POOR-BRANDED WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

MELISSA ANN GOODNIGHT. Poor-Branded Women. (Under the direction of BRYN CHANCELLOR, M.F.A.)

Poor-Branded Women is a collection of three creative nonfiction essays aiming to establish the idea that both morality and personal responsibility live on a spectrum, by examining the lives of several women. These personal essays focus on women who have lived outside the standard societal norms set forth for them throughout different points in history. They chronicle a woman's life through an extramarital affair, a teenager grappling with her sexuality, and a woman who chose to have an abortion. These stories of real women showcase these specific topics in an attempt to get the reader to learn about topics they may not have experiences with, fully understand, or agree with, while asking the questions about why the women made these choices. These essays are written through the eyes of one woman, but all three reflect an overarching sense that ordinary life can lend itself to the extraordinary, and that women can gain strength from their own lives, and each other's, even in unlikely circumstances.

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I'd like to thank all my linguistics professors. They routinely made me feel inadequate. They were staunch supporters of my choice to change my major to creative writing.

Lastly, many thanks are in order to the ghost of Anna Nicole Smith and Dr. Lara Vetter.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my husband, my children, and my mother. It is because of them that I know unconditional love.

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Critical Introduction

A couple months before I started my thesis I was resting by my pool, sipping iced tea, as my eight-year-old worked on his backstroke. I had my legs hanging over the edge to abate the heat and I was reading one of my favorite books, *We Tell Ourselves Stories in Order to Live* by Joan Didion. This collection of nonfiction was written between 1964 and 1966 for various publications, its contents ranging from journalism, to memoir, to political and social commentary. I came across Didion's work in college, but none of her stories or essays ever stuck with me quite like "On Morality". "On Morality," an essay Didion was asked to write for the *American Scholar* in 1965. They asked her to simply write "about morality," and so she did. Because of her particular style, "On Morality" came out as more than just an anecdote to the turmoil of the era, but also as a call to action. In her matter-of-fact way, Didion begged the questions of responsibility to those who found themselves watching war unravel the fabric of their nation. She wondered, are we responsible for the actions of others? Who is responsible for telling us what is right and what is wrong? Are we bound by those principles? Didion discussed "wagon train morality" and unpacked "primitive morality." She imagined how someone might leave a dead body on the desert floor overnight, knowing the coyotes will come for it before dawn. How can they think it is moral? Won't it give them nightmares? The idea came to me that day to do my own investigation of morality, in a very specific way, while answering some of these broader questions. I did, after all, have a few instances in my life where my morality could be questioned. Where my morality *had* been questioned. Probably many of us had. So, I decided to base my thesis on these questions of morality

and responsibility, of individual freedoms, and of conventional principles. Then I finished up my tea and jumped in head first.

Within a week I had the basis of my plan: I would write creative nonfiction essays about my life and my experiences with three topics that had the potential to muddy the waters of "morality." I imagined readers who had never been through transitional experiences like mine, but who had hard-lined opinions on the topics I was discussing. For example, I decided to write about an abortion I had in 2011, because my abortion was different than what people generally envision when presented with that topic. I thought my story had the ability to inform and entertain my readers, and if I'm being honest, to change their minds. Next, I wanted to write about my parents' relationship, specifically examining my mother's part in their extramarital affair. I wanted to showcase women like my mother who made a "bad" decision in the name of love. This is also where I planned to dive into the life of Bonnie Parker, from the infamous Bonnie and Clyde. Bonnie was a woman I had recently become obsessed with, and I was starting to notice similarities between my mother's life and hers. My third essay didn't immediately come to me. I knew I wanted to deal with another "moral" issue, but this time I wanted to bring humor to the essay. I've always relied on humor as a way to deal with uncomfortable topics and particularly like to play with humor and grief, weaving in and out between the two. I have found doing this brings me the closest to my voice as a writer, as well as a nice way to make the reader feel comfortable with a topic that can invariably slide into the sentimental. I was hopeful the third essay would show itself to me in a sweaty dream, wherein I awake inspired and scribble illegible notes on my bedside tablet. I chose three essays because, I'm not sure, divine proportion? The Golden Ratio? Brad Pitt's face? It

just seemed like a solid plan. My professor agreed, and off I went to write stories in an attempt to convince my readers that morality is less of polar extremes and more of a spectrum, shaped over the course of our lives. And if I was lucky, to make people laugh at things they don't think they should laugh at.

Creative nonfiction has always appealed to me. Its combination of gut-wrenching truth, mixed with its quiet observance of people, places, and things that have changed us, for better or for worse, consoles me in some way. Think: We are all messed up, this is what did it to me. Creative nonfiction's artful nature allows the writer to drive the narrative from an inward place, which can be impactful for the reader, at the same time it can create challenges for the writer. Our inward narratives can sometimes come from seedy and romanticized places. But, what fun! I suffer from going too far inward in my writing, and that has the potential to make my work vague. I was cognizant of this when planning my thesis, which forced me to ensure that I was telling the reader what needed to be said rather than letting them fill in the blanks. But sometimes we have to fill in the blanks in order to write the stories.

Like our memories, things are blurry in creative nonfiction; the lines that separate prose and poetry or fact and fiction, for example. It's true that creative nonfiction lives in truth, but it also lives in art, in journalism, in everyday life. It lives in the places where the writer is willing to step to the edge, and the reader is willing to watch you fall. In this way, the writer is free to remember those transitional moments, even the ones we may not want to, and share them in a way that allows others to relive those moments as well, hopefully leading to a climax that resonates with the reader. I've always thought, when done well, creative nonfiction can bring the reader and the writer to a shared satisfaction

that is unlike any other form of writing. It can be that hand that reaches out and says, "You're not alone. I've felt like this too." But I am biased.

Although there are many different types of creative nonfiction (and the genre itself has been stereotyped, categorized, and re-categorized over the years) we have come to expect certain stories from this genre. Food writing, travel writing, and the personal essay have all been labeled creative nonfiction, but the empirical form points to memoir, which is what I consider my work to be. Memoir writing is, at its core, an opportunity for the writer to recollect those transitional times and impart some wisdom to the reader from their lived experience. It also comes with its own set of dilemmas. How much responsibility does the writer have to the reader? Can the reader trust that the writer is staying true to the events? Does the reader go into the text knowing there is wiggle-room? Is there wiggle-room? How about rose-colored glasses, don't we all have a pair of those? The problem is that memoir writing is, in the strictest sense, crafting a story of one's own life, while recalling the life from the fragments we have pieced together from our memory. And our memories can't always be trusted. I'm often fearful that my memories aren't as clear as they used to be, that I remember something different than someone else, or that I am just completely inaccurate, allowing my creativity to subconsciously take liberties with my memories. I wondered if I was alone in this, or if this is normal in creative nonfiction. In short, I had some questions. That's why before I began writing, I read.

I read about creative nonfiction from the people who are actually out there doing it. I read excerpts and articles from authors like David Sedaris, who has been writing memoir for nearly 25 years, and whose veracity has often been questioned. I read articles

by Lee Gutkind, often referred to as the "godfather behind creative nonfiction" and the founder of the literary magazine *Creative Nonfiction,* who believes that creative nonfiction is the "literature of reality" (7) and has to be taken as such, mistakes and all. I read examples of contemporary nonfiction in essays and books. I read a compelling story by Luis Alberto Urrea titled *The Devil's Highway,* which chronicled the harrowing tale of Mexican smugglers and immigrants dying in the desert heat of Arizona. I read the very real story of Henrietta Lacks, written by Rebecca Skloot. I read essays by Roxane Gay and Megan Stielstra, writers who share the "real" in life, even the parts we may not want to talk about. I found empowerment from these stories, and somewhere along the line I found inspiration.

My third story came to me in one such bout of divine inspiration, much like I suspected it would. I was driving to the grocery store when a song I remembered from my childhood came on. Suddenly I was transported to a time and a place that was unique to me. I realized for the first time that maybe I had more stories to tell, just sitting there, idle in my mind, or packed away in my memory. When you're young you don't realize that your life, though it seems normal and often unimpressive, can sometimes be interesting. But the older we get the more we see that people like stories out of the ordinary. Sure, they like to be entertained by big explosions and over-the-top productions, but they also like the everyday of life, and after all, isn't that what creative nonfiction is? The essays and stories I was reading all seemed "common" when you would describe them to someone, but when you read them, when you really dig in, they are honest accounts of regular people doing regular things: buying homes, exploring their childhood memories, going to the doctor for a check-up, but the stories are told in such a

compelling way, and with such emotion, and often times humor, that we want to read these stories of everyday life. Anne Lamott once said, "Having a great narrator is like having a great friend whose company you love, whose mind you love to pick, whose running commentary totally holds your attention, who makes you laugh out loud, whose lines you always want to steal (Lamott 135:34-44)." That's what these stories were doing, that is what Urrea, Sedaris, and Stielstra had tapped into. I wanted to give my readers this sort of attention. I wanted them to feel like I was just telling them a story. I wanted to captivate them at the beginning, so when the large moral questions arose, or the characters that they didn't like so much came into play, they were already too emotionally invested to leave. I wanted to be my readers' friend. Which is all well and great, if you know your readers.

"Who are you writing this for?" The question seemed simple enough the day my professor asked me, and I had a ready answer. I fed her the same line I had been feeding anyone who asked me about my thesis. "I'm writing essays based on complicated moral issues to show a different point of view regarding what some would call 'immoral' issues, like abortion and homosexuality." "Great," she said. "But who's your audience?" This would be harder than I thought. The simple truth was I always just figured my audience were those people who spent their Saturdays standing in picket lines at Planned Parenthood. The people who said things like, "Can you believe she wears skirts that short?" and "Is that dude queer or what?!" To put it simply, right-wing, Christian conservatives from the Midwest, the people I had grown up around, the people in my hometown. But as the days rolled on it became obvious to my professor (and then much

later it became obvious to me) that those people weren't really my audience. My audience was much closer to home.

One day it occurred to me that the people I had thought I wanted to read my stories are actually people I didn't care too much about. Not to mention the fact that they probably wouldn't be interested in reading it anyway. So, who did I want to read it? I never really wanted my family to read it, certainly not my mother. I wasn't even sure I was going to let my husband read it, so what the hell was I doing here? I mean, besides fulfilling a graduation requirement. That's when I realized I was writing it for myself, and that is when things got even more complicated.

When I was originally focused on using my work to elicit some type of moral compass for others, audience seemed less important. I knew who I thought would benefit from reading about my abortion, but suddenly I wondered, who would benefit from reading about my parents? My blossoming sexuality? Somewhere along the line I had been so wrapped up in what my work was doing, that I sort of forgot why I was even writing it. With that realization came quite the existential crisis. It's been my experience that when I write for myself I go inward and I get very sentimental. I also have a nasty habit of never finishing work that I have delegated as "just for me." Of course, having a deadline breathing down my neck helps, but now I had to be on the lookout for all these other challenges. I started combing through my work from a different place. If I spoke about my sister and her weird tics, how much would I need to talk about? I mean, surely my committee (at this point the only people slated to read my work) wouldn't know my sister from Susan Sarandon, and what would her tics matter to them? To anyone reading this? I had to start ensuring that all these little moments that I was including were actually

serving to move the story along, and not detracting from anything. That's when I decided to go back to my characters.

Writing and developing characters is one of my favorite things to do in fiction writing. I love to spend hours in the mind of someone else. I might see a person walking down the road and then, boom, I am inside their head, creating their world. Wondering what they find funny or scary. Envisioning how they would hold a cigarette to their lips, or how awkward their first kiss was. I realized that I had spent so much time debating on how to start my stories, how to draw the reader in, that I had forgotten that I had actual characters to write. Sure, they were real people in my life that I had known, but why not develop them a bit more, really get into their heads? So that's what I did.

I went back to the story about my abortion and cut out the whole introduction. I thought about the people in the story and how they impacted my life that day and one of the characters I couldn't shake was the nurse who had told me that my baby had died. Her name was Melissa and she was lovely. I spent some time just sitting at my desk remembering her and before I knew it, I had pieced together a character who was as close to my memory of her as possible, weird tics and all. It was compelling, it was sweet, it was shocking in the end. It was the beginning to the story that I hoped to tell, and I was and still am very happy with it. By developing the people in my stories (my mother, my sister, my doctors and nurses) as characters, I was able to paint vivid pictures for the reader, while also sharing those special moments that I hold dear, as sentimental and intimate as they are.

In the end, realizing that I was writing this for myself, to help me cope with the loss of my daughter, to help work through the shame of being a bastard child, to help me

realize love, for anyone, is never wrong, I was able to process emotions I had kept far back in my mind, while sharing stories that I think could actually resonate with others, and maybe, if I am lucky, help them in some way. Because, although I still care about answering those larger questions regarding morality, I now realize that what I ultimately care about is helping people. I care about making a positive impact on society. I care about using my stories, my life, to help others realize their potential, to look inside and find their own stories. And I don't think I am alone in this.

This has certainly been a long journey for me, one that was quite unexpected, and I'm ashamed to say, unwanted, at first. But as the process unfolded and as the stories poured out of me, I started to see the positive impacts on both my life and my writing. I started to really see that these stories could make a difference in the lives of others. Creative nonfiction might seem contrary, at its core, but it really isn't. It's about the stories of people and of everyday situations, even the really tough ones. Especially the really tough ones. Is a good narrator important? Absolutely. Does humor find a way in where it belongs? Yep. How about characters, do they play a big role in the story? Uh, yes. But at the end of the day, if you don't have a good story to tell, one that others can relate to, one that has the ability to entertain, to enlighten, and to jump from the page into the hearts and minds of your reader, then you don't have much of anything. You don't need to comb through the big questions of morality or share a near-death experience to get the readers' attention. Sometimes, all you need to do is spend an afternoon watching your child work on his backstroke and remember how you came to be the person you are today.

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Poor-Branded Women

"A man can break every commandment

And the world will still lend him a hand,

Yet a girl that has loved, but un-wisely

Is an outcast all over the land."

-Bonnie Parker

The first time I read a poem by Bonnie Parker, my husband and eight-year-old son were standing behind me, discussing what it means to be a criminal. We were at a crime museum in Tennessee, one that housed photos and stories from modern-day criminals, from Bugsy Malone to O.J. Simpson. We'd been walking around the museum rather aimlessly, stopping at interesting stories and interesting people. Stories that wouldn't give our son nightmares. Stories that wouldn't give us nightmares. We stopped in front of a picture of a smiling couple. They were young and they were happy. They were in love. My son wanted to know about the pretty woman in the photograph. It was Bonnie, I told him. From Bonnie and Clyde. He looked confused as I explained the bare minimum, all I knew about the infamous pair. They were robbers. They had a gang. They ran from the police. In the end, there was a shootout. His confusion turned to concern. It had never occurred to him that a woman could be a criminal. It had never occurred to him that a woman could shoot a policeman, or run from the law. To him, women are mommies and mommies are sweet. They bake cookies and they give hugs. They protect people. But there we were, face to face with this sweet image of Bonnie Parker, and neither of us knew what to make of her. My son shrugged his shoulders and walked to the next picture, but one more glance into Bonnie's charming eyes, and I was hooked. As

soon as I was back home I started reading all I could about her. I dove into her lawless life and her rudimentary poetry. I wanted to know her. Where was she from? What was her childhood like? What did she see in Clyde Barrow? Was his love worth dying for? Did she regret her choices in the end? Bonnie wound herself up tightly in my simple life. She seemed familiar, comforting. She made me wonder about the women I had known. She made me curious about love, about risking your life for the sake of a man. She gave me nightmares.

Bonnie[1] was petite. Her eyes were bright. Her hair was long. She loved to write poetry. She wrote of love and longing, of pain and despair. She wrote about being in jail, about being on the run. She wrote about Clyde Barrow and their short, tumultuous life together. She liked to take pictures. She liked to pose in front of stolen cars, while brandishing a pistol on her hip and a cigar, unlit, between her thin lips. She also liked to sew and wear dresses. She had best friends and childhood crushes. She was helpful and smart. She was born the middle child of three in 1910 in a small Central Texas town, the daughter of a bricklayer and a seamstress. She was pretty and quiet. She loved fiercely and died the same. Or, so the story goes. Six days before her 16th birthday she married the only husband she ever had, Ron Thornton. Though his troubles put him in prison shortly after their wedding, they never divorced, and when she was gun-downed in rural Louisiana, it was Ron's wedding band on her finger.

[1] While researching Bonnie Parker I referred to the following sources: *Caldwell Barrow, Blanche*. My Life with Bonnie and Clyde. Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 2004. and *Milner, E.R.* The Life and Times of Bonnie and Clyde. Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1996.

Clyde was an outlaw. A young, handsome man with a past he couldn't escape, and wouldn't want to, if he could. He had a penchant for black suits and stolen cars. He was devoted to his family and always made sure to visit his mother during the holidays.

Bonnie loved Clyde and Clyde loved Bonnie. That's what she told him, though she had already promised her heart to another man. What she shared with Clyde was more than lust. It was more than some brief fling. Bonnie risked her life and the lives of others to be with this man. She strained her relationship with her family, she stole from friends. She broke her mother's heart into pieces, all in the name love.

Clyde loved Bonnie and Bonnie loved Clyde. That's what he told her at an abandoned amusement park in Dexter, Iowa in July of 1933, five days after they engaged police in a shootout in Platte City, Missouri, and fled the state on the old, two-lane Interurban, northbound to Highway 29.

Eleven years after Bonnie and Clyde survived that vicious gunfight in Platte City, Margie Shanks was born five miles north, in a hospital off 29 in Dearborn, Missouri. It was a hot September evening. Her mother, nearly 47-years-old and blind from undiagnosed diabetes, had no trouble pushing out her last child. Her father, a migrant tobacco farmer, took to the front yard that evening to shoot his shotgun in celebration. The war was over, and his last child had been born a girl.

Shortly after her 18th birthday Margie married her first husband, Harlan. Harlan was an alcoholic, who routinely beat her with garden hoses, belt buckles, and angry fists. She bore him two children before she had the nerve to pack up her old Rambler and escape to her parent's farm in the middle of a summer night in 1965.

In 1966 Margie, recently divorced, moved to Leavenworth, Kansas, a quiet, bedroom town just across the state line. Not having a high school diploma, Margie took the first job she could find, as a bartender at the local bowling alley. The job allowed her to spend her days at home with her two children, and her evenings at work, where she met handsome, eager young men.

In the summer of 1970, Margie gave birth to her third child, the second of three daughters she would come to have by three different men. This daughter's father was a married man. He denied the baby and Margie, and she was left single, and with three mouths to feed. In 1972, Margie married again. Her second husband was older, the owner of the bowling alley. Shortly after they were married he moved Margie and the three kids to Traverse City, Michigan, to open a new bowling alley and start their new life as a family of five. After one year in Michigan, the insecurities of being with an older man, the faults Margie knew of married men, and the loneliness of being far from home, drove her to her second divorce. Once again, she packed up her children, her car, and made her way back to Kansas.

Back in Leavenworth, Margie floated in and out of houses, jobs, and relationships, until the late 1970s when she met Ralph, a sweet construction worker, with Catholic beliefs and Italian features. He was dark and handsome. He was strong and mysterious. He was married, she knew that, but she thought he loved her like she loved him. In September of 1981, she gave birth to Ralph's daughter, her fourth and last child.

Margie loved Ralph and Ralph loved Margie. That's what he'd told her that chilly April night, wrapped together in the crumpled, beige hotel sheets of a steamy, second-floor room. That's what he'd told her weeks before, sitting on the barstool across from

her, watching stray wisps of hair slowly unravel down her neck while she emptied ashtrays and filled pint glasses at the Knights of Columbus. He'd sit and watch her for hours while he sipped whiskey and made her laugh. She was young. He was handsome. She was confident. He was married.

Ralph loved Margie and Margie loved Ralph. That's what she told herself five days after their baby was born in a cold, sterile hospital room on the second floor. It was her 37th birthday. She didn't have any cake. No one threw her a party. She was alone, except for the sleeping baby and the telephone. She dialed the number and hung up before it rang. Then she dialed the number and let it ring. Another woman's shaky voice came across the line. There they sat, in silence.

A month later Margie had a birth announcement printed in the local paper. It was a small, black-and-white snapshot of her black-haired baby girl. Under the picture she listed weight and time. After the word mother, she wrote her own name. After father, an empty space. Just like the birth certificate. Just like the school paperwork and the medical records. Like the family trees and the family albums.

Her small, black-haired baby grew into a brown-haired little girl with pink dresses and a soft, round belly. She grew into her toothless grin. She grew into a rowdy teenager, with a desire to please others, wrestling a streak of rebellion her mother didn't understand. She grew and she grew, despite the empty space.

The only memories I have of Margie and Ralph together come in bursting snapshots that infiltrate my mind at unexpected, and sometimes unwanted, moments. Meeting Ralph, my father, for the first time. Watching him work in a parking lot. Margie,

my mother, moving us into Ralph's neighborhood. These all recall distant, somewhat chaotic memories for me. I feel no attachment to my father and his life; meanwhile, flipping through photos of my mother's life is very different.

My mother was curvy and soft. She had strong legs, ample bosom, and an affinity for flowered prints. Her auburn hair was always curled, either spiraled high on top of her head or wrapped in scarves while tending bar or tending children. Her voice was low and firm. She had a habit of swatting the arm of the nearest person when laughter consumed her, and she was often consumed by laughter. By the time she was the age I am today, she was a pregnant, single mother of three, having grieved two failed marriages: one by the hands of an abusive drunk, and one by her own insecurities.

My mother was an animated storyteller. I'd curl up behind her on cool, fall nights and fade safely off to sleep while she told me about an old farm house with a tin roof, and reminisced about the way she'd bathe her favorite puppy, in a cylinder bucket with soapy water raining down on them, while my grandmother hung clothes on the line. Her memories transported me into a world I didn't know, but one that grew familiar. So much so, that today I can recall her memories as if they're my own. The baby of twelve. A house with dirt floors. Swimming in creek beds and hunting raccoons. Born on a sunny, summer afternoon in 1944, under the sign of Virgo.

My father's harder to imagine. Weaving his life together is like doing a puzzle without all the pieces. There are no snapshots, no funny childhood stories, no pictures to rake through on nostalgic Christmas evenings. I have his obituary clipped from the local newspaper. It called him a *family man*, an *asset to the community*, and a *father of three*. But he wasn't a father of three. He was a father of four. My mother tells me that he was

funny. She tells me that he was persistent. She tells me that he had kind eyes. But for all the stories she tells me about her life, she keeps my father and their moments protected. Still, I have moments I can remember when the three of us were together.

When I was five years old my mother took me to the Knights of Columbus, a bar run by the Catholic organization of the same name, of which my father was a proud member and where my mother tended bar. That's where she'd met my father. It's where he'd go after work, before he went home to his wife and kids. On this particular evening, Bingo was being played and the house was packed. Music and cigarette smoke drifted above my head while my mom paraded me around to all the patrons, many of whom knew exactly who I belonged to. They patted my head, offered me sips of beer, and told me that I had my father's eyes. Though everyone was polite to me that evening, I found myself feeling anxious and afraid. I didn't know who my father was, and it scared me that these strangers did. I wanted to ask them. I wanted to sit my hand of one of their shoulders and beg for a story, anything about the man I didn't know. But I didn't. I merely shuffled around behind my bubbly mother, a lollipop in one hand and a Pepsi in the other. Completely oblivious to the lie we were both living.

My mother sat me on a barstool next to a very tall man with dark hair and bright blue eyes – my eyes. He smiled at me and told me that my dress was pretty. I blushed and put my head down, running my fingers across the seam, an anxious habit I had picked up in kindergarten. My mom told me to say hello, so I did. Then the man and I turned our attention to my mother who was already behind the bar emptying ashtrays and filling pint glasses. I watched my mother that night, move in and out from behind the bar to the

tables of people who smiled and told her they were happy to see her again. She was smiling and laughing, swatting arms and hands, throwing her shoulders back in rolls of deep laughter, her spirits as high as her auburn hair. She would occasionally come our way, put a bowl of pretzels in front of me and kiss me on the forehead, smile at the man. The two of us would watch her walk away, both with the same, stupid smile on our faces. At five years old, I couldn't connect the dots. At five years old, I was just trying to not be afraid. At five years old, I was still just her daughter.

When I was eight years old my mom and I drove through the IGA parking lot on a hot summer day. We didn't normally shop at the IGA, Food-4-Less was our store. Close to home and lots of cheese options to suite my finicky palate. I asked where we were going, and she told me to be quiet. I sank down in the seat and stewed. We circled the parking lot one time. Then again. And then again. On the third go around, she slowed the car down under an Elm tree that shaded several of the parking spots to the right side of the store. Our car didn't have air conditioning, so she turned the engine off and sat looking straight ahead.

I was immediately hot, about to start in with the whining that she despised. I sat for a few minutes, wondering about all the things I could start with. I could whine about the scorching, vinyl seats sticking to my legs, or maybe about a drink of water, or maybe to use the bathroom. I didn't need to use the bathroom, but I was confident that I could make myself go if she were to stand outside the stall and listen. Then all of a sudden, my mom sat straight up and pointed. Her rapid motion scared me and I sat up quickly, following her lead and looking out the window of the car. *Look, Missy*, she said. *See over there?* She pointed to a hole in the parking lot with orange cones around it. There were

four or five men standing near the cones. Some with shovels, some with hard hats. I managed to scoot my sweaty legs to the end of the moist seat and squint my eyes where she was pointing. *See what?* I asked. *The hole? The men,* she said. *Yeah,* I said, unsure of what lesson I was being taught. *See the tall one, in the white shirt and hard hat? Yeah,* I squinted closer to the window. *The one with the black hair?* I saw him, getting excited. Maybe this was a game. *That's your daddy, Missy. That's him. That's Ralph.* She looked at me with an excitement that I had never seen on her before. She was flushed, maybe from the heat, maybe from something else. She acted like I should say something. I felt confused and sad, but I didn't know why. I think I was sad for her, or maybe I was sad for me. I sat back in the seat, put my hand on hers and told her that he looked nice. She smiled and we drove away. That was the first time I remember the anger starting to brew inside of me. The first time that I realized my life could be different. If I had a dad like the other kids, maybe my mom wouldn't have to clean hotel rooms and work at a bar. If I had a dad like the other kids, maybe we could take family vacations. Maybe I could go to the father/daughter dances. Maybe we could live in a house, not an apartment. Maybe we could have air conditioning in our car. Maybe my mom wouldn't be so sad. That was the first time I envisioned walking up to him. Reaching out and touching his hand. Asking him to come to our house. To see my room. To watch my mom cook dinner. That was when I still didn't quite understand.

When I was 12 years old my mother moved us into a new house on a completely different side of town. I knew I'd miss all my friends in my old neighborhood, but my mom said the new house was in a better neighborhood. She said there was a nice church playground across the street where I could play. It was near my middle school. It was

near her friends. It just made sense. A couple of weeks after we moved in I made my way over to the church playground. Plopped down on a swing and started swinging. A woman in a house across the street came outside to her porch. She sat down one of those old, metal chairs that are springy and rock a little back and forth. She sat there and watched me swing for a few minutes, never taking her eyes off of me, never smiling. I didn't see any kids in the house. It made me uncomfortable, so I went back home. Later that night I told my mom what had happened. I said it was weird. She said it wasn't, because, *That's just Ralph's old lady*.

In January of 1930, while Bonnie Parker was staying with a friend, Clyde Barrow showed up in town. Bonnie was battling the lonely life of a woman whose husband had been sent to prison, and Clyde was on the run from a string of robberies that had gone wrong. Bonnie was immediately intrigued by Clyde's dapper fashion, and big ideas. She saw a kindness in him that many people looked right over. Clyde fiercely loved his mother. He had funny stories about his family. He needed a woman by his side. Someone to take care of him. To support him in all circumstances. Someone who believed in him. Bonnie thought that woman could be her.

Bonnie's mother, on the other hand, saw right through Clyde and spent the next few months begging Bonnie not to date him, suggesting many different jobs, in different locations far away from Clyde. Bonnie had family in Waco, Texas, and eventually she went to stay with them and waitress at a local diner. This made Bonnie's mother happy, but unbeknownst to her, Clyde had been arrested and sent to the McClelland County Jail in Waco. Bonnie, who up until this point had always obeyed her mother, managed to help

Clyde escape jail by smuggling a gun in to him. The escape was futile, and he was caught a week later in Ohio, but something changed for Bonnie in Waco. The adrenaline of sneaking into the jail, a gun strapped to the inside of her thigh, and the admiration that Clyde bestowed upon her for that sacrifice, it changed Bonnie in a way no one suspected. There was no going back.

By April 1932, Clyde was out of prison once again, having been paroled by the Texas State Governor by his mother's successful sympathy campaign, and Bonnie and Clyde were a couple in love and on the run. Clyde, and his gang of six men, robbed a bank in Lawrence, Kansas, the same month he was paroled and the Barrow Gang was born, with Bonnie as the unofficial bride. The Barrow Gang travelled from Kansas to Texas, committing a string of robberies and machine-gun shootouts the entire month of April, until three of the six gang members were in custody, Bonnie included, by May 11, 1932.

While in jail, Bonnie kept busy by writing poetry. Among the poems she penned in the Kaufman County Jail, was *The Street Girl*, a sad, saccharine poem where the speaker wrestles with the belief that she doesn't deserve love after the life she has led:

"You see how it is don't you honey,
I'd marry you now if I could,
I'd go with you back to the country,
But I know it won't do any good,
For I'm only a poor-branded woman
And I can't get away from the past.

Good-bye and God bless you for asking

But I'll stick out now till the last."

Bonnie wrote a total of ten poems while awaiting her trial, which ended as "no billed," meaning no bill of indictment was passed from the grand jury. She had successfully convinced the jury that the Barrow Gang had kidnapped her and forced her to participate in the robberies, so she was released on June 15th, 1932, once again feeling lonely and out of place. Bonnie believed Clyde had forgotten about her, having escaped this round of capture, and she feared their life together was over before it had ever began.

Bonnie was wrong – Clyde had waited for her – and the couple was reunited once again. Her relief, mixed with her new-found freedom, freedom from jail, freedom from her mother, and freedom from her old life, aided in her decision to stick with Clyde, to live, like him, on borrowed time. And from April 1932 to May 23, 1934, that's just what the couple did. But as happy and in love as they were, Bonnie was never able to shake the feeling that things were going to end badly with Clyde. Often writing about the end, including a young death for the couple, the only thing she could be sure of:

"They don't think they're too smart or desperate

they know that the law always wins.

They've been shot at before;

but they do not ignore,

that death is the wages of sin.

Some day they'll go down together

they'll bury them side by side.

To few it'll be grief,

to the law a relief

but it's death for Bonnie and Clyde."

We had an old yellow telephone in our kitchen when I was a kid. It had gray push buttons and a really long cord between the receiver and the wall mount, so you could be mobile, but you know, still attached. A lifeline to the world outside the kitchen window. I'd prank call my sister at work while I microwaved popcorn. I'd talk to my friends about my crush while I attempted a handstand against the refrigerator, my legs getting caught on the handle and slowly sliding down the front, knocking off magnets while I mumbled for help into the tiny holes of the receiver tucked between my chin and shoulder. The cord was so long I could wrap it around my legs seven or eight times, sometimes nine, if I was in the perfect position. My back on the cold linoleum, my pale legs straight up, my feet stretched out like a ballerina against the wall, chatting away like any normal teenage girl.

On the eve of my 16th birthday that telephone rang. I happened to be walking by it at the exact time it made its way to ring number two, the number of times my mother had said to wait to pick it up. *You don't want to seem too eager*, she'd say. *It's polite to let it ring at least twice*. I picked up the receiver quickly at the end of the second ring and I said, *hey* (the customary telephone greeting of a teenager in the 90s). The one my mom had asked me multiple times to change due to its rude nature. *You should say hello*, she'd start. *People will think you're rude if you don't say hello*. *Hellllo?* I tried. There was a silence on the other end. Someone was there, but they weren't speaking. *Hello?!* I was

getting antsy. *HELLO?!* I tried one last time, determined to slam the phone down onto the receiver in one skilled motion. Then a man's voice came across the line. *Melissa, can I speak to your mother?* It was posed as a question, but the tone was more of a demand. I stood for a moment, confused. Melissa? No one called me Melissa in those days, unless it was my frustrated mother who'd asked me to start my laundry six times, or my math teacher trying to give me a pep talk right before I failed another algebra test. Melissa didn't exist. Missy was there. Missy was home. She was standing on the other end of the line trying to figure out that voice.

Not very many men called our house since my sisters had moved out. I knew it wasn't my sister's husband. I knew it wasn't my brother. This voice sounded old. Like my volleyball coach or the guy who tried to sell my mom a satellite dish. *Who is this?* I finally managed, half expecting for him to just hang up. It was an awful lot of trouble to talk to my mom on the phone in those days. No answer. *Hello?!* I tried again. *I'm hanging up*, I added. An empty threat, like when I thought I heard someone rummaging through our dumpster and I yelled that I had a gun. *It's Ralph*, the man replied. Ralph? I thought for a minute. Ralph? Oh. Ralph.

On the eve of my 16th birthday I screamed into the tiny, yellowed holes of the telephone receiver. I asked why he was calling her. I told him to *never fucking call again*. I said fucking. It came right out of my mouth, along with *asshole* and *piece-of-shit* and *noonewantstotalktoyou*. Then I slammed the receiver back into its place on the wall. Then I picked it up and slammed it down again. And then again.

By this time my mother had walked around the corner to see what was happening and I unloaded like a rifle. I spattered 16 years' worth of childhood anguish at her feet.

How dare she? I demanded. How dare she love a man who did this to her? To me? How dare she think that it was okay for this man to call our house? How dare she put me through this? Did she not know? Did she not see how people talked about us? How people treated us?

At first my mother tried to console me. She tried to stroke my hair and tell me that she had regretted it all, but she wasn't convincing. I didn't know anything about love then, but I knew looking into her eyes something that she couldn't hide. She still loved him. After all he had put her through. Me through. Us through. God, that pissed me off. My 16-year-old brain shot right past the sadness and the loss in her eyes. It went down to her exposed heart, and drove steel into the spots left wounded by this man years before. My 16-year-old brain thought I had the right to rage at my mother that night, to make her feel small and alone. To blame her for all my insecurities.

She tried to stay calm, but it was too late, I'd crossed a line. She'd been waiting for this day to come, and here it was, and here she was still protecting him. She screamed at me. She said I didn't understand. Margie loved Ralph. She yelled that I was too young. That she had loved a man who wasn't faithful to his wife, but that wasn't her fault. That she had loved a man she knew she shouldn't. Ralph loved Margie. All I could do was cry and scream, *love* not *loved*. Margie *still* loves Ralph.

In May of 1934, Bonnie and Clyde laid together in a small apartment at 3347½ Oak Ridge Drive in Joplin, Missouri. They had been all over the US since April of 1932, committing small robberies, engaging the law. They kidnapped a sheriff deputy in Carlsbad, New Mexico. They killed a shop owner in Sherman, Texas. In that Joplin apartment, they killed a detective and fatally wounded a constable, just after they had

made love on a mattress behind boarded up windows. Over the next few months, Bonnie and Clyde and the rest of the Barrow Gang stayed one step ahead of a posse from Texas sent to catch them, dead or alive.

Bonnie was slowly beginning to feel the pains of loving a man with the law always at his heels. The excitement was starting to dwindle. Their luck was wearing thin and Bonnie and Clyde were starting to make mistakes. In each location, and with each shootout, the Barrow Gang became more and more reckless. They continued to leave behind clues; maps, pictures, and evidence of crimes they committed, that helped the posse stay close. Bonnie, though painted in the years to come as a crafty murderer, is said to have never fired a gun, though she always kept a pistol strapped to her inner thigh. At one point Bonnie and Clyde wrecked a stolen car and Bonnie was so badly injured that she had trouble walking afterward. Without the ability to go to a hospital, the gang holed up in a tourist court in Fort Smith, Arkansas, while Bonnie recuperated as best she could, but she was never the same after the accident and had to be carried by Clyde for the rest of her life.

The last year of Bonnie's life has been made into two full-length movies, countless television documentaries and fictionalized shows, plays, and even an annual festival, but the truth of the events that transpired are not as romantic as the movies have made it out to be. We can't be sure, and the historians can't agree, but I like to imagine that Bonnie wanted to change. That she envisioned a different life. Maybe she tried to talk Clyde into settling down, getting married, having babies. Maybe she cried in her hotel room, unable to walk to the door. Maybe she begged him to change his ways.

Maybe she begged him to make a Christian woman out of her. Or, maybe she was content to be who they were.

Bonnie's life has been painted many ways, by many people since her death, but the most common painting is of a lying, murdering villain. And maybe those people are right. Maybe she was a villain. In the least, she was an accomplice. In her four-year love affair with Clyde, she was an accomplice to more than a hundred felonious acts, including kidnapping, robbery, and murder. And she didn't seem hell-bent on making amends for any of it.

When I was pregnant with my first child, I called my mother to ask some questions about my medical history. My sister answered her phone, which was odd, and I asked what was up. She told me that she was headed out for the evening with mom and that mom was busy. Then I heard a man's voice behind the chaos of a car full of people. A voice I immediately recognized. I asked my sister why he was there. She started to make up something, but I knew. I knew why he was there. I knew who he was there with. Here they were, 27 years after their break-up. Him now widowed. Her finally with the man she had always loved. And there I was, on the telephone, just trying to be a part of the story. I wanted to tell my sister to hand him the phone. I wanted to ask him why he continued to do this to her. I wanted him to know that I knew who he was. I wanted to tell him that we made it just fine. That I had made it just fine. I wanted to tell him that I hated him. I wanted to scream that I hated him. I wanted him to tell all those people at the bar that he was a horrible person. I wanted him to claim me as his child. I wanted him to say that he was sorry. But I never asked for the phone.

“You've heard of a woman's glory
Being spent on a ‘downright cur’
Still you can't always judge the story
As true, being told by her.”

On May 23, 1934 Bonnie Parker laid in the backseat of Clyde’s stolen Ford Deluxe. They were driving down a rural, gravel road in Bienville Parish, Louisiana, when a posse of six lawmen opened fire on the car. The rumor is that the gang fired back, but in reality, they had no way of doing so. The posse unloaded more than 130 rounds into the car, even after a Louisiana Deputy Sheriff’s first shot killed Clyde instantly. The story goes that Bonnie, upon watching the last breath escape Clyde’s lips, screamed out and then was quickly killed by another of the Remington 8 bullets flying at the Ford.

Historians have always questioned that moment. They have wondered if the gang knew what they were headed into. They have asked if it was a suicide mission. If Clyde knew, but Bonnie didn’t. Would he lead her into that knowingly? Would she have gone even if she suspected? Was their love the kind of love you die for? The kind of love worth dying for? Of course, we can never be sure. The historians have theories. Bonnie and Clyde fans have varied beliefs. The only thing we can know for sure is that Bonnie and Clyde died together that day. I suspect Bonnie would have died either way, from a gunshot wound or a broken heart.

When I was 30-years-old I was standing in my kitchen, contemplating what to cook my cranky, two-year-old son for dinner, when my cell phone rang; it's unmistakable ring set off a burst of speed from my son, who liked to reach it first so he could tell me who was on the other end of the line. He recognized the picture that popped up. *Mama*! he yelled. He handed me the phone and I said *Hi, Mom*. She sat silent on the other end. *Mom*, I asked, a little nervous. It wasn't like her to be quiet. That's when she told me that my father had died.

In the moments that followed, we both sat in silence, listening to the uneasy breaths escaping our lips across the line, separated by hundreds of miles and hundreds of questions. I wondered how she'd found out. I wondered if she'd slammed her fists into the table and cursed. I wondered if she'd cried. I wondered if the regrets had immediately flooded her mind, along with the memories. I wondered if she had regrets.

But, I didn't ask any of those questions. I didn't ask if she had always known he was married. I didn't ask what the first words were that he spoke to her. I didn't ask if they snuck out to motel rooms, or they made love in his car. I didn't ask if he ever mentioned me or if he'd ever shown remorse. I didn't ask if she knew what his last words were. I just imagined. Margie loved Ralph. Ralph loved Margie. And somewhere in the middle of that love, was me.

Warming Our Voices

In fourth grade I told my whole class I was a lesbian. This wasn't too weird if you consider what I thought a lesbian was, a girl who had a lot of friends. I was a popular fourth grader, popular with the teachers on account of my grades and curiosity, and popular with my classmates because I was terribly misguided, but you know, in a funny sort of way. I'd get excited when I knew the answer to a math problem, shoot my hand up in the air, and knock my pencil box off my desk at the same time. The whole class would laugh and my teacher would just shake her head and smile. Oh, Missy. I was like a living, breathing Judy Blume character. It wasn't all that uncommon for me to say things that made no sense, to people who weren't really there. I lived in my own world most days, surrounded by people I brought to life with my wondrous imagination. It also was not uncommon for me to occasionally slip those people into my real, waking life, like that day in fourth grade. That day when our teacher stepped out for a few moments, I got out of my seat, walked to the head of the class, cleared my throat and said, *I'm a lesbian*. I waited. Most of the kids just looked around at each other, sort of confused. One boy in the back raised his hand and asked what a lesbian was. I told him that a lesbian was a girl who liked girls. Then there was a bit of whispering, and one by one the girls in the class started raising their hands to say they were lesbians too. Turns out there were a ton of lesbians in my fourth-grade class. I was stoked.

When I went home that night I told my much older, much cooler sister what I'd done. She spat out her soda and asked me *why on Earth* I had said that. *I dunno*, I told her, as I handed her a paper towel. *I guess because I AM a lesbian. You're not a lesbian,*

she said. *You don't even know what that means.* I was a little surprised when she said that, because she is the one who told me what a lesbian was.

Let me back up. Three months earlier, my sister and I were at a Melissa Etheridge concert. This may seem an odd place to take a 10-year-old for a fun Friday night, but this was a typical evening for me. See, for some time at the height of Melissa's career (winning Grammys, playing on David Letterman, cutting platinum albums) my brother Scott dated Melissa's sister Jenny. Melissa and Jenny had gone to high school with my older sister and brother, and they were all friends. When Melissa struck out to California to chase her dreams, Jenny stayed in Leavenworth, had a couple of kids, took over the family home, and eventually found her way back to my brother. They were perfect together. They both loved to smoke weed, go on all-night cocaine binges, and you couldn't really trust either of them with a loaded weapon. But to be fair, this was the most *normal* my brother's life had ever been. They went on family trips, they had us over for cook-outs in their backyard, they hosted the annual holidays. My brother even had a driver's license for the duration of their relationship, which was a big deal for someone who had it routinely taken away for driving under the influence. In fact, he had it so together that my mother would let me go to Melissa's concerts with their family whenever she came to town, provided my sister came along too.

So, there we were, standing in the front row of a Melissa Etheridge concert in downtown Kansas City, at a venue called Memorial Hall. It was an old brick building, with one of those lighted marquees. Its dilapidated façade had seen the likes of Ray Charles, Elton John, and rumor had it, The Beatles. My brother and sister were standing on each side of me singing along to one of Melissa's song when I started getting bored

and decided to scope out the crowd. As I started to look around, I began to notice that there weren't many men at the concert. Aside from my brother, the only other men around were the guys in the band and the security guards. I tugged on my sister's shirt and asked her where the men were. She couldn't hear a word I said, she just took the tug as a sign I had to go to the bathroom. She grabbed my hand and we made our way to the right side of the stage where a very large man looked at our backstage passes and waved us through. She stood at the end of the stage and gave me a little push. I knew where the bathroom was, I'd been there ten times before.

Since I didn't really have to go, I just took this as an opportunity to explore. I walked past the bathroom doors and into the Green Room, which is what they called the large room with all the Pepsi, M&Ms, and mini-sandwiches you could ever want. It was a bit of a misnomer as the room wasn't painted green, it didn't have a bunch of exotic plants or anything like that. It was just a large room, painted a sort of peachy color, with couches and tables, and some weird paintings. It was dimly lit, smelled like it had just been cleaned, and there were televisions streaming the concert on the other side of the wall. I meandered around the room for a bit looking at the paintings, when I decided I'd grab another Pepsi and head back out. That's when I saw the two women on the couch. At first, I wasn't sure what I saw. I knew I saw people, I knew they were very close to each other, and I saw a lot of hair – very long, very beautiful hair. I wondered for a minute if it was the man who had been playing the drums on stage. He'd had long blond hair, but his was pulled back in a ponytail like mine. So, I decided to walk a little closer to the couch. That's when I realized they were women, and that's when I realized that the two women were kissing each other. They were kissing and touching each other, sliding

their hands over each other's bodies like the men and women in movies did. They were unaware that I was standing there, absorbed in each other. I stood shocked for a minute, then my face grew hot and my ears turned red. I forgot all about the Pepsi and I ran back to my sister.

As we walked back to our seats I had this sort of rumbling in my stomach, a feeling of anxiety mixed with a little bit of excitement. I had this feeling from time to time as a child, like that one time I walked into my uncle's barn while he was dressing a deer. But this time it was different. These women were different, something I sort of innately knew. They looked just like my sister and her friends. They were young and pretty. They had make-up on, they had that long, beautiful hair. But they weren't like my sister and her friends. They were different in a way that I couldn't understand then. I knew they were doing something that no one else was supposed to see. I knew it was a secret that I had to keep. I just couldn't understand why these two women were doing something that I equated with love. Back then I didn't have the words to describe what I saw or how it made me feel, but years later, it became clearer to me. Love, passion, lust; it was all present in that room that night, with its history, its peach walls, and its fresh Pine-sol scent. But in that moment, I had been so naïve and afraid, that I just closed my eyes to all of it. I closed my eyes to the world, afraid that this was now my secret and someone might find it out.

Later that night I did get brave enough to ask my sister why a girl would kiss another girl. She finally realized the error of taking me along with her and she looked around, bent down toward me, and whispered: *They're lesbians*, y*ou know, they're like girls who like other girls*. I nodded in agreement. But that didn't make much sense to me.

Of course, I never took what my sister said at face value. She often steered me wrong. She once convinced me I was adopted, that my real mother had left me by a rock and our mom came walking along, stumbled upon me and saved my poor, pathetic life, while messing up my sister's life for all eternity. I knew she was lying about the adoption, but I still sometimes liked to imagine that I had another much nicer, much cooler mother out in the world, desperately trying to find me. Anyway, that's how we ended up at the kitchen table that day in fourth grade. My sister told me that I wasn't a lesbian. But I was pretty sure that I was. I mean, I liked to hang out with girls. I had a ton of friends. In fact, she had a ton of friends who were girls too. *Beeb*, I said, as I rested my arm on her shoulder in a comforting way. *We're all lesbians.* Then she screamed for mom.

By 6th grade I couldn't wait for my brother to call and say they had tickets to a concert. I had told my friends all about the lesbians and what they did. I had friends lined up to go to concerts with me. Most of their parents told them no. Absolutely not. It wasn't safe for young, impressionable girls to go to a Melissa Etheridge concert. Melissa had just come out as a lesbian and our hometown of Leavenworth, Kansas – for the first time in my memory – was completely torn over something. You're talking about a true small town. Smack-dab in the middle of the Bible Belt, cloaked in the anti-gay political rhetoric of the 1990s, and standing ground against Bill Clinton's attempts at equality. Senator Jesse Helms' words spoke to the hearts of the people in my town. They played on our Midwest values. The idea that there were *weak, morally sick wretches* filling up our schools and our churches, hiding in the dark shadows, was too much. These prevailing thoughts were just a small part of the wave of hysteria that catapulted us into fist fights

and protests. The Westboro Baptist Church, led by the infamous Fred Phelps, was only thirty miles west on Interstate 70, a constant reminder that any sympathizing would be met with condemnation. And it wasn't just Leavenworth, a fact made clear the morning of October 7, 1998, when a cyclist named Aaron Kreifels was riding down a rural route in Laramie, Wyoming. He saw what he thought was a scarecrow tied to an old wooden fence. It wasn't a scarecrow. It was Matthew Shepard. Hours later Matthew died in the hospital. His mother, standing vigil by his bedside, had just learned that he was HIV positive. The whole United States was casting their brows down on him. On them.

Small towns like Leavenworth though, which weren't directly affected by the pain like those in Laramie, they didn't budge. Those people, the ones who had grown up alongside Melissa, the people who loved her and saw the great things she was doing for the community, those people said they chose to *look past* her sexuality. That's what they'd say in whispers at the Country Club, or the check-out line at Wal-Mart. They wouldn't hold her *choices* against her. They would look at the *bright side*. The *good side* of her, of Matthew. Then there were the others. The people who took a stand against homosexuality and the *corruption* they said it caused. They were the ones who were picketing her concerts, running to city council meetings to protest the sign that was being erected in her honor. But they were also our neighbors. They were my friends' parents. They were the self-proclaimed *examples* in our community. The rest of us were just degenerates.

My mother was caught somewhere in the middle. She didn't particularly like that I went to the concerts, but she was assured by my brother and sister that I was well looked after, and that I had a great time. And I did. I told my mother that I loved

Melissa's music, which was true, and I enjoyed hanging out in the tour bus. She took delight in my happiness and always said yes, even when she wanted to say no. And I was glad for that. Mainly because my brother and sister were damn, dirty liars. As soon as we would get to a concert they'd tell me to stay close, then they'd start pounding beers and God-knows-what-else. My sister would meet up with friends who got free tickets off my brother, and Jenny and my brother would hit the tour bus, where I can only assume the *good drugs* were. I was left to my own devices, which usually meant slamming Pixie Sticks and watching Melissa get ready for the show.

Melissa was short. By 6th grade I was taller than her at a whopping 5'4". She was petite and thin, she had that long, blond, rocker hair, always down and in her face. It smelled like hair products and a little bit like flowers. When she would stand next to someone to take a picture or sign an autograph, she would always grip their hand and squeeze it a little. I always considered this a sign of her genuine nature. She had the ability to make you feel like you were the only one in the room when she was talking to you, a trait I've often tried to emulate in my own life. Though I didn't have much interaction with her at her concerts, since I was only a child, I did get the chance to just hang back and observe. Before the show she would walk back and forth in front of the mirrors and sing things that made no sense, in notes that she wouldn't normally use. *She's warming her voice*, my brother would whisper to me, then he'd yell at Jenny's kids to stop running around and making damn fools of themselves. I would move to a quiet corner somewhere, away from the hustle of the people backstage, and just watch and listen. The rhythmic sounds of her cowboy boots knocking against the concrete floor was a welcome distraction from the people and the chaos. She seemed to never know others

were around. At some point a woman would come over with an apron on the front of her jeans, like a waitress carries, and she would start pulling make-up out of it and brushing it on Melissa's face. Somewhere between meeting her on the tour bus, listening to the click of her boots, and walking out onto the stage I would watch Melissa transform from that little girl from Leavenworth into a rock star. I fantasized about what that would feel like. What it would be like to be someone who had their named chanted by thousands of people. Someone who wrote and played music that moved souls. Someone who appeared to be unapologetically the person they were meant to be.

When the lights would dim in the dressing room, the crowd standing on the other side of the wall would know it was time. They'd start to roar. Their collective voice rising up in their chests. Feet stomping, hands clapping, cheering her name, Melissa! Melissa! She'd stroll past me, her guitar strapped to her back, and give me a smile or a wink. I never followed with the group of people behind her, and I never watched her as she entered the stage for the first time. I preferred to sit with my back against the wall and listen to the crowd catch the first glimpse of her. The noise was tremendous, the rise of the screams confounded my gut. Sometimes, I'd close my eyes and pretend to be out there on the stage. Melissa, not Missy. A daughter of the music. A possessor of raw talent. A keeper of this new-found passion. But mostly, I'd just close my eyes and listen to thousands of people watch a tiny woman pluck at guitar strings until the wee hours of the morning.

As the evenings would wind down, I'd usually end up walking alone backstage. The halls were always dark, with lights down low by my ankles. I would duck into doorways to escape men pushing drum sets on large carts, or security yelling into walkie-

talkies. At some point in the evening I would find myself in a room with a couple of women who were on a leather couch, or a futon, or an overstuffed chair. I never knew who these women were, but there were always plenty of them. My sister would usually come frantically looking for me, and gasp at whatever or whomever she saw me watching. She'd grab my hand and lead me to the car, reminding me to not tell mom and to forget what I had seen. Except, it was a little too late for that. I would go on to spend many nights wondering, fantasizing, about what it would feel like to have a woman's long hair in my face, loud music pulsating in the background, lying in that heat, two soft bodies pressed against each other.

By 11th grade I was in a full-on crisis regarding my own sexuality, brought on by everyone around me. I was taking heat from my mom who was worried that I knew all Melissa Etheridge's songs, and my sister, who would routinely hold me down on the ground and try to put lipstick on me, or pluck a stray black hair from my upper lip. Listen, puberty was not nice to me. My confusion was intensified by my desire to please my family, and to figure out this nagging feeling I had inside. Why was I different from the other girls? Why didn't I want to date anyone? Why didn't I feel like I belonged? *Just try*, my mom would say, as she would slip a stray hair from my eyes. *You have to put yourself out there. You're such a pretty girl, any boy would be lucky to have you*. *Sex*, that was my sister's advice, *stay away from the weird-looking dicks though*. I didn't know what a *weird-looking dick* was, but I was certainly scared of them. The idea of seeing or touching any genitals frightened me, but I knew my mom was right, I needed to put

myself out there. That's when I decided to take matters into my own hands and ask a boy to prom.

My first prom date was Roger, my gay best friend. Yeah, I knew he was gay. I knew Roger was gay before Roger knew Roger was gay, that's why I asked him to prom. I didn't want to find myself slow dancing some dude who smelled like his dad's Stetson cologne, trying to hide an erection he got from the lace of my dress rubbing his ironed Dockers. I wanted to be there with a guy I knew wouldn't expect me to go down on him in his car up at Haven's Hill after prom. But I also wanted a date who would open the door, pay for my meal, and tell me that I looked pretty. 'Cause damn it, I was a lady.

Roger was a bit surprised when I asked him, but he said yes. I suspect it was because his crush was going stag and he just knew that the two of them would end up slow-dancing to Madonna under pink crepe paper by the end of the night. But as prom night drew near, Roger and I both chickened out. Who were we fooling? I mean, Roger had a list of guys stapled to his bedroom wall, in a descending order of hotness, and I was a varsity thrower for the track team, racking up points in shot put and discus throwing, not to mention a heck of a third baseman. Some things just seemed destined. Instead of going to prom, Roger and I orchestrated a kick-ass hotel party for the after-prom crew. We used his sister's ID to book the room, my sister's ID to buy the tequila, and his mom's Food-4-Less discount to stock up on limes. *How many limes do we buy?* Roger asked, frantically. *I dunno, fifty?* We were naïve but ambitious.

That night, in the hallway of the Super 8 on Fourth Street, I kissed a girl. It wasn't my first kiss, but it was the first one that I wanted. The first one I had been pining for. It was the first time I didn't feel like I *had* to kiss the person standing in front of me. It

wasn't a boy holding my shoulders to the ground at recess and sticking his slobbering, swollen lips on mine. It wasn't a boy pushing me hard up against a locker, darting his tongue inside my mouth like a snake. This kiss, this person, was different. She was soft, and she was sweet. Her hair was the color of strawberries and her skin smelled like dandelions. We'd spent long nights laughing on the telephone together, sharing stories and secrets. I wanted to kiss this girl. I wanted her to like me. I had thought about her non-stop for months. I had fantasized about our first kiss and our first touch. The way her hair might fall into my face while she lay on top of me, our bodies fused together, under blue moonlight streaming through curtains. Hearts aching, arms touching, hands grasping under the veil of thin sheets.

We snuck into the bathroom of the motel room, just as the rest of the kids had started taking shots of whatever they'd lifted from their parents' liquor cabinets. We laughed as her hand slid to the lock on the door, turning the knob to make sure it took. I flipped the light switch off, then she flipped it back on with a smile. We stood, motionless, for what felt like hours. Her hair was disheveled from the chaos of the party, the top button of her shirt was unfastened, revealing a small amount of lace flat against the top of her breasts. I nervously laughed, and moved my attention to the peeling, yellowed wallpaper. She took my hand in hers and I looked up. Her straight, white teeth bit at her bottom lip, but her eyes remained fixed on our hands. I watched her teeth pierce the pink skin, a summer berry about to explode. My breath quickened. I felt a yearning in my stomach like never before. I knew this was our moment. I leaned forward into her welcoming body. Our lips met, my hands instinctively grabbed her hips and I pulled her toward me, frantically. The smell of her skin took me by surprise. As she reached up and

took my face in the palm of her hands to pull me closer, a sigh escaped her lips. I wanted the moment to freeze. I wanted to stay there, wrapped up inside of her forever. I wanted my heart to explode with joy. But it didn't. Instead, my heart began to fill my head with worries. How does this end? How will she hurt me? Is it possible that I could hurt her? I thought about my mother finding out. I thought about her mother finding out. I thought about the world finding out. I thought about Matthew. Fear took hold of me in that moment and it never fully released.

Roger and I cried together that night in a creaky, hotel bed, between stained sheets, under the sweet, prickly smell of marijuana floating above us. I told him that I thought I was broken. That I didn't know how to love the right way. He told me that he was gay. I tried to act surprised, but mostly I just tried to assure him that he was okay. That I was okay. That it would all get better. But I wasn't sure. This was only months before Matthew Shepard's murderers would be tried for leaving him, alone on the fencepost, to die. Only months after the whole world began to take notice of the very real threat facing people like Roger and me. Months after mainstream America finally had the rampant abuse of the LGBT community thrust into the spotlight. And kids like Roger and me, kids who just didn't know what the hell was happening, we started to get scared.

Over the next couple of years, I had a lot of confusing nights, with a lot of different people. There was Jen. I'd lie next to her and run my fingers through her straight, blow-dried hair. Her breath smelled like Sweet-Tarts. Her lips were plush and full. She'd whisper for me not to tell anyone. There was that guy I met at that party. The really cute one, with the blond hair and six-pack stomach. He rubbed his hands up and

down on my jeans so fast that I thought I'd catch fire from the heat. There was Hannah. She'd played *Three Days Grace,* hoping I'd like her taste in music. One day she told me how her dad sometimes came into her room in the middle of the night and ran his hand slowly over her breasts while she pretended to be asleep. We would make giant leaf piles in our neighborhood and climb inside to hide. She told me that she loved me with a red leaf stuck to her wavy brown hair. There was Christopher. We'd play pinball together in his basement after practice. He'd stand behind me, his basketball shorts pressed up against mine, our reflection in the glass in front of us. He'd move his hips toward me with every release of the silver ball. I'd push back against him, as it rolled down the machine, into the small crevices and secret corners. The machine would light up and shapes would whirl around us. We played pinball three times before he told me that he liked another girl.

Throughout the end of high school and into college I went back and forth between where I thought I belonged, and where other people thought I belonged, butting up against my fears of intimacy and finding that forever kind of love. I thought I had to decide. I thought I had to label myself one way or the other. One side or the other, as if there were sides. As if it was that easy. I had a growing desire to be loved, but I also had a growing fear of what love could do to a person. My mother had spent her life largely alone, in part because she had grown unable to trust men, and by the time I was a teenage girl she had unknowingly transferred that distrust to me. I went into each new relationship feeling like I had that night in the motel, wondering how this person would hurt me. I'd fantasize about the break-up, rehearse the way I would tell them that it wasn't going to work, repeat into the bathroom mirror, *you don't get me, this isn't*

working, I can't trust you anymore. Allowing myself to love and to be loved took time. Many years of failing, many years of doubt and shame. Many years of learning to go easy on myself. And I didn't learn how to do this by myself.

Roger's life became complicated. Time and again I came to his rescue. Once to get him from an abandoned parking lot that a group of guys had driven him to when they found out he was a *faggot*. He was lucky that night, only a few broken bones. I bailed him out of jail for a bar fight. I helped him pack his things after another boyfriend had assaulted him, called the cops, thrown him out of the apartment. Each time I told him it would get better, and over the next couple of years Roger's life did get better. He came out to his family. His mother cried. She knew the hardships he'd face. She knew the sleepless nights she'd endure, wondering if her only son had made it home safe. His father told him that he couldn't spend time with him anymore. Then he told him he wasn't the son he had hoped for. But as the years rolled on, he let all that go. On Roger and Gregory's wedding day, his father told him he was proud of him. Told him that he'd kill for his son. Told him not to take shit from anyone.

As for me, I fell in and out of what I thought was love a couple of times, with people who were never right for me. Then I met Jerimiah and my life changed. He was patient with me. He restored my faith in more than just men, he restored my faith in love. He showed me what it could look like. How it really felt, and how it could really save those that need saving. I spent many nights crying, wondering why I was falling in love with a man who knew me, but still chose to love me. He knew about my distrust in men, he knew about my worries over hurting and being hurt, he knew about my bathroom kiss.

He knew about my mother's history and my irrational fears. But there he was, and there he's stayed, all these years later.

It would be years before I let Jerimiah's love teach me about the most important kind of love. He taught me how to love and accept myself. Through letting down my walls of fear and expectations, I was able to see that I had nothing to be ashamed of. That I was loveable, still after all these years, those moments I held secret for so long were making me who I am now. The clumsy, messy, kind, and awkward person that I am today was formed by those years. Formed by the unabashed eagerness with which I lived my life, by the chances I took, and those years of constant mistakes. I was formed by those awkward kisses and anxious thoughts. Formed by the ideas of a naïve little girl, swaying to the collective song on the other side of the wall.

Today while I was driving down the road a Melissa Etheridge song popped up in my playlist. It was a fast one, with a great beat, and an amazing guitar solo. I remembered it. I remembered standing behind the curtain, looking out into the faces of thousands of people, swaying back and forth. I remembered the feelings. I remember feeling small, but empowered.

My third-grade son was in the backseat. He asked me who was singing. *Melissa Etheridge*, I said. *Melissa?* He asked. *Like you?* I smiled. *Yeah, like mommy.* I realized that gone are the days of confusion and chaos, of fear and sadness, and secrets – for me. But not for everyone. There is a whole new generation growing up now who may never hear the name Matthew Shepard, but who will no doubt feel the sting of a familiar shame, a familiar fear, for their friends, for their classmates, for their selves. I'm reminded of this

everyday as I watch my son play and learn. Watch him laugh and run. Watch him grow into friendships with kids not like him, but also very much like him. I have a feeling, deep down inside, that the next generation will not let us down.

Meanwhile, my memories serve as a constant reminder. A star-lit evening on a creaky deck with a brown-eyed girl and the desire to learn something about each other. About ourselves. Watching Melissa warm her rusty, deep voice before walking through the curtain. These are the memories I move forward with. These are the memories that little fourth-grader never imagined she'd recollect on a starry, summer evening watching her son grasp at fireflies just out of reach.

Doll

The nurse, Melissa, worked the morning shift at Skaggs Regional Hospital. As far as nurses go, she was friendly and efficient. She was a sturdy girl, with gentle hands and a welcoming hug. In the early morning hours, as the sun made its slow climb from behind the clouds, Melissa could be found shuffling cords and fluffing pillows. After breakfast, she'd make her rounds saying hello to the patients she'd left the day before and introducing herself to new ones. Melissa was skilled at easing pain, whether it was with a dose of medication, or a relatable story to help take the patient's mind far from where they were. She'd speak softly while she brushed a comforting hand across an arm or a shoulder. There was something about her that made people at ease, something she didn't learn in nursing school. Melissa had a penchant for whistling when she was nervous, and when she first stepped into my room that sunny August afternoon, that's just what she was doing. She said hello, asked me if I was in pain, then she gave me a hug, so deep and so tight, that I felt like I was hugging an old friend. Then she went back to whistling. She whistled while she stuck me with an IV needle. She whistled while she pulled the Velcro of the straps tight around my belly. She whistled until nearly one o'clock that afternoon. Then, in the shadows of the last labor and delivery room on the right, she stopped whistling. She turned her eyes toward mine and in a smooth, calming voice she told me that my baby had died.

I wasn't surprised, of course. I knew all along what I was headed into. That morning when I checked into the hospital I registered to *give birth*, but that wasn't what I was doing. I knew that. The woman at the front desk knew that. The other nurses and

doctors on the floor knew that, and Melissa knew that. I was there to induce labor at 22 weeks' gestation. I was there to end my pregnancy. To have a late-term abortion.

Abortion. Jesus, the word stings, doesn't it?

Abortion. Late-term, no less. Isn't that where they rip the baby out and watch it die on a table while you writhe in pain and God shoots lightning bolts into your uterus? Doesn't it signify the end of your pure life and mark you in some way? Thrust you out into the unforgiving world alongside Hester Prynne, waiting in suspense to assume your rightful place at the end of a short, prickly rope?

Abortion. Some say it's a cardinal sin. Thou shall not kill. Or something like that.

In the state of Missouri, the abortion laws are lax, save the occasional Ethics Board review at a local hospital. Missouri allows for physician-assisted abortions in hospitals and clinics, including those considered late-term, which are performed after 16 weeks' gestation. This was good news for my husband and me in the summer of 2011.

We'd been cruising along in life, taking our ups with our downs, enjoying more of the ups, as it were. We were newlyweds, married in December 2006 when our first-born arrived just eleven months later. His name was Jackson Riker. He was the spitting image of his father. A large, round head. Soft curls atop his soft skull. Ten fingers, ten toes. A baby laugh that stopped women in the aisles of Target, prompting stories of their own children, now grown, and a strong desire to impart some wisdom on us. Promise to enjoy these moments, they would beg, as if we were in debt to the generations before us. The moments are fleeting, they would say, as they gripped our sweaty, naïve hands. We

would smile politely, not aware of the nostalgic sentiment with which the advice was being dispensed. Fleeting? We would give each other a knowing smile. It didn't feel like they were fleeting moments. We were exhausted. We were cranky. We were picking fights and charting who had more sleep the night before.

Two years later we realized our error. We went to bed one evening with an infant and were shaken awake by a screaming, wild, running-over-the-dog, crayon-eating, refusing-to-sleep toddler. A few months into the *terrible twos* and we were emotionally, physically, and financially drained. So, we decided to have another baby.

Several months later women at the grocery store would notice my belly, and my toddler covered in lollipop juice, and warn me that *no two are alike*. I would smile and nod. They were right, these women. I had felt completely different with the second pregnancy than with my first. With my first, I couldn't keep anything down. My stomach only tolerated string cheese and bananas for the first eight weeks. With the second I could eat anything I wanted, and I wanted a lot. Candy, bacon, and cheeseburgers were my three main food groups. Nothing upset my stomach. Nothing made me ill or the slightest bit nauseous. It was a miracle and so very unhealthy, but I was enjoying every bit of it.

My husband, watching my enjoyment, inquired one night about what I was going through. What does it feel like, he asked, when the baby rolls over? Feels like I gas, I imparted. The extra hormones? Makes me want to stab people, I confessed. The desire to eat an entire sheet cake? Mind your own business, I suggested. He wanted a glimpse inside of my alien body, to share something with me, to feel like part of the team. I tried my best to explain to him the miracle he would never know. It's harder than it seems. I

couldn't find the right words to explain the instant love and devotion. Or how this instinctual need for survival rises up inside of you. I got frustrated and told him that it's like the alien ripping its way out of John Hurt's stomach. We both laughed, but we knew the truth. I had cheated him. I cheated him out of the feelings of pain and of patience. Of rawness and of love.

I cheated him out of another feeling that night, too: intuition. Over the last couple of weeks, I was starting to feel something new. Something I tried to attribute to the ladies at the grocery store. *A new pregnancy comes with new challenges*. But as the days wore on this feeling creeping up inside of me felt somehow different. It was sending my thoughts to unfamiliar places. It was keeping my eyes open too late at night. It wasn't at all like the first time around, and those intrusive thoughts, they were giving me bad dreams.

My perinatologist was a small-framed woman with large, wire glasses. She was in her sixties, a fact she liked to surprise people with because she looked much younger. She had been delivering babies over thirty years and she could tell you, upon request, the exact number of babies she delivered weekly, monthly, and annually. Her busiest times were in September. New Year's Eve babies, she'd say with smile. Everyone needs someone warm to go home with on New Year's Eve. She made me laugh. She made me trust her. She made me feel at ease. She had promised, more than anything else, complete honesty. And she delivered on her promise.

It was a warm August afternoon when she called with the results of my routine bloodwork. My two-year-old and I were beating the heat with Mickey Mouse movies and

popcorn. My overweight chocolate lab had snuck into my son's room and swiped a stuffed elephant off his bed. I was headed to snatch it out of her mouth when my phone rang. I checked the number and immediately knew. I sat down at the kitchen table and said hello, elephant in hand. My doctor's easy but hectic voice came over the line. I heard the first part of the conversation clearly. *Melissa, I'm looking over your blood tests and I don't like some of the numbers*. Then things started to jumble. I put the elephant down and grabbed a pen. I started scribbling notes on the back of a Pampers coupon. The more she said, the more distracted I became. The more distracted, the more nervous. The more nervous, the more scribbling.

PAPP-A levels – Low

Chromosomal disorder

Elephant

One-in-five chance

Trisomy 18

Buy diapers

Not compatible with life

Amniocentesis ASAP

My son and dog, both sensing my worry, had come to comfort me. My son climbed into the kitchen chair, my dog circled my feet, whining. Was Daddy on the phone, my son wanted to know. *Talk to daddy*, he said.

I hung up the phone and rang my husband. He answered his office phone and asked what was up. He sounded busy. You know how sometimes when you're already on the verge of tears, and you hear a caring voice, maybe it's the love of your life? Or maybe

it's Arlene, the woman at the number four check-out line. Any voice, one that shows a semblance of generosity, you let the willing tears fall? This startled my husband. *What's wrong? What happened?* I could hear the thoughts frantically racing through his mind. I told him everything the doctor had said. I told him three, maybe four times. I told him with different inflections, sometimes emphasizing the low PAPP-A levels, sometimes emphasizing the one-in-five chance. I told him that I needed him to come home. I told him what I had been holding in for the last few months. I told him that our baby was not well. He told me we didn't know that for sure. I told him that I did.

The doctor had said we'd know more in a week. A week can be a long time to wait. There are a lot of quiet times in a week of waiting, a lot of time to think, to research, to make lists, and consult professionals. That's what we did.

The first questions were to my primary care physician. I called her office as soon as I could and I asked her what it all meant. She explained. An amniocentesis is a medical procedure where the doctor inserts a large needle into the womb and extracts a small amount of amniotic fluid. That fluid is then sent to a laboratory for genetic testing. The laboratory would be looking at my baby's genetic make-up. They would count chromosomes.

Healthy humans have a set of 46 chromosomes, 23 from each parent. A baby born with a Trisomy disorder has 47. That one extra chromosome is the trouble. It can lead to mental and physical problems that a growing fetus can't combat. For a Down's Syndrome baby, the extra chromosome is number 21, hence the term Trisomy 21. My baby had a *scary chance* of having an extra number 18 chromosome. More questions came flooding in with the tears. What had I done to her? To my surprise, I'd done nothing. Unlike

Down's Syndrome, Trisomy 18 is completely random. Random. For some reason, not one that can be traced genetically, one sperm or one egg carried with it an extra chromosome. Not only did I not do anything to cause this, it could have been my husband or me. We were, as it seemed, the losers in a lottery we didn't know we were playing.

I told my doctor about my concerns regarding the amniocentesis and she suggested I go against my gut and have it done, though the decision was ultimately mine. She was afraid I would spend the rest of my pregnancy in fear of the how it would end. It turns out, Trisomy 18 babies rarely make it full-term, and if they do, they have less than a ten percent chance of surviving to their first birthday. I ended the call a bigger mess than before, and this burning in the pit of my stomach, the one that said I was carrying a daughter, was also telling me she was not well.

During the rest of the week I spent countless nights circling message boards, typing Trisomy 18 into search engines, clicking on ads, and stories, and inspirational quotes. I once Googled *Are all doctors fucking stupid?* and I got a list of doctors who had malpractice lawsuits against them. None of mine were listed.

I had read that there were classic markers of Trisomy 18 babies. I had read about rocker bottom feet. Then I had a dream my baby was Forrest Gump, running down the Magnolia-lined road in metal braces and brown shoes. I read that Trisomy 18 babies had cleft palates and cleft lips. My doctor, the one who prepared herself to stand on my behalf at the ethics board, had a cleft lip. She had multiple surgeries as a child. I never asked, only overheard. She was smart. She was sweet. She was born.

I once read that Trisomy 18 was sometimes mixed up with Trisomy 21 and that these parents in Tennessee, or Ohio, or Michigan had decided to go to full-term with a

Trisomy 18 prognosis and then they prayed and they prayed, and the baby was born, and the doctors were wrong. It was a miracle. The baby had Down's Syndrome and had just celebrated his third birthday.

I'd cried so fucking much that week that my eyes were saddled with red streaks. My voice seldom came out above a whisper. My hair, unwashed for days, started to smell like sweat and salt. I told my best friend on the phone that I had cried all there was to cry. That the skin around my eyes was no longer taut, that my nose, devastated by the constant blowing, looked like Rudolph's. I would probably never be able to cry again, I told her. I was wrong.

I had agreed to the amniocentesis. So, seven days after the original bloodwork results, I sat in a darkened room, my shirt stretched over my belly. The ultrasound tech spread warm gel all over me. She found my bouncing baby on the screen. Then my doctor told me to take a deep breath in, and she stuck me with a needle longer than my arm. Immediately I felt a pop, like a threading needle going into a balloon. Warmth washed over me. The frustration, the fear, the sadness I had inside, it sort of flowed over me with this warm fluid, protecting my baby, easing my mind. I didn't know what the sensation was. I looked down at my belly. I looked at my husband to see if he had felt anything. His eyes were fixed on the screen. I turned toward the tech, my face broadcasting the feeling. *It's amniotic fluid flowing out of you*, she said. Of course it was.

I rested my head against the cool of the bed and moved my hands to my face. I ran my fingers over my smooth cheeks and I remembered my first baby doll. When I was six years old my mother bought her for me. She was nothing fancy. She didn't wet herself or eat food. She didn't have hair you could comb, or come with a bottle that looked like

milk was coming out when you lifted it to her lips. She didn't cry for attention. She was simple, and pale. But she had a set of dimples so convincing that I spent hours standing in front of the bathroom mirror, my fingers jammed into my cheeks trying to replicate them. I wanted to look like her mommy. I wanted to feel some connection to my pink, plastic doll.

Two days after the amniocentesis I woke up suddenly at five o'clock in the morning. I had been battling extreme heartburn the length of my pregnancy and the pizza I had the night before wasn't sitting well. The only cure I found for this was to sit straight up in bed, so I did. I instinctively grabbed my phone off the nightstand. This was my new routine. I would start at the *Trisomy 18 Foundation* website. I would find some new bit of information I didn't know before and I would end mingling with people on message boards, reading inspirational stories, and watching videos from other Trisomy 18 parents. That night I couldn't stop thinking about how life would change. Could change. Not just mine, but my husband's and my son's as well. I went back and forth trying to reconcile the thoughts racing through my mind. We had been granted a choice by our doctors. Either terminate the pregnancy, or try to go full-term and see what happens. But I felt like any decision we made would be selfish. It would be selfish to carry our daughter to term, in hopes that we could hold her in our arms, even for a minute. Likewise, it would be selfish to end the pregnancy and disrupt nature's, and perhaps God's, path for her. It was not a decision that we could step lightly into. I was afraid of being judged as a murderer; likewise, I was afraid of being made a martyr.

What if my baby did grow to be full-term? Certainly, it is difficult to try to explain to a two-year-old what a pregnant belly is, but how difficult would it be to explain to him why his little sister never came home? I tried to stop my mind from wandering off track, but it was too late. I had started down a dangerous path of *what ifs*. What if she survived and we were able to bring her home, would I set up a nursery for her? What if Jackson became attached quickly? What if I woke up one day and frantically laid my hand on her chest and there was no air moving in and out of her lungs? I didn't have answers to these questions, let alone a clear mind to think harder, so I forced myself to sleep that night with fear in the spaces of my brain that had been lately reserved for hope.

Friday, August 13th was another early morning. The sun was moments from stretching its arms over the horizon when I realized that I hadn't felt my baby move the night before. We had a ritual, her and I. At night when I ate a snack, I would always have it with a cold glass of milk. She loved milk and I would lie down immediately after and she would start squirming. Slowly at first, then little by little I would feel the movement from side to side. The two of us would get to know each other in these small movements. I had been such a heaping mess that week that I had abandoned our play time in lieu of Googling message boards and searching websites. My thoughts ran amok. Had her little heart stopped beating? Had she given up before we even knew what we could do? I ran to the kitchen and poured a glass of milk. I drank it in a second and went back to my bed to lie flat on my back, and then I waited. While I waited I imagined my daughter. I pieced together images of the various ultrasounds I had. Though she looked big in the pictures,

her body was only about the size of a Barbie doll. She looked sort of like Herman Munster, with her prominent hair line. But she had this long nose, her brother's nose, the same one as her great-grandfather. Her hands, I imagined, were long and thin.

Then I hoped that she *had* died.

As soon as the thought came into my head I cried. I begged God to forgive me for wishing that, but I couldn't stop thinking it. If she was as sick as they thought, I didn't want her to be born into a place she didn't know. I wanted her to spend her last moments being rocked by the rhythmic steps I took, I wanted her to leave the only home she knew, as quiet and as peaceful as she had always been. Then I felt the tiny twinge of life and my heart filled my eyes with hope.

Later that day my doctor called. She gave me a date. She said she had gathered a team. I had never thought of myself as a person who required a team. I had never thought of myself as a person who needed anyone to take care of me, but as the days went by that's what was happening. My mother came in from Kansas City. My husband stopped going to work. His mother caught a redeye from Maryland, and my son, nearly three-years-old, started asking if I was sick.

Slowly, my baby quieted down. She didn't care for milk anymore and she never wanted to play. She, like most Trisomy 18 babies, was losing weight, she was moving less, and she was waiting, I hoped, for her premature entrance into this world.

It was a sunny, humid August day. The kind of Midwestern humidity that takes your breath away. I wasn't expecting it to be so hot. It was almost the end of the month. Almost Labor Day. Almost the end of summer. Almost the end of everything. I squinted

my eyes on the way to the hospital. My husband reached his hand across the seat and squeezed my thigh. He asked if I had a headache. If I'd slept. He asked if I was okay. No. No. No.

At the giant double doors to the labor and delivery wing, I stood for longer than I should have. I thought back to the last time I'd been there. Last time I had a huge belly. Last time I carried a diaper bag and a car seat. I stood there this time, my mouth slightly agape, a pillow tucked under one arm, a bag over my shoulder armed, I thought, for the war I was walking into. "Put on the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil," Apostle Paul's letter to the Ephesians. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

I was a warrior.

I was a martyr.

I was, and possibly still am, a murderer.

The medicine would probably stop her tiny heart, that's what Melissa told me. Her heart, we already knew, was not strong. She had one of the classic Trisomy 18 markers, it was called Hypo-plastic Left Heart Syndrome. The whole left side of her heart was underdeveloped. It wasn't just her heart. We had learned, through several extensive ultrasounds, that her brain was abnormal too. She was missing the entire right side of it. With half a heart, and half a brain, my doll didn't stand much of a chance. The doctors were amazed her heart was still beating the morning that I checked into the hospital. It's

relying on you, they told me. You're keeping her alive. Then they pumped us full of Pitocin and Morpheme.

It only took four hours and I was in no pain. The day had just started for me. But for my daughter, it had just ended. She died inside of me that day. August 25th, 2011. Wrapped in her blanket of warmth, in the only home she'd ever known.

As soon as I saw her small, lifeless body on the screen I wanted to scream. I wanted to rip the cords off of me. I wanted to demand some sort of reparation for my loss. But I said nothing. I did nothing. The irony of this otherwise straightforward moment was that I still had to give birth to her. There was no easy way out of this. She had died. The doctor had wheeled in the ultrasound machine to be sure. No more kicks, no more rolls, no more blurbs on the screen. But there I was, still pregnant. Still very much alive.

My son came to visit that evening. They brought him to the hospital just long enough for him to ask me three questions in his broken, toddler English. Why was I in the hospital? Was I sick? Where was his baby sister? Then he ate half an apple and some Cheetos, kissed me with his orange lips, and told me he was going to the park. I bent over the side of the bed to kiss the top of his sweaty head and I felt the gush of warmth. I panicked and signaled to my husband for a nurse, but I already knew what it was. It was amniotic fluid.

Hours later my daughter's small frame slipped out of me, quite unexpectedly. My smart, sweet doctor held her in her small hands while standing in the dark room, a look of

surprise on her face. She hadn't even had time to put gloves on. She stood, momentarily confused, unsure of what to do. All the practice. All the prep. The *Do Not Resuscitate* order. The photographer. The body donation signatures. The Chaplain. All the work and worry, came down to this broken woman holding the daughter of another in the palm of her hands. I didn't know what to say. She didn't know what to say. The evening nurse came over. God, what was her name? She came over and she took my daughter into her hands, carefully, like an Agave just after bloom.

Like my body, my mind was not my own in those few, simple moments. It tricked me. It betrayed me. It told me immediately that my daughter was a precious doll. Is she pretty? That's all I wanted to know. *She's beautiful*, my husband said, tears streaming down his face, his whole hand on top of her small, thin body. She's beautiful.

For me, in the years since losing my daughter, my life seems to have been floating just out of my reach, sort of suspended in time, waiting to be myself again. I stay busy. I take my healthy nine-year-old son to chess club and soccer. I watch him smile and play. I take him for walks to the park. I take a pill, every day, to help the anxiety go elsewhere for a little while. I am alone with my thoughts more often than I'd like, but I have become used to it. I've become accustomed to the sadness that follows me around dabbing a bit of gray in each new colorful day.

For a long time after, I became the topic of conversation. Rather, my choice became the topic of conversation. My mother said she understood what I did. She would have probably done the same thing in my situation. Just to be safe though, to save me from others, she would tell everyone that I hadn't been given a choice.

A family member said she heard about our baby. She said she heard about the decision we made. She said prayer would help. She gave me the number to her preacher.

A co-worker told me that I was being punished for my husband's religious beliefs, or lack of. She told me that only when he repented would we have a healthy baby. She told me that he would burn in hellfire damnation for all eternity, and so would my son, my daughter, and I, by association.

It was the same story down at the grocery store. Across the bridge at the 7-11. People who knew people who knew me. They'd ask how I was doing. They'd ask what my husband thought. They'd whisper in hushed voices when I passed. They'd ask how I felt after *it* happened. Was I remorseful? Was I satisfied with my choice? Was I ready to try again? No. No. No.

This year will mark seven years. Seven years. You'd think the sting of the day would have settled by now. The heartache, the brokenness I feel, would have melted away into some kind of memory that takes a little more time to recall. But it actually doesn't take much at all.

A kindergartner walking into her classroom for the first time.

A blond-haired baby girl, full of curls and wonder.

A pink, polka dot blanket.

Anything can spark a memory. And I know I am not alone in this.

Anyone who has suffered at the hands of grief knows this to be true. Anyone who has watched another being, one they love and admire, slip slowly away from them has had to push through days, and weeks, and months like this. For a long time, I wondered

when these days, and weeks, and months, and now years would slowly slip from my conscious mind, but the truth is they never will. This grief, this loss, this unconditional love, this is life. And life, I know now, can be fucking harsh.

Today it is different than it was in the days that followed my choice. I am different. In those days, it didn't seem to matter to anyone else how I felt. Or how I saw myself. What mattered for others was the way that my choice made them feel, and that bothered me. But now, I don't feel that particular pang of guilt or shame. Now I don't feel the eyes watching me or judging me. Now I only feel this new kind of love that I have. The kind that comes from loving someone so much, that you will let them go even if it crushes you. Just because the reasons didn't matter to them, doesn't mean it didn't matter to us. It mattered that my husband's whole being had been crushed when they came in and wheeled Lydia's small, fragile body away. It mattered when I was wheeled out the next day holding a small, white box rather than a pink bundle. The looks from the nurses. The squeeze of hand from my doctor. It mattered. My arms wrapped tightly around the box, instinctively rocking back and forth.