter and he asks if she wants to go for a leisurely handholding walk on the beach at sunset with no agenda whatsoever.

We soon learn that he has been mysteriously wounded, not only by accidentally shooting his own foot in the army, but also by a previous lover. The girl then lies in his strong arms as the sun sets, noting that his brawny shoulders have undoubtedly been shaped via hours of woodworking. They make the gentlest of love because his foot and ego are still wounded and then get married the next day in front of the whole toothless town.

Mix in some light drama about how they break up for a total of three and a half minutes because he is just too emotionally fragile to be in a relationship, forty-five

seconds of light rain followed by ten seconds of a symbolic downpour, and two minutes where someone's great grandfather incoherently yammers on about his dead wife, and that encompasses just about every story I read.

I developed an addictive hatred for these novels and naturally consumed them at a rapid rate with my stuffed animals under the flickering light of my poster-clad bedroom. Each book seemed to excrete a kind of fairy dust with every turning of the page, which would eventually disagree with my nose, causing for me to sneeze. And yet, I sniffled on. They became these quixotic car accidents I couldn't turn away from even though the plotlines churned my stomach to the point of dry heaving.

The parts that irked me the most about the stories, however, typically occurred somewhere between the star-crossed meeting in the frozen food section and the wedding at the mysterious stepfather's re-furnished mansion/drug front. These were the gestures, made by the men, which caused for the women to become so feeble with emotion that they couldn't remember what day it was, not that they were great at keeping time anyways based on the X's etched on the wall of the cellar basement.

These were the over-the-top displays of romance that were the literary equivalents of trespassing on an ex-lover's lawn and blaring Peter Gabriel in the hopes that she will be moved enough not to call the police. And, interestingly, she always was. I ignorantly thought and slightly hoped that maybe, just maybe, in one of the stories, a woman would say, "You know, that's really sweet, but no thank you," hand back the three-hundred-sixty-five handwritten letters, and go dancing with her friends or learn a trade or go back to her natural hair color.

My peers, however, gushed at the displays of affection and outwardly yearned to somehow, at the age of eleven, be the women from these stories, whose statuses were heightened by the fact that a man looked at them longingly.

"Tyler winked at me from across the room yesterday," one would announce at lunch. "I'm not trying to say that he's like in love with me or anything, but, I mean, he did wink at me, so I guess my question is: what should we name our first baby if it's a girl?"

The Notebook was a very well known cinematic masterpiece at this time, and had won over the hearts of everyone I knew. The girls in class would say things like, "Noah is

sooo hot!” and, “I hope I die at the same exact time as my husband too.” Desensitized to romance completely at this point, I would feel the urge to turn the lights off, hold a flashlight under my chin, and whisper, “That could be arranged.”

“‘If you’re a bird, I’m a bird’ is literally *the most* romantic thing I’ve ever heard in my life,” one girl said, as if she were a cavewoman just discovering fire.

It became clear throughout middle school that these plotlines were something to be sought after if you were a girl, as evidenced by the amount of wishes made by my female peers at 11:11 pm, which had to do with the time’s synchronicity and the fact that we were in the suburbs. These wishes were often vocalized publicly at Saturday night sleepover sessions. Girls would say things like, “I wish Jason asked me out,” “I wish to have Jason’s babies,” and “I wish to perish as a human being at the exact moment Jason does.”

I would instead use the sixty-second interval of time at 11:11 to inform everyone that *Saturday Night Live* would be on in approximately eighteen minutes, should anyone want to use the facilities before the cold open.

“You’re being a downer,” they would say, during the playing of *The Notebook*, after I spent three minutes explaining how we already knew that they’d end up dead in bed together at the end. So, we might as well just turn on SNL right now so I wouldn’t look like an idiot when my adult neighbor asked me how I felt about the monologue the next morning.

“What? That’s how it ends?” one girl asked, astonished and already sobbing without the visual. “That’s so beautiful.”

I undoubtedly became burnt out with romance at an early age, partially due to my obsession with sappy novels and also, partially, I believe, due to heredity. My grandfather recently informed me that he asked my grandmother to marry him by saying, “Let’s get married,” and then tossing a ring in her general direction. When pressed about why he opted to go such a direct route with the engagement, he noted that it was the 1950s and at that point in time, a “flash mob,” would have been seen as a public warning of nuclear war.

Although I ceased my reading of the books that truly had no place being under the category of literary realism, the gestures I so despised seemed to leap from the pages, materializing in the halls of my high school during prom season. I walked around the concrete wasteland, breathing in the toxic fumes of the freshly spray tanned. With each new cough resulting from the secondhand noxious inhalation, I began to recognize a familiar twinkle in the eyes of those around me, as if they had all shared a joint laced with the mawkish saccharinity borrowed from the sappy novels.

There were Teddy Bears holding signs, balloons with hearts, and the occasional shirtless group of boys spelling p-r-o-m out with paint on their chiseled abs. Prom was a month away, and like hormone-induced clockwork, there were about two “promposals” occurring roughly every few hours. The halls would erupt in cheers every time another popular girl shrieked “yes!” to a football player who had so romantically gotten “Prom?” tattooed permanently to the side of his ribcage. “He can’t even *legally* get a tattoo,” the girl would gush, adding, “I can’t wait to introduce him to my mother!”

It appeared that any traditional yes or no question used by our foolish forefathers to attain dates to dances was out of the question; if you were asked to the prom, it was after doves flew out of someone’s ass while a string quartet played Celine Dion from the top of a Barnum-and-Bailey-trained elephant. Also, the entire thing would be recorded and posted onto Facebook by the recipient within the hour, with the caption: “I said yes!” as if anyone was unsure based on the image of the two people sloppily making out in front of their very confused Physics teacher.

While most of the girls around me secretly yearned for some knight in shining armor to ruin their car by spray painting “PROM?” onto it, I felt a vomit-inducing repulsion to both the practice and its participants. I viewed the prom as a celebration of the popular people and their ability to look ravishing in age inappropriate eveningwear. It was their night to dance and sing and possibly get pregnant and that was perfectly fine with me. Most of them considered it a defining moment in their lives, but I simply could not, as I didn’t want to be defined as someone who leaves things early or fake smiles.

I had already endured the junior prom, which was in the high school cafeteria. Watching sweaty teens gyrate on one another like monkeys on MDMA three feet from

where I ate turkey sandwiches every day made it difficult to ever eat lunch again for months, and I didn't need to lose my appetite in yet another setting.

"You can't *not* go to the prom," everyone said, rolling their eyes at my inability to recognize the significance of the once-in-a-lifetime evening. It felt much like taco night at my house. With a mouthful of inauthentic Mexican cuisine, my brother, sisters, parents, and even dog would mumble "yum's" out of their tortilla-stuffed mouths as if they were experiencing a culinary miracle. I detested the dinner and held an internal debate over whether the beef more closely resembled decaying brains or the feces of a rabbit suffering from irritable bowel syndrome. According to my family, I was missing out on the mouth-watering meal of the week, but according to my observations, the beef looked more like decaying brains, although I am admittedly unfamiliar with IBS's affect on rabbit stool specifically.

"You mean you've never thought about your senior prom before?" my friends asked, gasping hard enough to induce an asthma attack. It seemed downright unfathomable to them that I had not been daydreaming about the event from infancy, and found my aversion to everything from the promposal to the inevitable, eleven-minute "Stairway to Heaven" utterly blasphemous.

"Every girl has to go to their senior prom!" they exclaimed, as if this sweaty, three-hour long popularity contest constituted as a feminine rite of passage.

In an attempt to prove my reasoning, I took to my notebook and began to feverishly scribble the pros and cons of attending prom like a mad scientist on the brink of a breakthrough right before psychology class started.

Pros:

- Chicken wings are being served
- Someone mentioned an ice cream station
- It's at a hotel in Quincy, which strikes the perfect balance between elegance and the fact that it's in Quincy
- The passive aggressive courtesy between two girls wearing the same dress while everyone quietly decides that Ashley wore it better

- Taking a breathalyzer before entering to feel a false sense of thrill as if I am a badass that has to regularly prove that she is not inebriated in order to enter public places
- The occasional old song the DJ is obligated to play for the teacher chaperones who actively engage in the “Cotton Eyed Joe” for the duration of the night

Cons:

- Finding a dress to wear that says, “I’m wearing this ironically”
- Remaining in said dress for longer than thirty minutes
- James from Math class said ice cream station was a cruel rumor
- Having to take pictures while someone awkwardly holds onto my hips as if I am under arrest and will attempt to escape
- Figuring out where my hands go during the pictures and understanding the intricate meanings behind each different hand placement
- Pinning a boutonniere onto someone without fatally stabbing them
- Explaining to my mother that I am not engaged to be married to my prom date the next day

The bell rang, causing my hand to quake as I finished the list. I slapped the notebook shut and leaned backwards against my chair, content with my decision and imagining what kind of pizza I would order the night I didn’t go to the prom while my classmates flooded into the room.

“What are you hiding?” asked the boy next to me with boundary issues and cigarette breath.

“Nothing,” I said, as he reached out for the notebook, nearly getting a grip on it before our teacher interrupted him.

“Kelley!” she yelled back to me from the front of the room. “Can you run to the office and grab me some stationary paper?”

I paused and sheepishly scanned the room, wondering why she wouldn’t have asked someone in the first row to fetch her papers.

“Sure...” I mumbled, rising from my seat and wandering to the door. I exited the room, bore left, and meandered into the office where a white-haired woman spoke on the phone to an enraged parent.

“Well your son isn’t here today,” she stated, as the other woman screamed into her elderly ear so loudly I could make out every word. “Well we call after we get attendance sheets to let parents know...I...yes, I understand. Goodbye.” She glanced up at me with grinning eyes that defined the wrinkles on her forehead.

“I’m here to pick up stationary paper for Mrs. Mahoney,” I announced, even though I had not been asked.

We were watching a documentary about identical twins separated after birth in class that day, and I could not miss the first few minutes that would undoubtedly set the story up. It would be truly embarrassing to have to ask Cigarette Breath things like, “So are we leaning towards nature or nurture?”

The woman chuckled at the request and assured me that she would “be right back with that” as she moseyed into a side room. I sat in a chair and studied an inspirational poster that said something along the lines of, “Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you’ll likely land somewhere in outer space where it is 3° Kelvin, causing your body to explode out of every existing orifice.”

“Here you go,” she said, impeding my ability to be fully inspired by the bubble-letter quotation. Her outstretched hand offered what appeared to be ten blank pieces of computer paper, but I nonetheless grabbed them and ventured forth to find out about those identical twins.

I turned the knob on the door to my psychology class left, right, and left again, but it would not budge. I looked through the glass window and saw nothing besides the back of my teacher’s maroon sweater. I felt a sudden surge of heat travel from my forehead down to my spine, causing me to nearly sweat through my black sweatshirt.

After five seconds of standing in front of the manually locked door, my teacher turned to face me with wide eyes that seemed to try to overcompensate for something terrible that had taken place in my absence. She slowly opened the door as I reluctantly stepped in, feeling like I was walking into an episode of *Intervention*.

I took two steps forward before noticing a large, makeshift gravestone fashioned from white poster board at the front of the room. For a moment I felt a sudden rush of relief, reading the name “Kelly” scribbled across the bottom in black sharpie.

“Poor Kelly,” I thought to myself, almost laughing as I began to make my way to the back row, internally thanking my mother for adding the extra “e” to the end of my name. However, I suddenly became paralyzed by the unwavering stares of my teacher, classmates, and also the teacher from the room next door, who was now peering through her adjoining door into our class to watch what would happen.

I glanced to my left, where my eyes met the lens of a phone that was filming my every move. The air in the room became thicker, and my face took on a tomato-like hue. I stared into the phone as if it were the barrel of a gun before tripping over a pair legs. My eyes screamed as I saw that there was a large, male body under the grave holding flowers as if we were at a sincerely disturbing wake.

“Are you alright?” I asked, as the writing on the grave came into clearer view. His eyes remained shut and his hands clutched firmly onto the flowers. “Jesus Christ,” I said, accidentally, realizing that I was being “promposed” to by someone pretending to be a corpse who did not know how to spell my name. The grave read: “Kelly, I’ve been dying to ask you to prom.”

“So...” I said, hoping the corpse would stand up and ask me the question so we could rip this Band-Aid off violently. He stood up, all six feet and four inches of him, and remained silent. “So...” I said again, as he extended the flowers to me. “Prom?” he asked, as the stares and camera continued to roll.

Reading the room, I discovered that the only possible options were to A, run out and claim that I had heard someone calling my name from the hallway, or B, accept the promposal graciously because twenty-five people and a teacher I didn’t know were glaring at me with their mouths foaming, probably secretly hoping I would choose option A so they might have something interesting to talk about after school.

“Say something!” urged Cigarette Breath from the back of the room, who was now clearly reading my pros and cons list to his heart’s content. He was right. I had to say something. I thought about offering heartfelt thanks for the invite and how flattered I

was to have someone play dead for me, as my dog had been struggling with that trick for months.

Instead, I accepted the flowers and said, “Of course!” smiling so wide I could barely see. The class clapped and the teacher from the next room threatened to cry over the cuteness. I was congratulated by several of my female counterparts, although I wasn’t sure what exactly for.

I spent the remainder of the day lugging around a gravestone with my name spelled almost correctly on it and explaining to an artsy girl from English class that no, I was not participating in a performance art piece to show I felt dead on the inside due to the school’s strict anti-pajamas dress code.

“Oh,” she commented. “My fault for assuming someone would ever try to highlight a feeling of oppression via performance art.” I stared in pure confusion.

“Because this school is a prison,” she asserted, holding up a pair of plastic handcuffs that were undoubtedly purchased at the sex shop she always bragged about getting kicked out of for being “too much of a badass” and “not enough of a legal adult.”

“Oh, right,” I said, somewhat understanding. I explained to her that a very nice boy had asked me to the prom by feigning death during Psychology class. She gasped. I noted that while I abhorred the scene it caused, I was genuinely flattered by his innocent motives, but that I just didn’t want to go in general. She sighed.

“Well, the prom is an archaic social construct aimed at glorifying the teenage elite,” she blurted out in a single breath. Her slightly militaristic response comforted me, making me feel like maybe I wasn’t walking the halls alone.

“So are you going?” I asked, vacuously.

“Yeah,” she said. “I heard there was an ice cream station.”

I saw her again on the night of the prom, from behind a cluster of orange-faced girls who were posing for a slew of photos to commemorate the night of their lives. We made eye contact and smirked knowingly at one another, nonverbally agreeing that it wasn’t worth the ice cream station. I turned away, feeling a sudden surge of inexplicable delight in the fact that the night of my life had yet to come.

Not a Member

The trick is to enter the store appearing to be focused on a very important email. Your eyes should tell everyone that you're either receiving tragic news or that you are nearly there on an extremely complex Sudoku puzzle. It's also imperative you squint and mutter things like, "Oh, gosh. Okay. Hmm. Wow." And, even though you might think it's necessary to prevent yourself from walking into a mannequin sporting the season's latest trends, do not dare look up. Trust me. This is an effective strategy, should you want to prevent the piranha-like retail workers from approaching you, armed with passive aggressive phrases like, "You look like you could use some help—with everything!"

This is the advice I give myself before entering any clothing store, right after whispering, "They're more afraid of you than you are of them," three times to no one. This entrance tactic is merely one of the many defense mechanisms I have picked up during the very limited amount of time I have spent in these stores. In my experience, it has worked nearly twenty-percent of the time. The other eighty-percent has involved me exiting the store before an employee can say, "How may I assist you today?"

I know many people who engage in "retail therapy," which floors me, as someone who was once advised to seek professional help by a Hollister employee who noticed me standing motionless between push-up bras and sequin miniskirts. I was most likely paralyzed by the potent aroma that can only be described as a fusion of lethal toxins and adolescent tears.

"Are you lost? Like, do you need me to get you help? What's with this girl?" the bleach-haired employee asked, in her best Southern Californian accent even though we were twenty minutes south of Boston. The over-stimulation of the half-naked, chiseled bodies that served as the wallpaper seemed to close in on me while shoppers presumably confused me for a mannequin placed in the wrong store. "God," I imagined them saying, shielding their children's eyes. "An over-sized T-shirt and jeans? And is that a ketchup stain or a cry for help? I mean hash tag body positive, but where do we draw the line?" I usually do my best to remain unnoticed in stores, but I have always found that my inherent discomfort becomes amplified as the fluorescent light bulbs focus above my head like a merciless spotlight.

To put it lightly, Hollister was, in my opinion, a soul-sucking, health-code violating, confidence-crushing haunted house of retail. It was also the hub of fashion during my middle school career. It was not uncommon to walk through the store and hear mothers telling their daughters: “Honey, this extremely revealing fishnet bikini will look great for Brian’s end-of the-year pool party! Yes, I know you are only thirteen, but it’s high time you start objectifying yourself, do you hear me?”

The dresses that many of the girls tried on seemed, to me, more like shirts created solely to ruin family Christmas parties, even though the workers praised the way they fit just enough to be considered street legal. I surmised that every time a preteen girl asked, “Do I look hot enough in this ‘Push ‘Em Up Bra?’” an angel lost its sense of self.

I immediately felt like an outsider compared to my scrawny counterparts who were more in need of a food court hamburger than a transparent tank top that might show off their sexy ribcages.

“You might not find anything you like here because Hollister is more for the kind of girls...you know,” one of the workers said to me, studying my Celtics T-shirt in confusion. I knew.

I did not possess the sought-after, emaciated lack of glow that the patrons and wallpaper models did, otherizing me in a way that I had never before experienced. If the subtly sexual stares of the steroid-abusive, twelve-year-old Aryan models told me anything, it was that I should run—not walk—but *run* out of the store, as it would potentially burn off more calories from the pretzel I stress-ate prior to entering.

I began to imagine the implementation of Shopper ID Laws that would prevent girls like me from infiltrating the premises of esteemed shops of horror. I assumed these would require the completion of a causal questionnaire prior to entrance, much like the one below.

Dear valued and hopefully conventionally beautiful customer,

Thank you for attempting to shop with us! Before you begin, we would like to get to know you just a little bit better!

Please check any and all that apply:

- I have, in my lifetime, eaten an entire sleeve of Oreos during one sitting.
- On the Donald Trump scale of female ratings, from "Disgusting Animal" to "Beautiful Piece of Ass," I would clock in at either "Miss Piggy" or "Definitely Not a Ten."
- My thighs, like Mr. Trump, have touched on more than one occasion.
- I have never voluntarily purchased anything with kale in it.
- I have attempted to cram a fist full of buttered popcorn into my mouth while at the movies. After eating the whole box of Sno-Caps.
- I require vehement coaxing in regards to all things physical fitness; I typically wash down any and all exercise with copious amounts of chocolate ice cream.
- I have swiped my finger along the bottom of one or more uneaten cakes, stealing frosting and exhibiting zero self control.

*Thank you for taking the time to fill this out. Unfortunately, if you have checked any of these, we cannot legally allow you into the store. But don't bum out! The food court is right around the corner and we hear PF Chang's is having a lunch buffet! Do I smell Kung Pao Chicken? Anyways, we wish you luck in your future shopping endeavors and truly hope, from the bottom of our hearts, that you never show up here again. We pinky promise that security will be called. All the best!

These laws would also require females to provide proof of acceptable physical features. This proof would be gathered by using full body scanners as well as an insecure man named Ralph, whose job would require him to check females up and down and all around, on the lookout for any violations. Ralph would inspect for the following:

- Arms that show you lift, but not *lift*-lift. (Michelle Obama meets Jessica Biel meets woman from Shake Weight commercial blissfully unaware of the sexual undertones of the exercise)
- A shapely rear end that falls under an acceptable fruit category. These include: pears, apples, and plums. These do not include: raisins, mulberries, or dried prunes. Still awaiting a formal ruling on cantaloupe.

- Breasts that perk up when addressed by name in social settings
- The stomach of a malnourished hunger-strike activist nearing hospitalization
- Cheekbones higher than you were the time you did the 10-Day Paint Thinner Cleanse
- Plump lips that appear to be the result of an augmentation only because they are the result of an augmentation
- Hips that don't lie, but also don't really tell the full truth as far as that augmentation

These laws might not have existed in a legal capacity, but I knew they were being enforced in an unspoken manner, through passive aggressive phrases such as, “Oh, we only carry sizes Small, Extra Small, and those dresses that fit onto American Girl Dolls. You might want to check Plus Size Patty’s across the way. I hear they’re handing out free Cinnamon Rolls with every purchase of a tunic that doubles as a sail, should you ever find yourself in choppy waters!” Therefore, I always dreaded the adolescent mall trips that would inevitably lead me into the hellish abyss of string bikinis and chiseled abs.

It was, however, in the bowel of that netherworld wherein I learned to foster the non-American-Psychiatric-Association-approved illness of Shopophobia. Mine is a focused strand of the disorder, pertaining strictly to all things boutiques, shopping malls, pretentious plazas, intimate dress shops, high-end stores that exclusively sell striped scarves, and, of course, A Pea in the Pod, a store dangerously vague about its only selling maternity clothing. After about the third, “How far along are you?” I began to realize that being there was no longer conducive to my mental health, regardless of how much I loved a loose fit and the invention of a shirt with holes, even if they were only to allow for hands-free breast pumping.

I have often imagined myself in a Shopophobics Anonymous meeting, where I would learn exercises to cope with my retail aversion. “Hi, I’m Kelley,” I would say. “Hi, Kelley,” the others would moan, each carrying with them their own brand-name baggage. After a woman’s tear-inducing story about how she could only go near a TJ Maxx when

Mars was in retrograde, but could also do so when Mercury enters her tenth astrological house, I would stand and tell a tale about a traumatic moment in a boutique dressing room wherein a madwoman physically assaulted me in the hopes that I might squeeze into a smaller prom dress.

There was a time during high school when my sister and I were both attending the prom, which meant I would have to reluctantly join her on the search for the perfect gown. She had only one store in mind, as it was “Where *everyone* was getting their dresses.” Prior to this year, my sole method of attaining dresses involved my mother returning home from a mall trip with one that fit me, which I then wore to the corresponding prom, wedding, or funeral.

I grudgingly followed my mother and sister into the dress boutique one rainy April weekend. While perusing, we were interrupted by an employee who looked to be a Real Housewife of Orange County. Her salon-fresh hair and Trident-white teeth gleamed as she approached, speaking to us solely from the side of her mouth, as if she were a member of the royal family, come post hence to retrieve us gowns for the King’s elite ball.

“Ladies,” she said. “Do please let me assist you in finding dresses.”

“Thanks, but we’re just looking around,” we replied, to her now-scowling face.

“Nonsense, follow me!” she declared, motioning towards the changing rooms. We trudged through the dense jungle of sequin and lace, beating back the brush of rhinestone beading until we arrived at the dressing room doors.

She gently shoved my sister into one and me into the other, while our mother sat on a chair, bewildered by the store’s barrage of vibrant prom gowns that would presumably, in two short weeks, be stained with Bud Lite and mascara.

The woman asked our sizes, said, “We can do better than that,” and returned within seconds with a dress for each of us. I assumed I would be putting the dress on independently, because that is both customary and normal, not to mention legal. Instead, as I began to close the curtain, I discovered that the woman was right behind me, inside the now very cramped dressing room.

“Oh,” she said, sensing my discomfort. “How about you put the dress on and I’ll leave, and then I’ll come in to zip it.”

The woman of course invaded before I said I was ready and began tugging the back of the dress like her life depended on it.

“Suck it in,” she said, unaware that I was currently convulsing, trying to force the front of my stomach into my spine. The two were not meant to meet, much to her dismay.

“This can fit. It should be fitting,” she stammered angrily.

There is nothing more soul crushing to me than feeling like I have let someone down. I did not know this woman nor did I particularly like her in the least, and yet I was disappointed in myself for not being able to suddenly morph into a Victoria’s Secret model in that dressing room. My broad shoulders would not allow the zipper past the middle of my back, a severe blow to the woman, who had clearly devoted her life to squeezing teenage girls into dresses too small for them, so she could go home at night and, over a dinner of kale shakes, discuss with her starving daughters the importance of being able to fit into dresses that are one size too small.

“Don’t settle for your actual size; you are better than that. I raised you better than that,” I imagined her saying, while their blonde heads nodded simultaneously.

“What size was that poor, disgusting girl you met today, mother?” one would ask. The woman would choke back the tears and tell her daughters the truth so as not to shield them from the harsh realities of the world.

“She was, if you can believe it, about *average* size.” Their gasps would put the actresses on *One Life to Live* to shame.

“So she was obese? You met an actual obese person today, Mom? You are our hero, truly. Yours is the Lord’s work.”

The woman jolted me back and forth viciously in the dress before deciding that we should abandon the mission and accept defeat in a dress of my actual size.

“I always say, if you can wear a size lower, that’s always best. But, I’ll set out to see if we have this in the next size up.” Unfortunately, with each jolt, my self worth had been shaken out of me, now streaming from the tears I tried so desperately to keep from falling out of my soggy eyes. I grabbed my T-shirt off the floor and used it like a gauze pad, sticking it firmly into each eye as if to stop a profuse bleed. When the woman

returned, my eyes were stained red, which prompted her to say the nicest thing she said to me that day.

“Don’t worry about it. You can always lose the weight. It’s not like you’re fat, you’re more, you know, um...strong? You must play a lot of sports.” In my head, I assumed she was then waiting for me to retort with, “Yes, I am actually the linebacker on my high school football team. Usually they don’t let girls play, but they made a special dispensation for me, on account of my especially burly physique. I am leading the league in both tackles as well as emotional breakdowns disguised as touchdown celebrations.” However, I instead stood motionless, contemplating an escape out of the claustrophobic closet and the unforgiving mirror on the wall that assured me that I was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most horrifying of them all.

“You know, most girls really like this whole process,” she noted, studying me as if I were a foreign creature recently emerged from some nearby swamp. I was not sure which part the girls in question would have liked more, the intense invasion of privacy or the part where you get physically assaulted by a Xanax-deprived trophy wife. I did not look the store up on Yelp, but I can only imagine the kinds of top-notch ratings this woman would have received from hoards of teenage girls.

“Three stars. I used her as the subject of my psychology project and got an A!”
“Four stars. It was the literal slap in the face I needed.” “Three and a half stars. The doctors say the whiplash I sustained pales in comparison to the emotional trauma I have internalized. Not my worst half hour!”

“You might want to try a store more, um, more your speed, honey,” the woman advised. She was right. My “speed” was most likely online shopping in the middle of the night, but I did not need the *Real Housewife* to tell me that. My body literally rejected being in clothing stores, causing sweat to dribble down my forehead while apprehension inflated my chest. Biologically speaking, I did not belong.

I did not end up buying any dress that day because my mother eventually stepped in after noting my crushed demeanor as well as some other obvious red flags in the woman’s behavior. After that day, I vowed to never again step foot in a dressing room if I could help it. I knew, regardless of what I actually looked like, that I would always see the girl in the dress that was too small for her. I would always see someone juxtaposed

with the Californian ideal that pervaded the stores of my childhood. And I would always feel as if I had no right even being there in the first place.

I successfully refrained from entering another dressing room for nearly three years, until Christmas Eve of last year. I did as I had instructed myself, entering the store with my eyes locked on my blank phone screen, muttering, “Oh, gosh. Okay. Hmm. Wow.” I made it all the way to the women’s tops and grabbed a shirt before a festively dressed young woman approached me, asking if she might be able to help me find anything. I smiled instinctively and lied, explaining that I was merely looking around, as if I would ever shop recreationally.

“That’s a lovely blouse,” she said, pointing to the blue shirt I had blindly chosen based solely on its color and proximity to the store’s entrance. “Christmas present for Mom?” she asked. “She will love it.”

“Oh, well, no,” I mumbled. “I just needed a decent-looking shirt for tonight since it’s Christmas Eve.

“A *shirt*? On *Christmas Eve*?” she asked, clearly perturbed. “You *do* need my help!”

I yearned to stress to her that I was not in the store to make friends or have fun. I was also not about to be the subject of an impromptu episode of *What Not to Wear*, regardless how in need I was of an ambush-style intervention and makeup tutorial. I merely wanted to check out and then accidentally wear the shirt with the price tag still attached later that night.

“Oh, no I’m fine, really. But thank you and Merry Christmas!” I offered, hoping she would receive the blatant social cue and pick her next victim.

“Okay, well I’ll show you to the dressing room so you can try it on,” she said.

“I was just going to checkout—I think it should fit,” I replied.

“Well, won’t that be a waste if it doesn’t?” she said, her voice lingering.

I thought of my mother, who had advised me to return home with something nice to wear and was already peeved that I had waited a mere two hours before the festivities to do so. I knew she would overlook my not wearing a dress in the spirit of the season, but I didn’t think she would understand if I told her that something fit at the store, but it

must, you know, be the different air temperature of the house that caused it to no longer fit.

I inhaled and exhaled dramatically, as if I had been versed in some relaxation breathing technique at the Shopophobics Anonymous meeting. My posttraumatic dressing room experience from years prior had not been lost on me, in part because I could have sworn I still had a scar on my left arm from it. I trudged reluctantly behind the young woman, as if she were leading me to my own execution. I paused momentarily once we arrived at the chambers, contemplating throwing the shirt down and running out of the store before it hit the ground.

“How many items have you got?” asked the dressing room attendant.

“Just this shirt,” I said, staring down to analyze the odds of it fitting.

“You mean one *blouse*,” she corrected, as if I were a foreigner who had not spent a sufficient amount of time on Rosetta Stone prior to departing from whatever country I came from.

“One *blouse*,” I pronounced, with a real accent on the “ouse.” She nodded like a fulfilled teacher and motioned for me to enter into the claustrophobic enclosure. Almost all were taken, as evidenced by all the visible bare feet that were undoubtedly getting staff infection for Christmas. Finding a vacancy, I cracked the door open just enough to tell that there were three mirrors inside, which seemed not only excessive, but also inhumane.

For the first few minutes, I merely stood in front of the nightmarish funhouse, using the rare opportunity to discover the thrice-mirrored truth about myself. I noticed things I had never seen before, like a couple freckles that had previously flown under the radar and the very pronounced bags under my eyes. In fact, the closer I looked, the more I could see that my nose was slightly slanted and that my shoulders were abnormally large. My hair looked so unkempt that it would have disappointed the wolves that raised me. My thighs were a little too thick, my arms could use a Shake Weight session, and I could not see a rib anywhere, no matter which mirror I looked into.

“How’s it going in there?” the attendant asked loudly, banging on the door in a way that made me flinch. “We are closing soon, just want to let you know,” she said. I quickly changed into the shirt and closed my eyes, shielding them from having to bear

witness to my newly-bloused body. With my eyes shut, I could tell that objectively speaking, it fit. I could move my arms and touch my toes and it felt comfortable, and that was enough. I didn't need to see it. I knew I would be purchasing it anyways with the store closing, so I spared myself the disappointment.

I feverishly changed and power-walked out of the dressing room, headed straight to the register. Many might assume that my consternation would be alleviated at the checkout counter, but theirs would be a painfully ignorant assumption. The cashier, dressed appropriately in a Santa hat, could not simply scan the singular article of clothing and request the required compensation, as this would not jive with the aroma of inquiry so embedded in the store. Instead, she studied the blue blouse as if she had personally discovered it on some anthropological excursion.

Her brown eyes burned rays of discontent into the shirt, illustrating a fascinated concern. "Wow, navy blue on Christmas," she mumbled, just loud enough for me to hear. "Brave choice," she added. It is definitely an excellent rule of thumb to assume that any time a clothing purchase is referred to as "brave," it is perhaps the worst possible decision you could have made.

Had I not already felt ostracized by the fashionable environment and the cashier's contempt, the next question would assure me that I literally did not belong there. "Are you a member?" she asked, smiling wide enough for me to pick out the enamel on her blinding white teeth.

"No," I said, reaching into my wallet.

"Well, you *know*," she murmured, "If you *were* a member, you could save 50% on this purchase. It's our holiday deal. She stared at me for one, two, three seconds. "Would you like to become a member right now?" The outlandish amount of savings impressed me, so I agreed.

"Great!" she exclaimed, her fingers banging wildly on her keyboard.

"Can I have your email?" she asked, before ambushing me with a slew of questions that combusted my brain. "Great. Next, if you could just tell me: What is your date of birth, your credit card number, your address, your social security number, your mother's maiden name, your favorite color, the name of your first pet, all the members of

the Backstreet Boys, your favorite book, and the name your parents were going to give you if you were a boy?”

After giving her enough information to easily steal my identity, not that she would want to based on my clothing purchase, she smiled, said “Excellent,” and stared inquisitively at the computer. This time I flashed a smile back as I awaited membership into the cult of couture, and, more importantly, my 50% discount.

“Okay, just waiting for this to process,” she said. “Okay, great, here we go, it’s coming up, and...you...are...ooh. You are ineligible to receive a membership. Sorry. That’ll be \$24.99. Will you be paying with debit or credit?”

“Credit,” I said, in defeat. Perhaps I had blanked on one of the Backstreet Boys’ names, but something else told me that it was not meant to be—I did not belong.

Coming of Age in a Catholic School Bathroom

I stared out the window at the deserted playground, noting the freshly abandoned swing that somehow mustered the strength keep swaying. It beckoned for me to leap from my metal chair, fleeing the sterile room of prepubescent teens who had yet to master the art of the deodorant stick. I glanced at the door, which a priest guarded with his arms crossed as a kind of blessed bouncer. It was all a trap, as far as I was concerned, but I reluctantly accepted my fate as an inmate in the frigid room where I would soon learn the essentials of life.

Our school's health teacher, an affable woman in a woolen sweater, began setting up a poster that featured painfully accurate images of the female and male reproductive systems. The explicit visuals would serve as our field guide while we roamed woozily through the next five hours.

"Testes?" one of my classmates asked, panic-stricken. "No one said there would be a test! I didn't study! And there's more than one?"

"Hey, everybody!" the teacher yelled, as our heads shot upwards. More frightening than her upbeat demeanor, however, was the over-sized owl puppet that she wore on her hand like a glove.

"Knock knock," she teased.

"Who's there?" the room groaned collectively.

"Hoo!"

"Hoo who?"

"There we go! Now we've got the owl's attention! This is Oliver, the Owl," she said. "He's going to help us learn about sex!"

All of our cheeks reddened simultaneously. We parted in a stereotypical sea that was akin to a middle school dance while Oliver stared at us. Perhaps, to Catholics, owls were some sort of aphrodisiac. It certainly would not have been the strangest thing about the religion. Looking at you, Leviticus. Nevertheless, Oliver was the Archdiocese of Boston's answer to our lack of sex education, and he was there to peck it firmly into our malleable brains.

Our teachers had warned us that we would be having “sex ed” for the entire day, but other than that informative description, none of us knew what to expect. We had health classes before, but those puppets talked to us about refraining from doing things like drugs, drinking, and using the Lord’s name in vain.

As twelve-year-olds, we all had an idea of what sex was; we’d all snuck into at least one PG-13 movie where there was a mild suggestion that sex was happening off screen, so we pretty much knew all we needed to know. We thought.

“Oliver, what do you know about sex?” the health teacher asked the owl.

“I know that it’s a hoot!” Oliver exclaimed, as if to say that he had both been there and done that. Oliver then elaborated on the fact that he was a married owl, in case anyone interested in bestiality got any ideas. His was actually a beautiful love story that went as follows:

Once upon a time, Oliver the Owl was sitting on a tree in the forest when he saw Olivia the Owl, because every owl has to have a name that starts with the letter “O.” Olivia was beautiful, from her bulging eyes to the way she so gracefully twisted her head 360 degrees. Even the pellets she vomited made Oliver fall more and more in love with her. One day, Oliver asked if she would like to join him for a dinner of mice. There, Olivia wiped the mice blood off of Oliver’s cheek, which is the most flirtatious thing one can do on a first date. One thing led to another, and before they knew it, they were kissing under a full moon and judgmental God. They really loved each other, but decided that they should not go all Discovery Channel again until they got married. Now, every time they engaged in “coitus,” a new owl was formed and given an “O” letter name. The End.

I already wanted to throw up and we had not even come close to seeing a birthing video. Even as a twelve-year-old, I knew where this was headed: marriage plus sex equals babies, and sex minus marriage equals no. We were about to get the Catholic-school version of sex-ed, void of any preventive methods or wiggle room. If God was judging a sloppy owl named Oliver, how much would he be judging us?

“Okay, before we split up into just girls and just boys, I want to give you a quick overview of sex,” our health teacher said, putting Oliver down so as to now command respect. She clearly did not need his help for this quickie.

“I’m not here to scare you,” she said. “Sex is fun. It is one of the greatest things in the whole world. I’m not going to tell you that it’s not. But, it is something you can only have if you are married and you are trying to have a baby.”

It was as if she was selling us an amazing product, like a soft pretzel, but one you could only eat every once in a waxing harvest moon. And if you did eat the pretzel when the moon wasn’t waxing or harvesting, you’d be committing a shameful act. Also, you would probably get pregnant with a bastard pretzel-child, which, while delicious, would not be easy to explain.

“Sex can also be very dangerous,” the teacher added, while Oliver lay face down on the floor, most likely as a sign of solidarity for our suffering. “You can get sexually transmitted diseases, sometimes without even fully having sex.” All I heard was that you could get a disease from having sex, but you could also get one from *not* having sex, leading me to pick nervously at my fingers until a stream of blood dribbled down my hand. We were all doomed.

As I looked up from rubbing the blood off on my sweatshirt, I noticed the teacher holding another puppet that I recognized, like a ghost from Health Classes Past. It was Rudy, the orange dog who, as of two years ago, was a full-blown drug addict. However, we soon learned that he had traded his drug habit for a porn addiction. I was happy to see that he was doing better.

“You can be addicted to sex too,” Rudy warned us. “Sex is something special between a husband and a wife. Watching pornographic videos is a sin. Having dirty thoughts is a sin too. Also, woof.”

Rudy’s porn addiction was being remedied through prayer and the fact that he was a dog puppet. Rudy then suggested to the teacher that this would be an excellent time to send the boys out of the room, so the girls could have a more personal lesson in puberty and sex, puppet to girl.

The boys wandered out of the life-changing room with who I hope was not the priest guarding the door. With all the testosterone gone, us girls could learn about our changing bodies. I mean, God forbid a boy heard about a menstrual cycle or how pregnancy works. Perhaps their bodies would be set aflame by even the word “period.” I want to say that most grey-haired male politicians who tell women what to do with their

uteruses also learned about sex in this exact fashion. Nevertheless, now that the boys were gone, we could pass around maxi pads and tampons without anyone spontaneously combusting.

“Things are going to change soon,” the teacher warned, silencing the room. She took us through a list of “what to expect while you’re pubescent,” which was filled with blood, tears, and some very awkward social situations. We would get out periods, and immediately, males would begin to attack, blinded by our newly budded breasts and thirteen-year-old birthing hips. Mother Nature became my new mortal enemy, as she could strike at any moment like the monster that most definitely lived under my bed.

I took all of these warnings as something tragic that could never happen to me, like getting hit by a bus or being eaten by a killer whale. It was unfortunate, yes, that Mother Nature would end up taking some people victim, but I guess the homeless man who wandered my street was right when he said that life wasn’t fair. His claim about the fact that the government was listening to my phone conversations was still left to be determined, however.

“Once you get your period, you are officially a woman!” the teacher exclaimed, smiling wide to reveal her coffee-stained teeth.

“I guess I’m a woman,” whispered my friend Jane. I gasped.

“What?” I asked, the horror widening my eyes. Not Jane, I thought. Anybody but Jane. Couldn’t be Jane. She’s so nice. So innocent. She could have never seen it coming.

“Well I got my period...” she said nonchalantly, as if she had come to terms with her misfortune.

“Girls, if you have any questions you can ask them at the end,” the teacher assured us.

I couldn’t believe it had affected someone I was close to. You always think, “It will never happen to me or anyone I know.” I scanned the room nervously to gage how many other “women” were among us. I shook my head. My mother had tried to warn me about this phenomenon, but I usually ran away or blocked my ears, swatting every mention of a bird or bee.

The girl to my right then handed me the maxi pad that had been circulating the room. I accepted it reluctantly, fearing that touching it might induce womanhood. I held

the foreign object by the tips of my fingers, but felt that the other girls could sense my discomfort.

“Girls do have to worry more than boys do,” the health teacher said. She went on about how we would have to fend off the men who want to impregnate us and always keep tampons at the ready, should Mother Nature plot her merciless attack on our uterus without warning. She suggested placing some in a fanny pack, which I thought could definitely be an effective method to repel just about anyone. A person wearing a fanny pack might very well be the very last person I would ever consider approaching. It became abundantly clear that we, as females, had pulled the short end on the tampon as far as puberty went.

Aside from the part about how worried and vigilant we should be at all times, everything else we learned was in wonderfully vague detail. Instead of learning about using condoms, we learned that we could thank our floozy, Old Testament sister, Eve, for having to menstruate. We were still paying the price for that one time the weak-minded Jezebel decided to eat a piece of fruit. “Because,” the teacher said, “it only takes one time.”

Suddenly, Rudy the dog materialized onto the teacher’s hand, presumably returning from his porn marathon.

“Let’s get the boys back in here!” he exclaimed.

The boys soon wandered back into the room, their countenances drenched with discomfort. They sat back down away from us on *their* side of the room, which, we would learn, was the most effective form of birth control.

“Welcome back, boys!” Oliver the Owl announced. “Now that we have all learned so much, it’s time for questions. Everyone has a flashcard under their seat. If you don’t have a question, just write your name, so no one knows who is or is not asking questions.”

I had roughly three hundred questions to ask the wise owl, but was too embarrassed. So, I scribbled my name in chicken scratch and passed my flashcard forward, hoping that someone else would ask all three hundred.

“Okay, first question,” the owl declared, reading off the flashcard the teacher held for him. “Can you get pregnant without having sex?”

I think this question should have signaled to the owl that perhaps this sex-ed seminar had missed the mark. We actually thought that, like the Virgin Mary, we could be miraculously inseminated without having intercourse.

“No, but you can get diseases without fully having sex,” Oliver assured us. “Okay, next question: “I read in a magazine about an “orgasm.” What is that?”

Oliver flew around this question, ultimately using his phone-a-friend option by calling on Rudy the dog.

“You shouldn’t be reading dirty magazines that talk about orgasms,” Rudy barked, before presumably returning under the table to his copy of *Playboy*.

Oliver strategically half-answered questions about menstrual cramps, blow jobs, hooking up, erections, and the fact that you *can* and *will* get pregnant in a hot tub. He even dodged a question that asked how gay sex worked by essentially telling us that gay people did not exist, except in hell where the gay population, as well as rent, was surprisingly high.

“Well, this sure has been a hoot!” Oliver said, using the word rather liberally at this point. We had apparently learned all that was on his itinerary, and would have to wait for the next class to see the birthing video. This class would not take place for another year.

Although Oliver the Owl did not provide much in the way of valuable information, he started a real dialogue in our seventh grade class. The next day at lunch I went in for a bite of my soggy peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich while the girls at the other end of the table conversed in a grimy cafeteria version of *Sex and the City*.

“I mean, yeah, we did ‘it,’” one lied, as she undid the wrapper on her Fruit Roll-Up. The girl next to her wasn’t listening, however, as she was actively grabbing her chest to analyze the size of what she would refer to as “enormous boobs.”

“I’m a size C,” she said, proudly, to herself. The girl on her left then pulled out a handheld mirror to note the impeccable eye-lining job she had done that morning, smacking her lips in confirmation.

“God, they’re so into themselves,” my friend Erica said, accidentally catching their attention.

“What are you guys looking at?” they asked, as if we were supposed to answer with, “Your enormous boobs and flawless makeup job, your highnesses.” Suddenly, as a cohesive unit, they scooted down to the uncool side of the table to confront us.

“What size bra do you guys wear?” the alpha of the pack asked us.

“Medium?” I offered, hoping it would qualify as an answer. They all laughed like hyenas in heat.

“Have any of you guys even gotten your periods yet?” Enormous Boobs asked.

Some people had, but the majority answered no, which cued an under-the-lunch-table version of menstruation that Oliver the Owl did not have the capacity to provide as a non-placental animal.

“You bleed so bad that you can’t move, and it hurts for a long time,” they said. “But, when it comes, it means your boobs are about to grow, so that’s good. That’s when you’ll really get noticed. Then you can, you know, ‘do it.’” I imagined those magic pill capsules that transformed into shapes when dropped in water and struggled to finish my barely edible PB&J.

“My mom says that’s when you have to start worrying, though,” one of the Carrie Bradshaws asserted. Compared to the rest of us, she wore her newfound puberty quite well, so I didn’t know what she would be worried about. “Acne cream, birth control, tampons, it sucks,” she admitted. “My mom says that’s part of being a woman, though; she said the worrying never stops.”

A few weeks later I came home to a book sitting on my pillowcase called *The Care and Keeping of You*. The three girls on the cover mocked me with their glee and freshly used razor. How could anyone smile at a time like this? I inched closer, as if it were a Ouija Board that would predict the date of my impending entrance into womanhood. I flipped through the horrific pages of what looked like cartoon pornography before throwing the book on the ground and collapsing into the safety of my bed.

“Did you get the book I put on your bed?” my mother asked at dinner.

“No,” I said. “Can you pass the chicken?”

It wasn’t my mother’s fault that she had to resort to throwing a book on my bed to fill the void that Oliver the Owl had left. She had tried, many times, to talk to me, but

usually I maturely covered my ears or sprinted away from her, because if I didn't hear about it, it wouldn't happen. I appreciated her concern, but this was obviously just a worst-case scenario.

While babysitting my sister that weekend, I skimmed through the morbid book's section on shaving. I had never noticed before, but now my legs looked, to me, like I was mid transformation into a werewolf, and would soon be sneaking out to howl at the moon if nothing was done. I plopped my sister in front of the TV and quickly climbed back up the stairs to the bathroom, where I plucked a blue razor from its package in the drawer. Under the fluorescent light, I stared at the shark-teeth grooves that would soon chomp a piece out of my calf. Their cool edges sent goose bumps all the way to my arms, causing my shoulders to jump.

"Ouch! Shit!" I yelled, as blood spurted out of my knee and onto the tiled floor. I reached for a nearby white towel that quickly turned crimson.

"What are you doing?" my sister cried, knocking at the bathroom door.

"Nothing, I'll be right out," I said, trying to clean the bathroom that now bore a striking resemblance to a murder scene. After about twenty minutes of dabbing, the bleeding paused, allowing for me to take a closer look at the rest of my legs, which were riddled with cuts that would scar indefinitely. I decided to cross "becoming a woman" off of my list of things to do as it was morbid and making me lightheaded.

Unfortunately, however, Mother Nature began taking my classmates as victims, one by one. Danielle had bled through her khaki skirt and Rose stained her white gym shorts. Annie wore push up bras and kissed everyone. Val announced that she was on birth control. Mara and Mitch were officially dating, and their song was "Burnin' Up," by the Jonas Brothers. Theirs was a non-Oliver the Owl sponsored, elite club of peach fuzz and tissue-stuffed bras. It was as if no one had taken the talking owl seriously.

I made wishes upon wishes that I would not turn into a "woman" just yet, as I did not want to have to worry about the things the girls in the elite club were. I barely remembered to eat a Flintstone Gummy every couple of weeks, so there was no way I could ever be on birth control. My natural anxiety exacerbated every vague danger described in health class, and assumed that getting your period was akin to the president

pressing the big red “Don’t Press” button that exploded the nuclear bombs. Unfortunately, two weeks later, the button was pressed.

A few weeks later, I found myself laughing with my friend Polly over the funny pictures in our religion book. I attributed the ache in my stomach to our excessive chuckling, but it only continued to worsen. I glanced at the clock and noticed that the school day was three minutes from ending, although I couldn’t be sure as my vision was slowly fading to a fuzzy gray. A stream of sweat dribbled down my forehead and onto my nose, but my face was numb to the slithering sensation.

“Whoa, you look sick,” Polly said. “You’re sweating. You should ask to go to the bathroom and splash water on your face.” I tried to form words as I rose sluggishly from my seat, stumbling out the door and down the hall to the bathroom in what would be my final walk as a “non-woman.”

My skin crawled with every step towards the bathroom, which I felt might have been visible, based on the bewildered glances from other students in the hallway. My vision was blurring, but it appeared that my classmate, Bobby, sprinted in the opposite direction when I turned to him, sweating and squint-eyed, and asked if he also thought that the hall was spinning a little fast for a Friday afternoon.

“Oh, cool, I’ll catch you back in homeroom!” I shouted as he picked up speed, turning back only to make sure I wasn’t following. Battling my cramp-induced disorientation, I skated my hands against the walls as if reading Braille until I reached the aptly named Women’s Room.

The faucet screeched as the brownish water gushed into the sink. I placed my trembling hands under its stream and splashed it onto my pallid face, staring into the mirror at my nearly unrecognizable reflection.

As I turned to leave, I caught a sideways glimpse of a small drop of blood on my khaki skirt. I could feel my body rejecting its newfound womanhood as the oxygen flow to my brain decreased. My knees collapsed onto the damp bathroom floor and I awoke minutes later with tile marks branded on the side of my face. The final school bell screamed as if to alert the world that another girl had metamorphosed into a full-blown woman.

I looked to my left and right to see if any perverts had come out of the cracks in the wall. I wobbled to my feet and stared into the mirror at my tile-branded face. Womanhood had taken me while I was unconscious, unable to consent. I swear I saw an owl swoop past the window as I glanced down at the watch I had won from inside the Cinnamon Toast Crunch Box that morning. It was time to worry.

The Perils of Being Pleasant

It seems that females are creatures socialized to be tenaciously pleasant, as if one grimacing girl might disrupt the natural balance of the universe. For example, if I had a dollar for every time someone told me, “You’d be so much prettier if you smiled more!” I would have enough money to just go ahead and get the full facial reconstruction. This quality is, to a certain extent, ingrained in us from the moment we are brought into the world and referred to as “Sweetheart,” “Angel,” and “Smoochy-faced doodlebug,” presumably by a strange aunt. We are taught to be eternally affable, masking any discomfort or fear with a broad, toothy smile. For if we are not, we will be perceived as bitches who menstruate out of our eyes.

But, I would much rather have blood coming out of my eyes—blood coming out of my wherever—than place an agreeable disposition over my life, which is what seems to take place in all of the crime shows I consume in large quantities in the middle of the night when I can’t sleep. I highly suggest this practice, if, for some reason, you are trying to stay awake for an extended period of time. There’s just something about watching a real estate broker keep a woman chained inside a shipping container that makes you think twice about lying your head on a pillow and turning off the lights.

These shows often air on Friday and Saturday nights, which means it takes about an hour for me to get ready if I’m going out. Hair: one minute. Makeup: four minutes. Finding out it *was* the boyfriend who threw the girl’s body into the dumpster on *Dateline*: fifty-five minutes. I don’t mean to reduce the shows to their most common plot point, but I cannot curb my acute fascination with the various episodes’ most glaring similarity, which involves the tragic murder, rape, or assault of a girl who seemed to have smiled at the wrong person.

After the show’s host bombards you with whatever heinous act has taken place, the private detective typically confirms that the female’s body has been stabbed before being subsequently burned, hacked into pieces, and tossed along the roadside. The victim is usually said to have been a happy-go-lucky young woman in her mid-twenties. She had been reported missing by her sobbing coworker, who claimed not to have seen her since that night he stabbed, burned, and hacked her to pieces.

The show's host then teases some new findings for after the commercial break, leaving me reeling in a suspense that not even a Gerber Baby Food commercial can quell. My anticipation is soon met with the detectives finding a message written in blood on the wall of the victim's apartment, which features the coworker's initials as well as an unnerving smiley face. The police then decide, based on zero evidence, to accuse a mustachioed neighbor who owns an alarming number of American Girl Dolls that have not yet made their way out of the boxes. Although he's innocent, he loses his job as a high school science teacher just for the sake of adding depth.

The victim's pleasant demeanor and outward appearance are then brought up as factors in the case— factors that have worked against her and are perhaps the sole reasons she is now in pieces, (aside for, of course, the sociopathic coworker.) If only she had refrained from applying mascara, smiled less frequently, or had just a *touch* of elephantitis, she might have been spared.

“Well what do you expect?” a toothless neighbor wearing a beer-stained wife beater might then ask into the producer's camera. “A nice girl living alone? At night? In this neighborhood? With *that* tank top? And *those* legs?”

Friends will recall the victim as almost “too nice” or “too friendly.” And, even though these are merely two of the three thousand required tenets of femininity, they have backfired on her. At the end of the episode, we discover that she was “too kind” to her psychotic coworker who had been stalking her. I can't help but wonder if anyone had ever asked her how much prettier she might be, if only she smiled more.

I have therefore come to the unfortunate realization that females are not exactly safe. Not in their car or at work. Not on the street or at the movies. Not in a box or with a fox. Not in the rain or on a train. Not in a house or with a mouse. Not here. Not there. Not anywhere.

This idea was actually introduced to me in my elementary years, through the annual “Stranger Danger” seminar hosted by our local police officer, which might more realistically be seen as an advertisement for pepper spray. *Pepper Spray: Every Little Bit Helps. Pepper Spray: Like Perfume, But Not. Pepper Spray: Maybe She's Born With It. Maybe It's Pepper Spray.*

The assembly would usually involve the officer inserting a VHS tape that typically adhered to the following format:

FADE IN:

EXT. VACANT SUBURBAN STREET-BROAD DAYLIGHT.

A white, windowless van approaches a blonde, teenage GIRL who is wearing pigtails, a pink tank top, and her heart on her sleeve. The van pulls to the side of the empty road and the girl stops to notice, smiling wide even though a white, windowless van is approaching.

The driver is the STRANGER— a bulky man with a gnarly beard. The stains on his aptly worn wife beater suggest he either just went to town on a McRib or he recently bludgeoned someone to death. He opens the door of the van, where the girl is conveniently standing motionless on the sidewalk, ready to answer his very subtle questions that warrant absolutely zero concern.

STRANGER

Where you headed?

GIRL

Thanks so much for asking! I'm actually headed home, or, I'm sorry, what am I thinking? You don't know what that means! I am so rude. I am headed to 239 Cherry Lane. If you take this next right, go straight through the set of lights, and take the left, it's the third house down on the right.

STRANGER

(scribbling details into notepad)
Ok. Can you help me find my puppy? It's one of those yellow labs, like the one from the K9 Advantix commercial. He

actually *is* the puppy from that commercial now that I think more about him.

GIRL

What? He's lost? I am so sorry. He's such a good singer. Yes, I'll help you. Where did you see him last? I'll start looking.

STRANGER

I think I lost him inside this van, actually. Could you come in to help me look?

GIRL

Well, I'm not sure if...

STRANGER

There's candy inside. Chocolate, Skittles, gumdrops, everything.

GIRL

(smiling wider than when the van approached)

Well, jeez, you should have led with that, Mister!

The girl walks into the van while the video slows to a pause. Sarah McLachlan's "Angel" plays as the image of the girl fades to black and white.

FADE OUT.

"Wow," the officer would comment, shaking his head and holding his heart as if the acting warranted a Golden Globe.

He would then help us compile a list of preventative measures to curb the amount of times we would find ourselves without candy in a van. These included something along the lines of: screaming with the passion of a grief-stricken fisher cat, not smiling

back at the person like you've witnessed some sort of miracle, running like Usain Bolt in the opposite direction, and approaching other, non-suspicious strangers for help. It's worth noting that these strangers are not to be confused with "strangers," *strangers*, or even StRaNgErS. These are merely strangers, and are fine to approach usually mostly all the time.

Whenever meeting someone new, I am quick to think back to the impressionable girl from the video. "What are things I like to do? Well, right off the top of my head I can tell you that I do not like candy, or dogs, or white vans." This is a great line if you want to subtly let a potential 'napper know that they should take their tricks elsewhere, that the tried and true formula will not be working on you. It also works to repel each and every person you meet, if that's something you're interested in as well.

Being armed with ways to combat mentally ill adults who need a hobby would not be enough, however, the officer said, especially for the girls in the room. We found out that our XX chromosomes meant that we lacked a certain physical strength that boys had, which made us more vulnerable to attacks. Of course, if there were any girls who did possess a similar strength to the boys, she would have been mercilessly bullied, exhibiting yet another feminine Catch 22.

"Girls have more smarts," the officer said, even though the girl from the video did little to exhibit this. "They make up for in brains what they lack in upper body strength."

I thought about how I might implement this during an attack. "Excuse me, sir," I would say, giving him the "one second" sign. I would then pull out the Rubik's Cube that is permanently on my person and begin rapidly solving it until shock flooded his face.

"Scared yet?" I would ask, showing off my feat of astonishing spatial reasoning. Instead of taking the opportunity to pounce, he would take several steps backwards, unsure of how to handle the immense wave of intelligence I had unsheathed from my womanly wheelhouse.

" $E = mc^2$!"

"No!" he would cry. "I can't take it!"

"So," I would pause to ask. "This is definitely working, right?"

"Honestly, yes. Kudos," he would admit, shielding his face from my wisdom.

“Promise me, though, that at *any* time, if you feel like what I’m doing isn’t exactly working for you, just say the word, because I can immediately plunge into an insightful lecture on Victorian Era Poetry that I feel will make you, in the words of the great Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ‘stand farther off.’”

I find that, although I am well versed in the gory details of the sensationalized criminal investigations, I am not privy to them in real life situations. This became abundantly clear about two summers ago. I was working a night event where I was responsible for driving Boy Scouts through the woods to the spot where they would launch their canoes. With their life jackets and paddles stuffed into the large, white van, I drove up the hill and into the woods. The pungent odor from the pubescent boys’ underarms permeated the van, causing me to nearly choke on the air that I swore on their merit badges was thickening by the minute.

After about two minutes of driving, my coworker called to remind me to pull to the side at the opening in the road and wait for her to pass me in her van so we would not collide. I did as I was told, shifting the gear into park and turning up Magic 106.7’s playing of “One Week” by the Barenaked Ladies. After an exhausting workday, my eyes began to sluggishly close under the mask of my salt-smearred sunglasses.

Bang. Bang. BANG.

My shoulders sprang up at the abrasive clamor and I turned to decipher the source. Next to the passenger door stood a middle-aged man with a crooked smile who gestured for me to roll down the window.

“How’s it going?” I asked, smiling instinctively, hoping he was just an innocent hiker in need of directions.

“Mind if I hop in?” he asked, already opening the door to sit in the vacant seat and then slamming it shut before I could answer.

Seeing that there were many fathers in the group, I assumed he must have been merely meeting his son halfway by parking further into the park.

“Is your son in this van?” I asked, turning to face the Boy Scouts, hoping they might offer me a clue instead of avoiding any and all forms of eye contact.

“No,” he said, as my ears began to ring in fear.

“Is this someone’s dad?” I whispered in terror to the boy behind me.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “His son must be in the other van. It’s fine.”

“You have a beautiful smile,” the man told me. “Are you Irish?” he asked, as if you could tell someone’s genealogy from their incisors. I quickly placed my hand over my mouth, manually forcing my lips into a scowl.

My coworker passed me on the other side, stopping momentarily to wave and say “Hi.” I made a face that suggested I was on the way to my own execution, which she thought was merely indicative of the fact that I was in a van with fifteen Boy Scouts. She laughed and drove onwards, leaving the road empty for our van to travel. I yanked it into drive and pressed onwards, clenching the wheel to the point of ripping the faux leather in the hopes that the man’s son would greet him with a hug upon arrival.

“There’s just something about coming here at night,” he said, turning fully in the seat to make eye contact with me as I drove. “I certainly spend a lot of time here.”

“Nice,” I mumbled, internally wondering why I was speaking back to him and also why I let him in the van and also why I hadn’t really learned from watching the terrifying shows.

We finally arrived at the launch spot and the man did not seem to be mingling with any child or adult. I approached the Troop Leader, asking whether or not the man was indeed supposed to be on the trip or if he was someone I had involuntarily picked up on the side of the road in the woods with a van full of children.

“Yeah, he’s fine,” the leader said. “He looks pretty familiar to me. All good. So, if you don’t mind, us boys are going to do some canoeing now. That alright with you young lady?”

I rolled my eyes and began to take my estrogen-laden body back to the van, somewhat relieved that my mysterious passenger looked at least “pretty familiar” to the overly-decorated Boy Scout leader who, at age fifty, felt it necessary to wear the entire uniform from head to toe in a way that should have made everyone think for a minute.

I inserted the keys into the ignition and stopped to open my coworker’s text that read: “Everything okay? Why were you making that face?” I thought about how much she would laugh at the situation now that it was over, now that it was a crisis averted. I

got as far as typing, “So when I was parked on the side of the...” before hearing the creak of the passenger door being pried open.

“Can you give me a ride back?” the man from before asked, again, already climbing into the passenger seat.

“Aren’t you with the canoeing crew?” I barked defensively, hoping that maybe he had just somehow forgot.

“Well, I saw the canoeing, so I’ll go back to my car,” he asserted, as if I were conducting a disturbing sightseeing trip solely for him.

“So your son is here somewhere, right?” I asked, a question that was met with silence.

I am not proud of what I did next, as it went against every teaching of the school police officer and is often pictured as the catalyst in the crime shows. For whatever reason, I couldn’t say no to the man. I never deserted my pleasant demeanor, but instead internally wagered that I could endure the two-minute car ride so as to circumvent any confrontation.

“I finally got the right prescription today. It gets filled tomorrow,” he said, after I began driving. Sweat gushed from every pore in my quaking body as I realized it meant he was currently on the *wrong* medication. This was it. This would be on the news. He was crazy. He would murder me. I let this happen. What smarts I had were clearly sacrificed when I made the decision to trap myself with the man, so I clearly had little left in the way of defending myself. I glanced at the glove compartment, but assumed there wouldn’t be a Rubik’s Cube inside.

“How old is your son?” I asked, still holding on to a shred of hope that he was a part of that group.

“How old are *you*?” he asked, giggling.

We drove in silence for thirty seconds, until I could see his car, which was parked on the side of the road where my van had previously stopped.

“Why aren’t you smiling? Are you okay?” he asked, attempting to reach out and touch my shoulder. I leaned so far over that the van nearly veered into the trees. We reached where his car was parked after what felt like a million-mile trip, uphill in slow motion.

“Okay, there’s your car, I have to go back to work,” I said, as fast as I have ever spoken before.

“Okay, okay,” he grumbled, opening the door. “Maybe I’ll see you again,” he uttered, as I watched his feet finally connect with the pavement. I pressed the gas onto the floor of the van before he could even shut the door, leaving him engulfed in the van’s exhaust.

“You’re too nice,” my coworker said, shaking her head after I told her the story. I assumed she would have said the same thing into the news cameras, should the man have bludgeoned me to death. “Why didn’t you tell him no?” she demanded.

I couldn’t really come up with an answer, other than the fact that I was only being pleasant.

Single White Female Seeks Fairy Godmother

Most of the girls in my seventh grade class spent the majority of the year playing the game MASH, which was an acronym for mansion, apartment, house, shack. The mystical game determined things such as where you would live, whom you would marry, how many kids you'd have, what type of car you'd drive, and, depending on the mental stability of the game's moderator, your cause and date of death. A clairvoyant thirteen-year old would ask the subject to close their eyes as she drew the magical spiral that would dictate the player's future, while everyone watched wide-eyed as the destiny was foretold. The sprightly fortune teller would eventually conclude, "Rachel, it looks like you'll be living in a house, married to— oh my God—Ian! Ew! Also, I'm seeing that you will have seventeen kids and drive a used Toyota Camry!"

"Also," another girl would whisper from seemingly out of nowhere, "I'm seeing that the coroner will indeed confirm the suspicion of death by asphyxiation on March the sixth, 2032."

Everyone seemed to take the game's findings to be as legitimate as a medical report and even began acting on the answers, as if to hurry along fate. Couples formed out of the marriage predictions, which I felt was inspiring, given that their predicted living arrangements were in shacks. The marriage projections were the only thing any of the players cared about, however, and undoubtedly rushed home to inform their families of their pending engagements and looming pregnancies.

Interestingly, each time the game was played, there were three names under the marriage category and one blank space. This void signified that the player was destined to be unmarried— a tragic fate that had not yet been predicted for any player in the entire year thus far. And then, one Friday afternoon in May, I decided to play the game.

My future seemed to be panning out rather wonderfully in the first few minutes, as my soothsayer circled things like mansion and Honda CRV. However, after it appeared that she was finished with her calculations, she looked at me, her countenance drenched in alarm, and said, "Oh my god...you're...you're not going to get married." Everyone gasped collectively. "You're going to be alone!"

This was not news that I could take home. It has often seemed like my siblings and I have a lot to live up to in terms of marriage, as my parents have been together since they were in the ninth grade. And, as my mother will happily tell you, she and my father actually met in the second grade, at which point in the story people will either smile so hard their faces crack or projectile vomit, their bodies rejecting the utter adorability. My grandmother used to watch their three-hour wedding tape recreationally, sitting at the edge of her seat and chomping on popcorn.

“Oh, look how pretty the church was! And how not-as-into-drugs your uncle looks!” she would observe.

She inserted the dusty VCR of the wedding video while she babysat us, forcing us to relentlessly relive the magic. We struggled to contain our laughter as the bridesmaids moseyed down the aisle, their outrageous perms matching perfectly with their frilly, magenta shoulder pads. My grandmother pointed out all the characters for us, like her neighbors, cousins, and that uncle from Nebraska who was either named Frank or Fred, but it’s a two-way street and he really didn’t put in the effort getting to know her either, so she’s not going to beat herself up about it, alright?

She would clap in earnest from the couch as my parents kissed in front of the elfish-looking priest and blushing altar boys. My siblings and I then made vomit noises that were immediately hushed by a cat-embroidered pillow thrown in our faces.

The camera, clearly being held by a twelve-year-old with ADHD, panned erratically to individual people congratulating my parents. “You two kids were always so cute,” gushed three elderly women in unison.

“Truly soul mates,” affirmed a gentleman rather coldly, as if he was planning on killing everybody at the reception later on but felt the words fit appropriately enough for now.

“Cheers to many, many years,” shouted a half-in-the-bag friend of my father’s who was doing his best Dr. Suess impersonation, presumably to let the bridesmaids know that he was well read, in case any were into the intellectual type.

“They really are something,” my grandmother would declare, exhaling what was left of her Marlboro Lite and blatantly ignoring her manifesting emphysema.

“Kelley, you’re in the second grade. You know that they went to second grade together. Maybe you’ll meet your husband this year!” she exclaimed, half-joking but also half-extremely serious. I thought of the nose-picking, mouth-farting barbarians and determined there was not a husband in the bunch.

It’s not that our family put pressure on us to find soul mates during adolescence, but there was an underlying feel that my mother would have really loved it. I once came home from a gas station and told her that the boy working there told me I should get my tires looked at.

“A BOY? What? What else did he say to you?” she asked while I stared.

I don’t blame my mother for wanting all of us to find people to spend upwards of eternity with, as anxiety inducing as that sounds. She and my father have been married for twenty-five years and still genuinely love each other, which is truly an astonishing and rare feat.

“I don’t think I ever want to get married,” I told my mother, who slammed on the breaks of our minivan.

“Why would you say that?” she asked, her eyes threatening to water.

“It all really seems like a lot. I like being alone,” I said, in a too-cool-for-school tone that I know irked her to her core.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about yet,” she asserted, presumably thinking of the biography she would craft for me later that afternoon on Match.com. “Kelley enjoys long walks on small beaches and is unafraid of commitment. She loves to laugh, mostly at herself, but never at others. (Unless they are wearing sleeveless turtlenecks, for some reason.) She enjoys going out and staying in and her friends say she is easy-going, especially after she is given a powerful sedative.”

My mother has always told me that I will “just know” when I’ve met the person I want to spend the rest of my life with. According to WebMD, I should feel a slight pang near my ribcage area, a sensation known in the medical community as either “butterflies” or “gallstones.”

I think I must have felt something close to this when I was in preschool, when I became engaged to my neighbor/part-time lover, Jack. Jack and I were married in an intimate ceremony in my backyard by our other neighbor Brian, who was definitely a bit

too old to have been involved in the nuptials. Nonetheless, Brian handed us both Ring Pops and told us that we should kiss, which, again, now seems to be losing its innocent charm. Whether or not Brian had become a Justice of the Peace prior to the backyard ceremony, I do not know. But I do know that spiritually, I will always be married to Jack, which I plan to use as an excuse indefinitely.

“You don’t let anyone in,” my mother will say, every night before I go to bed, in the morning when I wake up, and from outside the bathroom door while I shower.

I began thinking of the time the woman at the nail salon asked me “Why you no have boyfriend?” and wondered if maybe there was something wrong with me, although she told me, more than once, that it was my dirty cuticles.

“Well,” I said, “I think I’m just—“It’s you cuticles,” she sternly asserted.

As I have gotten older, I’ve noticed that being single is somewhat worrisome to people, indicative of the fact that you must not be wanted. I whole-heartedly blame this on the fairy tales that girls grow up with, which all seem to involve weddings that enhance the status of helpless women who are much more in need of a psychiatrist than a one-dimensional prince who has a tendency to kiss unconscious females.

My main grievance with these tales involves the timing of the Fairy Godmother’s arrival in *Cinderella*. She doesn’t show up when Cinderella’s father dies, leaving her a servant to her psychologically abusive and evil stepmother. She doesn’t step in when Cinderella’s homely stepsisters sing “Sweet Nightingale” at a shrill enough octave to shatter all of the glass ceilings the film seems to endorse. And she does not interject when Cinderella speaks at length to talking mice about the definition of dreams. Instead, the Fairy Godmother appears to help Cinderella dramatically alter her outward appearance so she can be better equipped to attract the prince. She also turns a pumpkin into a carriage, but Cinderella opts to use the whimsical vehicle to attend the ball instead of escape from the prison she currently inhabits.

I think that if I were a character in these stories, I would be the spinster, susceptible to accusations of witchcraft. Although I’ve never cast a spell that actually did any real damage, there seems to be a hex on me that only attracts mentally unstable individuals who I must physically run from. Unfortunately, however, if the fairy tales ring true, fairy godmothers only aid in running toward, not away.

This curse was amplified with the high-decibel intensity of a metal rock concert this summer, when I met a knight in shining armor named Steve, at an outdoor bar. I was there with my cousin and her boyfriend, and I assume the aroma of my third-wheeling must have wafted in his direction.

Steve got the impression, via zero eye contact or conversation, that I yearned for him to invade my personal space so much that I could count the individual beads of sweat trickling down his blotchy face. He hobbled as best he could over to me in a way that mimicked the undead. He put his hand on my shoulder, looked at me square in the eyes, and, catching his breath, asked, “Do you believe in serendipitous communication? Also, hi, I’m Steve.” He had clearly been at the bar for a few hours, or days, before me, but he was apparently not so drunk that he couldn’t discuss finding meaning in the seemingly coincidental.

Steve was clearly parroting lines borrowed from a Philosophy 101 class, but was I supposed to “let him in” and engage in a faux-academic debate regarding the role of happenstance in human nature, or run, because he seemed like he was one drink away from a stomach-pumping?

Before I could decide, he impulsively snatched his friend’s sweater that was lying on a nearby table and threw it onto one of the roof’s floodlights. He leaned closer and whispered, “I think I’m going to kiss you now,” as if the friend’s sweater had really been bugging him this whole time, but now that it had ben addressed, he could proceed.

“No thanks,” I said, straining my neck away to the point of breaking.

“You have nice eyes,” he added, in case that might change my mind.

Taking a giant step backwards and explaining to Steve that I was already married, I noticed flames sparkling from the roof. The pungent odor of scorched cotton flooded my nostrils, causing me to cough.

“Your friend’s sweater is on fire,” I told him. Interestingly, he took the news much better than expected.

“That’s alllll right,” he slurred, his eyes closing in a rum-induced exhaustion. I nodded, noting his calm demeanor and obvious potential in the business of emergency management.

“Well, have a nice night,” I offered.

“Ohhhh,” he said, smiling to reveal his crooked teeth. “You want to come home with me tonight!” he screamed, over the reggae band’s best attempt at “One Love.”

“Again, no,” I replied, while resorting to pantomiming to alert him to the fact that the roof was on fire in the worst possible way.

Soon a towering bouncer came over and reached up for the sweater, which was now completely charred. He shook his head and handed it to Steve, who accepted it graciously. I began to inch away, scanning the area for my cousin and her boyfriend so we could exit the establishment.

“But I said you had nice eyes!” Steve yelled at me, as I began to walk away. “You don’t!” he screamed, louder. “They’re shitty! Not blue, not green. Pick a color!”

By the time he took one step closer, my indecisive eyes and I were already halfway out of the bar, reconvening with my cousin and her boyfriend. I don’t remember how it was decided, but we seemed to mutually yet nonverbally agree to walk back to the house where we were staying, which would take a half hour. My cousin’s boyfriend led us in the darkness, wielding a stick he found on the side of the road for protection. I was comforted by the notion that, should we encounter a small-to-medium-sized dog, we would be safe.

As we walked down the dark, narrow, sidewalk-less street, I felt a slight twinge of liberation. I began to pace faster while the midnight breeze roused the goose bumps on my bare arms. I was thrilled by the fact that I could barely see three feet ahead, and also that every step meant another one away from Steve.

The next morning I turned on the TV, watching the black screen flood with indecent images from the MTV show *Dating Naked*. Amazed at the notion of a thirteen-hour marathon for such a program, I quickly began to watch. I became immersed in this world of not wearing clothes, a world where you are just so genuinely you, save for, of course, your outward behavior. The show’s inspiration is derived from the fact the contestants are seeing each other as vulnerable and unfiltered, which is something we rarely do nowadays because it’s gross and unnecessary and illegal.

The contestants prided themselves on genuinely opening up to their partners about all things, which included strange birthmarks, weird, inexplicable moles on their left shoulders, and a breast that is slightly larger than the other one, but overall, they’re both

really great. After a couple hours of watching contestant Greg, an entrepreneur and *not* male stripper, struggle to make a real connection with the airbrushed specimens the show referred to as women, I realized that if this was putting yourself out there, I was all set.

“Life is just more beautiful when you’re with someone you have a real connection with,” said one of the women on the show. A very nice sentiment, had she not been so naked you could see her misspelled ribcage tattoo, which presumably featured the lyrics to “Who Let the Dogs Out.” Perhaps I was still ill with the residue of the night before, but I began to worry that my life would never be as beautiful as she described, which I hated, because, again, she was not wearing any clothes and felt that “Who Let the Dogs” warranted a permanent place on her person.

Once my cousin and her boyfriend were up, we decided to venture to the beach. After hopping in and out of what I hoped was non-shark-infested water, I decided to go for a walk and embarked on the trek to the river that was located behind the beach.

“Are you sure you want to go alone?” they asked. I told them I didn’t mind at all, grabbed a Corona out of the cooler, and started off.

I sloshed around the small stream, noting the crabs and tadpoles as they glided away from my splashing feet. Ripples came from the other direction as a man and his son walked towards me. As they got closer, I noticed a look of sheer concern consume the father’s face, as he diverted his son in a different direction, so our paths wouldn’t meet.

He stared at me as if I were a wildebeest wanted for murder and quickly took a sharp right, never letting go of his son’s arm. I hid my beer behind my back and wondered if it was the “no alcohol rule” that was the source of their aversion. He maintained eye contact, his mouth open, studying me until I stopped walking and stared back. Was there something in my teeth? Did I smell? Was I actually a wildebeest, but no one had the heart to tell me? Or was I now repelling other human beings away from me? Was *I* the problem this whole time?

I continued to walk until I got to the end of the river, all the while wondering what it was about me that would cause someone to shield their child’s eyes and stay back one hundred feet.

“I’m not a sex offender!” I wanted to yell, but ultimately surmised that this is exactly what a sex offender might be found yelling.

I hiked up the hill to the tip of the river where an elderly woman and her dog were playing fetch by the water. She too turned to look at me, her countenance conveying a similar concern. Overcome with frustration that I was now apparently akin the Hunchback of Notre Dame, I looked at her and said, “What is it?” She came closer.

“Yah face,” she said, pointing at me. “It’s bleedin’.” I touched my hand to my forehead, catching the blood on the tips of my fingers. I bent down to look at my face in the water, noting the hot stream of blood making its way from my forehead down to my neck. Whether I had picked at a bug bite, scratched a pimple, or was unknowingly bit by a shark, I did not know or care. I had never been so relieved to see my own bodily fluids in my entire life. I wasn’t a human-repelling monster. I was just a slob. I splashed myself with a few rounds of salt water and sighed a breath of relief.

“You ah sittin’ on the beach with that couple, aren’t yah?” she asked, in her beautiful Boston accent.

“Yeah, I replied, “I am.”

“Well, what about you? Where’s yah boyfriend?” she inquired, as I rolled my eyes hard enough to alter the Earth’s orbit. When I told her I didn’t have one, she chuckled until she started coughing. And then coughed until she started wheezing. And then wheezed until she decided it was for the best that she toss her cigarette into the sand.

“I’m just speakin’ from experience,” she said, throwing the dog’s tennis ball into the water. “But you don’t want one.” There was a peculiar comfort in her nearly unintelligible speech that granted me a kind of asylum from the worn out topic.

“No,” I admitted. “I don’t think I do.”

“Life’s too shaht to waste yah freedom. Like me, I had a guy. Rick. Everyone says ‘get married, get married.’ So we was married and the whole bit. He cheated. Waste ah twenty years. Now I take time fah me. Look out at that view. Yah know who would’ve ruined the hell out of that view?” she asked, although I could guess the answer.

I looked out, absorbing the picturesque spectacle of the incoming tide behind the tall grass budding from the untouched sand. It was really nice. And, although I never met the man, I had a hunch that Rick would’ve ruined it too.

I said good-bye and wandered back the way I came, convinced that I had just met my fairy godmother.

Parents These Days

I've held a slew of strange job titles throughout high school and college. Most of which involved children, and only some of which I would consider myself remotely qualified to do. I was a camp counselor by summer, but come fall, I might be anything from an unlicensed archery instructor to a non-lifeguard-certified swim teacher. "What level do you think my little Jimmy will be at by next month?" a mother once asked me about her five year old son, who, upon first interaction with the water, wailed with the violent agony of a torture victim. "He's a natural," she pointed out, while I held her seemingly epileptic boy in the over-chlorinated water. "A real merman!" she added, as he attempted to climb to the top of my head like a polar bear hanging onto the last piece of melting ice.

Although Little Jimmy had spent the class being carried back and forth in the water without ever attempting to swim, his mother seemed to think he possessed a certain amount of potential, based on her question about him moving up a level. Purely out of pity, I told her that her son would be in "Level 3" in "no time," even though I was absolutely unaware that we were operating on a level basis. "Three" sounded like an average number to me, until I found out the next week that it would require Little Jimmy to be able to perfectly land a triple lindy, which might be challenging, what with his bulging rubber-duckie swimmies. His mother agreed that he should be performing on this level, however, and continued to scream things from the sidelines, such as, "Faster, Jimmy!" and "Stop holding your nose!" and "If you drown, you're walking home, goddamnit!"

In this line of work, I have dealt with parents, even more sometimes, than their angelic children. Most have been lovely, but I have come across many whose behaviors both vex and fascinate me, as they are so foreign to what I am accustomed to.

I have seen a mother help her daughter cheat in a round of musical chairs by pulling a seat away from a physically handicapped six-year-old. I've witnessed a father ask his son if the vegan, gluten-free pumpkin muffin he packed him for snack "worked" for him. "Be honest," he said, "I am open to your feedback." I have observed a mother chalk her son's decision to stab another child in the abdomen with a pencil up to the fact

that there was a waxing gibbous moon. I have even looked into the wild eyes of a mother while she berated me for the fact that her son got bit by a mosquito while attending a camp in the woods. “Sorry,” I said. “I’ll talk to the insects tomorrow and straighten everything out.” She let me know that if her son got West Nile, it would be on my conscience, and I silently alerted her to the fact that it was only a matter of time for the therapist to confirm that her son’s chronic anxiety disorder was on hers.

Over the years, I have begun to classify the myriad parents into four distinct categories. These are pending approval from the American Psychological Association and are sure to be featured in some Psychology 101 textbooks in the chapter on parenting styles in the near future. These categories include:

1. The “Here’s an iPad, Now Please Shut The Hell Up, Cindy” Parents
2. The “Felix Chooses His Own Bedtime and Will Take His Medical Marijuana with Lunch” Parents
3. The “My Little Annie is a Superstar Despite Her Clear Lack of General Ability” Parents
4. The “Our Lawyer Will Be the Judge of Whether or Not Our Sadie Attacked That Boy As Seen in the Very Clear Video Surveillance Footage” Parents

These distinctions were perhaps the most noticeable during a program I worked entitled “Learn to Ride,” which required me to teach children how to ride bicycles, thus stealing the miraculous moment from their parents who were overcome with joy to learn that it wasn’t something they would have to do.

“One less thing,” a mother said, before departing for another workout session with her personal trainer. Some of the parents would watch from a safe distance, usually from their air-conditioned cars, while I, along with other staff members, bent over in ninety-degree weather, holding onto to shaky handlebars and assuring skittish children that they had nothing to fear besides the fact that their father was Snapchatting on a nearby bench. Other parents were more hands on, however, unwilling of course to aid in the actual teaching, but very quick to offer some guidance to us.

“Just a heads up,” one father offered. “Stacy doesn’t respond well to verbal motivation, so if you could encourage her by using facial expressions and perhaps a series of whimsical shoulder shrugs, that would be most effective. Also, feel free to throw in a couple hums but no more than three half-smiles—really just have fun with it.” It turned out that Stacey was not deaf, which is what I first assumed. She merely disliked being told what to do. I imagined her father asking her to clean her room by performing a desperate charade like a mime on the street. I could not even conceive how difficult it must have been to express, via mime, that he was not *telling*, but *asking* her to make her bed.

Although it was sometimes extremely grueling, I found a strange sense of accomplishment in teaching children to ride bikes. The whole “fall down but get back up” theme materialized quite literally, and I thoroughly enjoyed being a walking, talking motivational poster/life coach. “You’re doing great—basically everyone violently crashes into a tree on their first time,” I would say, spewing inspiration. “That’s not whiplash you’re feeling, it’s progress. Also, did I mention how great you look minus those three teeth?”

There’s just nothing like pushing a child that’s not yours and watching them independently pedal with a look of sheer joy that quickly fades when they slam into a nearby fence or unnerved pedestrian. The children signed up for week-long intervals, and I can confidently say that although no child under my tutelage left on a Friday without having some sort of wound that forced the parent to contemplate an ER visit, they all left knowing how to ride a bike. My method of teaching was handed down to me from my father, and probably his father before him. It involved saying, “Of course I won’t let go!” and then doing exactly that when you thrust the bike forward, hoping the child would stay afloat and not sustain any permanent trust issues in the process. Unfortunately, some parents did not agree with this method and consequently fell into one of the five aforementioned categories.

*

The “Here’s an iPad, Now Please Shut The Hell Up, Cindy” Parents represent those who shove technology down their child’s throat to curb their screaming, crying, or severe ADHD. This group earned their name after I spent a day with a nine-year-old

named Cindy who could not grasp the fact that in order to move the bike, one must exert force via their feet on the pedals. She was not used to doing any kind of physical activity and let me know very early on that she would much rather die a slow and painful death rather than pedal around on steaming pavement in the blistering July heat. When I asked her if she had ever ridden a bike prior to our lesson, she responded by saying that yes, she had, at a little place known as “Rainbow Road.”

“Ever heard of it?” she inquired, while I adjusted her *Frozen* helmet. “I usually use the Yoshi bike, but sometimes I go with the Flame Runner. I’ve only fallen off one time.” I quickly gathered that she had been talking about the Wii game called “Mario Kart,” and that the bikes she referenced were cartoon motorcycles. From this, I gathered that ours would be an uphill battle.

“Okay, Cindy,” I said, getting ready to start pushing. “I am going to hold the handlebars while you pedal. The more you pedal, the more the bike will stay balanced.”

We proceeded like so for a total of two minutes, before Cindy decided that she had exhausted all of her energy. “Keep going!” her mother yelled from yards away.

“I can’t do it! This is stupid!” she wailed, throwing the bike to the ground and unsnapping her helmet in defiance. I tried my best to muster as many inspirational phrases as I could to illustrate to her the importance of working hard to achieve one’s goals. I was not getting paid minimum wage for nothing.

“Cindy... No....” I moaned sluggishly, feigning motivation. “Come back.... Think about your future... Your country.... Fall down seven times, stand up eight.... Coach Carter....” My ramblings proved ineffective, however, as Cindy raced over to her mother to combat the apparent heatstroke by pouring Gatorade over her head as if she’d won a Superbowl or had moved around enough to warrant breaking a sweat.

“It’s too hot! I want to go home!” she sobbed. She grabbed her mother’s iPad from her grip and plopped herself onto the bench, inserting the attached ear buds. Suddenly, her tears ceased and her focus shifted like a laser onto the screen. The piece of technology acted as some sort of pacifier to the nine-year-old, who shut out the rest of the universe to fully immerse herself into what appeared to be the grisly world of *Game of Thrones*.

“Sorry,” her mother said. “Whenever she gets too upset or rambunctious at home, we give her the iPad. She watches her show. It always works. It’s just that We. Are. Here. To Ride. Our. Bike. Today,” she asserted, now directing her attention towards Cindy, who could not hear her over the brutal murder of John Snow. She might not have been able to endure the physical toll of peddling a bike, but she was definitely developing a thick skin in regards to withstanding mass amounts of violence at a very young age.

“If you ride your bike, you can use the iPad all night,” her mother said, causing Cindy to remove only one ear bud and tilting her head quizzically. She then sprung to her feet as if a switch had been turned, her eyes wearing a gaze of newfound determination. She clicked on her helmet, climbed onto the bike, and began peddling feverishly without any assistance. I felt like Jesus, post-Lazarus’ resurrection, watching in awe as the miracle unfolded. She rode valiantly onward as I chased, all the while praising her astonishing feat.

“Keep going, there you go, you’re doing it, okay, keep right, other right, away from the...ooh.”

Cindy had run over a squirrel carcass, which, from the putrid looks of it, had not been dead all that long. I am not an animal coroner, but based on the flies that feasted, I surmised that the body was not yet cold. Cindy had undoubtedly cemented the rodent’s death, however, as it was now squished, its internal organs oozing from its eyeballs. Unfortunately, some of the squirrel’s bodily fluids had found a place on Cindy’s bike tires, which triggered her gag reflex.

“Did I kill that squirrel? Oh my god! Ah! It’s disgusting!” she cried, somehow unable to deal with the gore that paled in comparison to that on the show she was watching.

“Oh no, it was definitely already dead. But look at you! You’re riding a bike!” I offered, attempting to transfer her attention away from the rotting road kill. She continued to teeter on the line of vomiting, clutching her stomach and bending over in preparation. Noting her disgust from afar, her mother sprinted over to assess the gruesome situation.

“It’s okay,” she said to Cindy. “It’s not your fault. You’ve never ridden a bike before. It wasn’t *your* job to know that there was a dead squirrel over here. *You* don’t work here,” she said, more aggressively in my direction.

“I can’t look at it! There’s guts on my tire! Ah!” Cindy continued, as if we did not already fully understand just how repulsive the situation was.

“Here,” she said, handing her daughter the iPad. “Go ahead over to the car and calm the hell down.”

Her mother clutched the handlebars, all the while staring at me as if I had planned the whole thing as part of some sociopathic science project. “Thanks *so* much,” she shot at me as she trudged back to her car where Cindy sat, safe in the arms of her iPad.

*

The third classification of parenting styles, known as “My Little Annie is a Superstar Despite Her Clear Lack of General Ability” is perhaps the largest grouping, indicative of a parenting illness called “Mommy & Daddy Goggles.” This obstructs objective reality and forces people to peer through the lens of a parent who has just a twinge too much confidence in their child. It’s truly a sad condition, one that completely blinds individuals into seeing their children as things such as professional athletes, revolutionary philosophers, or even halfway decent flautists.

My parents were always very supportive of us as children, but if someone were, say, terrible at basketball, they would *not* say things like, “You’re absolutely amazing. Anyone who says you aren’t is a complete lunatic. I know as well as you do that you air-balled that free throw shot when your team was down by one with fifteen seconds left to throw your opponent off.”

This group of parents would love nothing more than to ramble on about their child’s latest stroke of genius that came in the form of a macaroni sculpture or a pie-eating participation trophy.

“Oh, she’s basically fluent in Spanish and can bring you to tears with her delightful playing of the trombone,” they say about their wedgie-picking seven-year-old.

“Well,” the other parents rebut, pointing to their tiny child. “My son has read all of the classics from cover to cover and can slam dunk a basketball. You might not expect

it of him at first glance, but he soars in a way that defies logic.” I have sometimes felt like these parents are living vicariously through their children, that something is lacking in their own selves, so they hatched a being that might indirectly boost their self esteems, whether or not that being is actually worthy of any acclaim.

Ultimately, this category earned its name after I spent a week learning about how amazing six-year-old Annie was at memorizing the presidents, playing soccer, reading Latin, and, fascinatingly, speaking with dead people. Annie was a very sweet girl, and perhaps she held some of these abilities, but she could not ride a bike if there were a gun pointed at her head, although her mother and father could not see this reality, what with their parental goggles and video camera in full force.

“You don’t need to help her all that much,” they said, while I held on to her bike. “You can let go, she will ride. She’s very coordinated. In fact, just the other day, after her soccer game, a coach came up to her and asked what her name was. He needed it for the team photo caption but still, we knew he was impressed by what he saw. It’s only a matter of time before the colleges start calling.”

I heeded their direction and let go of their daughter’s bike, which sent her toppling onto the grass. “That’s it, get a feel for it,” they said to their grass-stained daughter. “She is never afraid to sacrifice her body. You should see her on the soccer field.”

After a while, Annie began to ride in small spurts, which caused for her parents to compare her progress with another boy who was working with another staff member. “Annie is riding circles around him, and how old do you think he is? I’ll bet he’s at least two years older than her. Amazing,” they observed, while their daughter pedaled at the rate of an injured slug.

“So, you like soccer?” I asked Annie while she struggled to propel the bike forward.

“Yeah,” she replied. “I like the games because there’s flowers on the grass and I pick them all.”

“She’s very multi-talented and definitely has an interest in the arts,” her mother said, defending Annie’s remark. “She is first in her class at Wood Elementary and, if you can believe it, she possesses a set of supernatural powers.”

“What?” I asked, glancing at the freckly girl who seemed to like nothing more than not riding a bike and picking the nearby sunflowers.

“The deceased speak through her and to her,” her father said, a little too matter-of-fact. “Just the other day, she told us that she had a dream about a woman with white hair. The woman told her she loved her. Oh my god,” he said, touching his arms. “I’m getting chills just speaking about it.”

“Anyways,” his wife interjected, “The woman she saw was *obviously* my grandmother, who died about seven years ago around this time. It’s just amazing. This child is a wonder.”

Annie slowly but surely learned to ride a bike, but it was in no part due to her inherent coordination or specialized set of innate skills. I assume her parents immediately entered her into the Tour de France the next day, after posting a photo of her on Facebook with the caption: “Annie learned to ride a bike faster than any child in history. We are so humbled to have given birth to such an astonishing, remarkable, and intelligent child.”

*

The next cluster of parents have a similar set of goggles on, but these lenses interfere with their ability to see that their son or daughter is capable of doing wrong. On many occasions, I have had to tell a mother or father the unfortunate news that their child decided to, say, punch another one. In this situation, my parents would have thanked the person telling them, asked no further questions, and verbally scolded us the entire way home and for the foreseeable future. They would not ask what others do, such as, “Well, can I see if a scar was left?” or “Did my daughter really start it, though?” or “Who witnessed this besides you? I need to speak with my lawyer.”

Much of the time, any bad news regarding a child is thrown back in the face of the person delivering it, like a teacher, coach, or juvenile probation officer. It then becomes that person’s fault, because “at home, Joseph does *not* act like this, so it must be whatever you’re doing here that’s the problem.” I was stunned when I first realized that this appeared to be one of the newer styles of parenting, one that decided all children were angels, unable to do any wrong. Theirs was a world without consequence, fear, or criticism.

I have dubbed this group, “Our Lawyer Will Be the Judge of Whether or Not Our Sadie Attacked That Boy As Seen in the Very Clear Video Surveillance Footage.” I worked with Sadie for a week in August, but my nightmares persisted well into October. She was a few years older and was in our biking class, instead of our “Learn to Ride” program. She was a persistent problem throughout the week in both her refusal to follow any kind of direction as well as her distaste for the other bikers, who she felt were “losers.”

At one point, we had all stopped along the path to wait for everyone to catch up. There, Sadie decided she would slam her bike into that of the boy next to her, causing him to sustain bloody cuts on his knees and elbows. When asked what possessed her to do such a hateful thing, she responded by saying, “He was in my way. Also, his face is annoying.”

“*Your* face is annoying,” the boy sniffled, while a staff member bandaged his wounds. Sadie pretended to lunge at him so that he flinched.

When Sadie’s mother came to pick her up at the end of the day, my coworker and I approached her, in the hopes that she would be understanding of our concern and talk to her maniacal daughter. Instead, she demanded to know whom this other boy was and what his scars looked like and why we were so dead set on the fact that Sadie was the perpetrator. “Is there any evidence?” she asked. “Video footage, photos, eye witnesses besides you two?”

“We weren’t video taping the event. We were on bicycles,” we said.

“Well that won’t hold up in court,” she replied, and I knew she meant it literally.

“We just want you to talk to your daughter about not physically injuring other children,” we asserted.

“Excuse me,” she said, tilting her sunglasses onto the tip of her nose so we could see her piercing green eyes. “Are you telling me how to parent my daughter? I will have you know that she is a sweet girl who would never do the kind of thing that you’re talking about. I’m done here,” she proclaimed. “Sadie, let’s go.”

Sadie shot me a cynical look that nonverbally declared her victory. I wasn’t sure if pushing other children off their bicycles to inflict physical harm would lead to her becoming a murderer, but even if it did, she would at least be armed with the knowledge

that it should be done where no camera could catch her, and that is perhaps what is truly important.

*

I have often found the last group of parents to be people that I might want to have a drink with, if that drink were a refreshing margarita topped with an arsenic rim. These parents take their children very seriously, as if their opinions mattered, which is not an idea that I grew up with. If we ever said that, as much as we appreciated the effort our mother put into the full-blown turkey dinner she toiled over for hours, we just *felt* that it could use a pinch more salt, we would be asked to kindly choke on the meat.

No one asked for our opinions because we were children who thought that Fruit By The Foot was the be all and end all of gourmet cuisine. Our parents did not ask, “Can we just get all of your opinions on where we go on vacation next summer? We have our eyes on Disney World, but if anyone expresses any objections, we are willing to be flexible.” My siblings and I had to earn our respect, which I learned had a lot to do with being older than the age of eight.

This is precisely why I am fascinated by this group of parents, who fall under the classification of “Felix Chooses His Own Bedtime and Will Take His Medical Marijuana with Lunch.” This name traces its history back to when an adorable boy named Felix arrived, hiding behind the LuLu Lemon-clad leg of his self-proclaimed “chill” mother. Felix was very nervous about riding for the first time, probably because the motivation his mother offered him was along the lines of, “Feel it out, honey. *Be* the bike. Do what you feel is comfortable for you. Ride *against* the grain.” She came across as very hippie-esque, but I soon learned that it was merely an act, based on her following Felix around like a fly on a dead squirrel.

“Careful!” she would scream at every turn, followed by, “Or don’t be—Do whatever you feel is right!” These warning and non-warnings would also be accompanied by “safety check-ins,” wherein she would gauge, on a level of security blanket to burning building, how “safe” her son was feeling.

“Are you feeling safe in this environment?” she asked Felix as I guided him on a path while she followed. I looked around to find that I was the only other person in the equation and felt immediately insulted.

“You’re doing really good,” I told him at one point, not particularly in reference to the bike riding, but in the way he so gracefully dealt with his irritating mother.

“He’s *fiercely* independent,” she told me after she double knotted both of his shoes. “He is the master of his fate,” she said. I glanced at Felix, noticing his absolute ignorance to all that was happening, and agreed that no other individual so encapsulated Henley’s “Invictus” so perfectly.

“You know,” she said, now whispering for some unknown reason, “He gets to make a lot of choices. He chooses what he eats, what he reads, and what time he goes to bed.”

I imagined the captain of his own soul eating worms, riding in an ambulance, reading the hospital bracelet clasped around his wrist, and then falling asleep with the aid of the pre-surgery general anesthesia. “If worms were what you wanted for dinner, I totally respect that,” I pictured his mother saying to him, before meeting with Child Protective Services.

“I read that granting a child a sense of autonomy makes them 38% less likely to take hard drugs, even when aggressively pressured by their peers,” she added. “And I mean *pressured* pressured. Like it’s after the junior prom and he’s in an alleyway and all his friends are injecting heroin into their veins. They’re saying really persuasive things like “Don’t be chicken,” or “We double-dog dare you to take this heroin, Felix.”

“What?” Felix asked, turning his head in confusion towards his mother, who appeared to be offering him narcotics.

“Nothing, keep riding,” she said, patting his back.

“I bet it also makes them 99% more likely to stay up all night watching TV and eating Skittles,” I replied, hoping the ill-intended joke would make her change the subject.

“Where did you read that?” she asked, her eyes bulging with demand.

“So yeah, that’s really good about the drugs,” I said, unable to reveal my source.

“Yes. But I’m not referring to marijuana, which will, god willing, be legalized very soon. In our house it’s used as a holistic healing substance. I don’t know how I’d put Felix to bed without it. He gets nightmares, you know?”

I decided it was time for Felix to make his first attempt at riding alone and prepped him for the plunge, half-wondering if he was currently operating the bicycle under the influence of pot and if he knew where I might get some.

“Hold on,” she interjected. “I’m totally cool with everything, but haven’t we forgotten to run it by Felix. Felix, honey, what’s your take on this?” she asked him earnestly.

“I want to go fast,” he said, his blue eyes smiling.

Felix indeed went fast and was perhaps one of my best bicycling students. He pedaled with a real sense of urgency. It was sort of like there were something he was trying to escape from, though I couldn’t imagine what that might be.

Losing My Religion

I've heard that, aside from life-sustaining medications and copious amounts of morphine, people yearn for a sense of religion sprinkled into their intravenous lines prior to dying. Helplessness takes over while organs begin to fail, and the expiring individuals need to believe that they will not merely decompose under a mound of loamy soil while a host of insects feasts on their flesh like a cheapskate at an all-you-can-eat buffet. This seems like a justifiable urge for those who meet their last hour without religious beliefs, which can act as a security blanket on one's bed of inevitable demise. Death is grim enough, but the thought that nothing follows, that no bearded man will ask you for a secret password at a row of pearly gates, is almost too heartrending an idea to swallow, especially when one's throat is already closing to the point of complete suffocation.

I can empathize with these people in that I, too, have desperately sought to discover the existence of a deeper meaning or higher power—something to explain the arbitrary nature of a world where tragedy, chaos, and confusion seem to reign supreme. A belief that an omnipresent being is at the helm, etching some grand design with my best interest in mind would truly make life a lot easier. For example, it would be a relief to explain to the person I rear-ended that I was sorry, but that this event was predetermined by a higher power and was merely a part of my human journey, so they should just be sure to relay that to their insurance provider and have a blessed day.

Plato says that “Man is a being in search of meaning.” He was, of course, operating during a time prior to the invention of the woman, but I think his assertion still holds merit. I have searched near and far—mostly near— for deeper meaning and answers to life's essential questions, such as why are we here and what are we doing and how did the Kardashians become so famous.

There was once a time, however, prior to my frantic search, when I thought I held the answers. Interestingly, they all had something to do with the world-renowned supermodel/savior, Jesus H. Christ. Through him, I could slay any question with the tenacity of the flowy-haired Samson, who somehow defeated an entire army with only the jawbone of an ass. For instance: Why did the Patriots win the Superbowl? Jesus. How

does email work? Jesus. Why was Lindsay Lohan sent to rehab, severely disappointing *Parent Trap* fans everywhere? Lack of Jesus.

I met the Lamb of God for the first time in Kindergarten, whilst attending our school's rendition of the critically acclaimed Catholic classic, *The Stations of the Cross*. As a six-year-old, I was completely unaware that the individuals involved in the live production were untrained, thirteen-year-old actors. Had I known that a prepubescent boy named Danny whose mother was videotaping from a pew in the back was playing the part of the Jesus, I might have been slightly less traumatized. Nevertheless, I twisted my neck frantically, glaring at all of the teachers who seemed so at ease to sit motionless while we watched what appeared to be a crucifixion in real time.

I thought it might end happily, like all of the movies and stories I had become so accustomed to. However, about around station number ten, when the whiplashed Jesus was forced to surrender his garments to the punitive Roman soldiers, there was a grim understanding of the blood-soaked inevitable.

Stop! Someone do something! He's innocent! I wanted to scream, but my apprehension was crawling up my throat, threatening to exit in the form of vomit. I nearly ripped a whole fingernail off as the freckle-faced Light of the World was bound to the cross with what looked like a jump rope borrowed from recess.

Thunder roared from what I assume was a "Tranquil Sounds of Nature" CD. The child soldiers in over-sized armor fastened Jesus to the wood, holding their hammers at the ready to pierce his divine flesh. I stared down at my dangling feet and squeezed my eyes as the cracks of metal echoed throughout the church. Jesus then cried out to his father to forgive the armor-clad Lollipop Guild members who were currently executing him.

"They know not what they do!" he struggled to exclaim, even though it looked like they had a pretty good idea. His chin then slumped into his chest as he finally entered the irreversible threshold of his untimely demise. The Lord was dead. A sudden bang soon erupted from a few rows back, where a pallid-faced first-grader collapsed in a faint. Several teachers scrambled to lift him as he regained consciousness, doing their best not to disrupt the death-drenched ambiance that pervaded the church.

“He’s alright!” they announced. If only they could say the same for the freshly murdered Son of God.

After a heartbreaking moment with the dead Jesus lying in his twelve-year-old mother’s bony arms, he was placed behind a papier-mâché rock, which might be recycled in November to tell yet another peaceful tale about the pilgrims landing in Plymouth. I foolishly assumed that the nightmare was over, what with the grisly display of capital punishment. However, classical music continued to play while the soldiers remained fixed in their spots on the altar, surveying the audience. *Are they going to choose someone else to kill now?* I thought, weighing my chances of being selected and sizing up those around me, checking to see who I might be able to outrun.

Finally, a young girl sporting a tunic and mildly offensive headdress took to the altar to proclaim, via microphone, that Jesus, after having spent three days inside the tomb, would rise from the dead. I imagined him crawling out from the haze of putrefying body odor and into the sparkling sunlight, just in time to search for the eggs that the Easter Bunny had hidden. I pictured him laughing at how he “got” everyone, and how angry they would be to have gotten Punk’d by a prophet. “Jesus *Christ*,” they would stammer, in disbelief that the Son of God had duped them.

“Why did Jesus have to die like that?” one of my classmates asked our teacher when we returned to the safety of our classroom, now prime candidates for intensive child psychotherapy.

“He died to save us all,” she said, grinning in a way that suggested she might spend her weekends screaming that exact phrase in public parks and train stations. “But he beat death and came back to life. He resurrected,” she added, for dramatic effect.

“Whoa,” the class mumbled collectively, still dusting off the traumatic residue of shock. She then tried to explain to everyone that what we had witnessed was merely a reenactment of a past event, but I don’t think we could hear her over our slack-jawed amazement.

The more I heard about Jesus during my early elementary school career, the more I was both impressed and bewildered. Bringing a dead person back to life? What! Walking on water? You’re kidding me! Being brought into the world via miraculous virgin birth verified by a midwife and several animal onlookers? Totally holds up!

Our public school peers might say things like, “Have you heard Aaron Carter’s song, ‘I Want Candy?’ It’s amazing. He’s so cool and hot and will definitely not burnout sometime around 2009.” I might then follow up with, “Oh, cool. But have you heard about Jesus Christ?”

“Yeah,” they would say. “So what about him?”

“Guy’s a mother freaking rock star. Just look at that hair. He’s the king. Literally. Ever heard of a little song called, ‘Joy to the World?’ Oh yeah? It’s about him...being born. Dude’s been rocking the world since Immaculate Conception. But yeah, Aaron Carter seems cool.”

We were told constantly at school that strengthening our relationship with Jesus should be the top priority in our lives and to do so, we must incessantly speak to him.

“You might not hear back,” the teachers would say, as if advising us on how to make a phone call to a deadbeat father. “But he’s always listening. He’s always there.”

At first it felt strange speaking to an invisible deity with no real script to follow. I typically kept the conversations rather light, acknowledging that he had more serious matters to tend to.

“Dear, Jesus, my rock and my redeemer,” I prayed. “Please place your divine hand onto my pencil tomorrow during the math test. Your holiness knows I cannot do the double-digit addition. Also, would it kill you to make it rain Skittles? Thank you for your time. Amen.”

He never got back to me. Nevertheless, this phone-a-friend option consoled me during times of distress, woe, and low-level hysteria. Jesus was the best listener I had ever encountered and I felt at ease knowing that he could take the wheel at any given moment.

These conversations ebbed around middle school, however, when I was exposed to some rather questionable stories regarding his family business. He might have been a decent enough person, but his father seemed questionable, which ended up hindering our once flourishing relationship. The famed Bible story of Abraham and Isaac was the most noticeable red flag, in its portrayal of God as an emotionally abusive boyfriend. God instructed Abraham to take his young son, Isaac, to the top of a mountain to sacrifice him, just to double check that he loved God above all else, as you do when you’re unsure

of your partner's feelings towards you. Abraham naturally does as God commands him, in a scene that, from what I can remember, pans out in the following manner:

ISAAC: Dad, where is the lamb we are using for this burnt offering?

ABRAHAM: God will provide.

ISAAC: Wait, why are you tying my hands together and laying me on this rock? Also, can I have my clothes back? This is getting really weird!

ABRAHAM: Close your eyes.

ISAAC: Are you freaking kidding me, Dad? Where is Mom? Mom!

GOD: Alright, Abraham. Stop. You don't have to *actually* murder your son, you adorable psychopath. I just wanted to make sure you would do whatever I told you. You're totally in love with me! That's so embarrassing! Are you free Sunday?

What was described to us as a testament of a person's unyielding love for God seemed more, to me, like a Public Service Announcement on abusive relationships. Of course, I learned this was not new behavior for the Holy Father, as he treated a man named Job in a very similar fashion. God entered into a bet with Satan on the premise that Job would not turn against him when faced with the wrath of Satan's torment. God's only stipulation was that Satan could not kill Job, because, after all, he did have some standards. So instead, Satan killed Job's livestock, servants, and all ten of his children. But, being as much a giver as he is a taker, Satan gave Job elephantitis.

The contempt I began to feel for the heavenly Father soon shifted towards his grounds workers—the priests. In the fourth grade, our school gathered in the cafeteria to be told that our church's pastor would be taking an indefinite vacation. I was confused as to why he would need our "thoughts and prayers" during said vacation, but I figured maybe he just wasn't used to taking a break from the ministry he had been ordained into in order to enjoy himself in a way that priests aren't typically encouraged to do. Many of the teachers were teary-eyed when the news was articulated, but the most confusing part of the entire situation might have been when, two weeks later, I saw him in our school's parish center, without a tan.

Talk trickled down to us from the older students regarding the man's alleged lewd behavior, but our teachers would hear none of it. And yet, week after week, the priest was on school grounds, humming the Ave Maria and offering us waves that were met with hesitation. So, when another priest at the parish was announced to be taking some time off to "tend to a personal emergency," I began to wonder. These men were supposed to be messengers of God—spewers of the Good Book whose life mission was to spread peace and drive beat-up Ford Fiestas featuring anti-abortion bumper stickers. But here they were, taking "vacations," tending to "personal emergencies," and asking for our prayers.

When they came into our classrooms, we were required to stand and greet them in unison, when in reality, we should have run in the opposite direction, only after spraying a sufficient amount of mace. They were venerated in our school, but as a fourth grader who had eavesdropped on the older kids on the bus, I began to feel like I had been tricked. It was sort of like finding out that Santa Claus wasn't real, if only Santa promised things like protection from all evil instead of a Polly Pocket Beach House.

Ultimately, these priests were less than wonderful Wizards from a different kind of Oz— facades that, once unmasked, revealed an empty church teeming with an immoral hypocrisy that could be seen through the most decorated of stain glass windows. And I, the Dorothy who diligently walked the Yellow Brick Road, arm in arm with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in search of the great and powerful, had begun to feel like maybe the Wicked Witch had a point.

Aside from being occasionally splashed with Holy Water by alleged child predators, one of the most jarring experiences during my time as a born-again skeptic came during an overdramatic ninth grade religion class, where I discovered what was meant by "resting in the spirit" or being "slain in the spirit," depending on how dangerous it makes you feel. Coldplay's "Fix You" echoed throughout the dark auditorium while abstract scenes of nature flicked on a grainy projector, evoking the sort of feel any cult worth its Kool-Aid should aspire to emulate.

At first I did not understand what was happening when a line formed near the stage, in front of the deacon who held out his hands in a way that seemed to

simultaneously say, “hug me” and “run for your life.” But, after the first two teenagers collapsed at his feet after having their heads squeezed, I began to make some guesses.

My heart pounded watching student after student lose all control of their motor functions and fall backwards into the arms of other students who often could not support their weight. It seemed, as a viewer, that some pressure point was being activated when the deacon’s hands gripped each new head like he was palming a basketball. So, when it was my class’s turn to be freed from the bondage of sin via intense stress on our skulls masked by the thick veil of religion, I remained seated.

I lifted my legs to let people past me, combatting their critical stares. Suddenly I was the outcast, the only weirdo who opted out of being touched by a man in a robe only to fall unconscious so that the Holy Spirit could have its way with me in front of my peers. I felt isolated, wondering why I couldn’t shut my mind up enough to waltz blindly over to be induced into the celestial coma.

“Did you feel it?” one girl asked another as we strolled back to class.

“Oh yeah,” she said. “That was amazing.”

As much as I was riddled with distrust, there was a minute cell of my being that yearned to feel the sense of security that these losses of consciousness seemed to offer people. I mourned the conversations I once had with Jesus, because, even though they were one-sided, they signified that something greater existed and was watching over me in a non-creepy way.

But, I soon learned that another way to be granted some solace was by praying to Saints, who were conveniently plentiful in the Catholic Church. They had been organized nicely, each placed in charge of a different group of needy people. Prior to taking a test, we might be given bookmarks that featured a prayer from Saint Joseph of Cupertino. If we wanted the Red Sox to win, we would phone our friend Saint Rita of Cascia. And if I sliced my knee open at recess, I would most likely be directed towards Marciana of Mauretania quicker than I would be handed any Neosporin.

My mother calls upon Saint Anthony quite frequently, as he supposedly assists her in discovering that, after a house-wide search, her keys are in her pocket. She repeats, “Tony, Tony, look around. Something’s lost that must be found,” until she finds what’s missing. I have tried to employ this tactic, but find that the phrase quickly changes to,

“Tony, Tony, please help me find my keys,” and eventually to, “Tony! What the hell! Tell me the truth! Did you hide my keys? Take whatever else you want, but not the keys!”

I could not quite grasp the idea of dialing up a team of Saints to aid in the everyday any more than I could grasp essentially anything about the religion that I was dipped like a chocolate chip cookie into via baptism. I began to see it as encased in glass, shielded off completely from the changing world around it.

As the years went on, I found I couldn't sit still in a pew while a priest accused of sexual assault spoke about how homosexuals were the real issues to a sea of nodding heads who, minutes prior, listened to a reading on how we should all love our neighbors as ourselves. I did not believe that getting divorced, having premarital sex, or eating assorted seafood would cost you an eternity in the ether of unquenchable flames, regardless of how disturbing it is to devour a trout with its eyes still intact. And I definitely did not buy into the fact that attending church regularly awarded you the right to spew sanctimonious gobbledegook about how your daughter got pregnant by the divine grace of God and not her too-cheap-to-buy-a-condom boyfriend, Rex, whose status as a former altar boy granted him immunity to any judgment. And yet, a part of me wished I could.

I was recently told that once you are a Catholic, you are always one, regardless of how many crosses you burn, names you use in vain, or Christmas masses you roll your eyes through while silently noting how big a deal Jesus is making about his two thousandth birthday. His “Sweet Two Thousand-and-Sixteenth,” in my opinion, had far too much off-pitch singing and not enough merlot disguised as blood. An “eternal Catholic” sounded like a lovely sentiment, but I knew, deep down, that it would not ring true for me. It all was just not my human goblet of blood. Nor was it my cup of tea.

After receiving the sacrament of Confirmation in the tenth grade, I could almost see the faith evacuate my body like a robust exhale on a subzero evening, the cloud of condensation vanishing into the void. It was as if the ground had fallen beneath me and I was floating like a speck of dust freshly flung off the shoulder of a jacket, propelling unprotected into the boundless recesses of the perilous universe. There was no order. No stability. No answers. And most importantly, no chance of it ever raining Skittles.

I began to search frantically for alternative meanings and answers to anchor my existence around, given that my life had been stripped of order. There had to be something that could answer my existential questions besides an emotionally abusive God who hated gays but loved a good slaughter. I thought back to 2005, a year that marked my introduction to the more sinister spiritual forces that surrounded us. I figured they might perhaps shed a clue as to the inner workings of the universe, or at the very least, possess my being so I could later write a lucrative, cautionary memoir entitled, *How to Protect Yourself from Demonic Possessions and Credit Card Fraud: My Story*.

Like most normal childhoods, mine involved a short period of time wherein my mother sat down with us to “play” with a Ouija Board. It was given to her by our elderly neighbor who used to take photos of us from across the street whenever we played outside. She would then place them in the mailbox to let us know that she indeed saw us playing, just in case we didn’t see her dark silhouette in the window. And yet, my mother felt that the board was humorous and utterly disregarded its having any affiliation with dark spirits. I think her amiable demeanor angered them.

“Let’s ask it what you’ll be when you grow up!” she exclaimed, gripping the plastic planchette that moves via the energy of nearby evil spirits. They conveyed, via supernatural forces, that I would be a mortician, which was also exactly what a career aptitude test once told me. Coincidence? I think not. An insult? Most definitely.

This was all pre-WiFi, but I think if you were to use the board now, you’d want to join the “EvilDemons666” Network. The password is “Satan365,” but it’s very touchy, so if it does not immediately let you on, try typing, “YesIAMReallyDoingThis.” Usually works. Communication might be instant or it might take the demons in your area a while to awaken, but, a word to the wise: never give them your credit card number. Before you know it, those ghostly bastards will be making all kinds of spine-chilling purchases, like antique ventriloquist dummies, billhook machetes or even the *Alvin and the Chipmunks* version of “Club Can’t Handle Me” on iTunes. All of these prove extremely difficult to explain to a judgmental credit card provider, but, based on the fact that you’re using a Ouija Board, these might not be your most bizarre transactions.

While my mother laughed off the sinister stigma that surrounded the board, my sister launched a full-fledged investigation into its origins and powers. She quickly found

that it's actually highly recommended not touch the board at all, as it triggers demonic communication for upwards of eternity, offering the imaginary friend you wish you never had. So, we naturally decided to hold a séance in order to gauge just how in danger of possession we truly were. My sister turned off the lights and nodded sternly at me as we placed our trembling hands on the planchette.

"Can you see us right now?" she asked, as it began to move eerily across the board over to the "Yes," which had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that our hands were presumably pushing it towards the "Yes."

"Oh my god," she said, with her mouth widening as if to blatantly invite a moderate-sized demon to inhabit her being.

After the paranormal phantasm confirmed that it was currently in the room, I swear I felt a frosty surge sweep through my soul's marrow. I felt it saw us, heard us, and even smelled us, sort of like how Jesus was fabled to. But, this entity actually spoke back when questioned.

So, in the tenth grade, I resurrected the Ouija Board from its home in our attic to resume the conversation. I brought it to the attention of my sister, who immediately shouted and ran away. After coaxing her back into my now dark room, we again placed our hands on the planchette. We wanted to ask a few preliminary questions, just to test whether or not there was a strong connection.

"If there is a spirit in this room, please knock," my sister requested.

After about five seconds, we stared at each other in defeat. But, just as we went to place our hands back on the board, a knock at the door sent our shoulders to our ears while our eyes screamed with fear.

"Oh my god," we exhaled simultaneously.

The door began to slowly creak open as we inched away, shielding ourselves with a blanket pulled from my bed. A silhouette of a dark-haired figure emerged from the dimly-lit hallway and began to speak in an unusually familiar voice.

"I made brownies. Do you guys want any brownies?" the being asked, before coming fully into the room.

“What?” we yelled, peeking out of the blanket to acknowledge the presence of our mother. We stepped over the board and ran downstairs to indulge in the fudgy treats, mutually agreeing that perhaps our answers did not lie with the demons.

But we didn’t give up. My sister and I piggybacked on this communication to delve deeper into the spiritual world, which involved getting our cards read by a fortuneteller, whose practice was located next to a hot dog stand at a fair in Maine, but I sincerely doubt any of these factors reflected her clairvoyant abilities. She began the session by telling us a stirring tale about how she knew her husband was having an affair with the mailman via her crystal ball, and also because she planted cameras in the garage.

My sister went first, mostly because I was slightly unsure as to whether or not it was safe. The fortuneteller closed her eyes, sighed deeply, and then placed six cards on the table, rapid-fire.

“Ah,” she said, lifting the first one. “Three swords piercing the heart. This signifies the possible flight of a lover, but don’t take it the wrong way. Like for me, this was a great thing. My husband ran off with the mailman, which freed me from the shackles he’s probably now using to do God knows what with the mailman.”

“Cool,” my sister offered.

“Oh wow,” the woman said, picking up two more cards. “This combination is really telling. When the Ace of Wands is next to the Page of Cups, it typically signifies a pregnancy. Probably within the next six months!” She then observed my eighteen-year-old sister’s face drain.

“But it doesn’t have to be a *real* pregnancy! This could mean the start of something new! Like how I now have a new lease on life thanks to my shitty husband!”

“Oh, thank God,” my sister exhaled. “About me, not about your husband.”

“Do you have any questions?” the woman asked, with all of the cards now turned face-up.

“Yeah—what does that one mean?” she asked, pointing at the card that had “DEATH” written across it and pictured a deceased man lying underneath a horse.

“Oh! Of course. Good news. Great news. So, the fact that it has fallen in the third row next to the Queen on Pentacles means that it is a metaphorical death. If it had been in

the first row anywhere near The Hanged Man, completely different story. You'd be a goner. But this, this merely signifies the end of something bad. Like my marriage."

My sister stepped back, thinking that she would get pregnant in the next six months as long as she didn't die first. The woman stared at me for several seconds before shuffling the cards, signaling that it was my turn. She laid six more cards on the table and then flipped them all over, studying each with equal intensity.

"It looks like school and work are definitely not your problems. You have *much* bigger problems."

I laughed, then in the same breath calmly demanded to know what those were and where she went to fortunetelling school.

"The Eight of Wands tells me there will be a battle of conscience within the next month. This came for me when I debated the ethics involved in planting cameras in my garage. For you, based on the combination of The Hermit and The Fool, this will be an emotional issue that will tear you to pieces. Wow. This is going to have lasting impacts."

I waited five seconds so she could deliver the positive version of the cards as she had done for my sister when she sensed her repulsion. However, it did not come.

"Yeah, the more I look at this, the more I'm concerned for your mental health," she said, biting her pierced and tattooed lip.

"The Judgment card definitely doesn't help either. But this doesn't necessarily mean a prison sentence for you. It could also mean that someone who has wronged you will be brought to justice. For instance, say you get murdered, your family and friends will receive closure knowing the perpetrator will be behind bars."

It wasn't the Bible's hell, but the paranormal world didn't seem to be offering me anything better. I walked away, past the hot dog stand and horde of clowns that I hoped were employed by the fair, feeling like maybe I didn't need to know *all* of the answers.

I've since thought about trying on Transcendentalism, due to my affection for walking in the woods alone and looking at nature, also alone. But, while I respect Thoreau's ability to dedicate his life to utter simplicity, I find it to be just a twinge self-righteous. Also, I don't think my mother would let me live in a handmade cabin in a deserted area "to front the essential facts of life."

“Oh, so that’s what the kids are calling it these days, huh?” she would ask. Within days, she would approach all of my siblings, cornering them each separately to ask, “So, you ever, you know, ‘front the essential facts of life’ with your friends? Well, you better not. Do it once, alright. Maybe twice, people make mistakes. But do it more than that and pretty soon you’ll be fronting the essential facts of certain death.”

My mother wouldn’t like to hear this, but I think the closest I have come to spirituality has always been after taking around three tequila shots. The high alcohol content mixes with my blood in a way that makes me engage in philosophical conversations with people regarding topics like religion, often making me the absolute life of every party.

“What?” most people say, when I comment on how subscribing to a certain religion can be detrimental to your freedom of thought, hindering your view of reality as you are placed in a hierarchical order and commanded to blindly believe in things that might be imbued in hypocrisy, hate, or even straight up idiocy.

“I think you should sit down,” someone might say, even though I am probably asserting that I am thinking more clearly than ever before and that maybe they should be the one to sit down.

I recently got annoyed at a gathering for reasons I cannot recall, so I decided to leave the room where everyone was congregated to go on the roof of the house. The railing of the back porch provided a sturdy ladder up to it, making it seem like you were almost supposed to climb up, which is what I would tell anyone who questioned my decision.

I laid my back on the prickly shingles, feeling the sharp tickle of fiberglass that had met my feet during the ascent while I observed the boundless sky. It seemed that the stars had been carelessly flung like glitter onto a black canvas, freckling the firmament in no particular order, but still shimmering boldly in a way that embraced their interminable surroundings. They didn’t suddenly align to spell words or connect their solar dots to offer clues to the questions of why are we here, what are we doing, and how are the Kardashians so famous. They were just there, existing, content to take part in the universe’s groundless lack of scheme. I thought, maybe someday, I could be a little like them.

A Good Enough Samaritan

The middle-aged woman paced frantically along the foaming shoreline, examining the water like she had lost a precious family heirloom to the crashing waves. She moaned as if speaking whale while beads of sweat and tears dripped into the incoming tide. I glanced up from enjoying the last bites of my turkey sandwich to study the desperate figure, noting that one—something very important had been lost, and two—it looked to be her bathing suit top.

“What do you think happened to her?” asked my aunt, straining her neck from her beach chair to see. The woman soon collapsed to her knees in the ankle-deep ocean, crying out in a Russian accent that seemed to amplify the sense of terror that now pervaded the beach.

“Villiam!” the woman yelled hopelessly into the salty void. “Villiam!” she screamed again, this time with her hands cupping her mouth to generate an echo that would hopefully be heard under legions of splashing sea. Before she could finish shouting the name a third time, my aunts, uncles, parents, and grandfather leapt from their chairs and approached the woman who was now directing her screams strictly to God, asking, if I heard correctly, to please send her the appropriate swimwear in which to handle this crisis. I might have been projecting, and I’m not fluent in Russian, but I could have sworn. Her breasts nearly hit her wrinkling face while she jumped hysterically, attempting to explain her situation to my very confused relatives.

“My husband!” she cried. “He say he go for svim. Vas hours ago. I take nap and vake up and he still gone!”

“Okay. It’s okay. Does he like to swim far?” my aunt asked, doing her best to look at the woman in her waterlogged eyes.

“Yes. He say he svim to Provincetown. But theece has been too long.” The beach was located in Truro, not far from Provincetown if one used a vehicle or motorboat. But swimming would take upwards of all day and something told me this William character had never taken home the gold in an Olympic freestyle relay.

“Well,” my aunt began, “That would really be a lengthy swim.” The woman grabbed her breasts firmly in genuine anguish as beach-goers shielded their children’s eyes from the free show.

“Oh no! With his heart he cannot do it!” she cried. “I think he is drowned! Oh, look! I think I see him floating!” Without another poorly pronounced word, my relatives began sprinting up and down the length of the beach, calling out the husband’s name and diving into the water. The woman, clearly recognizing her own strengths, decided to help by screaming to the point of Pneumothorax.

“VILLIAM, THIS WAY!” she shrieked at the confused seal that sporadically popped its head above the water. I imagined William swimming breathlessly past, advising the marine creature to follow him away from the shouts and into the sunset.

My cousins and I, all under the age of ten, were glued to the scene of utter bedlam playing out before us. I had turned my chair fully around to get a better sense of the situation, while my grandfather attempted to steer our attention in the opposite direction.

“Look at that sky!” he offered. “So, you know, just so blue. Are you guys looking? Looking up? At the sky? And not at the half-naked woman? Hello?” It was no use, and we all turned to listen in on the live-action European soap opera that our family had inserted themselves into.

“Get up and help us look!” my aunt yelled to my cousins and me. We all stood up reluctantly, unsure of whether or not our efforts would be best served on land or at sea. Noting we had been tagged into the rescue mission as reinforcements, the Russian woman made a B-line in our direction. We took a simultaneous step backwards but our attempted retreat was thwarted as she huddled us together to map out the attack.

“You vill valk up to everyone and ask, ‘Have you seen a man svimming?’ Heece life might depend on it! Ready, go!”

“Why doesn’t someone just call 911?” my cousin sighed, tossing some relatively sane logic into the mix of frenetic confusion. Blatantly disregarding his suggestion, the woman ran back to the water’s edge in the hopes that her beloved husband might wash to the shore in the same way we hoped her bathing suit top might. Nevertheless, we did as we were instructed, halfheartedly taking to the sandy beat like miniature detectives, leaving no towel unturned.

“So,” my cousin said to a gentleman eating a watermelon. “You seen anyone swimming here today?”

“Yes,” he noted, bluntly. “We are at a beach.”

“Hi,” I said, greeting a bikini-clad woman. “Have you seen a Russian man in the water at all today?”

“Sorry,” she lamented, “But I can’t tell if someone is Russian by the way they swim.”

“If you ask me,” a white-haired gentleman interjected, “I would say that the William man is swimming away from that crazy looking woman. But that’s just what I would do. ”

After a beach-wide sweep, we had no leads to go on and time, as the woman kept screaming, was running out. William’s corpse was probably being spotted by a traumatized family on a whale watch at that point, but that image did surprisingly little in the way of rousing people to action.

“Sorry,” my aunt said to the woman, dripping wet from the failed mission. “But we don’t seem to be seeing him anywhere. Do you think you might want to call for some professional help?”

“Ahhhh he is dead! I feel it in my heart!” she cried.

“You don’t know that—let’s call for some help.”

“Yes, yes, yes, we must now call, yes. But I do not have phone.”

My father offered up his Nextel work phone as she wiped back tears, clearing her throat in preparation. Before she could press even one digit, her body became paralyzed by the thunderous voice that seemed to shake the sand beneath our feet. “MARIA!” hollered a bald man from the beach’s entrance. “ANSWER ME, MARIA! DO YOU WANT AN ICE CREAM?” he shouted, adding, “THEY DON’T HAVE ANY VANILLA!”

“VILLIAM!” she shrieked, her voice piercing the salty air. “YOU ARE ALIVE! AND CHOCOLATE VILL DO!” My relatives looked at one another with similar, mystified faces. The woman dropped the phone in the sand and Bay-watched it over to her very alive husband whose only issue was the lack of ice cream flavor selection. My

family members remained standing, staring at the woman as she dragged William back over to us.

“I so sorry,” she laughed. “This Villiam. He’s alive! Thank yous for helping me. Villiam, ve thought you drowneded.”

“Can I get yous ice cream?” he asked, in between licks of his dripping cone. “Villiam!” the woman shout-whispered, nudging his shoulder. “Zese peoples are good enough Samaritans to help you. Say ‘zank you.’”

The Good Enough Samaritans reassured William that they were just happy to see him alive, which confused him, since he was apparently only gone for a total of twenty minutes.

I turned around, meeting the eyes of those who had remained immobile during the startling false alarm. The woman had shouted words that traditionally signify crises, such as: “Help,” “Dead,” and “korov'ye moloko,” which, translated to Russian, means, “milk the cow,” but it sounds pretty urgent nonetheless. And still, they sat with their toes in the sand, indifferent to the poignant display of overreaction.

In my junior year of college, I found myself sitting, not at the beach, but in my university’s library. On the very top floor, there is a row of desks hidden behind boundless rows of bookcases, where I tend to spend a great deal of time. It’s eerily remote and typically void of people, which are just two of my absolute favorite things about it.

Occasionally there will be one or two other students working at one of the desks, who I will stare at for a few moments, wondering how they discovered the clandestine spot and praying they keep it to themselves. On this particular morning, however, there was only one male intruder sitting two desks down from me, nose deep in a novel. If not for the infrequent turning of pages, I would not have known he had a pulse.

As far as I was concerned, the spot was now at max capacity. Combatting the claustrophobia, I typed ferociously onto my keyboard, attempting to finish an anthropology assignment before my weekend began. Suddenly, I heard moaning noises coming from somewhere behind me. Turning around, I saw nothing, and chalked it up to

being an echo from one of the nearby music rooms. But the moaning became increasingly louder, which begged the question: Are people having sex in *my* spot?

I looked over to the boy with the book, who now seemed to be focusing harder than ever on his literature. The noises stopped sounding so sexual, however, when I heard someone wail, “Help!” I looked again at the boy to my left, whose stare did not deviate from the novel’s page.

“HELP!” shouted the voice, this time very clearly. I rose from my chair and followed the moans to a pair of outstretched legs that were slouched behind a bookcase. Upon further inspection, I found the legs belonged to a quivering man’s body.

“Are you okay?” I asked, loud enough for the other boy to hear, in the hopes that he might wander over.

“No,” he winced, wasting his breath on my idiotic question.

“Okay, so it’s your stomach?” I asked, as if I were his primary care physician.

After another minute of clenching his fists in a pain that disallowed him from speaking, his breathing began to return to what I felt, as an avid viewer of *Grey’s Anatomy*, to be “normal.” Seeming to come to, the man caught his breath and told me that he had been experiencing frequent bouts of abdominal pain.

“It comes in waves,” he said motioning for me to grab his water.

“I can call for some help,” I offered, but he shook his head.

“No. I already went to the doctor’s. They didn’t find anything. I’m fine.”

He struggled sit up, but his body continued to betray him. In surrender, he flailed backwards onto the carpet, wincing. The walls seemed to wobble with each gut-wrenching groan, yet none of the students in the silent library, including the one five feet away, came over.

“What’s your name?” I asked, attempting small talk.

“Ed,” he wheezed, now closing his eyes. He pounded the floor and grated his teeth while another rash of ache seemed to set up camp in his intestines.

“Okay, Ed, don’t do that. Look, can you tell me how many fingers I’m holding up?”

“Two. You’re holding up two fingers in front of my face.”

“Oh,” I replied, trying to think of a harder question to ask. I assumed he might say something like three or four or seventeen, but I was glad we could rule out blindness.

The only other available measure I thought of taking was borrowed from every labor scene in every movie I’ve watched. When the woman is gasping for air and feeling the pain of a thousand knives stabbing her uterus, someone always offers up a hand for her to squeeze. As far as I was concerned, my current situation was the closest I had come to childbirth, so I extended my hand.

“Um. Do you want to squeeze it?” I asked, mostly out of courtesy, not thinking he would actually grab it, which he did. Initially, the hand crushing seemed to help, which made me somewhat proud. However, after about twenty seconds, he let out a chilling groan and began to shut his eyes.

“I am going to call 911 now,” I said, reaching for the phone.

“Call!” he cried, opening his eyes momentarily.

“911, what’s your emergency?” the woman asked in an eerily upbeat tone.

I explained the situation nervously, which prompted her to refer us to the university police, who were shocked to hear that the library had three floors.

“Three floors, oh yeah. Ok, so you’re in the way back, you say? We’ll be there in a minute.”

In the meantime, I did my best to keep Ed’s eyes open by asking him repeatedly to please keep his eyes open until help arrived. I attempted to distract him from the excruciating pain and possible imminent death by inquiring about his semester, which, he said, had been going great until this very moment.

I could hear the buzz of walkie-talkies making their way up the stairwell, and I assured Ed that help was here. I strained my neck beyond the bookcase to see the entrance to the staircase, and watched as the police officers walked in the opposite direction, past a number of students who absolutely knew that the 911 call had come from me and the nearly unconscious person on the ground. Still, everybody kept their heads down, barely noticing the police presence.

“Over here!” I yelled, my voice cracking from nerves. Thankfully, the two officers sprinted over to us, noting that they had never been to this part of the library.

“Ok, usually the EMTs get here before us,“ they said. “Anyways, tell us what’s going on.”

“He’s just in a lot of pain. He says it’s his stomach. He was yelling for help,” I said.

“Do you think it’s his appendix?” they asked.

I stared at them in confusion, wondering why they would be consulting my medical opinion. I became irrationally embarrassed by the question, as if I should have taken the next step after checking for blindness and performed an exploratory appendectomy.

“Does this happen a lot?” they asked.

“He says it comes in waves,” I asserted.

“And how long have you guys been together?” they asked. In the midst of chaos, I had forgotten that I was still holding his hand, even though he was now sitting up and speaking. We had truly been bonded by the trauma and it felt rude to remove my hand at that point.

Finally, the EMTs arrived, admitting that they too had never been to this part of the library. They took Ed’s blood pressure and heart rate, while I assured them that I had already done the one for blindness, just to save them some time.

They helped him to stand up and concluded that a gurney was not necessary. Since I was holding Ed’s backpack, I followed the group of emergency workers towards the elevator and hopped in.

We finally reached the ambulance outside the library, where they lifted Ed into the back. I plopped his backpack onto the metal floor, wished him well, and never saw him again.

But I assume he was fine. I think I would’ve heard if he wasn’t, since I’m pretty sure I was listed as his “next of kin” on scene.

“Aren’t you going to the hospital with him?” the police officer asked as I turned to walk away.

I explained to her once again that I was not in any way romantically affiliated with Ed, even though the handholding argued otherwise.

“Well you did good,” she said, as Ed began wailing. His cries echoed from the aluminum walls of the ambulance but were soon hushed by the officer’s slamming of the double doors. “Good enough,” she added, shrugging.