

LITTLE WANDERING STATUES

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## ABSTRACT

This memoir traces the paths of a mother and daughter as they face several similar choices. It is written from the point of view of the daughter who, in an effort to understand her own choices and motivations, discovers that to her dismay, her path has been more like her mother's than she'd first thought. The memoir also traces the lives of other women in the family and meditates on the presence of family secrets and the history of how society has treated unwed mothers in the twentieth century.

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## DEDICATION

To Alpha Mae, Peggy, and Debra.

## GOING BACK

Our family operated on an unspoken boomerang theory: everyone would come back. Those few that didn't—and there's still time for them to return—fought nearly unstoppable forces. On my mother's side, we arrived in Kentucky by the early 1800s and that is where we stayed, at least for the last three, going on four, generations. Something held us there; maybe it was the soft limestone landscape, the hills that didn't pose any problems. The ease of gentle curves and inclines. Hunkered down for generations, we grew here like plants.

The gray light of the afternoon shone in through the open windows and around the metal easels pushed to the edges of the classroom. In the darkest corner of the room, six or seven of us sat on the floor, students with pens or drawing pencils in hand, taking notes on the scratchy pages of our sketchbooks.

“Huh. Here's another window. Gwen John, *Corner of the Artist's Room*,” said our professor, Sheri. “That's funny. I wasn't planning on this as a theme.” She held the slide clicker in hand, projecting images of paintings onto the bare wall. I wasn't taking notes, but sat leaning back on my arms, hands on the cool concrete floor. A breeze blew in through the windows.

“Next slide. This one is by Anna Blunden. A woman looking out another window. Maybe I have some sort of affinity,” Sheri said. She wore a tattoo on the back of her neck. “I wonder if there is a psychological explanation.”

None of us offered any ideas. In the painting, the woman sat at a table longingly looking out a window.

I'd been painting like crazy during the fall semester of my senior year. I spent hours in the studio at night with all the fluorescent lights on, working on a painting and then going outside, smoking, and looking in the window at what I was working on, some inane series of oil paintings of animals, goats and elephants and donkeys. I'd tried to breathe some depth into a cow's big black eye, but it wasn't working. Technically the paintings were okay but they were soulless and I couldn't bring myself to finish one of them. They hung there in a row on the studio wall, lacking in something, background, the texture of mottled fur.

I'd abandoned my usual method of starting with nothing, a blank canvas, no thought, and loud music playing in the studio. I'd put all my colors on the palette and dip my brush in turpentine, mix paint with linseed oil, and start off, letting the painting take me where it did. I had a vague idea about the origin of life and reuniting the positive and the negative, the eternal two into one. And I would take it from there, starting in a corner and building up until the canvas was full of fishlike images and circular patterns. Then finished, I would interpret it as some example of fecundity and show it to my class or present it in a student show. Some people were impressed that I could start with nothing. "But this work lacks depth," one of my professors told me, "and you could do more." So, the animal paintings. Finger painting. Figures painted in yellow and green, ugly with contorted faces. Nothing was working.

By the end of the semester, right before Christmas break, I was supposed to present my plan for my final comps project—a series of interconnected paintings that I had to complete and show in the university gallery to graduate in the spring. It didn't come. The animals weren't

working. My unconscious, abstract imagery had grown more troublesome. I'd paint yonic images and just get confused. Like I didn't have any control over it. I wanted to control it though. I wanted something different to come out, something not so unexplainable and radically foreign and embarrassing and strange and something that I couldn't wrap my head around. Hence, the animals. Hence, portraits of people. And hence, my final project came around and I had to tell everyone, my painting professor and the three other student painters what I was doing. And I couldn't.

The day came and we all sat around a table in a seminar room. There were four of us, three guys and me, a small class of senior art majors. The guys told the group about their projects, something about graffiti, something about a conceptual piece—light and music moving together in sync, and something about close-up realist paintings taken from pornographic images, and me, empty-handed. And I was surrounded by all these people confident in their own certainty, intent on their own amateur mediocrity and my professor, he was a genius. He drew images of the sky and ripples on water with pencil and charcoal on massive sheets of paper. They were beautiful, grounded, and ethereal.

“I don't know what I'm doing,” I said.

“Well, it's nearly too late. You should have had it figured out by now,” said the professor, Carlos.

“I'll work on it over Christmas break,” I said. I sat there for the rest of the seminar meeting, withholding tears as the others elaborated on their stupid projects. It was getting dark outside, four-thirty p.m. By the time we were finished it was pitch black. I walked to my old truck. It was an ugly red truck—low-rider with chrome highlights—that came from a mentally-

impaired redneck from back in Danville, Kentucky, where my mom and grandparents lived. The truck wasn't me and that was just out of place, at the private liberal arts college where I attended, though my friends got some kind of kick out of it, wanting to ride around in the back of it. I hated it. I was ashamed of it, driving around amid the Land Rovers and Mercedes of the campus of this school dedicated to continuing the traditions of the moneyed old South. I walked across the grassy commons, holding my arms close to my chest in the chill wind. There was no one else around, not even cars on the road.

Carlos said that he felt anxious about encouraging women artists. That these women won't take their art seriously and will end up painting, as he said it, in the garage. That they will take off at least five years to raise a child, more if they have multiple children. Then their work would be an avocation at most. And then they will never get back to it and take it seriously as a man would.

My mother had called mid-semester. "I'm leaving Bill," she said, "and I've fallen in love with someone else, someone wonderful."

She had married Bill on my sixteenth birthday. I was her maid of honor. He was a high school political science teacher turned housepainter hooked on the free-spirited art teacher. He charmed and courted her, buying her jewelry and gifts, fixing her elaborate meals. Then he moved in and things changed. Sometimes, he was witty and friendly, telling jokes and teasing us, fixing homemade cakes and dinners that took half the day. But much of the time he was silent, working all day, keeping to himself, not talking to anyone, closing himself into their

bedroom when he came home and drinking whiskey every night. In the six years they'd been married, they had threatened to divorce several times already.

“Who?”

“His name is Basil. I met him in Maine. He is so different from everyone I've ever known.” The previous summer, my mother and sisters had driven up to Maine for vacation. Bill stayed home; I was away, busy with summer school and waiting tables.

“But Maine's pretty far.”

“And we know that. We've been traveling back and forth.”

“How come you never mentioned him?”

“Well. I was with Bill. And I didn't want to tell you until I knew things were serious. Until I thought he may be the one.”

I was sitting in my room, my friends just outside the door in the living room of our suite, in a conversation I wanted to get back in on. And there were books on my desk and a paper to write. I twisted the cord around my finger and looked out the window at the gray sky and changing leaves.

“So what does this mean?”

“This means that you'll probably meet Basil next time you come home.”

The semester ended without any resolution on the art front. I promised to work on it over Christmas break—five weeks off.

I always came home for holidays, though I felt uncomfortable using the word home when I talked about that house. My mother, Bill, and my youngest sister, Lily, had lived there for two years and I slept in the guest room.

I drove up the bumpy, pothole-ridden driveway, bouncing in the red truck, its bottom sometimes scraping the ground. I passed the oldest sycamore in the county with its giant hollow center; you could fit three people inside it easy. People called these trees ghosts, how they shined in the moonlight. I curved up the hill and then braked. A donkey stood in front of the cattle guard that led to my mom's house. I honked the horn but it didn't budge, didn't even look at me, just kept chewing. I thought the donkeys were cute with their big eyes and ears, but, man, come on. I couldn't wait to get out of the truck; I'd been sitting for five hours. I drove forward slowly, as if to nudge him, but he scurried off. I pulled in and got out of the truck, relieved to be on my feet. The dogs ran up to me, wagging their tails, one jumping up at me. Hold it! I said, get down.

My mom's car wasn't here, yet there was a big black pickup parked in the yard. I shouldered my bags and pushed my way through the back door, and sitting there in the recliner watching television was a black-haired man who looked to be in his fifties, big beer gut.

"Well hello," he said. The television blared a football game.

"Hi. You must be Basil, right?"

"Yep. You Megan?"

"Yeah. Nice to meet you." I stood at the threshold between the kitchen and the den.

"You're mom's still at work."

“Are Sarah and Lily here?”

“I haven’t seen them.” He smiled a little too forcefully, but I knew he was trying to make a good impression. “You guys have a nice place here. Everything is just wonderful.”

“Yeah. Well, it isn’t mine but thanks anyway.”

“It’s a lot colder in Maine.”

“I bet. I’m going upstairs now. Unload some stuff.”

I went outside to smoke and walk around. It was warm for December. The best thing about this place was the land. It was all farmland, owned by who knows. When I came back here, I ran or walked for hours, jumping gates and fences and climbing up and down soft limestone hills. This wasn’t the house I grew up in. Lily, Sarah, my other younger sister, and I grew up with our mother and we moved a lot. When I was thirteen she got a job teaching art in her hometown, in her old high school—a place she swore she would never return. But the lure of a steady job and the lure of a paycheck large enough to cover a car payment for a new Toyota Corolla overrode any misgivings that she had. We left our in-town neighborhood in nearby Lexington and moved to farming country—corn, tobacco, and cows. The horizon was all fields with few trees along creeks and fencerows. We didn’t move to town but instead to the country, nearly always on old farmers’ land, little rentals reserved for farmhands or starter homes that the farmers themselves started out in. Something always happened though and we moved every year or two. We would rent a place that was for sale and it would sell. One got broken into. Sometimes the houses started to feel too small or too rundown.

My mom came home a while later, smiling really big and thinner than I'd ever seen her before. She looked great. Basil hugged and kissed her. He went back to his game and my mom went into the kitchen to start dinner. I sat down at the table.

"How long is Basil staying?" I asked her quietly.

"Just a couple of days. He has to get back to have Christmas with his kids."

"Are you having a good visit with him?"

"Yeah. We are."

Marikka's wasn't fancy—a dark, smoky bar that occupied a corner spot in a strip mall that had seen better days. The place was popular though, and sold more different kinds of beers than any bar in Lexington, maybe in the whole state of Kentucky. Matt and I went there after dinner. We chained smoked and played pool. By the end of the night I staggered out and we went back to his house. "Are you still on the pill?" Matt asked.

I lay back on the bed, my head spinning in the darkness. "No, but it doesn't matter."

I looked out the window into the night and saw a woman standing there in a doorway with short hair, yellow light behind her. I could just see her silhouette. She leaned against the doorframe. He came on the covers. The woman walked away from the door, the yellow light still there. I blinked and the window was black again.

The next morning we went to breakfast and I told him I couldn't be with him anymore. He started to cry, left the table, and went outside. I sat there amid the throngs of happy brunchers eating their omelets and buckwheat pancakes, the sunny morning light streaming in

the windows, hitting the excess of houseplants that stood next to the glass. I drank the rest of my coffee, feeling relieved and disastrous.

I was driving back to Kentucky from Atlanta after New Year's. A few days before New Year's Eve I'd met my friends in Tuscaloosa, Alabama for a friend's long overdue debutante ball. She rolled her eyes about it, calling it stupid but we all enjoyed the party.

I'd asked Jeff, who I was just getting to know, to come with me to the ball and he arrived late as we were all sitting in a hotel room smoking a pipe and drinking jugs of free liquor before we went downstairs. Seeing him, there, that he had said yes, driven from his parents' house in Atlanta to come with me, made me jump inside. Afterwards we gathered leftover red roses from the ballroom and threw them all over our hotel room. We slept in the same bed that night, sharing the room with two other friends. We kissed, but nothing more.

On New Year's Eve my friends and I we went from bar to bar in Buckhead, apparently so did everyone else. The streets moved with people like ants, taxis and limousines parting the crowds. Everyone was doing what we were doing, cramming into one bar, standing, smashed together, drinking out of plastic cups. For a minute or two drinks and moving onto the next scene of more of the same. Toward midnight, another bar, just like every place playing Prince's "1999" like they were the one that thought of it, we got crowns, Happy New Year! And noisemakers and girls that came around with Polaroid cameras to snap at our group happiness. We stood around a little table, a fresh pack of twenty-one and twenty-two-year-olds. On the televisions above the bar we could see the ball hanging in New York. We toasted with our champagne in plastic glasses.

The drive back to Kentucky the next evening was dark and long. I listen to the same mix tape I'd listened to for the entire trip singing along to all of the words but bored at the same time. Coming over Jellico Mountain north of Knoxville I saw the moon is waning in the eastern sky, but still bright enough to light up bits of snow on the mountaintops. Strange, I thought, my period should have come already. Wondering if I was pregnant, just the knowledge that I didn't want to face, that something had changed. Something internal. Some seed of knowledge there that I carried, something that the moon reminded me of. That it was waning and my period always came when it was near full. And I felt dry. This small seed of dread and anxiety planted itself in me. I didn't want to listen though, turning up the music instead.

January third. I wrote in my journal: *maybe I'll fast tomorrow and start purifying myself—but no one wants to starve a baby.* I filled my journal with to-do lists that all said *paint. Paint. Paint.* So I sat up a big canvas on two of the dining chairs in the kitchen. I squeezed out an abundant amount of Naples yellow out and crimson and pthalo blue and emerald green onto the palette. I wanted to work with alternating colors. Figure out how red and green played together, using just enough so they would pop out at your eyes but not make you dizzy so you would have to turn away, the colors vibrating off one another, too strong to really handle for long, like they would move themselves quickly off the surface. I was going to figure out colors and I was going to figure out painting and figure out my final project. I painted on squares of yellow and red stripes and green bands, loud music playing as I tried to block out my thinking mind.

But it wouldn't come together, the colors just stood there beside one another. I put so much paint on it, too much, the whole surface was covered with so much wet oil I couldn't do anything with it.

At the same time, I filled my journal with pastel drawings, two of which were centered on a red dot, one small and one large. I drew piles of melted wax, falling down like a waterfall and mounting up like exerted fat. *Fat gooey wombs*, I wrote.

I worked on the painting for a week or more. By the end of that time I had no passion for the painting or any of the paintings I started. I had one semester left and had to do one final project and then I would be finished. I contemplated leaving and chided myself for not having the courage to quit school earlier. *Why I don't want to be an art major*, I wrote in my journal, *my paintings are lifeless and I have no ideas. No one demanded God to create. I can't be demanded either.* I began thinking of switching majors, even though I would have to stay another semester.

My period never came, and though I wasn't religious about tracking it, I knew something was wrong. I took a pregnancy test. I was in the house alone. Took two tests. Positive. Positive. Then another. Positive. I tried not to believe it.

"I have to tell you something," I said to my mom. We sat in the most popular restaurant in town, Texas Roadhouse, and the place was packed on Friday night. The words were in my throat and I knew I'd have to force them out at some point. I've broken out in a rash all over my body. It didn't itch but it spread fast over the last twenty-four hours. It appeared suddenly after I

took the tests. I looked down at my hands and the shallow red bumps on them; I felt my neck, its thick bumpy skin under my fingers, foreign and hot.

The waiter came up and took our orders. He left. “I have something to tell you too,” my mother said, “but you go ahead.”

“That’s okay. You go.”

“Okay.” She dumped a pack of sugar in her coffee and opened up the creamer, pouring it in and then stirring it, the metal spoon clinking against the mug. She cleared her throat and smoothed her hair away from her face. “You know I haven’t been happy here. I’ve decided to quit teaching after this year and leave Danville.”

“Where are you going?”

“Basil’s asked me to move to Maine with him.”

I wasn’t surprised. “Lily will be out of the house. So I guess you can do what you want.”

“I can do art there,” she said. She loved Maine. She smiled. I thought he was unappealing physically and personally—he was arrogant and chewed with his mouth open.

“That’s great,” Our salads came. I didn’t have an appetite.

“It will be an adventure. And you know, after I decided to go through with it I feel so much better. Such a relief.” She paused. “What were you going to say?”

I stared at my salad. Sigh. My mom cleared her throat, stirred her dressing with a fork and poured it on her salad. “I’m pregnant.” The two sliced Roma tomatoes lay on a pile of semi-wilted iceberg lettuce, the ranch dressing in a plastic ramekin flecked with specks of green and black. I opened the pack of club crackers on the edge of my plate. I sat them beside the tomatoes.

I looked up at her, saw her blue eyes wide open, “What?”

“I said I’m pregnant.”

She looked at me intently. “I heard you. I’m just shocked.”

“It’s strange,” she said after a while, “I never thought you would be the first to get pregnant. I thought it would be Lily.” Lily was the wild one. She was probably out with her boyfriend with the long blond hair and dog collar tonight. She wore shredded jeans, heavy black liner, and her hair cut short and spiky. She was gorgeous with big blue eyes and high cheekbones. “You are the more adventurous one. I didn’t think you would want to settle down.”

“It happened.”

“Do you know what you want to do?”

“No.”

She patted my hand. “You don’t have to go through with it.”

“I can’t do it. There is no way.”

The next day I got up early. I dressed in jeans, hiking boots, and my now ex-boyfriend’s fleece jacket. I hadn’t told him yet. He was coming over tonight. I went to the kitchen and stared at the painting that I’d started. It hadn’t come out right. I looked at it, yellow covering the canvas with sections of red and green stripes, lines of orange and yellow swirling around the thick paint. It had no core, no unifying structure.

I went out the back door and the two dogs followed me as usual. They’d been my dogs too, back in high school. They always went on walks with me. We walked to the back fence and I climbed over the wooden planks, the dogs squeezing underneath. It was early and still a

little cold so I ran to keep warm. The dogs ran ahead, in and out of the thin line of trees that stood beside the gravel road. We reached another gate that bordered a fallow field and I climbed up, sitting on top of it and watching how the sun slanted over the hills ahead, the bits of frost shining gray in the light. I hopped down and walked on, coming up to a ravine full of round geodes. I smashed them open one by one on the flat rocks, breaking them open and hoping for something big and beautiful, amethyst or giant quartz but they were the same small white fluoride crystals. Tiny, like teeth. Once they were open the crystals would start disintegrating but I kept smashing them open and leaving them there.

I kept walking and eventually made it up to a tiny old graveyard under a bare hackberry. From here I could see much of the county laid out below me. The hills and valleys, shallow and repetitive and the flat roofs of the factories in the distance. What was I going to do? The dogs lay beside me, panting and happy. I couldn't think and I tried to will away this problem, this more than a problem. Maybe it was meant to happen, I thought. The previous summer I'd sat around with some friends and we talked about having children. How that would just make things easier. I'd like to just have kids by myself and a bunch of lovers, a friend had said. And I imagined that scene like greatness: living in some big, ramshackle but lovely house full of children, free and easy and a man here and there for comfort.

But I can't do this now, I thought.

The light slowly changed on the hills. The sun rose higher in the sky. The dogs fell asleep. I sat there trying to find an answer, to make a decision about what to do yet none would come. I looked out at the hills, how low they were, how the hills were all the same height, and the valleys were all at the same depth.

I pulled up a chair right in front of the painting, sat, and stared at it. The oils were still wet.

No commitment to it could make me or help me bridge the gap that the nothingness that came out of me when I approached the canvas showed me. Another art student had once applauded my ability to start a painting with nothing, with complete emptiness. How once I hung four white canvases on the wall and approached them with a full palette and no sense of idea. And how it worked on a basic level. “How can you do that?” He asked, and then said, “I have to have a plan.”

“I guess I don’t. I never thought about it,” I said. I just did it. But now that just doing, the only thing I really knew how to do, wasn’t working. Now that canvas still sat in front of me on my mom’s kitchen chairs. It was still wet and messy and I couldn’t give it the form. I couldn’t follow through.

I decided to drop the art major. The paint wasn’t working; I wasn’t working with the paint. I’d been contemplating a double major and I had nearly enough credits to earn a degree in Natural Resources—rocks and trees—it would just take a semester longer. Something empirical, something you could take a final exam on. Something that didn’t defy interpretation, that didn’t need inspiration. The study of what is, rather than what could be.

I never went back to painting in a serious way. When I dropped it, I dropped it good and hard. I’d still long for it though, for the seeming—and illusory—simplicity of conveying emotions visually rather than through language’s complicated signifiers. But at the time, there was only so much painting could show, it couldn’t speak.



## ORIGINS

The art students at the warehouse studios looked like workers, housepainters and scruffy carpenters in old and torn clothes. But what were artists supposed to look like anyway? Certainly there were no fitting stereotypes. Maybe good looking in dark jeans and black t-shirts. But their physical natures weren't their works of art. Just like the fashion designer doesn't wear her own peacock clothes, the artist's looks aren't for show. Their faces could be hollow and pale. Their looks can say I live, I burn, I'm broke for my creation. I wear it like a style. It is me.

Cigarette smoke wafted in and out of the half-open doors. The smell of paint and turpentine, wood and glue drew me up and down that hallway, peeking into each studio. Some were dark, some held tinny cassette tape music that the walls and doors couldn't hold in, one held a lone man in a white t-shirt and messy hair studying the contour of a woman's hip. A woman in layers of black applied bold cerulean blue to a white board. The hallway was littered with creation: a shellacked dining room table covered with plates of preserved mismatched food. Discarded sculpture and broken boards. I walked up and down those halls, eyeing the bulletin boards layered with old handbills and the scraps of materials that fell out of the studios. The building was nearly falling down, drafty in the winter, oppressive in the summer. But I loved what I would later call its aesthetic. I went back there years later, eight months pregnant. A sunny dead-hot August day outside, I opened the door and went in, the door behind me slamming shut, blocking out the light. I wondered if it would still look the same, but it didn't,

having been renovated and sterilized. I saw a flyer; they were looking for nude models. I considered it briefly, disrobing not to reveal a sexual being but something else, something holy and animal.

I loved the way it smelled of turpentine. I loved the messiness of it. The way that the chaos of the pallets were art in themselves, the way that the sinks and soaps were stained with color, the way nothing ever came clean, the way the artist's skin could be stained with paint, fingers cracked with darkness like delicate china. These people didn't exist just as individuals but as this world they carried with them, what they made and all the accompanying tools and refuse.

My mom's studio was just a starting point, something that wasn't that interesting compared to everyone else's. She'd deposit us at a table with a stack of computer paper and crayons and get to work on her own paintings. Her's were abstractions based on still life, landscape, and Native American motifs. She's set up huge canvases and cover them with strong colors, not bold and bright, but earth—mineral and grain.

There is a picture in my mom's high school yearbook of her painting a paisley or butterfly design on some guy's blue jeans. She's leaning down over his leg, her tiny brush on his thigh, the tips of her wavy blondish-red hair grazing his denim.

It was autumn. 1975. When he walked into the classroom she was struck by how gorgeous he was, tall, thin, dark eyes, long brown hair. He arrived late. She said he was clumsy and I could picture him running into an easel, falling in through the door. The professor pausing to look his way, the students following the professor's gaze. "Oh hey. Sorry," he might have

said. Then he might have smiled. “Is this drawing 201?” he may have asked. The students, girls, may have giggled or rolled their eyes.

The professor: “Yes it is, now take a seat.” Then the professor probably turned back to the class, continuing his lecture on shading or perspective before the students began their still lives, their easels and drawing pads set up in a circle around the table maybe covered with fabric, a jug, and a cow skull. My mom, though, kept her eyes on him.

They slowly got to know one another and she learned more about him. His name was Philip. Both sophomores, he had only just turned eighteen to her twenty. He’d graduated from high school early, came to the University of Kentucky early. A talented, gifted kid, but, she said, incredibly awkward and a real klutz.

Slowly, she and Philip started spending more time together, hiking in the Red River Gorge, running around, she said, like wild things.

Her paintings, maybe not at twenty, but definitely by the time she was thirty, were highly abstract with natural themes and imagery. I like to track the lifetime work of individual painters. I like to see their early work, how wavering it is, how unsteady and unsure. How they cling to some formality, how they start by listening to their teachers and technically perfecting their work. And then, if you look ahead to the work of the artist in his or her prime you can look back and see the seed of their signature that would later develop. That individual voice. It is always there but has to be uncovered. That discovered theme, vision—and all great artists have it—will be unearthed. Their early work is studied, copied, copious, varied but the idea is there in one corner. My mom’s favorite painter is Georgia O’Keefe. One of O’Keefe’s early paintings, 1919, “From the Plains” has her mark on it in the bottom in the way she paints the sky and hills is

almost O'Keefe but the top is my mother—bands of zigzagging colors, true and not bleeding into one another. Like a band saw.

My mother stopped painting when she started teaching high school. She never had an easel set up in the house, never had a studio. She'd draw sometimes. We would go on vacation to a cabin in the mountains and then she would go in the woods, drawing leaves and rocks. She'd make us intricate valentines but no paintings. She'd pretty much completed her body of work by the time she was in her early thirties. The paintings, I don't know where they are anymore. I have one, she has some.

Her art, and Philip's, back then, were remarkably similar. Both dealt in abstraction, but whereas she let the figure and faces alone—in her later years she would sometimes include figures but they were always faceless—his work included faces, and could be quite dark. He also wrote a lot, pages of meanderings when he was stoned, pages of poetry. He played the guitar. They dug each other. They kept hanging out but little by little, the relationship got harder.

“I'm not sure why things got tough between us. We were a little muddled up by the drug, art, and music scene that we were in the middle of. We would split up and then get back together. We had amazing chemistry. I loved him and wanted to be with him, but we were both a mess,” she said.

By the spring of '76, their relationship had become distant and showed signs of imminent demise. She was getting ready to go to the Florida Keys for spring break, with thirty dollars in her pocket, when they saw each other one last time before she left. And, of course, ended up in bed.

When she got back to Lexington, they decided things weren't working and they split up. He immediately got involved with someone else, a mutual acquaintance, and my mom was messed up about it—hurt. Even if something doesn't work, and both people know this, it is still hard to let go. And then she found out she was pregnant.

She got up the nerve. Went to tell him. Knocked on his door. He was nineteen. Answered the door unprepared and she let herself in.

“There's no way it can be mine,” he said.

“There's no way it can be anyone else's,” she said.

Mid-semester. Gone. He left town. He left the state.

My mom chews her nails. She tries not to. I pull my hair, feeling for strange textures. When I'm nervous, when I'm thinking, when I have a free hand. I can see her then. Philip's gone. She was chewing her nails, sitting on the floor of her room with her back to the bed, her knees up to her chest, some music playing. Did she vacillate?

The semester ended and with it her part-time campus job. She applied for jobs but didn't feel comfortable not telling them that she was pregnant. She didn't have a car.

“I felt really scared sometimes about what would happen if I got into a really bad spot,” she said.

“I was terrified,” she said, “but in a strange way I was sure that everything would work out. I was a gypsy. I guess.”

She'd been living in a big house with a group of other students. By the end of the semester everyone was moving out. She didn't have anywhere to go or any plans. Her parents

disowned her. Her father was a devout Baptist with strict upright morals. He'd grown up on a farm outside of Danville with a religious mother, six sisters, and an abiding, if wayward, father. He became stern, stiff like wood, inflexible on sin. With her mother, appearances reigned. Hair had to be curled correctly, face properly powdered, clothes properly pressed. I asked my mom if they gave her any options, wanted her to go away somewhere and have the baby and then give it up for adoption. She said no, that they were so outraged but didn't give any other solutions. Just that it was bad news. Just that they didn't want her around. That she was bringing shame to their family.

She never felt judged, she said, by her friends. She didn't feel judged by her aunt Marie, her mother's sister and her favorite aunt. Her confidant. "It threw me for a loop," she said, "Suddenly I was out in the middle of a field, no car, no buses, what do I do now? I didn't even have matches to start a fire."

On Sewanee's two-block main drag, there was this little health food store run by a tiny Chinese woman, the only one in town. Inside, posters advertising miracle green drink lined the walls: Barley Green, the cure for everything! As a child, I remember going to a dark, dusty co-op and playing in the children's area, full of old block stackers and cardboard books, while my mom shopped for yogurt, goat milk, and sesame seeds. Then, when it was time to go my sisters and I would get a Tiger Bar or a carob pop for a treat. I've always trusted the stacks of herbs and the hippie thinness of the co-op shoppers digging into bins of pinto beans and brown basmati rice.

I browsed through the store. The owner was on the phone. Jars of herbs, Avita herb tea boxes filling up a short wall, vitamins and a few boxes of all-natural gluten-free cookies. I walked over to the book section and picked up a book on facial diagnosis. I read that a person is overly feminine and docile if the whites of his or her eyes routinely show beneath the iris, as if the person is continuously looking up. If the whites show above the iris then the person is dominant, overly masculine and aggressive. Big mouths signify a lack of digestive fire. Blemishes around the mouth in women signify reproductive problems.

The proprietress hung up the phone and came over to me. "Can I help you?"

I raised the sleeves of my shirt and showed her the rash on my arms. My skin was red with the bumps that hadn't gone away but spread. "It's everywhere," I said, "Do you have something I can take for it?"

"Seems.. hmmm..." She feels my arm with her fingers. "Stress?" she asked, looking up at my face.

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Itch?" she said in accented English.

"No. I'm pregnant. This happened when I found out I was pregnant."

"I see." She felt my arm again. "You need heat. Sweat it out." She walked over to the herb section and scooped out powdered ginger into a plastic baggie. "Take a ginger bath. As hot as you can stand. Drink ginger tea. It helps you sweat and draws out toxins."

I thanked her and took the long walk back to the suite I shared with three other girls with the ginger. I went into the bathroom with its florescent overhead lights, the counters full of makeup, dirty towels on the floor, and poured myself a bath with the ginger in it.

I took off my clothes and got in the tub. The water felt insanely hot and I lowered myself down slowly. The smell of ginger filled the bathroom and the mirrors steamed up. My skin reddened even more and I was supposed to be sweating. Maybe so but I couldn't tell.

Later that day, I took a walk with Jeff. We had started dating. He didn't know what was going on, didn't know that I'd just broken up with my boyfriend, that I was dropping my major and staying for another semester. We walked out a country road leading away from campus. We climbed up in an abandoned barn along the road and sat on a ledge, overlooking a maze of shrubs and vines. Some of the forsythias had begun to bloom bright yellow against the surrounding gray. "Tell me something I don't know about you," he said.

I hesitated for a good long while. "I'm pregnant." I cringed, wishing I hadn't said anything. I looked away from him. I drew my knees up to my chest, not wanting to hear his response. Maybe I should have told him my favorite food. "But I'm getting an abortion this weekend."

He paused. "Whoo. That's intense."

"I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, I mean, that's what you're going through now. It's important."

"Yeah it is. It's all I think about."

We sat there, our legs over the edge of the wooden planks.

"It's sad," he said, "like the unknown soldier. I guess you will never know what the child would be like."

I sat there silently.

“I’m here for you if you want to talk about it.”

“Okay.” We walked back to campus, not saying much. His comments stirred up the indecision already whirling around inside of me. Of course, I knew I couldn’t have a child. How could I take care of one? I was in college, had no money; my truck was on the verge of breaking down. Of course I couldn’t. But what had he said? That he was sad for the child? Does this mean that if I had it he would be there for me? My thinking turned crazy. Wizards and magic. Perhaps the child could somehow be his and then he would be the dad and we would go through this together.

That Friday, I drove to Nashville where my mom would meet me at my uncle’s townhouse and we would go to the clinic together. Matthew would meet us there.

My mom and I walked into the waiting room on the following Saturday morning. It was overcast outside, like it was about to rain hard. The lights shown from the inside of the clinic as we walked in. Inside, young women, some alone, some with friends, some with boyfriends, sat on plastic chairs lining the waiting room. The place was packed. A big wood-paneled television sat on one side of the waiting room.

Saturday morning cartoons were on. I imagined kids sitting in front of the television with their footed one-piece pajamas on, eating sugar cereal out of the box while their parents slept. Why cartoons? Some of these girls, were they like children or something? Or was this a ploy to get those of us that were wavering to change our minds?

A nurse called my name. I walked back through the heavy double doors. The nurse led eight other women and me to a large room where we all sat in a circle. The room was sterile, tan

walls, a high window to the outside with a little plastic plant on the windowsill. Another nurse came over and stood in the middle of the circle with a clipboard in her hand. She told us what we could expect. “You’ll take a mild sedative and some local anesthesia. You most likely won’t remember a thing. I promise.” She continued. “The actual removal procedure is called a d and c.”

Dilate the cervix, suck out the contents of the uterus, and scrape out the remainders. I’m exaggerating. I was afraid. Dilate and cutterage. Earlier in the waiting room I’d seen a woman walking out—bent over and crying, her friend holding her up as they walked out.

“You’ll need to rest for the remainder of the day,” the nurse said, “and you’ll bleed like a heavy period. But you should be fine to go back to work or school on Monday.” She smiled at us. I crossed and uncrossed my legs.

“Now. You’ll all take the sedative here together and then wait until we call you back one by one for the procedure. Just sign the form and give it back to me.” We all held clipboards in our laps. We signed and handed the form to her as she walked around the room, collecting our forms and examining them.

I started crying, trying to hide it, wiping the tears away with the back of my hand. Soon there were too many though and my hands were soaked. One other woman was crying as well, the rest impassively gave their form back to the nurse. They looked so smooth and resolute and I had these emotions that I couldn’t control. I just sat red-eyed and hiding sniffles with the paper that I signed. I knew the risks were small. I had been resolute—confident in my decision that it was the right thing to do. That I wasn’t ready to have a child. I didn’t even have a real home. I hadn’t finished school. What kind of life would that be?

I wavered. It was moments like these, on the edge of taking one of two paths. Either one though was a shut door. I tried to imagine either option—get rid of the baby or keep it—not even a he or a she yet, not even anything real—but I could only imagine the very worst—letting go of something that really mattered to me or the danger of keeping that something. There. Admitting it. That this potential for a child blew me apart. The hazards. Something that at that moment I couldn't even realize mattered but did on a deeper level. I wanted to stay in that moment, on the verge, where all of the options were possibilities, before I signed any paper and before I went in either direction. If I took one step either way. But then I did. Okay. I have to do this, I thought. Okay. Okay. Okay.

Another nurse tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to come into another room. I followed her into a small office and sat down with a counselor. The counselor sat in a chair behind her desk, her head cocked sideways on the phone, reading glasses down near her nose. I sat across from her. She got off the phone and looked out at me from over the top of her glasses. “We won't let you go through the procedure if you are unsure,” she said, “You can take as long as you like to think about it.”

I took a breath. I stopped crying. Okay. I have to do this. Just do. There's still time to back out. I'm not in there yet, I thought, just say yes, just stall. Okay. Finally I said I was ready. I could do this.

“All right,” she said, “now I just need to see your driver's license and you need to fill out this paperwork.” I rummaged through my purse and wallet and my pockets again and again.

I didn't have my license.

“You can always come back,” she said. On her desk were a couple of those stress balls that looked like little earths.

I looked down at the papers in my lap. I looked up at the little window where I could see that it was now starting to rain. “I’m wondering,” I said, “what if I can never have children after this?”

“It is a very safe procedure.”

“But what if something happens?”

“You will most likely be fine. Don’t worry about it.”

“Can I sit here for a while?”

“Sure.” The counselor left the room. I stared at little rubber earth. I picked it up and squeezed it. Without my license there was no way I could do it and I was hesitantly grateful. At least a little more time.

The counselor came back. She sat down behind her desk.

“Can I reschedule?”

“Sure.” We scheduled the procedure for the following weekend. Same time, same day.

She led me back to the waiting room. My mom and Matt sat side by side. They both looked up at me; they looked surprised.

I sat down in a chair opposite them. “I forgot my license. They wouldn’t let me.”

My mom sighed and shook her head. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to come back next weekend.”

“You know, I can’t come down here next weekend. You’re going to be on your own.”

Her exasperation showed. She left soon after to head back to Kentucky. Matt and I went back to my uncle's house. My uncle was away. I packed up my things and then we sat on the couch. I wondered, if, and it wouldn't happen, if we had a child, what that child would look like. What about his blue eyes? In the sunlight they glowed. Or my brown? Brown is dominant. His height, his dark brown hair, my light brown hair. His pale skin, his long face, my long face. His musical ability, his doodling skill, my...what?

Here is the story that led to your birth.

The summer before I met Matt, I took a road trip west with friends. I cried in New Mexico, cried across the Texas Panhandle, and through Oklahoma. So much that it got boring. My friends asked why; I told them I didn't know why. Instead of talking I closed up. Not talking when they asked me questions. We'd met two guys driving south through Wyoming into Colorado. They honked at us, we honked back. We all stopped at the same truck stop. Two guys, three girls. That night, a hotel room somewhere, maybe in Colorado, I can't remember where. I was left out. I tried to sleep but where, the floor? The car? I wandered around the parking lot, I could have kicked them out of the beds; I could have squeezed in. But I walked around and felt like I had no place to be. In the morning we all ate breakfast together and everyone was happy. We decided to all go south together. I rode in the guys' van, sitting shotgun, staring out the window. "Why're you so quiet?" the driver asked me. His name, gone, his occupation: recovering alcoholic with a penchant for Native American tarot cards, kept.

"I don't know."

“You should smile. You have a nice smile.” I just stared out the window at the empty landscape. Mountains far away but just land in between. So sparse and so plain. It had been beautiful to me, the openness of it. But riding that day, looking out the window it just seemed like a cliché.

Maybe that’s not what did it, but something did. Like a wire just tripped. Arriving back at Sewanee, humid and green, all the leaves on the trees, deciduous and close, constricting like snakes in the grass. I couldn’t stay. I’d planned to stay and start my junior year but I’d wanted to quit for sometime. So I did. I went back to Kentucky and lied, said that I couldn’t go back to school because I didn’t have enough money. That I needed some time to work. I came back to my mom’s house, there in Danville, that same house surrounded by fields with the big sycamore tree out front [*he climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see*]. A new statement, I stopped showering and brushing my hair. Authenticity. My skin was pale and I was getting too thin.

But that’s not this story. That was before.

We rented out rooms in the house on Beaumont Avenue. The place was white, enormous. Inside stood an empty living room and dining room, no furniture, save for the Oriental rugs on the rough hardwood floors. The bedroom in the back had its own tiny studio and its own bathroom with a half-size bathtub and no shower. That was my room. It had gloriously floral wallpaper, exploding red roses and pink peonies on a stained beige background. This was mine, my first single space, my own room, if only one room, in a house with a kitchen. I walked to the grocery store down the block, came back with two plastic bags and fifteen dollars worth of food. I cooked lentils; I cooked rice; I didn’t know how to make coffee really but made it too

strong. I sat on the porch. I was twenty. First time since preschool that I wasn't in school. I got two jobs, a plant nursery in the day and as a waitress at a restaurant by night. Happier than I'd been in a long time but I couldn't say why. I didn't have any friends around. I spent time alone. I worked.

I don't remember why I went upstairs to knock on your dad's door. All of the rooms were rented out to different people. I knew that three guys lived there. I heard the front door opening and closing; I heard the sound of a violin; sometimes I heard the sound of a banjo. I knocked. He opened the door, there with messy brown hair, overgrown like the cool guys at Sewanee that were way out of my league, a red flannel shirt on, the sun shining from behind him. I gave him, what? A piece of mail. A package. I just remember us standing there, staring at each other.

He started sitting out on the porch with me. I read a biography of Van Gogh. I read a Martha Stewart magazine. He sat with me and we drank beer sometimes. He told stories. I listened. He liked Mark Twain and Charles Bukowski. It was more of a friendship than anything.

He went to UK. Wanted to be a writer. Wrote short stories about crazy people he knew at the restaurant where he worked as a cook. Wrote about another guy, Tony, that lived in the Beaumont Avenue house. Tony collected cans for money, had pictures of naked women tacked up on the walls of his room, and talked about ordering a bride from Africa. Matt wrote about desperate characters operating on the edge in their day-to-day lives. But he wanted to be a musician the most. He would stand in the middle of the empty living room and play the banjo. The sound would reverberate off of the ceilings and walls, filling the house.

The time passed by slowly. I watched the season change from late summer to a velvet red-leaved autumn at the nursery. I potted up pansies; dirt took up residence under my fingernails. I watched the sky change. I watched dandelions grow in the gravel underneath the greenhouses. Slowly your dad and I became closer friends—just out of habit—just out of someone to talk to at the end of the day. He, I learned later, was falling in love. I read in his journal, much later, *I can hear her footsteps downstairs, I can hear her move, feel her move*. I asked him to go to a concert with me in Nashville. We'd go down, meet up with my Sewanee friends, and then stay the night at that same uncle's house.

Halloween. I came home late; there was a little party at the house and everyone was dressed up. We kissed that night. The concert in Nashville—the next night. Later he'd say, *remember the sunset we saw as we were driving down to Nashville? That made me feel so good, like that was the beginning of a beautiful time*. Times end too. I left in January to go back to school. After I left he sat down on the floor of my empty room.

I don't know how much you want to know. If you'll want to know all of this someday. I sometimes feel like I'm telling you this from the death, maybe just the death of the past or the death of the self. That someday we'll both be gone and you'll wonder. I'll tell you this, though, that we've changed. I hate to say that our lives changed us but we just aren't as good as we used to be. Our hearts are harder.

We spent an hour or so sitting on my uncle's couch. Matt kind of fell apart. I didn't say so but he knew I was wavering. He leaned down, rested his head on my legs, not out of comfort,

but pleading and some sort of supplication. “Megan, you can’t have this baby,” he said, “if you do, we have to get married.”

“I’m not going to have a baby,” I said, irritated. I stared at the white wall across from me, the giant television turned off. “Why do you think that? Why do you keep saying that?”

“All I’m saying is that this isn’t any way to bring a child into the world.”

“I am going to have an abortion. But I need a little bit of time to really make sure. That’s all.” He, crying, me, emotionless.

*Do you really want to know the story of how you came into this world? Does it matter at all?* You can look at me in a certain way, that I was careless with his heart, that I should have just let him go and let it end and then none of this would have happened. You wouldn’t be here; I wouldn’t be here—at this moment—either. Your dad would have been free and maybe he would have been more successful, maybe he would have been the same but I would have had no idea. He would maybe be married. But those aren’t possibilities; those are the mind playing its circle games. We stayed together for another year or so after I left Lexington. We traveled back and forth. It’s just that I felt so good. At school, my art got better; I immersed myself into classes about India and Latin America. Your dad was instrumental in that goodness. He made me feel loved. There’s a difference there, someday you’ll recognize, between loving and liking being loved. But then, like a switch, I’d had enough of him. I didn’t love him and told him when he was visiting in March. I told him at night, in the dark, that I didn’t want us to be together any longer. The next day, we got in a car wreck. Someone slammed into my car, totaling it. Our heads hit the windshield, twin cracks in the glass. I got a rental car from the

insurance company; spring break began days later. Because I wanted someone to be with, I asked him to go to Florida with me where we camped on an island for a few days. We argued. I felt trapped. But still, I didn't leave. Said that I wanted to be with him.

So that's why. Until I finally said that we'd had enough, that I couldn't live it anymore. That's when I got pregnant with you. It must have been fate, if fate exists. But I don't think there's a such thing as fate anymore. Only our choices and the lives we make.

A week later—back to the clinic. This time Jeff went with me, along with two of my friends, Lee and Skye that I'd known since freshman year. They wanted breakfast at Ihop, so dropped me off at the clinic and went to get some food. We'll be back in an hour, they said. "After you recover we'll drink strawberry daiquiris. Something fun," Lee said.

"You'll be alright baby," Skye said, giving me a hug before I went in.

Matt was going to meet me but hadn't arrived yet. You could say I was fucking with his future. With the future. This time the television was off and the waiting room didn't have the same full feeling, the same brightness and noise as a buffer against the clouded rain-ready day outside. This time the waiting room was quiet. But still magic and superstition swirled in my head: I could switch the fathers. It would happen on its own. The universe would know who I wanted to have a baby with. This whole lost sailor thing. Jeff was a deadhead. I hadn't realized that was a song.

I didn't look at a magazine and no one was talking. Matt came in and sat down next to me. We didn't talk.

The nurse called my name again and I walked back through the heavy metal double doors. This time, I told the nurse that I had to go to the bathroom first and I stopped on the way to the group-talk-and-sign-paper room.

The bathroom was all steel gray walls, steel gray stalls. I stared into the mirror for a long time. I still wasn't sure what to do. It was a decision mounted in unreality: I thought that Jeff and I could make it together, even though we'd only been dating a few weeks. I stared into the mirror, hoping to figure out what to do. I can't go through with this, I thought. And it was fear too: that I wouldn't have another chance to have a child. That somehow this was meant to be. I looked into my own eyes and found no certainty. I was no rock. I was no anchor. Could I really have a child? Could I really have an abortion? I wanted to go out of time to a place where I didn't have to make either decision. Make it go away. Make magic take its place. I want three wishes: one, I am not pregnant, two, I have a million dollars, three, I have an unlimited amount of wishes. I have a fairy godmother, I go up to heaven and rest on a pillow of cream cheese clouds, I cover my ears and my eyes, and I am not listening! I am not dealing with this!

But I did. I looked intently at myself in the mirror, red-eyed, mouth all twisted, scared and freaked out and in need of someone to say it will be okay and to tell me what to do. I felt like I was five years old, that I was the girl, not the woman, that women, still, shouldn't decide on their own, shouldn't be alone in the bathroom but a man, yes, a man should be there deciding. And if I'd let him, there was a man in the waiting room saying this: either have the abortion, we are young and cannot take care of a child, or marry me. I am in love with you and I know you, one day, will learn to be in love with me too. He says you're too emotional. But you're not emotional—you're real. You feel things.

But I had to make the choice, right there, with no one else but me, this was my choice and the gravity of it filled me up—no choice, go back, that’s what I wanted. Uncertainty, but in the midst of it a tiny splinter of resolve: if can’t go through with having a baby I know I can’t go through with the D and C procedure. I may not come out alive—not a rational fear—or have children—not a rational fear. But sometimes we have to lean on these motives we know aren’t true. I breathed deeply, wiped the tears from my face, splashed it with cold water, fanned myself, and said, okay. Walked out of the bathroom feeling like an understatement waiting to happen, like some kind of seed of a hurricane wind.

I went outside, through the waiting room, not saying anything to the nurses or to the receptionist, just walked out. Matt followed me.

I sat down on the curb in front of some shrubbery in the woodchips. Matt stood out on the pavement of the parking lot, ten or so feet away from me—a long way away, a wary distance. “You didn’t do it did you?” he asked. The sky was in the process of clearing itself behind him, the clouds parting and sun coming out.

“No.” Instead of looking at him I looked down and fiddled with a wood chip, splintering its pine bark edges into thin mica sheets.

“You can’t do this,” he said to me, louder. Intensely. “You just can’t.”

“I just can’t have an abortion,” I said, still not looking at him.

“Jesus, Megan. This isn’t about you. This is about a new life and it’s about me too.”

“I know.”

“Why do you have to make this so fucking hard?”

“I’m not trying to.”

He paced. He ran his fingers through his hair. He sighed. He cursed. He put his hands in his pockets. Freaked out. I sat there placidly almost but numb by this point. Yes, I thought, I’m screwing everything up. I’m having a baby.

“Then we have to get married.”

I still wouldn’t look at him. “I can’t.”

“Goddamnit. We just can’t do it like this. You just can’t do it like this.”

“Maybe we should talk about this later. I can’t think now.”

“You can’t do this,” he said. Again. And again. “We have to deal with this.” And then he left.

I watched him go. He got into his car and drove out. He looked up at me, jaw clenched, and then he left.

About a half an hour later, Lee, Skye, and Jeff showed up. They parked and all got out of the car, coming at me with dyed carnations. Lee and Skye handed me blue ones and kissed me on the cheek, Jeff a red one, for passion, he said. We got in the car and stopped at Arby’s so I could get something to eat. Then we got on the interstate and headed back to Sewanee. No one talked.

“How did it go?” Lee asked finally. She and Skye were up front and I was in the back with Jeff, holding hands. I didn’t want to say anything but I couldn’t lie. They would know eventually.

“I didn’t do it.”

No one spoke for a while. Finally Skye spoke. “I knew you wouldn’t. You like babies too much.”

“I guess,” I mumbled.

“Do you remember when we were sophomores and we were talking about what animal we would be if we could?”

“Yeah.” Jeff was still holding my hand but we hadn’t looked at each other or said anything.

“You said you’d be a goat because they had such cute babies and that you loved sheepdogs because they took such good care of everything. I knew you wanted babies and I knew you wouldn’t. You said that your favorite rooms were the kitchen and the screened-in back porch. Very family. Very kids.”

We didn’t talk for a while. Lee turned on some music, cracked her window, and lit a cigarette. “It will be alright,” she said. Jeff patted my leg. Skye smiled back at me, squeezed my knee, and then turned back up front, leaning her head back and closing her eyes. I stared out the window, the familiar farmland and hills between Nashville and Sewanee passing by.

## TRADITIONS

Ours is a story of the tandem: exile and belonging, not one without the other. Sometimes you need the physical exile to create those changes that exile creates in the mind: a hardening or strengthening, however you want to say it. Maybe you don't need to be so soft. Go off into the wilderness. Go to where no one speaks your tongue, to where no one knows your story. The experiences there don't matter. All that matters is that you left. You can just tell everyone that you were gone but now you're back. Even if you consider staying gone while you are out there you know that you will be back, that back calls to you and will always be there for you.

But while you're away, you'll invariably run up against other people's lives and places. You'll consider trying those lives on for a while, consider staying, consider what would this be like if it were your full-time life?

Sewanee is up on top of the Cumberland Plateau that rises out of the shallow rolling hills of central Tennessee. You can walk to the edge of the plateau and look out westward over the valley, watch the sunset, and imagine that the flat horizon went on and on until the Rocky Mountains rise out of the plains. When a person wants to think or contemplate or just be, she goes to the edge of the plateau, sits on a rock, and looks out into the valley.

That winter and spring, my changes were incremental, slow imperceptible shifts. On the surface I lived two parallel lives—college student and pregnancy monitor. Jeff and I continued

in a hesitant relationship, liking one another but confounded by the confusion of the situation. I pulled. He pushed away. He came back though, and left, and came back, and left.

We tried but he was all college student, getting stoned in the afternoons, and I was divided, losing my college self bit by bit as my pregnancy slowly grew to define me. I became a religious devotee of *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. Each week, there was something new to expect. Each week, the baby grew a little bit more. Each week there were tips on what to eat, how much rest to get, what vitamins to take. The first trimester I slept all of the time. I'd come home from class and sleep. I went to the doctor once a month to get my blood drawn and tested. To have my belly felt, to see how big the baby was getting, how much weight I had gained.

The spring semester passed; it wasn't uneventful but rather a trying time. I took a structural geology class and studied metamorphic rocks. I learned about tropical ecology. I studied, I hung out with my friends but they began regarding me differently. I still went to parties but stopped drinking and smoking, and the whole scene began to seem hollow. Social events began to feel empty and in truth, I looked forward to having a child, partly because I wouldn't feel expected to go out so much. I wanted to stay home on a Friday night and not feel bad about it.

In April, I found an internship that I applied for in Honduras and received. I began getting extra vaccinations. I made the plane reservation.

My mom called me one day. I had spent the afternoon painting in acrylics on a large piece of paper. A pregnant woman, big and yellow with green vines swirling around her. The background yellow too, the inner and the outer feeding off one another. A picture that made

sense, structurally and emotionally. When I made the decision it made sense. I was of a nearly split mind before I went to the clinic the second time. Though I was resolute in my outer choice, inside I swayed. I looked at the trees for answers. I threw coins and tried to decipher the I Ching. Could that bring me direction? Something though, something not akin to rationality, told me to go with nature, like the tiny voice inside me was telling me that I could do it. That it was the right thing to do. But then, as time progressed, I wasn't sure at all. It was like all of that tiny bit of certainty had been a trick and now the bottom would really fall out.

“My plans have changed,” she told me over the phone, “and I wanted to let you know. I’m inviting you to come with me.”

“Where?”

“I quit my job a couple of weeks ago so this is my last year teaching. I’m taking a group of students to Europe this summer on a tour. I’d like you to come along as a chaperone if you want to. It will be a free trip.”

“I don’t know if I can,” I said, “I got an internship and a grant to go to Honduras for the summer.”

“Honduras?”

“Yeah. To work with some artists.” I told her about the internship: that I would be living with the artists or with a native family, in the mountains near a cloud forest preserve. They ran a nonprofit that promotes native arts. I would be making paint out of clay.

“But do they know you’re pregnant?”

“Yes. They said I could even stay and have the baby in Honduras. Dual citizenship. Said it would be a benefit to the baby.” I told her about how they said I could get medical care there.

There were doctors. I'd been trying for a month or so to finagle this deal. Emailing back and forth with Thomas, the director.

"I don't think this is a good idea. There's a lot that could happen."

"You don't really know that."

"Here's what else I wanted to tell you. You can come to Maine with me if you want. You can come with me to Europe. Then right when we come back, I'll pack up the house, sell most of my belongings, and then move up to Maine. You can work for Basil and stay with us. At least through your pregnancy and after you have the baby." Basil owned a campground and a small motel on the coast of Maine. On the edge of the ocean. He ran a little camp store and restaurant. I could work there. "And Sarah is coming too. She's going to spend the summer there. This will be good for you."

"I can't believe you are moving up there," I said.

"Yeah, its pretty crazy isn't it. But you know what? I feel so much happier now that I know I'm getting out of Danville and am not going to be teaching anymore. And living in Maine! I'm really exited."

The doctor was in a small town in the valley below Sewanee. A town dominated by Wal-Mart and a Sonic drive-in and a few other fast food restaurants. By early May, the leaves on the trees were coming out and everyone was making summer plans. I went down at the four and a half month mark for the ultrasound. I thought I was having a girl. I dreamed I was having a girl. I sat around thinking of baby names, looking through mythology books. "How about Arachne?" I asked Skye.

“No. You cannot name a child Arachne.”

“Why not? It’s a cool name. What about Artemis? Athena?”

Now I was laid back on a table in a darkened gray room, my shirt pulled up over my belly. The nurse squeezed out a glob of Vaseline and put it on the tip of the ultrasound pen. “You want to find out the sex of the baby?” she asked me.

I did. I still had some idea of giving the baby up for adoption. I still was not sure exactly what I was going to do. She rubbed the cold ultrasound tip on my belly. I was still small but beginning to show. The nurse rubbed the cold pen over my belly and I looked at the grainy ultrasound, its black and white image.

“See,” she said, “there’s a hand. You see the little fingers?” She moved the pen a bit more, “look at those tiny feet! So precious.” Moved it some more. “And the head, the little arms and legs.” I could barely make out the picture but it was real. So small yet so delicately formed. “And, it looks like you’re having a boy.”

At that moment, tears sprung up in my eyes, but not the sad tears, the “I don’t know what the hell I am going to do” tears, but happy tears. A boy! My dream was wrong. At that moment I knew I would keep him. “And he looks healthy too. Good size for ten weeks. Looking good,” she said to me.

The semester ended soon after with graduation parties and Jeff and I breaking up again. This time there was an immense distance between us. I went to my friends’ party where he played guitar and sang on the deck of the house, microphone and band and all. My dress was too short for my expanding belly.

My relationship with Thomas, director of the nonprofit in Honduras, was completely over email. He lured me in. You can have the baby here, he wrote, this is a great place to have a child. Safe too. He wrote to me about the work he and Julia, his wife, did. About the destruction that Hurricane Mitch had done to the country the year before. That they worked to make things right again. He wrote long, elaborate emails detailing Honduras's political climate, its meteorological climate, the safety of the mountain region outside of Tegucigalpa, where he and Julia lived. He promised that it was safe and that they welcomed me, baby on the way and all, to stay with them.

There was something metaphoric about taking this trip—a stepping out alone on my journey. If I had something to compare it to I would, but I didn't. I felt like I was doing something completely unknown and unheard of. I didn't find books to direct my path, to say, you are experiencing this normal reaction. I didn't have a normal reaction. What would be normal, according to my mom and to sensible people everywhere: go home, go to the family. Have a gentle pregnancy, take the tour of Europe, have the baby, live with my mother for a year or so and then venture out. Or get married. Or give your baby up for adoption. But no. Of course I had the reasons I told everyone: that I had to do as much as I could before I had the baby because I knew, that afterwards, I wouldn't be able to just travel to Honduras.

There is a tradition of young, unmarried women going away but usually they don't come back with a baby, or they don't come back still pregnant. Stepping outside of time. The easiest solution, removing oneself from the situation.

I looked for markers, for someone who had gone this way before and could tell me what was happening, what I was supposed to feel like. I read magazines about pregnancy but the women in them were entirely different from me: well-dressed, diamond rings, light-filled homes. Contented women. Magazine women that drank steaming mugs of chamomile tea curled up next to a fire, handsome husbands rubbing their feet, living the unattainable airbrushed glory. My new friends with children or who were pregnant at Sewanee were all married. I felt like I was the first student to do what I did and I felt completely out of place. One girl got pregnant and married before her senior year. I went to her house one time. I only remember how she had swirls of black hair growing on her cheeks like pubescent hurricanes.

I could have looked closer though, to my own family. To my mother and even my great grandmother. But that wasn't the direction I was looking in. Because their lives didn't make sense to me; they didn't have the lives that I wanted for myself. So I looked elsewhere but didn't find anything.

My maternal grandmother's the family investigator, the detective into the past, digging up secrets and fabricating memories. If you go into her house, you'll see that her basement is full of books and papers and boxes of photographs of gravestones. She has an office too, overflowing with the likes. When she takes trips, she goes to libraries in Salt Lake City, in Eastern Kentucky, in Virginia. Looking for her roots, for our roots. She's the proprietress, the family historian who tells stories like they ought to be told, not always completely factual, but more like legend, more like the way things ought to be. Putting mysteries together and calling hypothesis fact.

It started with gossip. “Aunt Martha’s supposed to be Joann’s mom. When she was alive she was married to Victor, my mother’s brother,” she told me. We were on the phone. A year after my grandfather, her husband of fifty-four years, had died. She’s been looking for someone to pass the genealogy legacy onto, to pass on her collected stories so they wouldn’t all die with her. She sent me a typed-up document entitled “My Life,” telling what my mom says is a romanticized version of her childhood and her teenage years before she married at eighteen. If I asked her about anything she took it as a sign of my growing interest in genealogy, sending me a subscription to *Kentucky Explorer*, a newsprint genealogy magazine with such features as small town post offices in 1912 and ties that Ronald Reagan may have had to somebody’s Kentucky kin. She’d tell me about a great uncle who may or may not have been a warlock. That he was out hunting with a group of cousins, and they got thirsty. So uncle warlock took off with the empty canteen in search of water. “And you won’t believe it, but he came back with the canteen full of milk. And there weren’t any cows out there in the woods,” my grandmother said.

If she meets you, my grandmother’s got to know your mother’s maiden name and what county your people come from. She’ll draw out your ancestral heritage and she’ll find out if yes, you were in fact a black Jew from Ethiopia. If you don’t have a past, she’ll create one for you with fictional roots that can make you feel good about yourself. She gave our family an illustrious past: we were related to Abraham Lincoln and one of our ancestors, Rebecca Galloway, had a torrid affair with Tecumseh. After the movie *Rob Roy* came out she let us know that he was our ancestor as well.

“But you know, Martha never acted like Joann was her daughter. Mother acted more like Joann was hers. And Joann wondered if my mother was really her mother,” my grandmother

said. “You know, my uncle Victor drank. Said mean things. It was just a sad situation and there’s no way to prove that mother was really Joann’s mother. Joann told her daughter Sandy about the whole thing. Said she thought she might not be Victor and Martha’s daughter. I said I’d go and look it up in the Pike County courthouse. They have a book of adoptions. But Sandy got angry and I quit trying to work on it.

“Mother didn’t mind a bit though.”

If my mother was sent to wander when school ended and she found herself pregnant with no home in 1976, then she was an adult and she sent herself. Maybe that’s what Roe v. Wade did, maybe that’s what birth control did, maybe that’s what a number of changing societal factors did, put the responsibility squarely in the mother’s hand. It’s your life to tear up now, baby girl. Wait, you’re a woman. I forgot. You have the power.

She could make her own choices. But consider if the same thing had happened but instead of being twenty-two, she was sixteen. Instead of 1976 it was 1924. And instead of living in Lexington, she lived deep in Eastern Kentucky in Pikeville, an isolated coal-mining town on the Virginia line. At the time, and even today, but not to the extent that it was then, Pikeville and the whole of Appalachia were extremely isolated. The people were confined by the land, and in response they developed a sense of social separation from the rest of the country. According to the massive *Encyclopedia of Appalachia*, prior to World War II communities were small and the adult population had to depend on one another to a greater extent than in other areas to survive. Thus, society was more open. Premarital sex was more common than often talked about and out of wedlock pregnancies usually led to hasty marriages.

Alphie Mae, born in 1907, came from a family of twelve children, third from the bottom. Her parents were what my grandmother called foot-washing Baptists. This church was strict: the ladies couldn't cut their hair or wear makeup, and could only wear long dresses. Most of the Baptist churches in the area then weren't part of larger denomination but rather they held more firmly to the idea of "spirit over dogma."

At fifteen, Alphie was a looker. She was about five-four with, as my grandmother says, the most gorgeous skin. She had big blue eyes and light brown hair. "Mother could sing real pretty. A soprano," my grandmother said. And along with singing she could and did dance. She square danced to fiddles, guitars, and mandolins.

When Alphie Mae was sixteen, her parents sent her off to live with a distant relative. Months later she came back. Around the same time, Alphie Mae's older brother Victor, who was years older than her, got a baby and raised it as his own with his wife. They named the baby Joann.

"Your grandmother believes Joann is Alphie Mae's daughter," my mom said, "but no one knows for sure. But it just fits." Joann was the right age and looked so much like Alphie Mae that it was hardly coincidental.

Soon after Alphie returned, she moved with her family to Stanford, in central Kentucky, hours from Pikeville and completely different in terms of topography. Alphie never wanted to stay in the mountains. Snakes scared her and she was ready to leave. "If you've lost your reputation, you've lost everything. Maybe that's why they came to Stanford," my grandmother said.

When Alphonse graduated from high school in 1929, her father set her up with a sewing shop in Stanford. “She was a little flirt! She spent her days flirting with the men who came to see her. She did have a good figure. Finally, she met my dad, Denny. He started asking her to marry him, over and over again,” said my grandmother.

She flirted but never gave him an answer. He would drive to Stanford from his home in Junction City, in the next county over, in his horse and buggy and kept asking her. His daddy was a bootlegger. “But you know. An old lady told me that Daddy kidnapped Mother and they got married in Danville.” Danville was about twenty miles from Stanford.

“What? Kidnapped?” I asked. My grandmother had always been high on the drama, blowing everything out of proportion. “How could you kidnap someone in the same small area? Junction City isn’t that far from Stanford. Her dad could go get her. Hell, she could walk out on him.”

“That’s just what I heard.”

However it happened, Alphonse Mae married Denny and raised their children in west Danville, the poor section of town. Most of the neighborhood men, including Denny, worked on the railroad. My grandmother was the oldest of three children, with Marie, the middle, and Charlie, the youngest son. Before their father died, Marie used to go sit with him on his porch of the house where they all grew up. They would talk and sometimes they would sit quietly. One day he told Marie that he had a secret that he would tell her before he died. But, he never told her. He died too soon or he forgot about it, or decided not to.

Now, the women in my family, Marie and my grandmother and Marie’s daughters and my mom, like to gossip. All through my childhood I remember them sitting around the dining

room table at Marie's house talking back and forth, generation to generation, old to young, young to old, you can start anew, fresh and no, you don't have to be like your parents, and wait, who is her daddy anyway?

"Sometimes we'd ask Mother about it and she would just clam up and not say a thing," my grandmother said. She maintained that Alpie never said a word about the possibility that Joann was her daughter and in light of my talkative family and how it is dreadfully difficult for any of us to keep a secret, she must have been different from the rest of us, or else the gossip isn't true. She didn't deny it though.

"You know though, Joann was always treated differently by her family. And you know," my mom said, "there is a line of secrecy about having babies in this family with dubious parentage. But it did happen. Just that no one talked about it."

So I wasn't the first. As I learned more about my mother's story, and my great grandmother's story, I became intrigued by how society treated these women and girls, and how changing times led to unwed mothers being either more or less accepted. After World War II and prior to *Roe v. Wade*, maternity homes were a common place for unmarried women to go when they were pregnant. Ann Fessler writes in *Girls Who Went Away* that young women were under enormous familial and social pressure to give up their babies. Families in effect made their pregnant daughters disappear, hiding them from the outside world. Kathryn Harrison writes in her *New York Times* review of Fessler's work that, "this was only an institutionalized form of the rejection she encountered wherever she turned, insisting she withdraw from all

social interaction.” She was physically sent into exile and when she returned, expected to move on and not talk about her experience.

By the 1950s, “white unwed mothers who wanted to keep their babies were diagnosed as particularly immature, or more usually, mentally ill,” wrote Ricky Solinger in *Wake Up Little Marie*. In 1954, Leontine Young wrote *Out of Wedlock*, in which she attempts to explain why young women get pregnant out of wedlock. She was considered an authority on unmarried mothers during the postwar era. She wrote that illegitimacy originates in a disturbed family home, either with an overbearing mother, an absent father—either emotionally or physically—or both. That these types of home environments made a daughter want a baby but no husband. These daughters could not relate to men and had no desire to wed. Her psychosis varied with her social climate. The more her family and social class looked down upon her, the more she had to lose, thus, if she gets pregnant, despite her knowledge that she would lose everything, she would have to be crazy to go tear apart her life in such a way. Socially, the girl would fall. She wouldn’t be able to go to parties; she would have difficulty finding a suitable partner. If her culture was more accepting, then the mother wasn’t that crazy. In the early 1960s, these societal opinions began to change. With the advent of birth control pills that were in some cases widely available, slowly, being a sexually active, young, unmarried woman wasn’t as looked down upon. And as times changed, pregnant single women became less stigmatized. They were just like the other women and girls, but had unfortunate luck.

Though times had changed, my mom’s parents were not accepting. She’d torn their world apart. And to send her away, to get her out of their sight, they effectively excommunicated her. We disown you, they said, and in our minds we do not have a daughter. You have to go away.

Later, my grandmother would give me more information about our ancestors. Though she clung to a romanticized version of the past, in which people were holy and upright, there were a number of babies born outside of marriages. There were a number of divorces and remarriages. She spoke highly of her uncle who never married, but “had two sons by two women he had been in love with.” Though she was well aware that my mother wasn’t necessarily breaking with tradition, she and my grandfather still let her have it, she still tarnished the solid reputation they had worked so hard to attain.

Even before my mother had gotten pregnant, she had made a radical break from her parents, especially from the world of her mother. If anything changed in our family tree, if any traditions were broken, it was between these two. But in a sense, my grandmother can also be seen as a prim aberration from her own ancestors’ wilder ways.

At her worst, my grandmother’s anxious and overly obsessed with hair, cosmetics, and jewelry. She made my mother sleep in rollers every night as a child and a teenager, and as soon as she could, my mother rebelled. There are pictures of my mom in high school—post smooth, curled hair—with her curly hair wild and untamed, wearing blue jeans instead of skirts and hose. My grandmother was the least rebellious of anyone in our family, though I may have come in a close second. Without meaning to, and despite my best efforts, I ended up closely following my mother’s path, as if it were a guide.

In 1999 and I had no idea what society may have thought of me. My family accepted me, though my grandparents not so subtly pressured me to marry Matt. I knew I was out of place in college but in the larger world, I had no idea. It seemed that single motherhood was a quiet thing; women didn’t go out and shout about it. Older women who were more established in their

careers did choose to have children on their own and for the most part, that was okay. There didn't seem to be any larger social codes to follow. But for people like me, who weren't prepared or planning to have a child, it wasn't anything to be proud of or advertise. I wasn't a teenager and I wasn't established. I wasn't disowned; my family still loved me. I would say I was accepted but single motherhood wasn't revered as an institution, like marriage or having children within a marriage. And I learned that the societal support of institutions meant a lot. And even if I wasn't shunned not having that support was difficult.

Throughout college I waited tables at the only nice restaurant in Sewanee, Pearl's. I told my manager, Terry, that I was pregnant towards the end of the spring semester before I left for Honduras. It was after a busy Saturday night and I was rolling silverware in cloth napkins and she sat eating a late dinner across from me. A little candle burned in the glass lamp on the table. "I just can't believe you're going to keep the baby," she told me, her mouth full of food, "I mean, how are you going to get a man when you have a baby with you?"

"I've already got a boyfriend."

"Yeah, but that's different. Who knows what will happen with it—he's young and you're young. I mean how are you going to get a husband?"

"I don't know but I think it will be okay," I said, surprised at her tone and that she'd even said that to me.

The plane ride to Honduras: looking out the window at the teal expanse of the Gulf of Mexico beneath wisps of clouds. Upon arrival, the plane skidding down the short runway to a quick, brake-squealing halt before the drop-off at the end. Green hills and mountains came into

view. Not empty hills but the hillsides packed full of houses and shacks and all sorts of buildings surrounded the city of Tegucigalpa.

I got off the plane out on the hot runway. I walked into the airport with all of its windows open. A speckled floor and light green walls. I passed by the duty-free shops selling American perfume and liquor. I got my baggage. The airport seemed absurdly small and yet fitting. A casual airport, not metal and thin gray carpet like American airports but the smell of food and breezes. I stepped outside, shouldering my big backpack and dragging a duffle bag. My thin flip flops slapped at the ground.

A crowd of people gathered in the hot sun outside the airport. Thomas hadn't told me what he looked like but somehow I knew without having to guess. He was small, shorter than me; he wore glasses over big blue eyes. His thinning dark brown hair was held back tightly in a low ponytail. He was talking to a taller man with wild white hair. As I stepped out he looked at me and we regarded each other without speaking, perhaps neither wanting to verbalize and formalize what we'd gotten ourselves into.

"Welcome to Honduras," Thomas said when I walked up to him. We talked briefly and then he led me to his white Land Cruiser with purple-tinted windows.

As he drove, Thomas insisted on keeping the windows up because of the dust and exhaust. But inside the air was stale and sickening.

We got gas and made our way to the open-air market in the middle of town. The truck bumped and swerved on the potholed-streets. I looked out the window at the dusty, sunny environs—men and boys riding in the back of pickup trucks, children walking in groups beside

the road, buildings all jumbled next to one another, school buses with flames painted on the sides. We wound up and down hills, around curves, bounced on cobblestone.

We parked and got out at the market. It stood on a plateau of sorts so a person could see the city falling from all sides and then the rising of a green ring of mountains. The large, flat concrete expanse exploded with small tables holding up piles of fruits and vegetables. Slabs of raw meat lay stacked on top of one another under white canvas shelters. A young man carried what looked like half of a cow slung over his shoulder, flies buzzing around him, trying to keep up.

Thomas and I walked slowly through the stands. I still felt nauseous and a little weary from the flight. “What kind of fruit do you want?” he asked. We’d stopped at a large stand shaded by a black cloth awning. “I try to come down here pretty often, whenever I come into town. This is the place to get the best produce.”

I looked up and down the wide tables filled with so much more fruit than I had ever really seen in one place before. A woman standing behind the table looked at me. “Queres embarazada?” she asked.

“Si.” I didn’t think I was showing enough for anyone to tell. She smiled, though I felt like she looked at me deeply with her dark eyes—that there was an element of seriousness behind her smile.

“Que bien, que bien.”

I went back to feeling papayas with Thomas, though I didn’t know what I was feeling for. “You want them not to be firm but not to be too soft,” he told me, “like this one.” He held one up, oblong, green, tinged with orange.



## REINTERPRETATION

Metamorphic rocks, from Oxford Illustrated American Dictionary

Metamorphic rocks are formed by the application of heat and pressure to preexisting igneous, sedimentary, or earlier metamorphic rocks. The variations in metamorphic rock types are due to variations in the original rock type as well as the differing conditions to which the rocks were subjected.

“I don’t know what it was. I must have been a gypsy, I guess,” my mother said. She was forced, in a way, to go.

It’s hard to imagine my mother contented with being alone. Sure, I’ve seen her alone but when she’s been alone she’s been wanting. When my sisters and I were kids and she was single, I remember her telling us, repeatedly, that our behavior would be different if there were a man in the house. Later, she’d say again and again that she didn’t want to grow old alone, didn’t want to die alone. Yet, the way she describes her pregnancy with me sounds almost idyllic, even though she admits she was broke and yes, alone. Even though she admits that it got to her, the way she describes it makes it sound like there was a peace there too. A peace that I don’t quite trust, a peace that may have come with time and distance, a reinterpretation. She doesn’t tell me about her fear, but rather a faith that the world would remake itself in her favor, that in looking back, her next foothold always fell swiftly into place.

After moving out of the house where she lived while she was in school, my mom spent three weeks sleeping on couches wondering what she was going to do.

Then she met Bill Gordon, an English professor at the University of Kentucky, who needed help getting his truck gardening operation started on his farm in Eastern Kentucky. His plan was to grow produce and drive it the hour and a half to Lexington a couple times a week to sell it at the farmer's market. She hitched a ride out to his farm and once she was there, decided to stay on.

The eastern part of the state is a land of flat-topped ridges or mountains with steep valleys, locally known as hollers, in between. The mountains are actually part of a larger plateau that has been extensively weathered for millions of years so that when you look out at the horizon the tops of the mountains are all flat and of the same height. They've been dissected by streams and rivers that wore through the horizontal layers of sandstone, shale, and yes, coal. This area isn't good for farming but land has always been cheap. She may not have known it at the time, but she traced her family's movement backwards, back to the mountains from the more refined central Kentucky, the same Eastern Kentucky that her grandmother left at seventeen. A place to leave, to migrate away from rather than return to. Gordon's place was near Beatyville, a couple of hours west of Pikeville. To reach the farm, you have to drive up a long road up to a ridge known as Shoemaker Ridge. The locals simply called the place "that hippie farm on Shoemaker Ridge." At Gordon's farm, my mom found a main house where a few people lived and a couple of outbuildings, one of which she moved her things into. They all stayed on for the summer, working in the gardens and driving the produce to Lexington in exchange for room and board.

The summer was great, she said. I try hard to picture her there, so much younger. Her face unlined, her hair pulled back into two braids. I imagine her wearing overalls and old t-shirts. I have a hard time seeing her. I see her now, a woman in her fifties who has looked the same since she was in her thirties: a practical woman who wears a uniform of knit shirts, sweaters over turtlenecks in the winters, and requisite khaki pants. She wears practical shoes and has a short practical hairstyle. Like painters grow into themselves, adults grow into their own personal styles, their own ways to do their hair and their own uniform. But back then, I imagine her as a little more unfinished.

She developed a routine, a way to get her farmwork done and make time pass. She spent the summer planting or weeding and eventually picking beans and corn in the mornings. In the afternoons, she went swimming in a pond on the property to cool off on especially hot days. Each evening, she would walk to an overlook at the edge of the property that looked out over a river gorge, deep and full of forest. There she watched the sunset and played a bamboo flute, a habit she still carries with her. Every week or so, she and the other workers took the veggies to market in an ancient pickup.

Through it all, though she lived with other people, she was essentially alone, partnerless. I can't imagine her without a partner or without desiring one. But when she tells me about her pregnancy it takes on the air of this crazy mystical time that though was pretty bad—lack of security, home, money—had this base of love. Maybe it is time that makes her think of it this way, for her to say that she was so happy to be carrying a baby and so excited to have me. But all I can think of is what existential fear and dread she must have felt.

My room at Thomas and Julia's had stone walls, two twin beds with thin blue blankets on them, a desk, and a window that looked out on a small rocky pasture where a solitary horse grazed. Beyond the pasture was the forest, not a wilderness but dotted with settlements, big families holed up in little houses, a goat in a dirt yard, scavenger dogs.

The earth under Honduras is home to a number of brightly colored clays, from earth tones—sepia, burnt orange, browns, and dusty yellows—to bright blues and reds and deep muted purples. The blues were the rarest. A young pregnant mestizo girl sat under a tarp next door to the house and spent her days grinding the dry clay samples down into fine powders. I went over there sometimes to sit with her and try to communicate with a basic *hola* and *como estas* and she would answer or usually just look at me with a smile on her face, *si, si* or *bien, bien*. One of the nonprofit's major projects was to gather clay samples from all over the country and grind them into a fine powder that could subsequently be used as the pigment and base in making paint or pastels.

Later, I sorted small baggies of powdered clay by color and origin. Each bag had a sample smudge of what the color would look like mixed into paint on it and beside it the name of its origin, what town it was found in. A lot of the samples were from the same towns or region. I sat in the upstairs office area on the floor with the open doors out to a porch letting in fresh air and sun. I looked out at the road as I sat there surrounded by these bags of colors.

My experience was tri-fold: wonder and intensely wanting to go home and not knowing exactly where home was. That was scary. After a few weeks in Honduras my normally baggy shorts wouldn't zip up. I tied them together with a length of string underneath my t-shirt. At night, I started sleeping on my side with a pillow between my knees, a habit I wouldn't lose.

Julia and Thomas went to an American church on Sundays in Tegucigalpa. On the way, they dropped me off at *La Pastelaria Franscesca* a couple of weeks after I'd arrived. I ordered café con leche and a buttery croissant and sat in the courtyard behind the bakery. Three or four wrought iron tables stood on a concrete patio. No one else was there. Green grass surrounded the patio and in the corner stood a large mango tree. Tall concrete walls surrounded the courtyard.

Sitting out there with half a cup of cold café con leche on the table, writing a letter on my airmail stationary, I paused and wondered if I had died—it seemed that I was suddenly so disconnected from my previous life that I may not even be the same person and may never return to the life that I lived. Something that only in this quiet I could feel.

I walked over to the mango tree. In the grass the fallen yellow, green, and orange mangos looked like eggs. I picked one up, feeling for ripeness and chose one that felt good enough to eat. I looked and saw a tiny white airplane far up in the sky. I truly wondered if I was dead, if my old life was over and if I could ever return or if I would be here in this country where I didn't understand the language at all.

Disconnection, dislocation, metamorphosis. The words couldn't explain. I was growing into someone else. As I stood there in the green grass I could see inside the bakery, its dark interior, a door swung open to let in a breeze. Inside the darkness a couple of women worked wordlessly, laying out trays of cakes, scones, and croissants.

The days passed slowly. I wasn't happy but I still tried to and sometimes succeeded in having a good time. I walked a lot. The men called out; the older women looked hard. Maybe they wondered who I was. Thomas and Julia may have been my aunt and uncle. My husband may have died and I came here to mourn with my distant cousins. I could take on any identity I wanted. But most definitely, I was a woman down on her luck or a bold woman without care for what anyone thought. I had to convince myself of some story to stave off the awful, existential feeling of taking this trip for no reason other than partitioning off a small chunk of time to keep emptiness away and postpone the inevitable, when I would have to go back to the states and start some kind of life. That nine months was going to end whether I liked it or not, I would have a baby, and not everything was under my control. This was my way of slowing down the process, but I started to feel so heavy, so rootless, like I wasn't doing what I should be doing.

I became oblivious to the onlookers, wearing sunglasses and not looking at anyone. Except kids. They ran in packs; they were like little animals.

Walking up and down these mountainous gravel roads was all I could do, the only thing to keep me sane, searching out bromeliads, strangler figs, macaws in the treetops. I climbed up steep ravines and held onto vines. When I wasn't walking, I wanted to sleep or I just laid on the bed and thought of everything that was wrong: where was I going to live? How was I going to take care of a baby? But the thought of having to give the baby up for adoption would kill me. I hadn't really considered it as an option and now I only thought of adoption as a last resort, what could happen if I somehow didn't get my life together. I imagined myself doing so and then self destructing, wanting a drug like heroin and then dying from exposure somewhere, not caring.

Have you ever seen the fruit of a cashew? The nut's poisonous encasement looks like a mushy sweet pepper with a little gushy purple stem. Inside that stem is where the cashew's smooth fatty flesh lies.

We ate: neighbors sold us a canvas bag full of raw cocoa beans to sell to us. We laid them out, each one about the size of a large cockroach, round and oblong like a football vitamin. We laid them out on the concrete patio next to the house to dry in the sun all day. If you walked up and down the road you'd see neighbors doing the same thing. They turn from red to brown. Then roast the beans in the oven, slowly, on low heat; then grind them and then make cake. Exquisite, the ground beans fall to the bottom but still delicious. Like a drug, more so than any chocolate I've ever had. *Can you imagine what it would be like to grow up here? Maybe I'd start a business, making my own chocolate bars and exporting them to the USA. You could play soccer and speak Spanish. Maybe I'd teach at the American school. Each place has its own dream, you know. These places can tie you in; people can tie you in too. Leaving you feeling turned around and wondering what your intentions were from the start.*

Rosalita, the maid, and I made bread together and listened to Thomas and Julia's Bob Dylan and I thought he was singing about me: "she's got everything she needs, she's an artist, she don't look back."

How can you feel, so young, out in the world—on your own—and so jaded? Like you've done it too many times? So ready to just give up and stop looking around? One morning, I awoke and lay in bed feeling the little kicks from the baby as he turned from side to side. I felt

him spinning upside down and swinging back up, an elbow poking to the surface of my stretched skin. I stared at the ceiling, my shirt up and the sheets down around my hips, the blankets swirling around me as the baby moved. The early gray light moved in from the window and I waited for the sound of Rosalita starting the coffee.

In a way, I felt lucky to be pregnant, to use fatigue as an excuse for lying in bed for half of the day. To have an excuse to be taken care of—to need to be taken care of, to be rendered helpless. An excuse for crying and being emotional, for singing off-key pop songs to the horse in the field behind the house. *Don't go chasing waterfalls, just stick to the rivers and the streams that you're used to.* I had to make no more pretenses at being even slightly independent.

How many ways there are to carry a child. A woman laying in a bed, just like me, staring at the ceiling but wearing a wedding band and a diamond ring. A woman laying on a mat on the ground in one of the shacks outside of Tegucigalpa, three other children asleep beside her. She stares at the flapping of the tarp and the bright early morning sky outside. A woman laying in the open air staring at the sky above. Children welcomed into these shiftless, unfinished worlds. Coming into the mother's life mid-sentence: conceived before she's sure she's fallen in love, but with the burden of choice as well as its freedom. The freedom to create a disaster, to venture out into the world alone like this.

He stopped kicking. I turned on my side and closed my eyes. I fell asleep and dreamed I was driving a huge old car and trying to back that car into the driver's seat of another car.

At the end of August all the other people living at Gordon's farm moved out. Most were students and most headed back to school or wherever they were living. She didn't have anywhere to go back to so she stayed on with only the horses, chickens, and a stray dog named Alpha for company. She decided to move out of the little outbuilding into the main house. The day that she was moving, taking a trip from the main house back to the outbuilding to get her things she saw a giant black snake stretched out across the threshold, blocking her way. She panicked, no time for realizing that the snake was harmless, but only feeling scared out of her mind and it all added itself up: being out there on the farm alone, pregnant, and how was she going to deal with what, snakes? What else could happen? Get stung by a black widow, come across a mountain lion? All kinds of things could happen. Fires in the night, burglars and robbers.

She called a neighbor and he came over with most of his family in tow to cheer him on as he assessed the situation and then chopped the snake's head off. It was through the kindness of these neighbors and other neighbors that she was able to make it through, for a while. She befriended an old man named Randall who took her out ginseng hunting, or sangin', in the mountains. He showed her how to bag it, dry it, and send it off to a company to make money. A hundred bucks—and it seemed like a fortune.

That fall she continued her walks. She still played her flute at the overlook watching the sunset. Below her in the gorge, the trees sang into purples, yellows, oranges, and reds. The woods grew quieter as it seemed like everyone was leaving, people, animals, birds, all were hunkering down, finding their nests and storing themselves for the coming winter. But

sometimes those things can be ignored. Just go, just trust, just do the day to day thing, live in the present, play the flute and watch the sunset as the entire world completely changed.

But the poverty and loneliness set her on edge. Frayed her just a bit. The push to leave came when someone started calling and hanging up when she answered the phone. A lot. It spooked her and she decided it was time to go.

Two of Gordon's friends offered to let her stay with them in their home on the Kentucky River in the central part of the state. So she packed up her few belongings, got a ride, and moved on again. As she said, the future was a huge unknown and the present was trying. She didn't have a job or money. She cleaned houses from time to time, got food stamps, and stayed on the river, walking, looking at the water.

One day towards the beginning of my stay in Honduras, Thomas and I had walked a pretty good distance and landed in another valley and in another little village beneath the mountains of Piliguin. The day was overcast. Slivers of thin white clouds lay against the jungle-covered mountains that surrounded the town. We walked through a field toward a diminutive chapel whose white plaster was falling off in sheets around its base. It looked abandoned. Thomas knelt down to the ground. "See this little plant?" he said, pointing to a small weed with tiny green leaflets.

I knelt down.

"It's called a sensitive plant. Touch it."

I put my finger on a front and the leaflets closed toward one another like rows of praying hands.

We stood up. “That’s cool,” I said.

“See that chapel? This valley has a pretty sacred history.” Then he told me the story of the chapel and the Virgin. I’m telling this story here, but with the flourishes that come with time and translation. This story is loosely based on what may not be a true story.

It began with a shepherd that lived in this valley a long time ago. The shepherd lay down to sleep in his field one night. The Virgin Maria Suyapa statue banged him on the head, waking him, and then fell into his hands. He rubbed his eyes, not understanding this apparition, this statue, near broken and scarred, now laying in his arms like a new born baby. All around him, his sheep slept peacefully and when he looked up at the sky, the stars seemed to gaze down lovingly at the tiny statue in his arms. He sat up and got a good look at it. She was small, about the size of a doll-baby. The paint on her surface was chipped and the orange clay of her fired-body shone through where the purple, sepia, and white paint had faded. But she had this glow about her. He was then convinced that it must be a miracle. He brought it back to his village where Thomas and I stood hundreds of years later. He brought it to his family and they took it rightly as a sign and placed her upon an alter. As time passed, the virgin blessed this valley more than any other valley ever. And did the virgin bless that valley! Once the people built the Virgin Maria Suyapa her own chapel, the farmers’ carrots in the high hills grew so plump, so fast that the farmers’ wagons couldn’t contain all of them. They were the sweetest carrots in the land and made the farmers very rich. The shepherd prospered as well. His sheep provided the finest wool that commanded a high price and was sought by noblemen across the land.

The Virgin became more popular as word of her benefice spread to neighboring valleys and lands. But then. The bishop came to the village one day after hearing rumors. He carried her

off in his fancy cart to the sound of the villagers weeping as they watched the virgin go, all the while the bishop promising to place her in the biggest cathedral in the land. After the bishop swept the Virgin away, desolation besot the land and the farmers' carrots lost their sweetness and the shepherd's sheep's wool grew courser and soon stopped growing all together. All in the valley mourned the departure of the Virgin Maria Suyapa.

Not long after the Virgin left the valley, her colors faded and her miraculous powers diminished.

Hundreds of years later, the Virgin disappeared from that cathedral and lo and beyond, reappeared many years later in a men's bathroom in a restaurant in Tegucigalpa. It lay on the floor beneath the urinal, still busted and still broken but intact and suddenly glowing.

If there is a truer legend, a more accepted version of the story, the one put into print, rather than recalled through two sets of memory, then it would be the following. Here's what happened. In February of 1747, a farmer named Alejandro Colindres and an eight-year-old boy were returning home from a hard day of harvesting maize. It was dark and they were sleepy so they found a cozy spot on the side of the road where they rested until morning.

Something woke Colindres in the middle of the night, something sticking in his side. He grabbed whatever it was and threw it. He then went back to sleep, only to be awoken again by something jabbing him in the same spot. Without thinking, he grabbed the object and stuck it in his bag then went back to sleep.

He had forgotten about the object until the next day, when digging around in his bag, he found it, pulled it out and realized that it was the Virgin. She had a purple face and stood only a little over two inches tall. Colindres took it to his mother and she kept it in her house. In time,

the Virgin's reputation grew as a possessor of miracles and healing abilities. The statue's fame spread. When the Virgin healed a wealthy landowner of his kidney stones in 1768 he built a temple in her honor. She is still kept in that temple to this day, though a larger basilica has been built in front of the temple. She is now the patron saint of Honduras.

According to a 2000 article by Billy Weiss in *Honduras This Week*, "the statue has been stolen twice, most notoriously in September 1986, when it turned up several hours later, wrapped in newspaper, in the men's room of La Terraza de Don Pepe, a popular downtown restaurant."

That summer Alphie Mae died. She'd been living in a nursing home for the last nine years of her life and had been made infantile by Alzheimer's disease. She hated being there. When she was in her eighties, she climbed a fence, trying to escape. I just have childhood memories of visiting her house: a bowl of plastic fruit on the kitchen table and talk about the possibility that Alphie Mae might accidentally consume the rat poison she used in her kitchen. I didn't fly back for the funeral. My family said it didn't matter that much, that she'd been dead for a long time in the spiritual sense. Sarah and Lily sang Amazing Grace at the funeral.

It stormed each afternoon. By sunset, the clouds parted, letting through lavender, orange, and pink rays of sunlight. The plants around the house grew huge and swollen with fruit or flower; frogs and lizards littered the sidewalks. Giant roaches gnawed on the piles of fruit slowly rotting in baskets in the kitchen. Our clothes and sheets mildewed and more of the wild inhabited my room: scorpions, giant spiders, and bats. I grew too; my belly grew to the size of a cantaloupe and then a small watermelon seemingly overnight.

I spent my days putting gold leaf on Thomas's wooden frames to frame his work in, but I worked slowly, pausing for five minutes sometimes just to sit and stare at the wall or run my fingers along the paper-thin gold.

One evening, Sarah and Thomas had friends over for dinner, an American herpetologist, Travis, and Wilhelmina, a Honduran biologist who was also Travis' shy wife. Travis was large and brought a jug of rum with him. He told us stories of chasing down crocodiles and facing off poisonous snakes. Wilhelmina didn't say much but rather looked down and answered Thomas and Julia's questions with quiet monosyllabic answers in a Spanish I didn't quite understand.

By the end of our dinner everyone was drinking small glasses of rum. Travis poured me a little glass, claiming that *all* European women drank during their pregnancies. They all cheered me on. "Okay, just one," I said. Just once and return to the heavy business of being serious about *embarazo*. I swallowed the rum quickly. It warmed as it went down.

A guy that lived down the road took me out one night. I wasn't sure if he knew I was pregnant or not when he asked. But he had to, how could he not? He was the son of an old American man that had come down to Honduras, started a new life with a young wife and had two toddlers. The guy was twenty-eight and lived, most of the time, in New Mexico. We went to a club—the one club that I'd been to already in Tegucigalpa—where *punta* plus bass thumped and the floor was crowded with moving, sweaty bodies. He danced with me, but then rubbing his hands along my belly and then in the car, trying just between my legs, not even kissing me. I pushed him away.

On the way back to Thomas and Julia's after a visit to a doctor's office, I saw a car parked by the side of the road that looked like the one my best friend in high school used to drive, a faded maroon Plymouth Reliant. It was old then, and even older now. I imagined that it was her car down here and I imagined what path that car would have to take to end up here, on the side of the road. When my friend owned it, she picked me up and we drove to school together, smoking cigarettes and eating twenty-five cent Little Debbie Snacks for breakfast. We rode with the windows down in the summer, music streaming out of the windows. Then, she left for college and the car faded, perhaps sold to a neighbor and then perhaps to a Mexican that drove the car clear down to Oaxaca where he had a nice homecoming. Then someone stole it, hijacked it, and carried it to Honduras after getting bullets shot through the windows in the Guatemalan highlands and here it sat, not running or barely running.

Thomas drove me back to the airport. It was a lot like the drive when I arrived. We hadn't grown too close. I was ready to go and I imagine that he and Julia were ready for me to leave too. "Here we are," he said when we stood there in the lobby. "I guess this is it." He looked at his watch. "You have a little time. Want to eat some lunch?"

"No, not really. I just want to sit and wait for the plane. Spend some time alone." I wore a dress that a previous intern had left behind, a long, loose, green dress with tiny flowers on it. I wore a tingling ankle bracelet and pink flipflops. The dress fit like a maternity dress and at this point there was no deception, I couldn't pretend I wasn't pregnant any longer. I definitely looked it. I couldn't much pretend I was something that I wasn't any longer either. I was traveling alone. I'd come to notice wedding bands, who had them and who didn't. I'd come to

see that my lack of one and my solitary travel signified something. That I was no longer someone on her way to becoming something, but I definitely had a new identity.

“Let’s wrap up your luggage, come on,” Thomas said. He picked up one of my two bags; I picked up the other and followed him as he walked toward a man with a giant roll of blue cellophane attached to some sort of cutter, like a giant case of Saran Wrap.

“What’s this?”

“You never know what can happen to your luggage. If someone will open it up, try to steal something—“

“There’s nothing there to steal.”

“—or try to put something in your bag.”

“But I don’t need that.”

“Hey. Come on. It’s my treat.”

I gave in. “Okay.” The man wrapped both of my bags in layers and layers of the blue plastic.

## FATHERS

Until I was ten years old I thought at George, who we called Papa, was my father. Then I came across a letter that he and stepmother, Lisa, had written and sent to my mother. *Dear Diary, I over read a note from Lisa and Papa it was about me. It said that I should have a chose[sic] to go there or not. This is what it means. They don't want me there because I'm not in their family. I bet the next thing they are going to say is I can't go to Florida.* We were going to Florida soon for vacation. My sisters and I had never been to the beach before and I really wanted to go. We just want her to have a choice, they wrote, she can visit us if she wants to or she doesn't have to. I took that as a blade.

My mom married George when I was nine months old. They married and their marriage lasted a good seven years until it disintegrated. My mom said she wished I wouldn't have found out the way I did. That there was probably a better way to go about it but none of us knew of one. After I found out that I had another, at least biological if nothing more, father out there, my mother took me up into the attic and showed me a picture she'd sketched of him. "I drew this back when we were together," she said, "I don't know why I've held onto it, maybe just so you could see it someday. His name was Philip." She pulled a smudged charcoal sketch out of an old scratched-up portfolio of a man with dark eyes and dark hair, non-descript features and a buttoned up shirt.

She told me that when I was born Philip came to the hospital with pot brownies; she refused them. She never saw him again until she went to court to get child support when I was a teenager. We took DNA tests. When I was sixteen we met for the first time. “He’s changed,” my mom said, since she knew him when they were younger, “my guess is that it hurts him still.”

He had written me a couple of letters. He told me he was living in Ohio, that he worked on something called the world wide web, had I ever heard of it? His wife, Cindy, took photographs for textbooks and they had a little daughter and a son on the way. He was thirty-six.

He drove down to our house on a gray day in February. I imagine that his wife patted his leg on the way and said it would be okay, asking him how he felt about the whole thing. I can imagine her shock in finding out he had a daughter, or had she known all along? Had he told her before they married that he had gotten a woman pregnant when he was twenty? Did he tell her that she had the baby and kept it and that he saw me once in the hospital and that’s it? If so, what did she say? After sixteen years he would have to admit, yes, I am her father. Face it, Cindy may have told him after they’d put their own daughter to bed, face it.

He arrived at our house that day in his maroon minivan bearing gifts: a Cannon thirty-five millimeter camera and a subscription to *Scientific American* along with the most recent issue in hand. Cindy must have been in a motel or at Denny’s or something, because I don’t remember her being there. My mom walked me out to the driveway, where he stood. She said a brisk hello, he nodded back, then she gave me a hug and walked back into the house. He wore a windbreaker and glasses. A mole beside his mouth. He was tall and stood a little bit hunched

over, like he wasn't comfortable with his size. He wore jeans and running shoes on his slightly pigeon-toed feet. I wore Papa's old blue jean jacket and a full face of makeup.

We stood around awkwardly in the driveway. The air wasn't hot or cold and the clouds were thick and unmoving. "Well, hello," he said, "I'm Philip and I'm, you know, your father."

"I know who you are," I said. We just stood there making polite conversation about what, I cannot say. I imagine my mom inside, looking out the window.

Philip rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. He patted his arms against his side. "So, you want to go get pizza or something?"

"Sure," I said. I didn't have much to say.

I directed him to Pizza Hut as we drove into town. We arrived, sat down, and ordered.

"So your mom tells me that you like science?"

"I guess so." I suddenly hated science.

"And you're on the track team?"

"Yes."

"I run too, you know. I run on my lunch break with some guys I work with."

"Neat," I said.

I sat there, the *Scientific American* in front of me. I opened it, flipped through the pages, saw advertisements for cameras and minivans, pictures of space and bacteria.

"Do you like the magazine?"

"Yeah. It's pretty good."

"You know, because your mom said you were into science and all. I thought you'd like a science magazine."

“I’m sure I’ll like it,” I said, still flipping through the pages.

“It’s the best one.” He had this way of looking into the space slightly above my head, like he was trying to see me but was looking a little bit off in the distance. He didn’t know what to say and neither did I. Maybe that was genetic.

Our pizza arrived and we ate in silence.

“Here’s a picture of me,” he said, handing me a glossy snapshot. The picture was of his head and shoulders, a smile into the camera. Behind him everything looked green and shaded in muted light. His eyes behind his glasses were like mine, dark and the same shape and his jaw line angular, like an upside down triangle, just like mine. We sat there, me now with the picture. “Here’s a picture of my daughter. She’s almost two. Her name is Caroline.” he said and handed me a studio portrait of a baby girl, smiling in a corduroy Christmas dress. She too had the same dark eyes.

“Do you have a picture for me?” he asked, timidly.

“No, I didn’t think of bringing one.” Later—not at that moment—I would recognize the irony. The trails of two daughters, one with and one without the corduroy dress and her place in her dad’s wallet. And after recognizing that ironic fate-twist, much later, I would stop with the bitterness and throw away the indictment that no, it wasn’t fair. But ambivalence ruled as well—if I had my choice, I wouldn’t have picked this guy. I’d have picked someone rich and exiting who would come to his senses and love me only, take me off to live in a mansion on the California coast.

“Maybe you can send me some pictures you take with your new camera.”

“Sure” I said. I never sent any.

The server cleared our plates away. I looked down at his hands, seeing they were just like mine, and it was then that time bumped, like a CD skipping. I suddenly hid my own hands and wanted to get out of there.

When I was a child, I remember my grandmother and my mother talking about my hands. “Look at those long fingers,” one of them said, “you could be a piano player. Or a writer.”

I never learned how to play the piano, not formally anyway. We got a piano and I would spend hours playing it, just making stuff up and getting lost in the sound of the keys. But it never went anywhere.

Seeing Philip’s hands there in front of me—long, slim fingers, his hands thin and delicate—gave me a shock of recognition that I didn’t want. That my uniqueness came from somewhere.

When we got back to my house, he brought out his camcorder and filmed me standing in the driveway next to my mother’s minivan. I waved hesitantly, smiling a little bit and wanting this filming to be over right away. He put the camcorder on a tripod and filmed us standing next to each other—perhaps to note the resemblance, to have some record of his nearly-grown not-quite-daughter. He put his arm around me. I could feel his hand resting lightly on my back and I looked into the lens, both of us, with what I imagine were forced, tentative smiles. I waved into the camera. He did too. Then he packed it up. Checked his watch and said it was time to leave. We hugged each other, a light hug, both of us seemingly unsure in our own skin and even more unsure about each other. Perhaps we both wanted this moment to be over as quickly as possible, at least I did.

He, the person, didn't mean much. Sure, it would have been cool if I would have discovered a different kind of father, one that puts his kids through college or who harasses his daughter's dates, but maybe those kinds of fathers don't just appear after sixteen years.

Fathers: I never knew quite what to think of them, how to understand them and their role. Mothers were a constant imperfection. My own mother was around, I was tied to her and even though I hated so much of our relationship, there was no getting loose. What I learned was that mothers stayed. They had to stay. And fathers, I don't know, maybe the string wasn't as tight, the rope frayed. And rationally I knew there are different fathers out there but I couldn't get it, couldn't understand what a good father looked like. I could hypothesize: the bond has to be cultivated; it isn't inherent.

After the letter incident, I didn't stop going to see Papa and Lisa. My mom had a big confrontation with them, telling them how hurtful the whole thing had been when I found the letter. They said of course I could still come over; it's just that Lisa had a lot to deal with, taking care of us and her own children while my dad worked. They said they didn't mean it in a negative way. But still, I wondered.

## LEAVING MAINE

Lisa married Papa when I was nine and she was twenty-years-old.

He was thirty-one, freshly divorced from my mom and deposited into a trailer in the middle of a plant nursery—balled-and-burlaped-trees and three-gallon shrub pots surrounded the white trailer. My sisters and I spent every weekend at his house and we slept on a fold-out couch in the living room. I remember meeting Lisa one morning as she was sitting at the kitchen table in a maroon robe with headphones on her ears and a Walkman in her lap, smoking a Virginia Slim. Her blond-headed one-year-old son, ran around the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets. She'd gotten married at sixteen and after abuse and drama, left him and moved to Lexington. Her first date with Papa: this is family lore. He picks her up in his worn-out black work van and once she's situated in her seat he says, "You know, I'm looking for someone to marry."

She said okay and a year later they married in Lisa's aunt's backyard; she was six months pregnant in a blue and white striped sundress; he wore blue jeans and a white button up shirt. All of the children were there: four of us so far and one all the way. Lisa says that ever since she was a girl she knew she'd marry a man named George and have five children. We were her's, she said, to the chagrin of my mother.

She came to get us in early August, driving twenty-four hours north with Lily in the passenger's seat of the minivan. Lisa was eleven years younger than my mother. She was pretty,

with long straight brown hair and blue eyes. After she and Papa married, I hung around with her much of the time, going to the grocery store with her, basically following her around. My mom must have felt like Lisa followed her around, got in her dirt and always knew what was happening. Waiting to rescue.

The summer when I was away in Honduras, my family's lives were all in flux. I wondered if there was some astrological explanation for these events, something that made all of our lives change at the same time. Soon after Lily graduated from high school, my mom left for Maine. Lily could have gone but didn't want to go. She didn't want to go to college, didn't want to get a job, and didn't want to leave town.

I wasn't there when my mom and Sarah drove the moving van away from my mom's house in Danville. My mother sold most of her belongings and then divvied up the kitchenware we grew up with between my sisters and me, packing it up into neat little boxes to be stored at my grandparents' house until we needed it. My grandmother, the documentarian, was there though, taking pictures the entire time. My mother looked out the driver's seat window of the yellow Penske van, waving. Her smile, wide, lipsticked. Sarah looked out at the camera from the passenger seat with her sunglasses on, waving like she is starting a new life as well. My grandmother took a picture of Lily sitting on the back stoop of the house. She wore a bandana over her closely-cropped hair, a loose white t-shirt, and faded boy jeans. In the picture she is blowing cigarette smoke out of her mouth and isn't exactly smiling. She was reluctantly moving on—she would stay with friends, on their couches. Her stuff was packed. She would spend the summer traveling, riding out to California to smoke kind bud with the Marin County kids; she

would go down to Tennessee to hang out in somebody's parents' basement. They drove down that curvy gravel road out of the farm, honking the horn to get the donkeys out of the way. A new beginning, as fresh as a new morning shower.

My mom moved in with Basil, in his house on the coast, surrounded by his small empire—campground, motel, and campstore. The locals prided themselves on the fact that the sun rose first in Eastport, the most easterly point on the east coast of the United States. People in this area like to eat bean hole beans, something Sarah and I couldn't stop laughing about. And bean hole beans, in our opinion, were flat out nasty. They dug a pit in the ground, started a fire down in that pit, let the fire burn to hot coals, lowered their bean pot down into the hole, and covered it with dirt. Cooked the beans all day.

Sarah had been there for much of the summer, working the cash register at the camp store and cleaning the motel rooms. She lived in Basil's house where she and my mom moved in when they arrived. But—Sarah wouldn't stay. She'd just come for the summer and would go back to college in the fall.

When I arrived at the compound, I started working the register for minimum wage. The job was easy, too easy. It was my first time making minimum wage ever, and working eight hours for about forty or so dollars. I moved into a Spartan-style room above the campstore, complete with fake wood paneling and a cheap bed covered with a thin bedspread. My mom said I could move into the house when Sarah left.

“But you don't want to do that,” Sarah said, “You can hear everything that goes on between those two. And they fight too.” When we weren't busy, Sarah and I sat around and drank soda until it was time for her to take a clean load of sheets and cleaning supplies down to

the motel rooms. Sarah's long, curly hair was her defining feature. She had pale perfect skin and big lips—people would joke that she had a black daddy, that there was something else going on in the family tree and all of it came out in Sarah, with her kinky curly hair and big lips. She said Basil was always making eyes at her.

Eastport stood in stark contrast to Honduras. The ocean, within short walking distance, was cold, rocky, and choppy. Before I'd left Honduras, Thomas, Julia, and I went to the Pacific Coast for a short vacation along the Gulf of Fonseca. Volcanoes surrounded the placid gulf, the waters warm and sand black. Thomas and I took a little boat to an island not too far off the coast. There we spent much of the day. As he explored the beach I laid in the sand on my belly, digging a hole in the sand to make room for it. A couple of men watched me from the water like alligators. When I went for a swim they circled, asking me to marry them. I told them no and to go away.

Thomas found little blue starfish along the beach. "Here you go," he said, handing me one. "Take it, a souvenir for you."

"But is it alive?"

"Yeah, I think so." He put it in my hand. It was the size of my palm with long, thin rays.

"Then I don't want to kill it." I threw it back into the water.

My mom sat by the water a lot, or she sat in Basil's house beside his big windows that looked out on the sea. There she painted watercolor images of the sea verging into abstraction. This land and water fed her, the black rocks and the blue water crashing against them. It was too cold for me. Or—again, like in Honduras—I wasn't looking to enjoy the scenery. I was seven and a half months a long, now in Maine and feeling really awkward about the whole situation.

Sarah and I complained like crazy about the store and about Basil. We compared our measly paychecks. She seemed to be doing fine before I came along, but when we came together; our singular complaints became a movement.

I wanted to leave. From Sarah's account, Basil and our mom were unsteady and even so, my mom and I hadn't been that close and to have her to lean on only, out here where the nearest little town was thirty miles away, where the winters would snow us under, just me, mom, and Basil—and baby, of course—yikes.

“She's not happy,” Sarah said one day referring to our mother, and actually she said it a lot.

For the first time in a long time she didn't have to support herself. She could sit and paint. She didn't have to take care of children. But it wouldn't last. She'd fallen in love with Maine a year before during a vacation. Maybe she got the man mixed up with the place.

Sarah and I convinced Lisa to come get us. It wasn't too difficult. We could have left on our own but neither one of us had cars. A little bit stranded. I'd been independent but found myself no longer. And now, I was leaning on everyone, needing a place to stay and feeling more like an object rather than a person.

Lisa and Lily waited in Basil's living room for Sarah and I to get our things together. I looked in the mirror when I was getting ready that morning; my face looked naked and pink, my eyes puffy. I knew that a crying pregnant woman was a stereotype. That I was expected to be moody and unpredictable. And I was. Not having a place to put all of those emotions proved

to be difficult. Maybe it steeled me though; if I could get through this time then I could do anything alone. Boot camp.

There are these schools of thought that suggest that a mother's emotions go straight to her unborn child when she is pregnant. Years later, I went to a Buddhist retreat in southern Colorado and there all of the adult participants were led to do a regression in which our current selves were led backwards to before we were born. Before we began I didn't believe in it, I thought it was something silly. And I'm not sure if what I experienced was real or imagined. I wrote this about the experience in my journal: *empty space around me and then the mother that contained me, her around me, her thoughts and feelings coming down to me—of jealousy, sadness, loss, and wanting something she can't have. I realized that I've been trying to relive my mother's life and relive it better.*

And at the same time, when I was pregnant, I felt a similar desperation, a fear that things would not work out. I worried about what I was passing onto my own child because I rarely felt calm and content, but rather always felt an underlying anxiety. And though I wasn't with Jeff, I still thought of him and longed for him. I tried to shake it, so I wouldn't pass all of these feelings along, but I couldn't. I hoped there was an innate goodness deep within me, somewhere that I didn't know about, couldn't find to wreck, that he'd receive. I'd hoped that all of this emotional passing in utero was all conjecture.

Years later, I would get mad at my mother, telling her how my childhood had screwed up my life and how messed up I was because of her—that whatever mistakes I had made rested

solely on her shoulders. She would say she was sick of people blaming their problems on their parents and childhoods. That no parent was perfect.

Back in the living room, Lisa took pictures of Sarah and Lily looking serious-straight into the camera, their identically faces and different hair, Lily's now short blond spikes, Sarah's long curls. Lisa turned the camera on me and I begged it away, sticking my hand out to stop her but she took a picture anyway. My mother busied herself in the background of Lisa's new scene, of her heroic intervention. I imagine her washing breakfast dishes, her head down, clearing her throat, smoothing back her hair, going into the bathroom to put on fresh lipstick. And if, if it was true at that moment, that she and Basil weren't working out, yet this was her stake, her holdout and her retreat she must have thought this was not supposed to happen this way. Lisa wasn't supposed to be up here with all three of my daughters, who come and go and come and go again, in a month or less, here they come and there they go, and there is Lisa the hero taking them back to Kentucky.

I was antsy. I stood in the middle of the living room. My mother wiped the dishes dry and didn't look at us. Sarah and Lily sat together on the couch in front of the picture window with the foggy sea and gray sky behind them. Our suitcases and duffel bags and pillows were loaded up into the back of Lisa's minivan, snacks in the front seat. Lily leaned her head back in some laid-back smile. My mom asked if everything was okay for her, sure, she said, sure it is, and she went out to smoke a cigarette.

"We'd best get on the road," said Lisa. My mom finished with the dishes and ran her hand through her hair, mushing it up a bit. I put on Matt's old fleece. We walked out the door,

hugging my mom good bye, she trying not to cry, us trying not to make it look like we were too happy.

“She didn’t even wave goodbye to us, didn’t even see us off,” Sarah said, looking out the back window of the minivan. I looked back too and there stood Basil’s house getting smaller behind us as we curved around the driveway and out onto the main road.

## THE FARM

There are certain passages in life that are heavy. Having a baby, for instance, is one. If you be a total paddy-ass all your life they're going to have to knock you out when you have your kid, because you're going to be too chicken to have it. And if you do something that builds character ahead of time you'll have enough character that you can have that kid, and it will be a beautiful and a spiritual experience for you.

--Stephen Gaskin, from *Spiritual Midwifery*

Max Weber said that "in contrast to, say, the hermit or the migrant, the utopian rejects his world by seeking to transform it." Utopia means not a place, a place that does not exist. Maybe the virtue of even attempting to create a utopia is trying to bring a fantasy to life, to change the world and make it how you'd like it to be, but on a much grander scale than a happy family, a work of art, or a beautiful and useful building. Rather, create a new world of people, not messy like we all are, but fresh and pure and whole. To bring the afterlife to reality.

If Gaskin was a utopian and if I've never really known a true hermit, then I was and am a migrant. I rejected small worlds. Later I learned but couldn't accept that people have to settle. Become a part of something. But then, migrating was the cheapest way to go. It costs but it bled me out so slowly that I never saw that I was aging, deflating the balloon. Migrating, though it is

hard on the body, is easier than staying put. Migrating is full of promise and change and fleeing. Easier than transforming.

We, this family, are migrants. We don't quite have the power to create the utopias we visit. If we did, we would make them small, comfortable household-size utopias and there we would hunker down like hermits.

When my mom was a few months pregnant she got ahold of Ina May Gaskin's *Spiritual Midwifery* and was hooked on wanting a natural childbirth. *Spiritual Midwifery* was and still is a homebirth icon. The book is hippie-handmade, if it were a blanket it would be a patchwork quilt, frayed at the edges, made out of old t-shirts and blue jeans. In it, there are pictures of births taken at the Farm in the 1970s. In many of them the woman giving birth is naked, being held by her husband and surrounded by several women. The Farm, a one-time commune and vision of Stephen Gaskin, spiritual leader and husband to Ina May, is now a smaller, less communistic, more capitalistic incarnation of its prior self in Summertown, Tennessee. During my pregnancy, I found *Spiritual Midwifery* at a Barnes and Noble. Though I never bought the book, I would return to it again and again and buy it, eventually, eight years later. While I was pregnant, a certain picture drew me in. In it, a man and pregnant woman and two children all sit naked on a bed together. They sit Indian-style, smiling and mellow in low light. Looking—if you'll excuse my language—completely beatific.

The book is full of birth stories with women talking about how “heavy” the birthing process is but that it can also be a really “stoned” experience, bordering on ecstasy when done right. It can be downright orgasmic; husbands are encouraged to fondle their wives' breasts and

make out with them during the contractions, or “rushes.” Birth is described as a sacred spiritual experience that if a woman can handle can be one of the deepest, most meaningful experiences she will ever have. Ina May’s vision lay in direct contrast to hospital births of the day. In the hospitals, ladies were usually drugged up and didn’t know what was going on. The babies were whisked off after birth to be attended to, poked and prodded, and the mother was left to herself to recover.

There are all these books, *Spiritual Midwifery* is one of them, on how to have the keenest pregnancy, birth, and childhood possible. They detail some natural perfection, some ancient wisdom that has been doctored out of us through our collective affair with modernity. We’ve let go of our personal power, these books will tell us. *Magical Child* by Joseph Chilton Pierce is another one. I found it on my mom’s bookshelf. Published in seventy-seven, before he wrote the book Pierce’s wife died and he was left to raise four or five children on his own. He says have your children at home. He lays out a plan on what you need to do when raising children, otherwise they will grow up to be neurotic and never quite reach their spiritual potential. Then the *Continuum Concept* by Jean Liedloff. The same deal in both, we need to move back to this Edenic ideal of how to live. Let us look to the primitive people among us for clues. Some women had their babies alone out in the forest somewhere and after birthing their babies, with their instinctual knowledge of when and how to push at just the right time; they ate their placentas and slept peacefully out on the ground next to their bloody newborn. The mother then licked the baby clean, washed it with sparkly creek water and headed back home.

In 1974, the first Farm book was published by the Farm's own press, simply called The Book Publishing Company. In *Hey Beatnik! This is the Farm Book*, the midwives "made public their offer to mothers who desired to continue their pregnancy, even though they were unsure about keeping their babies," wrote Ina May in *Spiritual Midwifery*. The Farm instituted a program in which any single, pregnant woman could come and have her baby there. If the woman couldn't take care of her baby, she could leave it and have the option to come get the child whenever she was ready. The folks on the Farm weren't down with abortion and knew that there were still women getting pregnant and having to make difficult choices. They wanted to make it easier. Single pregnant women could live there, room and board provided for. The midwives would deliver their babies. During the 1970s, over three hundred single women delivered their babies at the Farm, yet only a couple of women ended up leaving them.

By 1976, homes for unwed mothers had fallen out of vogue. Following World War II and up until the early 1970s, these women and girls were stigmatized, either forced into quick marriages or hidden away and sent off to have their babies in maternity homes. Maybe unwed mothers needed to disappear, not only for themselves but for everyone else as well, to give their communities and families time to adjust. It doesn't matter what she did when she was gone. She could knit. She could pick beans or grind clay and watch American movies dubbed into Spanish. She could be cook a meal or eat a turkey sandwich in someone else's yard. But there was and is value in being away. And maybe, wherever she goes, the value of the experience would still be similar. She'll transform and that transformation could occur anywhere.

When my mom stepped out she was doing so on hope, maybe relying on some mystical hippie sense that everything falls together as it should, that God or the universe cares for the

lilies of the fields and the birds in the sky, and not the least, this solitary woman. Stepping forward into the fog hoping and maybe even knowing that she won't fall. And maybe it looked like twenty-two years later I was doing the same thing, that I felt that same trust but I didn't. I felt like things distinctly would not fall into place.

September 1976. She was due in November. Ticking. Through the Kentucky River folks she connected with a couple of women in Louisville who were planning to go down to The Farm to have their babies.

My mom decided to go with them. They headed south in late October. It was like the promised land. They thought they were coming to such a peaceful enclave, such a safe place to have a baby.

Stephen served as the spiritual leader of the community, which at the time there were 1200 members living on the Farm's 1750 acres. Long-time Farm member Albert Bates summed up Gaskin's spiritual philosophy as this:

The preeminent agreement was "We are all one." This one-ness was not limited to the human family, or some abstract love of one another. Farm members understood that matter and energy existed together in a kronon-to-kronon dance of existence and non-existence; that electrical fields co-penetrated; that boundaries between separate individuals literally did not exist.

The original Farm members arrived in Tennessee in 1971 armed with counter-culture glory and slowly learned, under guidance of Gaskin, that societies must have shapes. That "anything goes" wasn't a valid policy. Early on, Gaskin had rebelled against the idea of people

forming partnerships, coupling with one another. Said it would bring down the community, that people, when they got so involved with one person, would lose focus of the larger group and thus the community would disintegrate. There were even group marriages in the very beginning but that all stopped pretty quickly as the Farm's numbers kept growing. He reportedly told the group while they were in caravan before they actually settled the Farm that, "If you are sleeping together you're engaged; if you're pregnant, you're married." Sex was accepted only within the confines of a committed relationship. Sex, within marriage, was the path to higher spiritual growth. Thus it followed that giving birth was held in high esteem at the Farm, perhaps a woman's most righteous task.

The men spent their days working in the fields and in the automotive shop; they made tofu and harvesting sorghum. They went shirtless; they grew their beards. They grew strong and tan in the summer sun.

Many people shared a number of big houses on the land. The majority women spent their days in these homes. They gathered together in the mornings and spend the days cooking, cleaning, and taking care of other chores. They spent their days looking after the children that multiplied around them.

I imagine the single women coming to the farm and looking at these partnerships, being right up there with them in these communal households, and looking at them with longing. With wanting what these couples had and what the single woman didn't have. She did have a warm place to sleep but not the man rubbing her belly after he came home from the fields. She didn't have the same, self assured and self satisfied look that the married mothers had. She was precipitous, on the balance of two extremes, ready to fall to one side at any moment.

When my mother arrived, she didn't find things to be a rosy as she first thought they would be. "I thought they were a cult," my mom said, "Once I got there I saw how much control they exerted over other people's minds. It was regimented. The men and women divided like the Amish. Somewhere in there were good motives though. It was their own world though and definitely a strange place to be."

From the outside, the division of labor proved to be one of the most controversial aspects of the Farm. Tim Hodgdon wrote in *Manhood in the Age of Aquarius* that the women aged quickly on the Farm and didn't have much say, even if they were married. That they were relegated almost solely to the home and domesticity. That if you were outside of a marital relationship you didn't enjoy the same prestige. To be a midwife was the main opportunity for women to get out of the house, yet midwives were chosen based on their excellence as wives and mothers. They were to be guides for the other women on how to treat their men, and they told the men how to treat the women as well. They exerted a high level of power on the Farm, unlike the majority of women.

The women had a rough time of it. Conventional birth control was shunned—it messed with the chi, locally known as "the juice." Women had babies all of the time, so much so that they often wore maternity clothes even when they weren't pregnant. All that sacred birthing and sacred work of keeping up the house and living in voluntary poverty took its toll on the women.

No one on the Farm had much privacy. People lived together in large households; sometimes only curtains divided one couple or family from another. This lack of privacy was thought to keep people accountable to one another. When my mom first arrived at the Farm, a group of women decided where she and the other two women should go to live. The women

sent her to a household out in the woods where she was given a small room in which she unloaded her mattress and things. One of the other women, Athalia, and her two-year-old son were sent to a larger house where about thirty other people lived.

“One day, after I was there about a week or so, I offered to massage the back of one of the men in the house who’d hurt it and was in a lot of pain. My offer certainly wasn’t suggestive. I was eight months pregnant and not looking for a guy. Plus he was married,” she said. So she worked on his back and not surprisingly, the wife was upset and the household didn’t like it. They had a group meeting and decided that she had to leave the house. “I mean, didn’t he know the rules?” she said.

The last night she slept in the house she had a horrible nightmare. She woke up feeling like she was in a bad place and that she needed to get out. The next day she moved into the big house and shared a room with Athalia and her son. She got sick with stomach problems that she blamed on the diet: solely vegan with an emphasis on soy, starches, and sugar.

“It was like Big Brother was watching you all of the time,” she said, “we didn’t have any privacy. You were really encouraged to stay with the group at all times, never go off alone.

“I stayed in this giant house. The men worked and the women would stay in the house all day, cooking and cleaning and smoking joints in a big circle together. It wasn’t cool if you didn’t join in and I wasn’t really into smoking pot in those days.”

She thought it was a bad scene all around. Her walks that had provided solace at Gordon’s farm and later along the Kentucky River weren’t happening at this farm. No one was supposed to be alone. Hodgdon wrote that even courting couples, when they took walks after Stephen’s Sunday morning services, had to walk with groups. “I witnessed a fourteen or fifteen

year old kid being forced to leave. His family had brought him there in hopes of straightening him out but he wanted time alone. The leadership didn't like that and told him he would have to leave," she said.

Time changes things and I take what my mom says about the Farm with some skepticism. Was that really why he was forced out? And really, is it cool to give someone else's husband a back massage in a non-professional environment?

She'd been due from mid to the end of November but her baby, me, didn't come. She left the Farm not doing so well. She'd planned to stay there, have the baby there and then decide what to do. But weeks had passed and no baby came and the Farm got worse. And then finally, she came home to her parents' house on Christmas.

They let her back in the house and they all celebrated Christmas together. They may have wondered where she was going, or if they said she could stay. It may have been unspoken. Where would she go if she left?

## MOUNT TABOR

I consider that the world and almost our civilization for the next 25 years is going to depend upon a simple, cheap, safe contraceptive to be used in poverty-stricken slums and jungles, and among the most ignorant people... I believe that now, immediately, there should be national sterilization for certain dysgenic types of our population who are being encouraged to breed and would die out were the government not feeding them.

Margaret Sanger, 1950

Friday nights at Joyland Lanes, pins crashed until one in the morning. A thick smoky haze filled the air and it was all Bad Company over the speakers. We heard it from the back, the loud thud of bowling balls hitting the clamoring-down pins. Our apartment backed up to the lanes and for kicks sometimes I'd walk over there with my friends, ducking under the chain-link fence that separated Roger's Road low-income apartments from Joyland. I was seven, my mom and Papa freshly divorced when my mom moved my sisters and I to a conspicuously government-subsidized three-bedroom apartment complete with institutional vinyl flooring and roaches.

We arrived back in Kentucky in the middle of an August drought. Gone were the afternoon thunderstorms and dynamic skies of Honduras, gone were the fogs and chills of Maine. Each white-skied day was more like the last than I had thought possible.

I printed out a list of all of the low-income apartment complexes in Lexington, marking through each one of them with a black marker as I called and each receptionist said, we're full, or, I can put you on our waiting list. The situation was looking dire. Finally, one place had an opening, Mount Tabor.

I sat down in the manager's office on a sunny, hot afternoon. The manager, a thin, middle aged lady with teased blond hair and a lipstick-stained cigarette burning in her ashtray, gave me an application to fill out. All the usual, name, address, income, criminal background check, credit check, are you kidding me? Personal references, three of them. I filled it out and handed the form back to her. "Thanks hon," she said.

A maintenance man came in the office. "Hey Tammy baby," he said, "How're you this morning?"

"As good as can be," she said, "Frank, this is Megan. She's probably going to be moving into 2A. It's ready isn't it?"

"Just about." He leaned back on the window sill and lit a cigarette, shadowing the flame with a stout, weathered hand. "We got to paint the upstairs and that's it."

She looked at me. "You want to take a look at it?"

"Sure."

"I'll take her," Frank said.

“That’s all right. I want to get out of this office. I’ve been sitting down too long.” Tammy spoke as if she had once had a slight speech impediment, maybe couldn’t pronounce her r’s correctly as a child. She got up and took off her sweater. “Lord, it’s cold in here too. Ya’ll ready?”

Frank and I followed Tammy out into the sun. “Another hot one,” Frank said.

I hadn’t taken a good look at the apartments going in. I’d noticed only that the neighborhood was fair and it was only a couple of miles from Papa and Lisa’s house. The complex wasn’t large, two rows of townhouses. Old cars filled the parking lot stained with motor oil. Tammy’s heels clicked on the asphalt. “There’s the other one we’re working on,” Frank said, pointing to a unit with an open door and open windows. Classic rock blared from inside the apartment and two men shoved a roll of carpet out the door. “It was a mess in there, trash everywhere, broken furniture, the carpet all stained.”

We paused, stopped to take a look. “Some people, no, most people that live here are quiet, honest people that keep to themselves and keep their apartments nice and neat. But some just have no sense of responsibility. They trash their places and don’t pay their rent,” Tammy said.

“Is it pretty safe?” I asked.

“Oh yeah,” Frank said, “nothing much happens around here at all.”

“If it does we take care of it. If you move in, you have to sign a contract that says you’ll ‘take quiet enjoyment of the premises,’” said Tammy.

We arrived at 2A, a unit in the middle of a two-story brick building. Each unit had a front door with a small stoop, a picture window, and an upstairs with one big window that faced out

into the parking lot. We went in, cool inside. “Why’s the AC on in here? It’s just wasting money,” Tammy said.

“It shouldn’t be on,” he said, “I’ll check on it.”

“Take a look around,” Tammy said, leading me through the place. “This is the living room. Here’s the kitchen and dining room.”

“It’s not exactly a room,” Frank said. A kitchen, plain, with a small space for a table. If I squinted my eyes I couldn’t make out the cheap vinyl flooring or the thin industrial-strength carpet in the living room.

“It’s nice,” I said.

We went upstairs and looked at the bathroom and two bedrooms, one large and one small.

We walked through the apartment again. “Out here’s the patio,” Tammy said as she opened the back door that led to a larger concrete stoop and a patch of yellow grass in front of a chain link fence.

Back at the office, I told her I wanted it, that I’d take it if she’d give it to me. “How far along are you?” she asked.

“Eight months or so,”

“And when do you want to move in?”

“As soon as I can.”

Tammy called a couple of days later. She said that she could set me up with a rent of thirty-three dollars a month. Utilities would be covered. “You seem like a nice girl. Responsible. And we want to help out girls like you.”

“I really appreciate this,” I said. I thought of myself as different as what I imagined the other Mount Tabor dwellers to be. I needed to be here, but I wouldn’t be here long. I moved in a week later.

I got Medicaid and a midwife, no Ina May Gaskin and no homebirth but a hospital birth plan with the midwife in attendance. I got food stamps and went to the grocery store to shop for myself with my brand new WIC coupons. Donations by my relatives furnished the townhouse. A futon and mattress from my grandparents, an old table from a second cousin, a crib from that same cousin, and three baby showers provided me with clothes and diapers and all of the baby supplies I needed.

I put down *Magical Child*. I was sick of all that seventies bullshit, all of this radical new awareness and how they were going to change every thing and now, the world was still the same only with some small modifications. I got dressed and went out for a walk. I met a woman who lived in an apartment a few doors down. A large woman, overweight, with limp straight brown hair and wearing a disheveled long dress. She was out on her little stoop-porch straightening decorations. “Hello, I’m Kathy,” she called out when she saw me walking by. “Did you just move in?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And you’re due any day now aren’t you?”

“In a week or two.”

“And you’re on your own?”

“Yep.”

“So am I. My son is seventeen and I’ve been a single mom for his whole life. Let me tell you this, you don’t want to have more than one child if you are a single mother. More than one is too much.”

I stood there with her for too long as she told me about her son, who joined the ROTC and would soon join the Marines, his lifelong goal. He arrived back at their house, tall, his blond hair buzzed, wearing an olive-colored army surplus backpack. Kathy introduced us and he said hello quickly, not really looking at either of us. He excused himself, went into the house. She then told me about her health problems, which there were many, and her money problems, which proved to be direr because of her health problems. She told me about scholarly papers she’d written and writing she’d done for websites, the subject matter sounding convoluted and round about, not clear at all. I finally pried myself away and went for the walk I had started. The future? I wondered, was this it?

I walked out of the complex—quiet in the hot afternoon, no one except the woman I’d just talked to was out—and down the street into a residential neighborhood composed of single-family, three bedroom brick ranch homes, all of them identical.

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Leontine Young wrote in 1954 that young pregnant women without husbands didn’t know how to make decisions. They are infantile, not wanting to grow up but by some primitive urge they strive to have these illegitimate babies. They say I want a baby and no husband. It is their decision but they don’t take responsibility for it. They blame everyone else but themselves.

When people tell you that you are throwing your potential away—you've got to tell them you aren't, that you'll make it even with a baby—that you've got it under control. You like babies; you can handle it. You've got to tell them that you can deal with poverty and with doing everything on your own. That you can deal with your water breaking when you are home alone, that later you can deal with a baby's cries in the middle of the night, that you can swing it all. You won't need anyone's help ever because you are fully capable.

You have power even if we don't know it, even if it only upon looking back that you can view recklessness as courage. The outcome determines whether the decision was infantile or brilliant or some mixture of the two.

Bright white light filled the room. I leaned my head back against the pillows. I felt languid on the sheets; they were slick and cold. I read a book for a while but put it aside and stared out the window with my hand on my belly. I couldn't see anything but the tops of the other brick townhouses and the pale September sky.

I'd started to feel scared. For the past few weeks, I'd felt contractions but didn't know what they were. My belly would tighten up and it felt kind of good. Then it would release. Also in the past few weeks, my belly got much bigger, like we'd been saving up all the growth until the end. I felt him rolling around, sticking out elbows, hands, and feet. As I got larger, I wondered how I would get this baby out of me.

I got up and took a shower. As I toweled myself off I felt a trickle of water running down my leg.

My mom wasn't having a good time in Maine. She still enjoyed idling on the coast, writing poetry and painting watercolor portraits of the rocky shoreline. Sure, she enjoyed the landscape and the break from teaching and from being in Kentucky. But there was one huge, there's-no-getting-out-of-the-way-of-this-one problem: Basil was more of a beer drinking, country music listening, no-teeth brushing, young-woman lusting man than she'd bargained for. And my mom was none of these, though she did drink a beer or a glass of white zinfandel every once in a while. She was on her way to Kentucky, driving south, abandoning many of her possessions.

I called Lisa; we went to the hospital. Contractions came and receded and came again. Then, I was in the hospital, walking around the delivery room, navigating the contractions with Lisa beside me. I chomped on ice, recovering from the last round of contractions, my body doing this anyway, despite my wishes it went ahead, no stopping and no control.

My grandparents walked in the room. My grandmother carried her camera and a bag of bakery goods, her hair gray and teased high, her skin pale with ivory-colored powder, her massive pocketbook slung across her arm. My grandfather shuffled in behind her, his baseball cap crooked on his head. I looked on in horror as my grandmother raised her arm toward me with the bag of bakery cookies. I didn't even talk to them; a contraction was crushing at the moment. I turned to Lisa and whispered hoarsely, "Get them out of here!"

“You know, Papa and I have been talking,” Lisa said to me on the phone months ago, “and he agreed with me, saying that if you can’t take care of the baby or whatever, then we can take him in.”

My grandparents left the room. More contractions, I walked, paced, closed my eyes and turned inward. I heard the door open again and this time it wasn’t the nurse but my mother, rushing through the door with a smile on her face, bringing a tornado of action in with her, fresh from running from her car, rushing up the stairs, and I imagine telling everyone along the way to make way! Make way!

Christmas night, 1976, the bicentennial year. Two hundred years. My mom and her little brother, eleven-years-old David, lounged around at home in front of the television set. The lights were dim and my grandmother stood in the kitchen, drying dishes, and my grandfather sat in the living room with the kids. The presents had all been opened. The fatigue of Christmas and food had set in.

They’d let her come back home; she’d been un-disowned. She hadn’t wanted to come back, but Alphie Mae encouraged her too, as well as her Aunt Marie. Both of them, she said, supported her completely. Eventually, perhaps with pressure from Alphie and from Marie, her parents relented. She’d left the Farm and arrived just in time for Christmas. I wonder how many possessions she had, like a rambling stereotype did she carry a stick with a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief at the end of it? Did she whistle, barefoot, in overalls, belly like a giant surprise?

No. It was winter, she bundled herself against the cold, maybe in layers of too-big flannel shirts and too-big men's jeans belted under her belly.

She was three weeks overdue, at least. My grandmother walked in the living room, drying off her hands. She looked at her watch. "Well, we've still got time," she said, "wouldn't that be something to have a Christmas baby?"

In the middle of the night my mom awoke with labor pains and woke her parents. They all went to the hospital in Lexington, an hour away. Even David, who wanted to sleep. Her father drove like mad to make it.

"I am so excited to be here. I just got in from Maine. I am just exhausted," she said, saying hello to Lisa and I. Lisa had been counting my contractions, my mother stepped up. "So how is it going?" she asks me and patted me a little on the head, stroked my hair. She wore glittering eyes and abalone shell earrings. I sat on the edge of the bed, my head in my hands, I'd turned in—the world outside was black and brown to me— my mother's—and grandparents'— intrusions into this silence and motion waved in the background like an itch I couldn't reach, a roach I couldn't chase fast enough after to kill. I remained still and rode the contractions like waves, trying to concentrate, but the door to the room kept opening and closing. My eyes opened and closed, the yellow light of the delivery room and its cold floor and metal bracketed my own interior stillness, dark and deep, two worlds that kept folding and kneading in on each other. The midwife came in and out checking my dilation. The nurses checked my pulse. A resident came in and with his clear eager eyes asked for permission to watch me give birth. Okay. He hung back, leaving and returning.

I lay down on the bed, keeping my eyes closed. The contractions got closer. Below all of the sounds in my head and in my body, the waves of static that came and went like loud heat if it had a sound, that filled up all my awareness, making my eyes stay shut, closing out the world of the scratchy sheets, myself lying there nearly naked to the world save for a hospital gown that wouldn't stay closed, but I didn't care and I turned in, settling into a deep darkness. My mother's voice interrupted and I opened my eyes, she smiling like it's her goddamn birthday, telling Lisa about the fucking seals on the coast of Maine like this is a motherfucking tea party. I wanted to tell her to shut up. I opened my eyes and looked at her, her face open and animated, looking at Lisa with the blue water she left behind still wholly a part of her being. I wanted to tell her to get the hell out of here and get back to Maine if she loves those damn seals so much but I didn't. I glared at her and hoped that she'd get it but she didn't even look at me, just kept talking and Lisa nodded her head.

They arrived at the hospital. Rushing, rushing, running, bright lights and tile floors. The plan for a nice natural birth thrown out the window. Do you know what they do? Clamp you down, tie you down, spread your legs, and get out the forceps. She said it was terrible, methodical, drugged up, and knocked out.

Running, running, running, in high school I ran constantly. Through fields, up and down the country roads with headphones blaring out Pearl Jam and mix tapes playing over and over again. If I was in a bad mood, my mom would tell me to go running. I ran track; I ran cross country; I ran to get away from everything. The first time I ran. Eighth grade, in a fight with my

mother in the car, the beginning of a pattern. Our fights were like symphonies, lasting and complicated, their meanings forgotten. We fought constantly over everything. I got out of the car as soon as we parked and ran around and around the cul-de-sac. Not stopping. My mom and sisters went in the house, closed the door behind them and turned on their yellow lights. I ran and after that night didn't stop.

Then it came again. And the midwife rushed in, her short hair flapping. My feet up in the stirrups. The resident stood in the background, my mother still talked about seabirds, and Lisa grabbed and held onto my arm. Midwife said push. My eyes closed in that silent world of darkness but then I pushed with everything, like pressing my hands against clay on a spinning wheel, squeezing them in, forming a column out of the wet clay, rearranging the slick surface with even pressure. And then I was dark and they said stop pushing and the slow silence returns and I was in a starless space, like being asleep in the back of a moving car, short breezes of air coming in through the window, talking in the front seat, lights from streetlights passing by outside the window. My eyes closed pretending to be asleep, feeling the largeness of the world inside of myself, like space and I have to hold onto something outside of myself so I can feel like a person again, not like an easy porous barrier where space shifts in and out again.

And then push again. The midwife said, "Look, I can see his hair on the top of his head, he's got long hair." I rose. She played with his hair like he was a Barbie toy and then said okay, push one more time this time is the time, the real time, no stopping just go for it.

My spikes were tightened and my eyes are closed, visualizing, as I'm supposed to, as the coach has taught me to, as all successful athletes do, running faster than ever before with that golden baton in my hand. My teammate runs up behind me and slams it into my open palm and the baton shines in the sun but I don't have time to look. I make off, run fast and hard my vision blurring and the edges of my sight turning purple. I curve around the track and all I see in front of me is the finish line, waving and wavering, not steady, to the sound of wind and cheering voices somewhere far beside me. All I feel is the pain in my legs and the heaving of my breath. Sight dims and the sounds get quieter and the white finish line shakes in front of me, the baton singing in my hand until I slap it into the next girl's hand. And we go forever, around and around.

When I got into my friend Jessie's car, after she picked me up from the airport when I came back from Honduras, I sat down and laughed. And laughed and laughed and cried and laughed and cried again. She sat there, quiet and bewildered. I'm sorry, I said, I don't know what it is. I just haven't been able to talk to someone I could relate to, I haven't been someplace familiar, the whole time I was away.

And he was born, out free and easy into this room full of people, not dimly lit in a cave, not at home, but here and for this moment none of that mattered, all of the other concerns fell away, where we'll head home to after leaving this hospital fell away and there was only this: a baby with a new name in his own new world, his eyes closed and into my arms, like something so magic it shouldn't exist but does, always has and will for at least this moment.

Afterwards, she lay socked out in the delivery room, sleeping amid walls of bulky gray machinery. She had her baby at nine a.m., or was it five a.m.? No one can recall. Either the sun had risen or was on its way. My grandparents woke David and he looked in the window at all of the babies, lined up in tightly-swaddled rows. Later, my mom woke up, not so groggy any more. They handed her the paperwork, the birth certificate, the procedure for bringing new people into the world. Signed the birth certificate and under father didn't write anything, just a long, dashed-out line, meant to signify the unknown or some person I don't care to mention now. She put the paper aside.

Her hands were beaten up. She'd always bitten her fingernails and now they were bitten down to the quick.

I held him, wrapped in a new blanket, so small and I didn't want to let him go. The resident came over to me, his eyes shining, thank you so much, he said, that was incredible. That was amazing. Matt has been waiting outside in the lobby and he came in, followed by my grandparents, and Lisa and my mom were still there, and the host of the midwife and the nurses were there. And outside the window in the dark night the rain began to fall.

## POST PARTUM

Soon after he was born, the nurses placed him under “observation” in a clear plastic container. They put a little tag on his arm that matched the tag on my arm, name and a number, something like 54868932-FFDK, perhaps so the mother doesn’t lose the baby, doesn’t accidentally take the wrong one home. So they can keep it all straight. Matt stayed at the hospital. They didn’t put a tag on Matt’s arm, he wasn’t officially involved. He could tell the nurse that yes, I am the father, but would that make a difference? Powerless, but at that moment it wasn’t about power.

Under the heat lamp to be viewed and shot with Vitamin K and anti-hepatitis vaccinations in his foot. And then to lie there for two hours. He was tiny with the stub of umbilical cord in his belly button, naked, with his eyes looking like they were fused shut, like the work of getting born just knocked him right out. What a way to come into this world, under sterile observation by nurses wearing breathing masks to shield the babies from the malevolent germs running loose in the hospital. One baby born right after the other and each one stamped, poked, and registered. Matt stayed for hours, looking in on [our baby?] through a glass window in the hall. He stood there, just looking. I walked in from the delivery room to [our baby’s?] side and held onto his fingers, avoiding Matt’s gaze. We hadn’t talked once during the birth or afterward. I wondered who called him. The structure was set right there: he would be on the outside; I would be on the inside. I didn’t mean for it to happen that way but the pattern stuck.

Hours later, after the observation, [our baby?] was back with me in a darkened hospital room. *It isn't fair for me to surround you with a parenthesis and a question mark. I didn't feel ambivalent at all. Just completely in love and in surprise.* I named him Micah. His middle name would be Joseph, for Matt's middle name and his father's middle name.

Everyone had left and it was the two of us. I looked down at his face and thought I would call him Moon, that Moon is what his name shall be. His face was little and round like a moon, his eyes closed. I held him there in the darkness.

And this aloneness hit me like a wall that has always been there, closing in tighter. Now, me and one other, this creation on his way to being a person. He opened his eyes, not with crying, but just opened them. I looked down into his eyes, so deep and dark. In those eyes I saw wisdom and seriousness.

I lay there, dark all around and I couldn't sleep. Newborn Micah, or Moon, lay in my arms. The rain stopped. This is my new reality, I thought. Wisps of steam blew up outside of my window, the curtains open. In the distance I could see more hospital rooms, some lit and some dim. I could see people moving around in the yellow-lit rooms, nurses, a guest. I could see the blue glow of a television in a darkened room. And a feeling of serenity and connection to something larger, even if it was just this living, came over me.

Yet at the same time, I felt like I shouldn't be alone like this. There was an ache, an emptiness, but also a growing sense that this was my life now. Lisa would later tell me that, no matter how small, Micah and I were a family. Sometimes we would feel like half a family when I thought about such things, but most of the time, I didn't.

I'd never hung out in hospitals besides visiting my grandfather, my mom's father, who had been in and out of the hospital for nearly ten years.

Years ago, I was sitting at my grandparents' kitchen table with my mom, Sarah, and grandmother a few days after Christmas. We were talking. Sarah was in college at the time and had let loose. She'd been a devout Christian in high school and was practically engaged to her innocent boyfriend. But when she went to college she let all of that go. We talked about marriage. "I would get married someday if I found the right person," I said.

My grandfather, we called him Pop, walked into the kitchen from his recliner in the living room. He spent much of his time in that recliner watching the too-loud television set. He walked into the kitchen slowly, holding onto the counter and the wall, his head bald from chemotherapy, his body round but his loose pants held up by suspenders. We thought he was going to die soon. We'd been thinking that for years. He'd had cancer for years. Each Christmas we thought it would be his last. He'd look frailer and then better and then worse.

"I'm never going to get married. Who needs it?" Sarah said.

Pops eyes bulged out like he faced slaughter. "You just going to give it away for free like a cow in the fields?"

Sarah looked up at him, her mouth open in shock. "No, I'm not."

"That's what it sounds like to me. Why pay for it when you can get it for free?"

The next day, guests descended. Matt came and held Micah in his arms for a long time; he held him close to his face and breathed in his scent. "He smells so good."

“I can’t smell him,” I told Lisa.

“Because it’s you,” she said to me, quietly.

He held and stared at him, gently rubbing his the tips of his fingers along his tiny eyebrows, his eyelids. “And his eyelids are pink and purple, just like Megan’s and her mom’s,” he said. A trait that I’d never noticed. I figured something there, that he loved us but when I looked at him I felt nothing. Like stone. I remembered when he said that I could fall in love with him, that it could happen if we tried. If I tried. And I knew I never could and that would be a tragedy for all of us. That when my grandfather asked me why in the world I wouldn’t marry Matt, when he would tell me that he’d been praying that I would, I could say, no, it is my fault, but I can’t.

The day was a blur, people coming and going, everyone looking at Micah, wanting to hold him, taking his picture, taking my picture. The nurses, bustling in with their little nurse outfits decked out in pony and heart prints, checking his eating schedule, checking his burping schedule. That night, again, I was all alone with Micah, sleepless again. A nurse came in the middle of the night. “Has he nursed?” she asked me in a stiff voice. She stood in the doorway, all of the lights off in my room; her frosted blond teased hair formed a halo in the yellow light shining in behind her. “Has he eaten?” she asked again.

“Yeah, a little bit.”

“Has he burped?” She held a clipboard in her hand. Maybe it was her job to monitor every baby on the floor, note when they eat, get their diapers changed, burp.

“I tried to burp him but I couldn’t get him to.” He lay on my chest, sleeping, small like a little cat.

She bustled in, setting her clipboard down on a counter. “Give him to me. You have to burp him or else he’ll get a gas bubble,” she said. Impatient. She took him out of my arms and sat down with him in a chair at the end of my bed. She held all seven pounds of him firmly and banged him on the back with one hand, rhythmic, like absentminded nervous toe tapping.

It seemed hard to me. Too harsh. “You can stop. It’s okay, I’ll burp him,” I said.

“No, he needs to burp. Or else he’ll be up crying all night with a gas bubble,” She didn’t look at me, instead stared out the window as she bang-banged his back. A gas bubble? “Why won’t he burp?”

“Maybe he doesn’t need to,” I said quietly. Sounding like I was asking her something rather than stating a possibility.

“No, believe me. He does.” I noticed she was chewing gum at the same time. The whole of her being a jumpy movement. I just stared at Micah on her lap, so small. He didn’t need to be there. I wanted to tell her to stop. To quit it. To go away.

But I didn’t know how. I just spoke again, meekly and under my breath. She stopped on her own. She sighed, stopped her tapping, “Well he just isn’t going to burp. I don’t know what the problem is.”

“I need to be alone now,” I tell her. She says okay and went to put Micah in the little plastic crib-on-wheels. She starts to roll him away. “No, he can stay here.”

She stopped rolling him out and rolled the cart over by my bed. “I’ll take him,” I said.

“You’ll smash him if he lies with you.”

“I will not.”

She sighed and handed him to me. She left the room. To her, babies may have come and went, like a button to push or a lever to pull. Wash, clothe, change diaper, feed, burp, lay down in crib. Repeat cycle.

I started to see that I had to make choices, that I, this woman, not a girl any longer, was just as capable of raising a baby as the teddy bear nurses with bad hair.

The next day, I was to leave in the afternoon. I felt good. Sun shining in, Micah doing well, healthy. I called Jeff. It was his birthday. How did I track him down? No cell phones, still taboo in certain social circles. Did I call information, get his dorm room number? Call his frat house?

“Oh. Hey,” he said, “I wasn’t expecting to hear from you.” Micah slept in the little crib beside me. Jeff sounded distant, beyond static.

“I just wanted to say happy birthday.” My white plastic hospital bracelet scraped against the phone cord.

“Thanks. So what’s up?”

“I had the baby a couple of days ago.” I wrapped the phone cord around my finger. Unwrapped it and then wrapped it around my middle finger.

“Really?”

“Yeah. A boy. You know. I named him Micah.”

“Wow. Congratulations.” I could picture him there, wherever he was, it was the same: sitting on a lumpy, tapestry-covered couch, smoking a joint, surrounded by other guys. And then I call, they get silent. After we hang up, he tells them what happened. Man, one of them

probably says, that's some heavy shit right there. Why's she calling you? She's in a different world, Jeff would say. Yeah. Jeez. I can't deal with it, he'd say.

We talked for a couple of minutes. Strained conversation. Of course, we weren't together. We were friends but I was the one calling him from my hospital room. But I was still devastated. He'd come to see me—as friends—at Mt. Tabor before I had Micah. We took a walk together and went to Denny's and it was so hard for me not to imagine us as a couple, especially when people in their yards smiled at us and said things like, what a cute couple and when are the two of you expecting? It was easy to get swept up in that mirage, that fantasy that held no truth at all.

He stayed the night. I went downstairs in the morning. I sat on the edge of the futon where he lay, half awake in the early morning light. I hadn't really slept all night, thinking of him downstairs. "Good morning," I whispered. He mumbled something in return and then turned over, his back to me. I walked into the kitchen and stared out the back window, the grass brown on brown on brown on blue sky. I felt completely empty and something familiar welling up in my throat—I would call it heartbreak.

"I guess I should go," I said, "Happy birthday again."

"Thanks. Good talking to you."

"Bye."

"Bye."

After Jessie picked me up in Atlanta, we drove north to Sewanee to hang out for a couple of days and where Jessie threw a baby shower. Though I had only been away for barely two

months, I felt different, like I didn't quite belong anymore. I looked different, of course. I was by this time distinctly pregnant, and I wore what a friend called "housewife chic." Being back in Sewanee made me think of Jeff all over again, something I was working on forgetting. In Honduras I held onto the inane fantasy that he would magically show up in front of the house, be standing on that dusty street in the mountains, coming to get me. But of course, no.

Back at Sewanee on the first night, I slept in a house where I had once lived, that got passed among friends. One of Jeff's friends came over and I looked at him for clues, like he was his representative. I didn't get any. Later, I lay in bed looking at the sparkly ceiling feeling something happen inside me: pillars growing in my heart, like columns holding it up. Metamorphic rock, limestone to marble.

"Dark beer, good for nursing," my mom said, as she picked up a six-pack of Guinness on the way back from the hospital. She was planning to stay with me for two weeks—or at least spend a good deal of time with me—while I recovered. She started the car and pulled out of the parking lot of the liquor store. It was early evening and people milled around outside and cars came and went. It was Friday after all.

We got back and everything felt different. She gave me a beer and she checked the mail. I made sure Micah was okay.

Two days later, I hadn't healed. I was bleeding, I was tired, I was starving—hoarding energy bars on my bedside table for five-a.m. feedings of my own, my belly was a newfound flabby balloon, my body alien and still looking half pregnant, I wondered if I'd ever get back to

the way I was. My breasts were tender and leaky; my eyes were in constant need of scrubbing the sleep out.

I read somewhere, maybe in a women's magazine like *Family Circle*, some dubious source that played up reasons why women, older than desirable, or better yet, have had babies, are still sexy and should feel good about themselves. This mysterious source said that stretch marks are a woman's battle scars; they show that she's been through war herself. And for that reason, they should be honored, as should any woman's postpartum misshapen body. She is a holy vessel.

My mother spent much of her days at the library, looking for jobs on the internet. She would cook dinner though, and bring me the ritual Guinness in the evenings. But she was antsy, sitting in a rocking chair in the living room biting her fingernails. Since she'd gotten back she didn't have a place to live or a job, and that retirement she'd cashed out was quickly shrinking.

A few days after Micah's birth, I walked outside, shut the door behind me, and I sat out on the stoop, alone. My mom and Marie were in the house, taking turns holding Micah, remarking the obligatory remarks, "He's so tiny! So cute! Look at those tiny fingers! Aren't they precious!" I didn't think they'd even seen me leave.

I snuck out the front door, feeling empty without the baby in my lap, in my arms, sleeping next to me. I sat out there and felt the enormous weight of the situation hit me all at once. How the hell was I going to do this? I quickly realized what an obligation I had now that I didn't even think of, didn't think it would be a big deal at all. But it was monumental, huge, a responsibility that I didn't feel like I was even close to being able to handling.

Everything outside was the same. The sky still blue, the parking lot still saucy with tar, the girl who lived in the townhouse directly across the narrow parking lot still sat on her stoop, waving her cigarette around, yelling and laughing. But inside, there was this heaviness of obligation, a baby that I loved with all of my heart—forgive the cheesiness, forgive the cliché, but there are only so many ways to say it—a baby that was tied to me with rope and glue, that was as much a part of me as my self—but that needed *so* much from me, so much more than I could give.

I prayed then, something I did from time to time but never talked about. Never prayers of praise or thanksgiving, only supplication. Please help me right now or else I will die—do you hear me? I will cease to exist. *I can't do this. I don't know what I was thinking. I love Micah but there is no way I can take care of him. It is too much. I feel completely stuck here. I can't lose him but I can't do it. I am not strong enough. If you want me to—whoever you are—then you're going to have to give me something to hold onto. Something to help me along.* I said this and then just sat out there, crying into my hands. I didn't want to go back inside. I couldn't go back inside.

My mom opened the door; Micah was crying a little bit. “I think he’s hungry,” she said. Marie popped her head out of the door.

“My, my, isn’t he gorgeous,” she said, in a voice that was all her own. She talked slowly, with emphasis, as if every syllable merited its own moment to feel special, but in a gravely tone, a deep voice for a woman. She stepped outside, stood on the sidewalk, and pulled out a menthol cigarette. She was my mother’s favorite relative, the one she’d go to for comfort and to talk.

“Well, Megan, are you okay?” she asked me when she looked down and saw my red face.

My mom came outside. I stood up and she handed me Micah. So small, wiggly, and crying a quiet, agitated cry that jerked his limbs. I took him into my arms carefully and sat back down and began nursing him. “I’m freaked out,” I said, my voice breaking, “I can’t do this. I love him but there’s no way I can do all of this. It’s too much.”

Marie took a long drag on her slim cigarette and blew smoke out of her nostrils and her mouth. “Honey. There is not a woman alive who has not felt this way. It is completely normal.”

“Well, she’s on her own. Doesn’t that make a difference?” my mom said.

“Hell, most women I know would rather be alone. I know Beth Ann would. You could do it on your own—do it exactly how you want to do it—or have a baby with some man around, a man that will want to be taken care of just like the baby.” Beth Ann, Marie’s daughter.

“Every man isn’t like that,” my mom replied.

“Every man isn’t, sure. But most are. Am I right? The men in our family? The ones we’ve had?”

My mom ran her hands through her hair, fuzzing it up. I could see her, later, in the house, brushing it out with a wide hairbrush, making it frizzier. I could see her handing me the hairbrush, asking if I want to brush my own hair, knotted and slept in. “I guess you’re right,” she said.

“Well, that doesn’t matter. All I’m saying is that Megan is going through what every woman who has a baby goes through, man or no man. And that it is easier without a man.”

“Well it is harder on your own. I can say that much.” Fuzzing up the hair.

“Okay. I get it,” I said.

“All I’m saying is that every woman has gone through this.”

“I know. Okay,” I said.

“And you will get through this,” my great aunt said.

“Can I have a drag?” I asked.

“No you cannot!” she said and cackled at me. “Maybe later, when you aren’t holding your baby.”

“I quit smoking when Megan was a baby,” my mom said, “I was just sitting there one day, holding her in my arms, smoking a cigarette. She must have been six months old. I just gave it up right then. It felt so wrong to hold a child and hold a cigarette at the same time.”

“I want a cigarette right now,” I said.

The girl across the parking lot. I could partially see her through the parked cars, my Nissan Stanza, maroon, the black Chevy Caprice, some dimwit’s yellow low-rider pickup. She, wearing a white halter top and her requisite cut-off jeans, her baby, wearing his requisite messy blond hair and saggy diaper, laughing and yelling; she, waving around her own cigarette. Completely oblivious to the weight of the world, I thought, so fucking stupid. So ignorant. Everyone, completely oblivious to the seriousness of children. Of the weight of this life, like a giant boulder on my lap, a responsibility that none of us are up for. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid girl.

And like that, I was better. That moment on the stoop never repeated itself, well, never to the same intensity over having Micah. Never, after that moment, could I even question my ability to care for a child. I would just do it. After that moment, those days were beautiful days. They passed slowly and easily for the most part. I ate a lot, I nursed Micah a lot, he slept a lot, and I slept too, or spent my time reading as he slept. We lived in a giant napping house,

unmarred and unmarked by time or hours. Just by sleeping, waking, and eating. Elemental. Those first few months passed uneventfully, blissfully even. Once I got up the strength to walk, I packed him in my front baby carrier, a little pouch that held him to my chest, and walked around the neighborhood, out of Mt. Tabor Apartments and into the residential neighborhood. I pretended I didn't live at Mount Tabor but maybe, at least I lived at one of these places. Something modest but a house, a home.

Matt came by nearly every night to see Micah. He would hold him or lay down beside him. We didn't talk at all, what would become a well-worn path between us. Our relationship was non-existent. A silence so huge hung between us, held up by bitterness's own power. But he wanted to see his son. All of the apprehension and doubt about having a kid or being a father either vanished or hid itself away when he was with Micah. When we did talk, he spoke of how he someday, when he finished school, when he made it as a musician, he would get a house and Micah would have his own room in that house and could come and stay in it whenever he wanted to. He would teach Micah how to play the fiddle, how to play any instrument he wanted to. He shifted from his uncertainty to sudden devotion, at least in my presence. In a sense, we all did. All hesitation and wavering went underground as we turned strong for this one child.

## FAMILY

All the life which the parents could have lived, but of which they thwarted themselves for artificial motives, is passed onto the children in substitute forms.... The children are driven unconsciously in a direction that is intended to compensate for everything that was left unfulfilled in the lives of their parents.

--Karl Jung

Who said Mary didn't have to do some quick thinking? That Joseph was a good guy, taking her on with this baby? Who's to say that the miracle wasn't a concoction, a cover up? Wouldn't the story have been better if we'd known the truth? That Mary got pregnant, that she was a sinner, doing something she wasn't supposed to? That God didn't save her but Joseph did, giving her some dignity. That she didn't set off for Bethlehem for any silly census business but because she was in exile, she was evicted from her homeland? Even if she may have evicted herself. That she spent some of those desert nights terrified, huddling up on a makeshift pallet?

One morning, my mother sat in her parents' living room with me on her lap, having a bottle, and smoked a cigarette. She wore a blue bathrobe and her hair back in barrettes. Her hair fell in waves, like it had been curled. Have you ever pictures of Athena from the Parthenon? That statue's long destroyed. In Nashville, though, there is a replica of it and the Parthenon. In

it, you'll see Athena, white and touched with gold. If you see that statue, you'll see my mother, the same nose, the same wide face, the same eyes and lips. That morning, my grandmother took our picture, she looking up at the camera in incredulity or sarcasm.

My mom stayed with her parents for a while after having me but eventually got so tired of it and wanted to leave. "The house was full of tension and anger and I wanted to raise you in a peaceful place," she said. Her parents had fought with each other since she was little. She'd tell horror stories about them acting in ways that I'd never seen. To me, they seemed normal, they were distant, sleeping in separate bedrooms, but they were fine together. He drove; she sat in the passenger seat. He watched television; she busied herself with genealogy, shopping, and yard sales.

She didn't stop moving. She dated a man briefly who lived in London, Kentucky, south of Danville in the mountains. He gave her a place to stay in exchange for cooking for him. "I went but it was just too strange and isolated," she said, "So I came back again. No wonder you have wanderlust."

My mom had met George when they were both in high school. He was a couple of years younger than her, and like Philip, tall, skinny, long dark hair, and dark eyes. He pursued her then, but she'd had a boyfriend. She said that once he'd come up to her, he must have been high or something because he nearly fell over and then told her that she was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen. She told him she had a boyfriend. But still, he liked her. He came to the library where she worked to see her and soon they became friends.

After returning from London, she moved back in with her parent while she figured out what to do next. She decided to call George's parents to see if he was around; she hadn't talked

to him in years. Turned out he was around. He lived with his parents, having just ended a short marriage. “We were both getting our lives together,” she said. They started hanging out. They went on some dates, took hikes, and got more serious. Soon, she found herself pregnant again and this time, got married. They married before I turned one and moved out into a house in the country a few counties over. There are pictures of the three of us, my mom, Sarah, and me, out in that white farmhouse, she had her arms around us and we smiled, a child under each arm, all of us on a messy, patchwork quilt-covered bed.

There are times when we think that a done deal has solidified the rest of our lives, made our lives whole, or at least more predictable. When she and Papa married, that must have been one of those moments. Even if it wasn't going to last, even if she got into it knowing that it wouldn't last, but not knowing how slow and painful the falling apart would be, she did get a seven-year rest.

And that is where our paths diverged. You could say she got married and gave me a dad. You could say she was looking for someone to take care of here. And she got them both, though they may have been a little flimsier than she'd first thought.

But it did last a while. We moved a lot when I was little, but then when I was three or four, we moved into a three bedroom brick ranch house in a neighborhood of identical houses. It had family written in the marigolds out front, in the swingiest and the dog in the back. Grandparents and even Alpie Mae came to visit. Houseplants grew and we got bikes for Christmas. My mom held Halloween parties for neighborhood kids and cousin, dressing herself and us up as gypsies.

Maybe she couldn't stay settled for long, maybe that's genetic. Maybe though she longed for stability, maybe there's something she recognized that you lose by sitting still. But that restlessness was cloaked with a desire for controlled happiness, some dream akin to being in love everyday. Maybe that's what the moving and the marriages were about, not being able to sit with something for too long, because it gets boring and you have to eventually accept life's flaws.

No matter what genetics say, Papa and I share certain traits that may have become affixed to both of us by time. We share hazel eyes and mouths that won't close, teeth that don't want to fit inside. Papa's teeth are like desiccated tusks of some Artic walrus, striped with yellow and coffee.

A couple of years later I'd finished Sewanee with a degree in natural resources but without a job. I'd come back with Micah to Kentucky for Christmas, driving north from Atlanta through a freak snowstorm. I spent a couple of days at Lisa and Papa's, looking for jobs on the internet. So many of them, available for new-types like me, without experience, required nights away from home or living in some remote forest outpost. These jobs appealed to me and bemoaned to Papa that I could apply to none of them now. I complained that I couldn't do much of what I used to do, what I still wanted to do. That I wanted to travel still and take long hikes. "Oh, but you are having a different experience, one that is worth way more than those others," he told me. And his words comforted me, especially because he said so few.

Papa and I had never been that close, though it could be said that he wasn't close to anyone, at least not his children. Or, that could also be incorrect. He loved us, but in his own

way. He didn't talk much; he didn't call you on the telephone. He busied himself with hobbies—reading, fixing computers, selling cars on eBay, cleaning guns, making homemade flies for fishing, and playing guitar. But though he was distant, I never doubted his presence, always steady and unwavering. I never doubted that if I needed help, if I had a flat tire, he would be there. My sisters, maybe because he was their real dad, had a harder time with this than I did. They didn't feel like they had a dad at all and later had to come to terms with him, that he was who he was, and that didn't mean he didn't love them, but maybe that meant he could only love in a certain way, that he could only go so far.

A few days later on Christmas Eve, I decided to visit Philip's parents, Christine and Bob, who were hosting their own gathering. I'd seen them a few times since I'd met Philip. I'd stayed with them during one spring break when I was in high school. I'd asked Bob for career advice. They send cards and money on Christmas and my birthday. I liked them but I didn't have a clear reason for going there. I'd never spent one holiday with them; I hadn't seen them in a couple of years. I hadn't seen Philip since I was eighteen.

I strapped Micah into the car seat and took back roads to their house in Louisville. Christine opened the door to let us in, giving us hugs and smiles. She led us into the family room where Philip and Cindy sat together. Their two children, Caroline, seven, and James, five, sat on the carpet watching television. Bob sat in a chair. They met Micah for the first time. We all said hello.

Later, I walked around, looking at the framed photographs of the family that covered the walls. Chris and Bob had four boys and one girl. Chris told me about all of them. "Robert is a French literature professor at the University of Chicago. He got his PhD a couple of years ago

from Colombia. He couldn't come. And Bob, the younger Bob, is a reporter down in Florida. He couldn't come either. And you remember Tim, he's a story teller but he's on disability now. And Alicia, with her baby, she went to law school but now she's staying at home. They were here earlier."

I looked at the photograph of Robert, like the rest of the family he had brown hair and a square jaw, but his eyes were blue. To feel okay about getting a PhD in French was beyond my recognition of the known universe. It was the scraping of two families, one that I half-wished I were part of, just for the contacts and maybe, maybe for how it would sound to be Megan Norman. And then what? Would it really have been so much different?

That last name cut me like that of a rejecting lover's.

My mother's family: a trudge out of the mountains and a settling to stay. A deacon and a dancer. All served up in a country cooking restaurant. It's just that my mother changed everything when she went in a different direction than her family trajectory. When she stopped going to church, when she worked toward becoming an artist rather than something like a secretary, when she had me and married, then remarried, and so on. I was born without a map—like we all are I suppose. Or, I was born with a map, with a direction, to follow her into the world. *Magical Child* says you aren't supposed to do that: that you follow your father, not your mother. You have to grow up and leave her behind. But I did follow her and her direction didn't work out—full of migration and I just got so tired. Full of trying to make things work under the cheapest possible circumstances. My sisters and I grew up saying that we wanted to be nothing

like our parents. That they weren't our role models. And though I tried to get as far away from her as I could, I ended up not surprisingly, a lot like her. But different too.

All of this is so complicated, like brushing out dreadlocks, when it would be easier to just whack the whole thing off or take an electric razor to the scalp. It would be easier to start fresh, anew, in a new town where there is no family and I don't have a family, a free agent. But I've tried that and it doesn't work. And I wonder if the Normans are tied up as strongly as we are, or if they just get together for a day or two every year and eat sausage balls and bland and chewy roast pork with over-cooked green beans.

I sat down on the white carpet, Micah beside me, playing with some old blocks that Christine found. We watched Sponge Bob. Philip and Cindy gave Micah a toy. Caroline and James looked at us with a combination of openness and wariness.

"This is a really great show," Philip said, "it's hilarious."

"Yeah, it's pretty funny." I said.

"You still run?" Philip asked.

"When I can. I do, sometimes. But not very often," I said.

"I run everyday on my lunch break. With these guys from work."

"That's great." He didn't look much different from when I first saw him, eight years ago. He had the same walk, the same awkwardness.

We didn't stay long. We all hugged on the way out. Philip and I hugged lightly, so formal. So alien. I got back in the car. Started it up, the air cold inside. Philip and Cindy stood

outside, the steam from their breaths filtering through the air, the light from the house at their back. I swore to myself never to go back.

## LILY

Lily is four years younger than me and the prettiest out of all of us: apple cheekbones, dark blond wavy hair, blue eyes, and a wide smile. She could draw, sing, and play the guitar. But something was off. As a child she threw monumental temper tantrums and hated going to school. She'd get these vague psychosomatic sicknesses as she grew older, nebulous aches and pains, Epstein Barr, chronic fatigue syndrome, tonsillitis, and bottles and bottles of chalky pink antibiotic. Then depression, then manic depression.

Lily had been running wild since our mother left for Maine a few months earlier. Every time our family got together all conversation eventually turned toward Lily. "What is she doing now?" one of us would ask. And we'd string out any well-worn gossip that we knew, out of less than concern and more out of wanting to live vicariously through her crazy life. She'd graduated from high school in May. Then she rode to California in a beat-up car with a red-headed Danville guy. They smoked kind bud in Marin County. Ate out of dumpsters. Then, she had my dad and stepmom fly her back. The first time she'd been on a plane.

Since she'd been back in Kentucky, she'd moved from couch to couch, boyfriend to boyfriend until the last thing we'd heard, she'd stolen three hundred dollars and left town, no one knowing quite where she'd gone.

October. Leaves changing slowly. Maples red and yellow and people in Mount Tabor stopped running the central air and instead, opened windows in the afternoons. Walking along the sidewalk, I could hear voices from insides of houses, solitary women talking on telephones and kids yelling and crying.

I'd always been jealous of Lily's effortless beauty. That it was more of a liability to her than something she'd tried to keep. It would be a lie if I said she knew how to use it because maybe, if a person is that pretty, you don't have to do anything to make people notice and bend to it. I was average looking—different, a guy said, and more appealing the more he got to know me. When I was younger I accomplished things, got good grades in high school and won races. Lily didn't do all that. She did what she felt like doing. If she felt like watching sitcom reruns on TV with a bowl of peanut butter on her lap, that's what she did.

Lily was back, had surfaced and was staying with our mom in Bardstown. Her hair grown out from her scalp in brown curls. She came to my apartment with our mom, wearing light blue cords and a frayed gray hoodie, appearing more refined, and more mysterious.

“Why don't you go out,” my mom said, “get some fresh air. You need some time to yourself.” The inside of the townhouse was dark and sleepy, a house that hadn't woken up, even though it was all bright 2 o'clock sunshine outside. It hadn't woken up in weeks. I wore clothes that I could sleep in: baggy sweatshirts and flannel pants. I spent hours on the couch. Scattered books covered the floor from the times when I read while Micah napped.

I held Micah in my lap. I didn't want to go anywhere. I'd driven once since coming home from the hospital with him in the car. I drove all of two or so miles to the grocery store and cringed the whole way, worrying about crashing, like I'd just learned how to drive, like it was way too dangerous to bring a tiny baby out into this world. I still didn't want to drive.

"I'm okay," I said, "I can just stay here."

My mom was in a good mood, laughing and smiling. Lily sat down on the couch, cooing at Micah, who had his eyes open, looking around. They were dark, almost navy blue. "You want to hold him?" I asked Lily. She did, so I passed him to her.

"Look at you, holding Micah," our mom said. "How sweet. You look like a natural. Megan, come on, you need a break. Go out for a while, we're fine here."

I reluctantly said yes and left. I drove the same two miles to the grocery store. In the car, the sunlight shined in on me, too hard and too bright. It shined on the dust in the car, the grimy surface of the dashboard. I put down the visor.

Inside, I wandered around, not needing anything, just looking through the aisles absently, waiting until I could return. I felt like a different person, greasy and unkempt, still looking pregnant, or some step there in between. I didn't feel like the same person that I was. I looked through the medicine aisle and then at the magazines. How to please your man, read one article. Remember to touch him behind his ears and in the crease on the back of his knees. Use a light touch. But don't touch too much. I picked up a few groceries.

When I got back, they were smiling, joyful. Lily holding Micah and my mom kneeling down to take their picture. I immediately burned up inside, feeling like someone had moved in on my territory. This was my business and my baby and no one was going to get in the middle

of that. I walked over, picked up Micah and sat down in the chair by the window, not saying anything. They paused and turned to stare at me. I didn't say anything or look at them.

"How was your break dear?" my mom asked.

"Fine," I mumbled.

"Well that's good," she said, "we were having lots of fun. I think Lily here will be a good mama some day." Lily laughed a short laugh, didn't really say anything. I sighed and looked out the window. Frank was going into another apartment.

After Thanksgiving Lily and Sarah came over. "I've got something to tell you," Lily said to us. So casual. She was collected; she was icy cool smooth. "I'm going to have a baby," she said with this earnest voice spoken from someone on her thousandth incarnation, but who, for some reason, just wanted a reckless life this go around. Who didn't do it out of some sort of obligation, some sense of karmic necessity, just because she wanted to.

"What!!" Sarah and I both yelled.

"Who'd the dad?" I asked.

"How did you find out?" Sarah asked.

"Jeremy," she said.

"You all are still together?" I asked

"I thought you broke up," Sarah said.

"We did," Lily said, a smile on her face. She could have been smoking a joint on a beach in Tahiti.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

“Are you going to get back together?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t know if we’re getting back together.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked.

“I’m going to have a baby. What else am I going to do?” She looked at us with this mock incredulity.

Sarah’s mouth was open, her eyebrows arched up to her forehead. “Oh my God, I cannot believe this,” she said.

“Me neither,” I said, “I mean, you’re so young.”

“So? So are you.”

“But yeah, but look at this. I’m living here, it’s not that fun.”

“I’ll figure it out,” said the mellow one. She leaned back against the armchair.

“You’re eighteen,” I said.

“I still cannot believe this,” Sarah said..

“You all need to relax,” Lily said, “Everything is going to be fine. Relax.”

Later: “We can’t be judgmental,” my mom said again and again. My grandparents were outraged; Lily was serene. Lily moved in with my mom, at her new apartment in Bardstown, a small town about an hour northwest of Danville. Bourbon plants held the town afloat and filled the air with the smell of sour mash that smelled like rotten potatoes. Lily unpacked all of her hand me downs. She hung up necklaces and scarves with pushpins on her walls. She stacked weathered paperbacks on the shelves and covered her bed with an old comforter.

During her pregnancy she gained weight. She sat on the couch all day. Pregnancy brought a calm to Lily that nothing else could. She settled in, she got quiet, she got occupied. It all started to feel a little ridiculous, like a maladjusted family tradition.

On the eve of 2000, many people, at least in the United States and at least as reported in the news, anticipating some technological breakdown, either large or small. A glitch or apocalypse. Even if we didn't stow a gaggle of canned foods up in some northwood cabin, we sat on edge, looking for something exiting to happen. Maybe the balances on our credit cards would magically disappear. Maybe there'd be a riot. Maybe, according to all the town and TV crazies and wizards, the computers wouldn't turn the page and the next day would never even happen. Maybe time would stop and the world would explode. Maybe we weren't so advanced after all but like our ancestors, running for cover at the sight of a comet. Kissing each other goodbye.

By New Year's Eve, Micah was beginning to eat solid food; he sucked on an apple that I gave him, holding it in his chubby fingers. He gooped up mashed bananas. He smiled like a baby model for the camera. I'd lost the baby weight and our world busied itself with a new routine of sleeping and eating and playing together. I had decided to go back to Sewanee for my last semester in January. Micah would be four months old; I'd graduate by the time he was nine months. In a couple of weeks everything would change again when I would move back to school. Only this time I had more stuff, and more of us, to move.

Lily, Sarah, our mom, baby Micah, and I all spent the night in my mom's living room. She was back with Bill. Everyone knew about Lily's pregnancy. It was accepted like law now.

The year before, I'd been at bars with friends, roving around, now here I was, with the mother that I'd wanted to get away from, here she was, back in the state she'd wanted to get away from. Here was Lily, now living with my mom, with something, even a baby, to settle her down. This state wields you back like a game of tug o' war if you're from here. This is where you belong, this small place. This place of simplicity where the options are predictable and you already know what's going to happen. This is for you, the only place. Your people, your kin.

Bill was in the bedroom, reading. The rest of us sat in the living room, Micah slept beside me in his car seat. The ball dropped and the crowds on television cheered. Nothing happened and when we woke up in the morning the world was still the same. Hate to say it, but I was a little disappointed.