

SURRENDERING TO THE TANGLE: ESSAYS

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ABSTRACT

A collection of creative nonfiction essays exploring the author's gender and sexuality, changing worldviews, and coming of age (under the direction of Kiese Laymon).

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Introduction: On Writing True Stories

I was in my introduction to creative writing class my sophomore year when I first became familiar with the genre of creative nonfiction. Our class was assigned Cheryl Strayed's "Heroin/Heroin(e)," an essay about her mother's premature death to cancer and Strayed's subsequent addiction to heroin. I found the piece beyond moving. Of course, the subject matter is incredibly emotional--Strayed is unflinchingly raw in her depiction of her mother's swift decline in health, as well as in her own reckless behavior and struggle with addiction. What stuck with me most, however, was not the fact of the tragedy that struck Strayed as a young woman. It was most powerful to me that she appeared unafraid to write about her heroin addiction, a topic that generally carries stigma and shame. Furthermore, she created something beautiful and logical from the ugly chaos that colored her early twenties. I was stunned by her ability, by the essay's end, to rise triumphantly from the ruin.

It had never before occurred to me that I could write about my own story and make it into something literary. I was vaguely aware of memoirs, insofar as I understood you could write one if you were already wildly rich and famous. This was something different, though, something that connected with me in a way that the idea of writing fiction never had.

When I tell people that I write creative nonfiction these days, I sense some of the confusion that I once had. Some will ask, is it journalism? And I will say no, not really, unless you're Ta-Nehisi Coates. Others will ask a more relevant question: is telling true stories inevitably didactic or self-indulgent? And I will say no, not *good* creative nonfiction. It's strange to me that a genre that is actually quite prevalent requires so much explaining. I want to say, haven't you heard of Roxane Gay? Haven't you ever taken a look at the opinion section of any

newspaper or magazine? Haven't you ever found yourself accidentally on the serious side of BuzzFeed?

But back to Strayed. As I reflected on her essay, I thought: what if I cut to the heart of the shame I carry? What if I name the things that make me the most afraid and make something beautiful out of them?

From this mindset, my first essay, "The Lies I Told and the Sex I Didn't Have" was born. The essay, it seemed, arrived in my mind in full and was written in about an hour and a half on a public computer. I would find out later that this is not usually how the writing process goes, but in her collection of essays *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit describes this phenomenon well:

I wrote it in one sitting. When something assembles itself that fast, it's clear it's been composing itself somewhere in the unknowable back of the mind for a long time. It wanted to be written; it was restless for the racetrack; it galloped along once I sat down at the computer.

My life was different after that. For the first time, I was satisfied with something I had written and I had a sense that it might be worth sharing, yet I was also nervous that I would never write anything as good.

But I kept trying. I kept practicing being honest and brave. As I learned more about crafting essays and choosing stories that matter, I realized that I *did* have more to say and I *would* continue getting better at articulating my thoughts. It's hard to believe now that I thought I had peaked at the age of twenty when I now understand that the essays in this collection are probably only the beginning.

As best as I can figure, what makes a piece of creative nonfiction successful is the writer's ability to be comfortable in ambiguity. It makes sense: there is never only one angle to look at a story, even if it's yours. I must always consider the other side, the chance that I'm wrong, and acknowledge that most of the opinions and ideas I have now are not and have never been static or concrete. Beth Ann Fennelly told me in a workshop that the best creative nonfiction was that in which the writer's own discovery was apparent on the page (or rather, she wrote it on a chalkboard and underlined it several times). As readers, we don't want to be preached at, perhaps because we know inherently that no issue worth exploring is ever so black and white. In this collection, I try to discover and explore. I examine the truths I've been given and see if they still make sense within the context of the life I'm currently living. I try to reconcile what I've been *taught* with what I've *learned* on my own.

It seems cliché to mention that the essays in this collection center around my coming of age, but because of my relative youth and the fact that these essays are necessarily rooted in my own experience, it would be difficult to not write about growing up. In these essays, I tend to focus on the moments in which I become disillusioned, whether about issues surrounding sexuality, religion, the importance of art in our society, or the true and untrue stories that we tell ourselves. I find that instances like these--those times when I realized that everything was not as I believed--have been the most challenging and transformative. Though I am mostly past the primary "coming of age" years, I know that I will continually have my worldviews challenged and reshaped throughout my life. It is best to not be afraid of such shifts.

In the meantime, I utilize a confessional tone in these pieces. I believe in the power of vulnerability and reveling in the discomfort of my own experiences. I like to think that being intensely honest is the only way to gain credibility. There's something really undeniable to me

about writing that bares all, the simple authority of writing that has the reader thinking, well, why would anyone lie about *that*? I also rely heavily on voice to do much of the work that is making these essays worth reading. Dialogue and description are wonderful tools that I have become more skilled at in the past couple of years, but I have always had my voice. In my mind, I might as well still be a girl hunched over a private diary--but, somehow, now it's a "craft."

So I push myself to be faithful to my memories, even when they contain unpleasant truths and even when I'm not entirely certain if I'm remembering things as they actually *were*. I like to think that the resulting essays are mostly honest. In this way, the act of writing is just as much about forming my own self conception as it is about creating art. The challenge of understanding myself and articulating the my own ideas about the world is enough to keep me engaged with writing.

1. Forward: A Letter to My Mother

Dear Mom,

When I was in my last two years of living permanently at home as a high school kid, we used to joke that you and my father never saw me. When Abby and Victoria moved out to go to college, I took a semi-residency in both of their vacated bedrooms. For example, I'd often get dressed in my own room, do homework in Victoria's, and sleep in Abby's room, the largest of the three. I would throw my clothes on the floor and leave a pile of used tissues in one bedroom, and instead of cleaning it, I'd move to the room next door and proceed as usual.

In this way, I formed a divide in the house. The three bedrooms were mine, and as such, we referred to them as my "wing" of the house. When I was home, I came out for meals, and not a whole lot else. It was easy, since I had so much space, and, in general, you let me be.

I wonder if I told you anything about myself during those late teen years. I remember when I got dumped for the first time, right before I turned eighteen, and I didn't tell you, even though I was doubled over sobbing, aching for the better part of a week. I suppose by then, I had lost the language to tell you anything personal, anything beyond the mundane, the *how was school?* and the *it was boring, as usual*.

So I was heartbroken, and I told Victoria, instead, who told Abby, who told you. In this way, we established our chain of information, a process that our family would use more than once in the years to come.

When did I forget how to speak to you? When did I lose the ability to ask questions or seek advice from my parents, the people who should have been the ones to guide me?

I don't want you to mistake my tone for anger. I have always been grateful for the way that you didn't really pry or tell me how to feel. You trusted me to make my own decisions and

figure things out for myself. You made me independent and resourceful and gave me the space I needed to become my own person.

In the meantime, when you left me to my three bedrooms, the world got harder, got darker and more complicated. When I tested some of the things I'd been taught about the world, I found they didn't always hold up. I made mistakes that seemed life-ending; I got hurt and felt like I would never heal; I had secret joys and personal discoveries that lit me up. And for some reason, I couldn't share any of it with you.

It must be difficult, at times, to come to terms with the fact that I, your youngest, am not a child anymore. And for me, too, it is difficult to fathom that you are more than just my mother. You are someone who has likely felt the same things that I am feeling, has had secrets and tragedies all your own. I often think about the fact that you remained unmarried until you were thirty, and I wonder what you were like then, living a full life that belonged solely to you. It's been a shock any of the few times you have mentioned your younger years, or any of the many places you lived before you settled down. Once when I was seventeen, you mentioned offhand that you'd spent some time working at a dinner theatre in Georgia before you'd gotten your career in order, and I wondered at the revelation. Who was Judy Holmes, and what was she like when she was still figuring things out? I begged you for more details, but you were mum. Oh, it's not that interesting, you said, but it was, it was, it was.

I wonder if it will ever be possible for us to access the full versions of each other, that is, transcend the boundaries of mother and daughter now that we are both adults. Could we do that, instead of speculating about each other in silence? I wonder if you'd like to know me the way I'd like to know you.

Easier said than done, right? I have made choices that you probably would disagree with-
-from what we do know about each other, I think it's pretty apparent that we are two markedly
different women. Maybe that is why I hide.

Somehow, I have developed into the person that I am today, and I worry that I'm not the
daughter you envisioned. I am probably messier, hairier, less socially graceful, and more liberal
than you would have hoped. Sometimes I forget my manners. I don't really go to church on a
regular basis. Even so, I have always sought your approval. Never wanted to do you any harm.
Always wanted to be someone you could be proud of.

Without realizing it, at some point, I decided that if I was myself with you, you wouldn't
accept me or you'd try to change me. But I wonder if I've done more damage by hiding, by
keeping our conversations impersonal, when I actually have so much to say. I envy the closeness
that I see in mother-daughter relationships around me, the ones that my friends have, and if I'm
honest, the ones that both of my sisters seem to have with you. I want you to know me better, not
just because I feel you have the right to, as a mother who has loved me so well. I want you to see
the person I became while you weren't watching, and I want you to love me all the same.

I think that's all that anyone ever wants from their mothers.

It's possible that I am a writer today because when I was growing up, there were times
when I felt I had no one to confide in. I was often lonely, but I always wanted to tell the truth.
My resulting writing is mostly confessional in nature. It is as honest as I can get it. It is me.

There were days in my younger years when I didn't know how to love myself, but I'm
much better at that now. I have made peace with my imperfections; after all of these growing
pains, all of the raw sharp hurt that comes with the process of maturity, I am okay. I wanted you
to know that.

I'm still learning, though. I will go through further heartache yet. I will find joy. I will be disappointed. I will laugh at the absurdity of my existence. I will be cruel to others sometimes, even when I try not to be. I am growing into something, and I wonder if you'd like to be closer to my journey.

Even though I know now that you're a human being rather than a *supermom*, I still think that you are an amazing, gracious woman. I have learned so much from you in the way of kindness. I think if I modeled my life after yours I'd be pretty happy--I've watched you love deeply, pursue multiple passions, and conduct yourself as a force to be revered in your workplace and at home. You are powerful. I think we all feel it.

My thought is that I have even more to learn from you. I bet I could gain a lot from your story, that is, how you became to be the woman I know today. In the same vein, maybe you have something to gain from hearing my stories. We could keep learning from each other. And you know what? I don't want to keep hiding.

Thank you for teaching me to be brave. I love you.

Caroline

2. The Lies I told and the Sex I Didn't Have

When I was thirteen years old, I had all of the answers. If you wanted to have a good life, all you needed to do was pray every night and stay away from peer pressure. All of the other kids, experimenting with alcohol and each other were just fools. I was smarter and I knew which way was up. Alcohol was for Sunday morning masses and sex was for marriage. That was what I had learned in Catholic school, anyway. I didn't understand what all the confusion was about, because the way the world worked was really pretty simple.

I was fourteen years old when I first started lying about my sex life. I was sleeping over with two new friends who were swapping stories about kissing the neighborhood boys and it dawned on me that I was inexperienced in a way that was out of the ordinary, as well as certifiably uncool. They looked at me expectantly, silently daring me to contribute. *And what about you? Who have you kissed?* I made up an unconvincing story on the spot about Jacob from art camp. Before then, I hadn't realized how behind I was. My lies followed me around school, with different girls asking to hear about my previously unknown tryst from the gallery. I told them he was from out of town, that we hadn't stayed in touch. They pretended to believe me, and I was grateful.

I was seventeen and drunk by the time someone finally got around to kissing me. By this time, I knew I was strange and prudish, but didn't know what to do about it. It was my party, but I wasn't in control. Pushed into a darkened room, I tried to lie down on the bed before I realized someone else was there waiting for me. Some anonymous lips found mine, and I was too wasted or too disoriented to remember how to respond. It barely lasted a minute, but the next day, girls were mad at me and the boys at school taunted me when I walked past. I had become tainted in a matter of moments, with just one unasked for kiss.

That year, my best friend lost her virginity and delayed telling me for fear of judgment. Surely I would condemn her for having premarital sex just because I hadn't had any. I knew she was hiding something and overheard her dishing to someone else: it happened last weekend and it hadn't been too special.

When she finally told me, I simply responded, "I know."

She said, "How?" but I didn't tell her the truth. I didn't say, I overheard you telling someone else and that really hurt me.

"I could just *tell*," I said mysteriously. In some way, this made me feel better about the whole situation. She would think she could never hide anything from me, even if I wanted to.

"But how?" She prodded.

"When you know someone as well as I know you, you can just tell something is different."

This was, of course, entirely false, but posing as a mystic made me feel like I solidified our friendship. See, I thought, I know you better than anyone else and I'm not judging you. I wished I had been the friend she'd come to first, when she was bursting with the new information, but my inexperience somehow disqualified me from that honor. I didn't understand why my friends believed me to be too innocent to confide in; I could be ruthless, arrogant and, of course, dishonest, but somehow because I remained *untouched* past the age of fifteen, I was a bonafide saint.

I was eighteen and heartbroken, and habitually drinking too much for my size. Mostly because I was bored with my sleepy beach town on the Gulf Coast and partly because I was sad, sad, sad. After the boy I loved dumped me without a hint of compassion, my life seemed hollow and incomprehensible. There I was, feeling utterly lost, yet even my closest friends only ever

saw the side of me that was as bitter as over-steeped tea. I couldn't find the words or the strength to tell anyone the truth about how empty I felt, so I hid behind a mask of resentment and coped by downing cheap vodka. I was miserable and irresponsible, but I felt like a Cool Girl because I could take shots with the boys. The boys weren't too kind to me in return, but at least I wasn't sitting at home and journaling about a breakup that happened five months before. That would require being honest with myself. Instead, I'd drink to numb the pain and, you know, if some boy from physics class decided to kiss me, without skill or passion, I'd take it in stride and think, *so be it.*

I rarely had a friend say to me, hey, you're one hundred pounds and you've just taken three shots of vodka in rapid succession—maybe we should go home. I was reckless, but I never felt unsafe. I would be fine, I *was* fine, because I'd always come out of those blurry nights feeling a little exhilarated and a little hungover, but it was never anything I couldn't fix with a good Southern breakfast, the sacrament of Reconciliation, and a few flimsy lies to my parents about where I'd been come Sunday morning. They had the vague idea that I was up to some sort of illicit teenage mischief, but we were Catholic and everyone I knew was Catholic, and, hey, Catholicism does permit drinking. I was running wild, and nobody could stop me or talk sense into me, not that anyone really tried. I was too idle and too quick to be content with what I'd always had, so I went looking for disaster.

And so the night I was sexually assaulted started out pretty standard: too much to drink, random house party, falling down, stranger in the woods, and then something else: struggle, protest, and finding myself helpless. People expect you to remember it all with the sharpest clarity, but I can only recall the weight of his body over mine and thinking, *Jesus Christ how did his hands get there so quickly?* Trying to push him off, to get away, but not being able to feel my

legs, only dimly aware of his nimble, unwanted fingers working at the buttons of my clothes. And then the aftermath, finally finding my friends, twigs in my hair, and not knowing what to tell them. Getting them to take me home and crashing on the floor, wanting to forget. Waking up and remembering the nightmare of what I thought had happened, but not being certain because everything was so disordered and confused through the filter of the liquor I had consumed and *oh God, did that really happen?* I told myself that it wasn't a big deal, because it happened all the time. I knew there was probably something I could do, some hotline I could call, but why draw attention to myself when I was *fine*? And sure, by recent definitions, it might have been considered rape, but in the grand scheme of things, it wouldn't have been. Where did that leave me?

I was still a smart girl. I knew it wasn't my fault. But I still felt the wash of guilt, an unshakable filth in my bones. The next morning I drew a scalding hot bath to try to purify myself. Sylvia Plath wrote that there was almost nothing a hot bath couldn't cure. I plunged my head below the surface of water like I hadn't done since I was a small child. Maybe this was my baptism.

It was my nineteenth birthday when I met Drew. I was bored at some party, and even though I had come with the same shallow girls I'd known in high school, I may as well have been alone. He rescued me from the mindlessness of the party and took me to his room. I understood the implications of it all, but I thought, what the hell, I'm in *college*. He played guitar and gave me a little bit of whisky and we talked for an hour or so. I remember feeling so warm—maybe it was the alcohol, but I felt so comfortable with this guitar-playing stranger. I threw my head back and danced by myself like I used to in high school. He laughed and told me he'd never met anyone like me before. I left before I got carried away, though, no matter how much he

wanted me to stay. *I have class tomorrow*, I lied. I met him a few more times after that, but it was too confusing. You're beautiful, he said. You're clever and smart, he said. Come over, he'd text me, but never before midnight. As I quietly moved on, mourning a relationship that hadn't really happened, I wondered if I shouldn't have just slept with him to get it all over with. For the first time, I thought: maybe you don't have to be in love to have sex.

A half a year later, I ended up in another relationship and I stopped drinking as much, because I was actually happy for once. Finally, I had found someone who liked to read as much as me, and who would sit in the coffee shop until close, and that was really all it took. I thought, maybe I'll have sex with him. Pace was kind and respectful and, most importantly, crazy about me.

I would wait until I was ready. He would wait until I was ready. We were waiting. And waiting.

One day he got sick of it. He had tried to kiss me, but I was feeling closed off and stressed, so I flinched away. He was frustrated, hurt, and he'd finally had enough.

"I don't understand why we haven't moved forward physically since the second month of our relationship," he said. "Sometimes I wonder if you're even into me."

I felt the air rush out of my chest hearing that. Not into him? We'd spent the better part of a year together. It was so untrue I felt offended, as though everything I'd tried to do, all of the love I had so carefully given, amounted to nothing.

Nothing. I said nothing.

"I mean, look at us. Look at our relationship. We're just best friends who kiss on a semi-regular basis."

"That's not how I feel," I said, my voice strained, my body tight.

“Then how do you feel?” he demanded.

As I still struggled to respond, his voice softened and he said, “Open up to me. What’s holding you back?” His eyes searched my face for some clue, some secret that would unlock everything I was hiding beneath the surface.

I felt my jaw lock out of frustration. I didn’t know how to explain myself, and I didn’t know why I couldn’t trust him with *this*. He was, after all, perfect for the task of helping me toss away my innocence. He would go down on me without being asked to and promise to be gentle. I could tell by the kindness in his red-rimmed eyes and because of the one time he’d asked me, “Hey, do you wanna get married sometime?” Laughing, but I knew he wasn’t joking.

I could see I wasn’t getting out of this one easily as he stared at me patiently, unflinchingly. He wasn’t backing down and he needed answers: why couldn’t I give myself over to something deeper? Why couldn’t I relinquish control? *Why couldn’t I just fuck him?*

Why couldn’t I?

I could never give a satisfying answer, because I didn’t really know. It had something to do with fifteen years of Catholic school, where without my noticing, my educators had actually instilled the fear of God in me, out of everyone else. I had learned from teachers who were encouraged to incorporate lessons on Catholic morality into their science, history, and even economic lessons; I had one teacher in particular who would disinterestedly explain supply and demand to a class and, in the same breath, move seamlessly into a lecture on the importance of female purity and how crucial it was for women to submit to their husbands. It was all I had ever known, even growing up in a state where Catholics were scarce. Our parents insulated us from the Anglo-Saxon majority by building entire communities around Cathedrals.

It had something to do with parents who never wanted to talk about anything uncomfortable, good decent people, who allowed me to Google search “what is the vulva?” They lovingly sheltered me for as long as they could, but I wonder if they left me somewhat unequipped when reality could no longer be kept at bay.

It had something to do with that night in the woods, with never telling anyone and telling myself that it hadn’t affected me. It had something to do with knowing deep down that it wasn’t my fault, but still thinking *What if I hadn’t gotten so drunk that night? Maybe things would have turned out differently.*

Maybe I hadn’t healed right. Maybe I’d never have sex and never get married. By the time I was thirty-five, no one would question me. I could live out a fearful, lonely celibate existence. At the very least I wouldn’t get hurt.

But I couldn’t say any of this, not even to Pace who had loved me so patiently and so well. He didn’t deserve this, because after all, no one expects to enter a sexless relationship as an adult these days. Instead, I gave a stilted, unsatisfying explanation that was far from the truth and I cried, big ugly sobs, right in front of him. No one wants to try and have a constructive conversation with someone inconsolable, so I evaded the truth for another day.

These days, I lie by omission more often than not. I know that if I were upfront about the barrenness that continually characterizes my sex life, people would make assumptions and they wouldn’t be kind. They would assume I’m not a feminist, or that I keep a journal bursting with letters addressed “Dear Future Husband...” tucked neatly beneath my mattress. They’d assume, like my best friend before them, that I’d be in the position to cast stones. But that isn’t true.

I’m not good enough to get into heaven.

I’m not pure enough to feel comfortable in church.

I think all of this saying no, all of this resistance to outside pressure, may have made me more unhappy in the long run. Like I've been flexing some muscle for two decades straight, for so long, that I now have no idea how to relax.

I wish I had a high horse to sit on, where I could look at the mindless fornicators around me and laugh, laugh, laugh. Look at them. Fools, looking for happiness in all the wrong places. Picture me: judging people, smiling, promise ring glinting in the sunlight.

3. My Katrina and Yours

I packed as though for a light vacation. I can't imagine that at that age I owned anything much larger than a duffle bag when it came to luggage. I don't remember much about the things I lost. Stuffed animals that I'd outgrown, anyway, and all of the children's fiction books in my white wicker bookshelf: *The Amazing Days of Abby Hayes* and *Molly Moon's Incredible Book of Hypnotism*, books that would have been donated in the coming years, because they were too easy for me even then. Still, I read every volume I could get my hands on, because they were about girls my age.

In the first book in the series, I think, Abby Hayes paints her bedroom purple. So, at nine years old, I wanted to paint my room purple. Not lavender, or mauve, or soft grey-lilac; bold, royal purple. My mother told me that she would paint my room for my birthday after I begged and begged. About a week before I turned ten, she finally told me: Okay, we'll really paint your room.

Shortly after that, in the final days of August, I went to a birthday party at the Treasure Bay Hotel. That was the trendy thing to do in the later stages of elementary school: have your parents book a room or two in one of the nearby casino hotels for a sleepover. Back then, city ordinances prohibited the building of casinos on land so they floated on massive barges in the Mississippi Sound. Treasure Bay's casino was distinctly separate from the hotel. The four-lane beach highway separated the two structures, and the casino was built to look like a literal ship perpetually suspended in the water. That part, of course, would be gone in the next day or two.

We watched the weather reports the next morning, August 27th, in the hotel room. A big mass, that's what it was, angry red and orange on the map, like some monster extending its feelers to graze the continental United States. We could see then, the day before, the trajectory

and curve of its path. The tropical storm—no, now it was a hurricane—was gaining traction all the while, preparing to advance through the Gulf of Mexico and come crashing...where? Louisiana and Florida were on the table, but it seemed then to be advancing right toward Biloxi. Deliberately, even.

And then we were packing. My smallish bag, filled with whatever items I chose to stowaway at random. In my family's confused evacuation, it never seriously occurred to me that that we would return to anything different, and my careless packing is proof. The only thing I brought for sure was a pair of pajamas that my mother and I had picked out from Target. I remember it was Target, because there wasn't one on the coast back then, so we would have had to have gone to Mobile, Alabama to purchase them. The pajamas were satiny pink, with generic looking chocolate candies on them. The height of luxury, as far as I was concerned.

I've never been any good at packing. I'm always the person who has to stop at a drugstore upon arrival because I've forgotten my toothbrush or some other mundane item. So, I packed the Target pajamas, and nothing else to sleep in. When we realized we would probably never go back home, I started wearing my dad's undershirts as nightgowns, just for some variety.

After the initial evacuation, my family temporarily relocated to Lake Village, Arkansas, a tiny Delta town just over the Mississippi-Arkansas border. We stayed with my paternal grandparents, since the coast wasn't yet liveable. There were people we knew who were there without power or clean water, and, as we found out, our home had flooded. A few days later, after I'd celebrated the world's most depressing tenth birthday, my parents sent my sister Victoria and me to the Catholic elementary school, Lourdes in nearby Greenville, Mississippi, where my dad had gone, while my eldest sister, Abby, was sent to his old high school—they

needed something to keep us busy until we were able to return back home, and they didn't know how long that would be. I wasn't terribly impressed with Lourdes or the fact that I had to ride a bus without air conditioning every day in the heat of the late Delta summer, but the teachers and other kids were welcoming enough.

Sometime after I'd joined the fourth grade class, we had a one page creative writing assignment. That was the first time I wrote about the experience of evacuating on a moment's notice, of trying to pack everything important, while also feeling certain that a storm couldn't be *that bad*, and, anyway, this was all probably one big overreaction. That was my first attempt to capture that feeling of loss, of never being able to revisit certain childhood memories. Of still not believing it could all be gone. I titled my work "Katrina Commotion," which I read soberly to the class of quasi-strangers. If I remember anything about my time in this other school, it would be how impressed everyone was with my composition. *Dang*, one kid said, *she should be a writer*.

There were small horrors of living in post-Katrina Biloxi: piles of debris on every corner, having to share a bedroom with my teenage sister and, shockingly, the revelation that the Olive Garden on Beach Boulevard hadn't pulled through. Still, life went on, for the most part. About a month later, when we returned to Biloxi, my school was back open, and I got to see all of my friends. There were aspects of our life that were novel and fun. All sorts of donations were coming in from around the country, so my classmates and I had access to brand new school supplies (my school designated an unused classroom as the Resource Room, for whomever needed a new Jansport or pack of colored pencils), a seemingly endless supply of ramen noodles (which we would crush up, toss with the seasoning packets, and eat dry) and the occasional Meal Ready to Eat, compact military rations that we dissected with fascination. There was a new

student or two when I returned, since some of the other schools in surrounding areas hadn't opened yet.

Even so, I craved a sense of normalcy, one that in my view did not include canned water. And I ached hard for our beautiful lost house. My mother was an interior designer and our home was her greatest showpiece. In ways, our home was downright peculiar. There were several murals within the house, not counting the detailed cats roughly the size of a toaster oven that were painted on two of the four walls in my room. There was a magnificent clawfoot bathtub in my parents' bathroom that I loved, and a baby grand piano that we'd paid for using money won from a game show. The whole house, you could say, had character.

I pouted unendingly about the fact that my family was cooped up in the duplex that had been my parents' first home together. It was within walking distance to the beach, unlike our *real* house, yet it had managed to stay entirely intact.

Even so, I survived okay. We were lucky. We moved on.

If you ask just about anyone who lives around on the coast of Mississippi about the Storm, they'll tell it to you just how I would—Mississippi got the brunt of the bad weather, and New Orleans would have been fine if those levees hadn't been faulty. If half of their city wasn't below sea, besides. It was an injustice that New Orleans was receiving all of the national attention. All of the headlines were: Devastating Storm Hits New Orleans and Surrounding Areas. *Surrounding areas?* We were living in FEMA trailers, too. Our tourism industry was dead for the foreseeable future, between the dicey gulf waters and the damage to the beachfront casinos. We were important, too, and we were outraged.

But, of course, a lot of us had flood insurance.

My awareness of the Storm as the rest of the world saw it came later. Later than I'd readily admit. At the age of ten, my immediate concerns did not include what was going on 90 miles west of us, and, eventually, everyone got tired of talking about the Storm. Most of the people I knew had been affected in some way or another. Some families had lost a few shingles, while one of my closest friends at the time was living in a FEMA trailer, one of the formaldehyde-laced "toxic trailers" that likely was the cause of her sudden contraction of mono. Everyone was trying to rebuild from the rubble, and it would be years before things were back to the way they were.

People I know divide time accordingly: before and after the Storm. In this way, Hurricane Katrina occasionally finds its way into my everyday conversation. When I was a freshman in college, I mentioned to a girl who lived on my floor that my hometown had been destroyed by the Storm nine years earlier. Whatever we'd actually been talking about was immediately derailed. She was stunned and shaken. She'd never met anyone who'd been affected by what must have seemed to her, a girl from Illinois, a distant yet salient catastrophe.

She wanted to know every detail. I gave her a few snippets of my experience, hoping she'd relent, because it something most of us had gotten over long ago.

"Yeah, our house was destroyed," I said when she asked for more details.

"Destroyed? What do you mean?" she asked.

"Well, it flooded," I said. "Six feet of water. But it's okay now. We relocated and it was fine."

"But, I mean, did you go without power? Water?"

Each time I attempted to close the subject, to tie up the loose ends with cheerful summation, she asked another question, rapt with attention.

I didn't understand her interest. Certainly, most of the people on the coast had been devastated by the Storm. A twenty-five-foot storm surge has that effect. But we'd also banded together. The memories were dulled by the time that had passed, and our fears were assuaged by the fact that we'd rebuilt new homes a few feet higher.

The peak of my understanding arrived at an unexpected time. In 2016, Beyoncé released the single "Formation," accompanied by a music video—you know, the one where Queen Bey posts up on a slowly sinking NOPD vehicle, the one that opens with the question, "What happened—after New Orleans?" and the image of the lower districts of the city totally engulfed in stagnant water. When the video ended, I immediately hit the replay button.

It's not that these images startled me. I knew, on some level, the basic facts of what happened in New Orleans. I just hadn't stopped to consider them in a while. Yet there it was, in 2016, too obvious to miss: what happened to my family and what happened to them were two entirely different stories. Over two hundred people died in the twelve or so towns that comprise the Mississippi Gulf Coast—a number far larger than what my parents must have told me at the time—and it's utterly tragic that these people, mainly the elderly and poor, were unable to evacuate before the tornado spawning, 125 MPH wind sustaining, larger than life, category 5 mess rolled up to our shores. It's a damn shame.

But that's not what happened in New Orleans.

According to the National Hurricane Center's official report on Katrina's activity, it's unlikely that the New Orleans area experienced hurricane weather above the Category 1 or

Category 2 level. A storm of that size can cause some damage, but the notion that a monster storm busted the levees exists primarily in the imagination. In the simplest terms, inadequate preparation, shoddy engineering, and delay in governmental response to the unfolding fallout in the greater New Orleans area led to the immense number of casualties and city conditions that weren't technically livable for weeks on end. You know, the kind of thing that could have been prevented.

The distinction between these two narratives is not one that the media or government has ever been interested in making. And I understand how it can get confusing: two different outcomes tied together by the same Storm might have been a lot for the public to wrap its mind around back then. Still, I can't help but feel that the lack of nuance when it comes to the way we remember the Storm is damaging to all sides.

For one thing, the almost nonexistent coverage on areas that were actually *hit* by the hurricane lets the people who were responsible for the extreme disaster conditions in New Orleans off the hook. The general consensus is that the Bush administration responded to the crisis with an astounding incompetence, but there is room to forgive Bush if, as some may have been led to believe, there was no way to predict the scope of Katrina, this most destructive storm of all time.

And being forgotten doesn't feel good, anyway. Mississippians were overshadowed to the point that we feel the need to overcompensate even today. I've heard nary a word of New Orleans in any of the Katrina memorials we've held year after year. It's downright unfashionable to mention New Orleans when discussing the Storm, unless you maybe have a really close relative who lived there.

Just about every person I went to school with has written their own “Katrina Commotion,” that is, the story of our local tragedy. Through the years, the story has only gotten more winning; we can tell the story of a region in ruin and trace the path to its eventual restoration. We can talk about how we are even stronger and better than before.

It’s an important story, but it isn’t the full picture. When we, the children of the Gulf Coast, talk about the Storm, I fear that we often do not understand everything that is associated with the term “Katrina.”

30,000 bodies crowded in the Superdome. People stranded on their rooftops, waiting for a helicopter to swoop in and come save them. Three, four months later, and resources are still scarce. A city underwater. A large population of urban poor that relied heavily on public transportation.

This is a brief sampling of what comes to mind for most people when I say that I lost my home in Hurricane Katrina. Even if I tell them that I was safe and snug in a Hampton Inn in Middle-of-Nowhere, Alabama as the Storm raged on, these images confuse the truth.

These not-quite-deserved associations are exactly what made the girl on my floor stare at me like I was a whole new person when I told her my story. They are exactly what led many of my classmates to write about the Storm in their college admissions essays. Even if no one has heard of Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, Katrina’s reputation precedes her.

The suffering that my family experienced in 2005 and onward is valid, even though I struggle to remember the way things were *before*. That doesn’t mean that the loss wasn’t deeply felt and mourned at the time. Little things come back to me sometimes: five days after the Storm hit, my grandmother baked me a cake from scratch, complete with a dull purple icing that didn’t

taste quite right. I resented the pastel shade thinking, *this is not the color I would have painted my room. If I still had a room.*

This shade of loss is, in some ways, so much simpler than what the people of New Orleans must have felt. We never blamed mankind. We didn't experience quite the same loss of faith in our government in the way that many southern Louisianans did, resulting in pervasive conspiracy theories that some higher ups bombed the levees themselves in order to salvage the French Quarter.

In the agony of finding out everything we'd ever known had turned to ruin, in the aftermath of picking up the pieces, at least there was that single comfort: nothing could have prevented the ravaging of Biloxi and so much of the surrounding areas. It was chaotic and ugly, but it didn't seem personal. That in itself, I've learned, is a privilege.

4. Shattered Dreams, Stage Left

As a sophomore in college, each day I would walk to my literature class in Isom Hall feeling a twinge of sadness. Isom was the theater building—why else would it be so dingy and obviously underfunded? I would sit in my British literature class miserably, as the building didn't have central heating and had odd water stains splotted across the walls. The buzzing fluorescent lighting in the classroom was unflattering and distracting; my class relied on natural lighting for the duration of the semester. In fact, the building was so depressing that when one of my other English classes had been assigned a room in Isom, the professor simply opted to hold the class outside permanently. And yet, when I would walk in each day, I'd see the theater kids clustered around the building, relaxed, confident and loud. I could tell that I'd stumbled upon their haven, and as I waited for class, I'd watch coeds lounge on the busted leather couch, chatting comfortably, watching videos out loud from their phones. I wondered what it would be like to walk into these doors and be *home*.

When you're a thespian, it's almost automatic that you're accepted into the fold, safe from the outer world, where people don't quite understand. Sure, they might come to your shows and laugh at your comedic timing, but then again you might find a few audience members heckling you from the back row. It's happened here, to this very theater department, before.

I look back now on my senior year of high school and I'm more than a bit confused about my own actions. It's hard to believe now, but I had somehow gotten it into my head that one day, I might grace a Broadway stage. This wasn't some dear ambition that I had held since I was young. I had done a few plays here and there through childhood, because my parents had wanted me to get out of my shell, but I didn't become frenzied and passionate about it until much later.

When I was a sophomore in high school, I tried out for the school musical and enjoyed it more than I expected. I wouldn't sing in front of my parents, but for some reason, with the lights blinding me to the audience below, singing on stage felt right, like it was what I was supposed to be doing. And then there was the applause. Maybe people like me get into performing arts because they want to be validated. I fed off the applause or any laughter my few lines received. It felt good to have people agree with me for once.

My love affair with performing only became serious the following summer, when I went out for a community production of *Hairspray*. The day of the auditions, my dad happened to see an ad about it in the paper and said, "You should go out for this."

I told him I wasn't sure. Going out for community theater seemed somehow shameful to me. I'm from Biloxi, a city with a population of 45,000 that still manages to be the fifth largest city in the great state of Mississippi. In a place like this, I thought, wasn't small-scale theatre just for sad adults with broken dreams?

"I'll drive you," my dad said, "so you don't have to go alone."

So I told him okay, and we went to the audition, but standing on that stage I still felt silly. Even though *Hairspray* is a production about sixteen year olds, I was clearly one of the youngest people trying out.

After the inevitable rounds of callbacks, I ended up claiming the role of the secondary female lead, Penny Pingleton. This was the role I was meant for—the character was meant to be nerdy and awkward, and there I had a leg up.

Maybe it was because I genuinely didn't have anything else to do, but I threw myself into the role like it was my job. I arrived at rehearsals an hour early and learned the lines of other

characters. I made friends with each and every cast member, and called them family. I thought: I could do this for the rest of my life.

When I was on stage, I forgot who I was. I forgot about the boy in the chorus that I had developed an intense, unrequited crush on, and how everyone else in the cast was totally aware of this. I forgot about how my costume was itchy and tight and how the clunky zipper caught the delicate skin of my waist every time I had to get out of it. What did I care that I was doing community theater in Mississippi? I *was* Penny Pingleton, the devoted, geeky sidekick.

The show had a two-week run, and after seeing it, one of my friends told me she didn't understand how I could bear to repeat the same performance every night. I didn't know how to tell her that everything I did on that stage felt natural and new, with each passing day. When the last song was sung, I got into my car to go to the cast party, a single sob catching in my throat. It was over, and I could never bring it back. I felt orphaned in a moment, and I mourned the loss of my fake family, mourned the fact that, without a story to bring to life, we had very little in common.

When I started school a few weeks later, I told my mother that I wanted to add something new to my routine: I wanted to do vocal training. I wanted to sing. I wanted people to hear my voice and think it was some kind of exaltation. So I went to voice lessons with James.

James was an overweight man in his late sixties with perpetually ruddy cheeks and a booming laugh. What I knew for sure was that he'd once sung at Carnegie Hall. I didn't know how many of his stories were true—had he really lived in Italy? Had he really been a virtuoso tenor in his prime?—but I heeded every word he said like my life depended on it. In return he fed my ego: *Honey, I could see you on billboards*, he would regularly tell me. He assured me that I had what it took (on what basis, I still don't know). I learned how to sing classical works in

Italian, German, French, and I could feel my vocal chords strengthening, bending to my will. My voice developed vibrato and I sang scales with ease, pronouncing all of the right vowel sounds as my voice slid up and down. And then it was time to apply for college.

I've heard it said that singing boosts endorphins, and I think that it must be true. I've never been one for exercise, but I think it must be about the same as the mythical runner's high. Nailing a difficult note felt just like victory, and I wanted to chase that feeling. As I researched which colleges I wanted to apply to, the answer seemed clear: I would go to a fancy schmancy private school with a celebrated musical theater program. When I emerged, I would be this generation's Carol Burnett. It seemed like a pretty simple journey from point A to point B to me. All I needed to do was gain a rudimentary grasp on tap dancing.

I was honest about my ambitions to anyone who asked. One night, I had dinner with my friend Reagan and her parents, and her father gave me the regular interrogation about my future. When I told him I planned to go into the arts, he abandoned all pleasantries and decided to try to talk some sense into me. *That's a nice hobby, but what's your career going to be?*

I didn't let it get to me. I was going to major in musical theater, and I was going to be on Broadway. But I still hadn't selected the lucky university or college to receive me. It was hard to determine who would be ready to accept my special brand of big headedness and inexperience.

With graduation looming around the corner, I finally sat down to talk about my higher education plans with my dad.

"So, where do you think I should go to college?" I asked him. "Maybe we should get that figured out." I was ready to hash it out for hours, for as long as it took, until we reached a suitable compromise.

He didn't even look up. "We know where you're going. You're going to Ole Miss."

“What do you mean?” I demanded, totally shocked. That was all? All of my dreams and countless hours of practicing amounted to nothing with just that, just one dismissive response.

“You only applied to one school that would pay for your tuition, and that was Ole Miss,” he said, “so that’s where you’re going.” I felt my jaw stiffen, and I didn’t say a word. I couldn’t believe my dreams had a price tag on them.

My dad was practical to the extreme, and I think he did his best to raise his children to be the same way. Both of my older sisters were happy enough to attend Ole Miss and were on track to become a lawyer and accountant, respectively. Like hell was I going to graduate with a useless degree, thousands of dollars in debt, *in this economy*.

With my future set in stone, I locked myself in my room and shut the door on musical theater. As I moved my sheet music and jazz shoes to the top of my closet where they would begin to accumulate dust, I wondered what I had been thinking all of this time, believing that I could pursue this improbable, expensive dream. It didn’t make any logical sense.

I never argued or complained much after that night. It was like a flip switched inside of me; the day before I’d been almost fanatical about devoting my life to chorus lines and curtain calls, but from that night forward, I knew on my own volition that I’d never find myself blinded by spotlights again. I guess I could have entered my freshman year at Ole Miss as a musical theater major, but it somehow didn’t seem worth it. Who was going to discover me in Oxford, Mississippi? In my eyes, if I wasn’t going to make singing and acting my life’s work—that is, if the experience of being a musical theatre major wasn’t going to propel me to my inevitable life’s purpose—there was no point in any of it at all. I knew innately that I needed to put all of my energy into one singular goal, that there would be no room for anything else. After that

conversation, I saw that musical theater wasn't *it*, and I looked at the world with new eyes: what else could I give everything to? What else could I ache to be with every fiber of my being?

In the end, I moved from one stupid dream to another, and started writing more often than I ever had before. When relatives or parents' friends would ask me what I wanted to do, I'd say I wanted to go into the "publishing industry," the sort of vague, official sounding response that I knew would placate them. I knew this type of answer would conjure up images of conference rooms and professional work wear, and that would be enough. They would smile and stop asking me questions. To some extent, this response was accurate: I had some hazy idea that I'd one day need steady work to pay the bills. On the other hand, I wondered if I would ever be content assisting someone in creating something as opposed to doing so myself. Though I was too scared to name it at the time, I knew I wanted to write. Perhaps there is some similarity in writing and performing: through both mediums I get the rush that accompanies being vulnerable, and I am often applauded for this or otherwise praised at the end of it. I could be honest and brave on stage or behind my keyboard, and there's some security in knowing that it's okay to look foolish when it's for a *craft*. All along, I never lost my desire to put myself out there in front of a crowd. I just stopped doing it in person.

When I saw that my sophomore literature class this semester was located in the theater building, I was a little scared to go in. I looked at the girls in dance clothes and the boys with their unusual piercings, and it was like spotting an ex in public. I felt nostalgic and intrusive and desperate to join them all at once. I knew how close I had come to becoming a part of this fake family, and I privately mourned the loss of the friendships I would have made, the songs I would have sung, the characters I would have played. On the first day, I walked past a boy in leopard

print leggings thought: *he thinks I wouldn't understand*, and maybe he would be right. Perhaps I'm too far removed. But today and every day I'll get into my car, turn on the music, and sing impeccably to my imaginary audience. A flutter of joy at the high notes, an unmistakable sense of satisfaction as the song fades—it's all the same.

5. An Intermingling

We've been drinking a bit, nothing crazy, when I say I've got an idea.

"What is it?" he asks.

"I was thinking..." Instead of finishing the sentence, I start giggling. I know I should just say it, but I don't know how.

"What?"

"What if," I start, but I trail off again. He looks at me expectantly. "What if we had sex?"

He doesn't say anything at first. I think he's trying to tell if I'm serious. We've been dating for a year and a half.

"Are you drunk?" he asks.

"No! I just...thought it could be fun."

So, after all of that waiting, Pace and I have sex. Or I guess we make love—that's the phrasing he would use, even though I think it's kind of a stodgy euphemism.

There's no spattering of blood or anything like that, but it doesn't feel great. Halfway through, we lock eyes. Perhaps he's accessing what I'm feeling in that moment, because he says, "Are you okay?"

I'm about to say yes, but I hesitate, and, to my horror, unbidden tears spring to my eyes.

He pulls out, and I start crying for real. It's not for the reasons I would have predicted. I'm not feeling guilty because God's watching, and it's not like the pain was unbearable, but I'm crying all the same.

"We don't have to do this," he says. "We don't have to."

"No! I want to," I say, because, *God*, I'd suggested it. Why couldn't I just do this?

"Okay, then why are you crying?"

“I’m just overwhelmed, and I need a glass of water!” the hysterical pitch in my voice makes us both laugh. He stands up dutifully.

“I’ll get you a glass of water.”

A year later, I’m visiting my friend Kennedy in Dallas. It’s Friday the thirteenth, and we go to her local hangout, a brewpub called Small. Despite the name, it’s open and spacious, with lots of finished wooden picnic tables, even though we’re indoors. Kennedy and I are joined by her fiancé Zack and their friend Larry. I get the same fierce brown ale that everyone else does, though I realize quickly that I should have gotten half a pint. It’s seven percent alcohol, and, well, I’m a pretty tiny woman. By the time I order a second drink, I’m feeling a little woozy. Suddenly, I’m looking at Larry, thinking, *I wonder if he’d make out with me.*

It’s a natural question to ask. It feels like I’m trying on old emotions that have been gathering dust in a hidden drawer somewhere. I maintain eye contact with Larry for a half a second too long, imagining what it would be like to desire someone new. Imagining what it would be like to be desired in return.

Under the table, I text my friend Wade: *Trying to figure out if I should rebound or not!*

She responds after a couple of minutes: *I’d hold off on that.*

In the two days since Pace and I broke up, and I’ve gotten past “crying every second of the day” stage, but I don’t feel great. We’d split amicably, I suppose, over one irreconcilable difference that I’d been avoiding for far too long: he wanted us to get married (eventually), and I didn’t feel the same.

So, two days after the breakup, I'm in Dallas with one of my closest friends, which is keeping me passably happy and distracted—I haven't seen Kennedy in over a year—but I wonder what I will do when I have to go home, when I have to return to the small town where most of the places I frequent could easily function as little landmarks for our two-and-a-half-year relationship: the corner on the Oxford Square where I'd told him to hold my hand after our first date; the coffee shop where we'd met for the first time sober; the bagel place on campus where we'd gotten into our first real fight.

On the advice that had arrived via text, I decide to hold off on the rebound. I haven't been through many situations like this, so I'm still learning how to respond to the ending of a relationship. Pace was only my second boyfriend, and my first relationship had happened back in high school, if that even counts (I mean, he was a *republican*). I just keep drinking and, for the most part, succeed at not crying.

A couple hours into the night, the pub is getting more crowded, and I meet more of Kennedy and Zack's friends, none of whom make any real impression of me. Partially because I'm a little drunk, but also, I just feel sort of reserved. Sort of distant.

When he walks in, I think: *Damn, that's something you don't see every day.*

He's better dressed than I am, wearing black jeans that fit just right and a shirt that has this big face on it. I don't know whose face it is, but I get the sense that it means something culturally significant (When I ask him later, he says it's a reference to some obscure sci-fi movie from the '70s. "Yeah, I think I've heard of that," I lie). He's wearing brown leather oxfords.

He's got deep black skin, and is--how do I say it?--incredibly attractive. He's tall and has cute glasses and a beard. A gap tooth smile that is utterly charming.

I'm looking at him, hyper aware of my unkempt appearance. My hair hasn't been brushed in days, and my face is bare. When getting ready for the night, I'd left all grooming tools in my overnight bag, thinking: nobody knows me here, so what's the point? I find out from Kennedy that his name is Adrian, and the two of us are introduced ("I think you two will be friends," Kennedy says), we talk about nothing, but I know instinctively there is chemistry between us. I also know that he can feel it too. Still, I keep my distance afterward, wishing I looked slightly more fuckable.

Even so, I understand that there's something between us, something that doesn't need to be analyzed or questioned, but just *is*. It's a dance that we're playing as our eyes meet across the room from time to time, a series of nonverbal cues between the two of us that say I'M INTO YOU, EVEN THOUGH YOU'RE A STRANGER, over and over again. I don't believe in love at first sight by any means, but I can close my eyes and see how we would fit together. I can close my eyes.

This time, I don't ask myself, *I wonder if he'd make out with me*. I already know the answer.

The next afternoon, Kennedy, Zack, and Larry are playing instruments, and I'm pretending to nap. The three of them are in a band together, and they have a gig tonight. I don't want to fully experience the music until we're at the actual show.

And, also, I'm not holding up so well. What's causing me the most turmoil is that I can't fully identify what feeling is ailing me. I just know that at the moment I'm not going to make good company, so I lie down in the bed in the other room and cry as quietly as I possibly can.

I cry unceasingly and start to feel like the whole day has been a sham. Kennedy and I had gone shopping and eaten delicious vegetarian tacos, and, sure, it had been great. But the whole day I had remained weighted by what I had lost.

It is all so unbearable and fresh. I love him, I think, so why isn't that enough? What more could there be?

And then there was Adrian. I wonder why I woke up thinking of him. That was wrong of me, right? I wonder if I had imagined the immediate attraction between us, the flutter of recognition. Perhaps it had just been wishful thinking fueled by beer. If I saw him again tonight, how was I supposed to act?

I'm scrolling through Twitter on my phone when I stumble upon a poem by Mary Oliver called "Don't Hesitate." *If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it,* she writes.

From the other room, I hear: "Adrian wants to know if he can come tonight."

Of course he does. The venue is small and secret, so the only guaranteed way of getting in is to have one of the bands give you a comp ticket.

Give in to it.

I rise immediately and go to the bathroom to get ready, weeping a little bit as I apply makeup to my eyebrows. I struggle to wrap my mind around the fact that I was in a long-term relationship just three days prior and feel guilt clouding my apparently fickle heart.

But I'm giddy, too. I want to know what would happen if I touched Adrian's forearm, want to see his body language angle toward me. I can close my eyes and practically hear him saying *I feel like we've known each other for years*. That's how comfortable we'll be. I can see it.

At the gig, Adrian and I stay close to one another. He's the only person there I know besides the talent, and, God, he looks just as good as I remembered. He has on gray knit socks with tasteful black polka dots on them, which practically knocks me out.

The first band is starting, and I notice he isn't nearby for the first time since we got there. I'm sitting on a bench, worried that he'll miss the music, when I see him cut through the small crowd. The bench I'm sitting on is one of the only real forms of seating, and it's full, so he sits on the floor at my feet. I feel his head resting against my knee.

As the show goes on, I feel a gentle tug at my one my sneakers, and I look down to find him tying my shoelaces into knot after knot. I don't stop him—I don't want to sever what's connecting us—but during a brief intermission, I take off my shoe try to get the knots undone. They won't budge. I look at Adrian accusingly.

"It's art," he says, all faux-solemn. "You just don't understand it." He watches me struggle for a little longer, amused, then takes my shoe and unsnarls the laces in about thirty seconds flat. The sight of his fingers working deftly at the knot triggers some arousal within me that feels nearly primal. I feel heat crawl up the back of my neck. He's so *capable*, I think.

Later, we're talking about our creative pursuits. He's writes songs, it turns out, and to relate to him, I tell him about the poetry writing class I took the year before. He seems interested, and asks me how I liked it.

"I don't think of myself as poet," I say, "but it taught me that there's something wonderful about just capturing an image, even if you don't attach deliberate meaning to it." He's leaning in, hanging onto my every word. "Some things can be beautiful, just for the sake of being

beautiful.” As I say these words, I worry it’s too much, that I sound pretentious and self-important.

He gives a low hum and shakes his head a little. “Wow,” he says, and I feel an exquisite sense of relief.

Later, the five of us are back at Kennedy and Zack’s apartment. We’ve all been drinking, but I have much clearer eyes than I did the night before. Adrian and I are sitting beside each other on the futon and our knees keep brushing.

Zack is sitting in a chair across from us telling a story when I feel it: one of Adrian’s toes resting on top of my left pinky toe. I feel a flare of pleasure rise in my chest; I know this is no accident. Or it might have started as an accident, but was purposefully sustained. He doesn’t move his foot, and neither do I. It is more intimate, somehow, than if he had simply reached out and grabbed my hand. Looking around the room, I find it unbelievable that the other three haven’t noticed the change that has transformed our side of the futon.

And yet.

Yet there is something stopping me from escalating the situation like I think an old version of myself would. That girl would have kicked her legs up and laid them on his lap, would have rested a heavy head on his shoulder, would have asked him to walk her to car on that last warm night of the year because she’d left *something important* in there. She wouldn’t have specified what it was or why she needed it, because she wouldn’t have bothered herself with thinking of a subtle excuse to get him alone.

This version of me, though, feels like I’ve swallowed a stone that’s become lodged in my chest. I’m starting to recognize this feeling as grief.

I can't believe that I'm here and that this is what I'm doing on the night that Pace and I were supposed to be at our friend's Halloween party. I can't believe that I've lost the boy that I taught how to dance. He used to smoke, so he couldn't keep up with me, but I taught him one night in his dorm room while we were listening to "Fame" by David Bowie. *I need a break*, he said, breathing hard, halfway through the song.

But I kept jumping up and down, saying, *No, no, you have to keep going!*

I miss the boy who I've built my life around over the last few years, who has been my daily meal of love, of joy. I despise myself for not loving him back in the way that he deserved.

But there is new joy, too, in the form of one toe on top of another, and I'm stunned to find these polar opposite emotions don't cancel out. They aren't even battling, really, just coexisting. When joy knocked on the door, grief answered and said *come on in*.

...don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not meant to be a crumb.

So, I lean into joy, even though I am afraid. I leave my feet where they are and relish the delicate touch of someone new. It isn't much. I haven't moved on, really, and I don't feel like he's the one, but some things can be beautiful just for the sake of being beautiful.

6. Damaged Pictures / Pictures of Damage

In my portrait, I'm standing in front of Bayou Laporte, wearing a white smocked dress, clutching one of the roses from the garden my mother kept. The bottom edges of the picture are warped, but we never bothered to get a new portrait done. It was hung just high enough to survive the flood. Mostly, anyway.

Of course, I didn't see our house immediately afterward. I was ten years old then, and I could surmise for myself what it must have looked like by the odd items my father would bring each time he came back from visiting the ruins. A piece of pottery, for example, that he found miraculously intact in our backyard; some blankets that had been in the TV room upstairs, where the water hadn't reached.

After everything, we went through the old photographs. So many of them were stuck together, and my sisters and I spent hours trying to pull pairs apart, clipping off edges where the colors had been distorted, and sorting them into piles—before 2000, after 2000, and unsalvageable.

Then there were new photographs. One Saturday, my mom enlisted my dad to take Christmas card-worthy photos of Abby, Victoria, and me. He got a disposable camera, and we dressed in our finest winter wear: jeans and Abercrombie sweaters.

Our temporary home was close to the beach, but we drove around looking for the most impressive piles of debris, which took us west, toward Gulfport. It had to have been about three or four months since the storm, and in that time the debris had become a particularly ugly fixture in the backdrop of our lives. It piled at every street corner, impossible to avoid, until, gradually, it disappeared. The wreckage lined Beach Boulevard, which stretched from one end of the Mississippi Gulf Coast to the other.

“I’m gonna pretend to balance,” I told my dad. I stood behind a fallen tree and posed, arms outstretched, one foot forward, a look of faux concentration on my face.

“Say ‘debris!’” my dad said. I put my arms around Abby and Victoria and smiled broadly. We posed in front of the scarred landscape, that heartrending reminder of all we’d lost, as if it were a massive waterfall or a rolling mountain range--some breathtaking act of God. And I suppose it was just that.

I imagine we got the pictures developed later and showed them to my mother, who, appalled, put them directly into our old photo album. We wouldn’t have a Christmas card that year.

7. I'm Probably Fertile, So Why Not Raise a Feminist Son?

I think I must have been sixteen or so when my best friend Isabelle boldly proclaimed, "I'm never having kids."

Such an idea had never occurred to me before and I turned it over in my head for a moment or two. I thought: that's something you can decide?

By then, I knew the truth--giving birth was usually gruesome, and the contractions were only half of it. There are the gritty facts that most uterus-having people try not to think about: the afterbirth. The shitting on the operating table. The fact that you might sustain nearly undetectable fractures to your pubic bone.

It has always been my understanding that the act of giving birth would open the door to many unforeseen horrors. And for what? So I could have some helpless former parasite keeping me up all hours of the night, leaving my ears ringing and nipples chafed? So I could be the chagrined mom in public, shushing her tantrum-throwing toddler? So that, after a few years of reprieve, I could watch my little cherub transform into an angsty teen that withholds love, gets into trouble, and is generally a pain in the ass?

God, what if I had to raise a kid that was half as annoying as me?

"I'm not having kids, either," I said to Isabelle, and that was the story I stuck to.

It's been years since that initial conversation, but I didn't come up with a better plan than "don't reproduce" until recently. I didn't suddenly meet the right man, no, nobody whose character and ability to provide inspired in me a primal urge to be impregnated. Nor have I recently held a sweet, cooing infant and felt my maternal instincts overpower me like a wave of nausea. I still firmly believe that motherhood will be nothing less than totally grotesque.

And yet.

Because I am a living, breathing woman in twenty-first century America, it has not escaped my notice that the current state of the union is, well, poisonous for women and LGBTQ people. Between legislation that threatens to police our bodies and make necessary healthcare less accessible for us, to a general climate that allows men to harass, assault, and rape us, we the people of one of the wealthiest, developed nations in the world are somehow still so vulnerable.¹

If you're anything like me, you've probably spent some time puzzling over how we might cure our society of the disease that is hegemonic masculinity. The only thing I *actually* do to break down our heteropatriarchy is share my own stories to try to help others understand my experience. Most always, it doesn't feel like it's enough. Even if I feel personally committed to breaking down a system that routinely devalues women and LGBTQ folks, what am I doing in practice?

At this point, it's difficult to know where to begin. It seems useless to try to educate those who refuse to listen, those who attempt to assert ownership over women's bodies, those whose system of morality makes electing a misogynist/narcissist/white supremacist to the highest possible office permissible.²

For a significant majority of the men who are already living, I fear it is too late. Which is why, I think, we have to start from scratch.

¹ I could go on, but I won't. At the height of the #MeToo movement, my friend Alexis and I discussed how we felt about the whole movement, one survivor to another, and our feeling was that we were *unsatisfied*. Unsatisfied because *of course* we could say #MeToo, and so could just about every woman we knew. Unsatisfied because the fact that we were seemingly always at risk of being attacked or harassed was hardly news, and it wasn't our job to educate men about the issues we faced in our daily lives. Sexism and violence against women aren't our problems to fix, because they don't belong to us. They just happen to us.

² Which is not to say, of course, that my sudden outrage at the way women and LGBT folks are treated is simply reactionary to a certain presidential administration - rather, the rise of Tr*mp's America is the sign of the deep, deep cracks in this nation's foundation.

Having a kid would be scary, but I think I could do it. Okay, scratch that, I *know* I could do it, because plenty of people who are way less intelligent than me have and will always be becoming parents--sometimes even on purpose.

Maybe it sounds wrong that I should plan to have a child when I'm not totally sold that the idea of being a parent is the ultimate pathway to joy and fulfillment. I wouldn't really be having this kid for me, though, as much as I'd be doing it for the greater good. You see, if I've got a husband and we're financially secure enough to spawn, some part of me hopes that we have a son. There are plenty of awful people out there who won't give a second thought to infecting this society with equally awful progeny, and so maybe it is my responsibility to balance that out. To tip the scale--even just a little--in favor of good, in favor of right.³

I can see what kind of mother I would be to a potential daughter. I will always have the record of my own experiences as a girl--from the essays I write now to the diaries I kept as a thirteen year old--to keep my parenting grounded in the challenges she might be facing. While I understand that parenting is never easy, I dare to imagine that I would be well-equipped to help my daughter become an empowered young woman, to be her advocate through the tangles and trappings of femininity. I would do my very best to be that beacon which many of us hoped for as young girls, the one who would give it to her straight: sometimes being a woman is very, very hard.

But a boy.

³ You might be wondering: why have a child at all, if you're only doing it for some greater good? Why not make yourself more broadly useful then and become a teacher?

That's a nice thought, of course, and if I had the type of iron will that I think teaching children must require, I certainly would consider this vocation. However, something I know to be true is that a great majority of children are monsters, and even more so when they are at school. I am not so unselfish. On the whole, children, and boys perhaps more particularly, are weird, messy, pudgy little aliens that I want almost no part of. I have no doubt that I would develop an attachment to any child of mine, because that is what tends to happen. But as for *kids*? Other people's kids? Kids who are not my own kin? Those are still pretty horrifying to me.

If I was to raise a boy, my job would be somewhat different, maybe trickier, though no less important. I wonder if I could do anything so important as raising a decent man, a boy who knew exactly the weight of his privilege from a young age. Maybe we could make the world safer, one genuinely feminist boy at a time.

As a mother of a boy, most of the parenting choices I'll make will be directly connected to trying to combat the messages that our society's toxic masculinity (excuse my buzzword) will be sending my son day and night from just about the moment he's born.

The foundation of my parenting prescription will be to help my son develop empathy--a trait that, for some reason, is generally not encouraged for boys (if your masculinity doesn't allow for an emphasis on compassion, I don't want it). By this I mean I'm going to shower him in words or books every chance I get. It's gonna be baby book on baby books until he latches onto language. Maybe it's naive of me to assume that I can fix all of the world's problems with books, but it's the only thing I've got. For me, at least, embodying someone else's perspective through literature has been the one of the only things in the world to teach me something worthwhile. And he's got a lot to learn, so we ought to start young. For every book about a boy, I'll try to read him one about a girl protagonist. You know: girls go on adventures, too. Likewise, we'll have a sense of inclusivity in the movies we watch--for every *Toy Story* viewing, we'll screen *Moana* the next night.

Most of our really important lessons, however, will begin once he is sent off to school. There is no way to avoid it--he must be socialized. It'll be good for him to go to preschool, I know, and it will be exciting to show off how he probably will already have a grasp on the alphabet, but those late toddler years are when he will start to form real ideas about his gender presentation, and I think that's when the trouble starts. There's no way to avoid it: younger

children are more likely to be very concerned with adhering to their given gender category. It'll be all *dinosaurs this* and *baseball that*. For these years, it's very possible that my son will pick up the idea that all things pink have no business being near him. That's okay, I'm ready for it, and, of course, I can get on board: dinosaurs really are cool. I do not necessarily think it's a priority that I raise a *gender neutral* child. I will not try to keep him from the natural tribalism that occurs this age, when the opposite sex is synonymous with cooties (the younger generation still has those, right?). What will be more important to me, actually, will be watching what behaviors he takes away from the other boys. For example, I hope to find out soon after the first time my son hears the message "boys don't cry." Oh man, shutting that down will be quite an undertaking, but no son of mine is going to be emotionally stunted. *If you are sad or scared or hurt*, I'll tell him, *it's okay to cry. Don't let anyone tell you differently. These are emotions everyone has, even your dad*. Yeah, I am making the big assumption that there's going to be a dad in the picture, a good, kind model for our boy. Maybe he'll chime in on the next lesson I anticipate I'll have to teach: the touch barrier and how to not break it.

Hey, bud, my husband/partner will probably say in a firm, yet compassionate tone, *if you don't want to give Aunt Abby a hug, you don't have to*.

I don't? My son will always questioning things. Such a curious young boy.

No. See, everyone has a body of their own. And yours only belongs to you. So you never have to do anything with your body that you don't want to.

And my son will say, *Unless we're at the doctor?*

Yes, that's right. Unless we're at the doctor.

Maybe as my son grows bigger, he'll try out a variety of hobbies. It's always good that kids have a skill or two. I'm thinking some potent mixture of art camp, swimming lessons,

soccer leagues, and community theatre. I want my boy to know that he can pursue anything he wants - he can be expressive or agile, creative or coordinated, and both categories are valuable. Oh, and I'm not saying that I'll impose writing upon him as a hobby, but that would be encouraged. At most I will only force him to write when he was angry or otherwise overwhelmed. This is something I think we could all use more of, but it would be particularly important to me that my boy knows how to work through anger in a healthful way, rather than never processing his emotions or allowing them to manifest through violent behavior or "acting out."⁴

Ah, the beginning of adolescence. This is when childrearing will get really tricky, but if I've laid my foundations right, I should be in a good place to guide my offspring through the rocky terrain that is becoming man. Even if all of my other parenting plans have gone awry, my future son will receive comprehensive sex education, even if it's the only thing I'm able to fully carry out as a parent. I wonder what our society would look like if we equipped our boys with the basic knowledge they needed to navigate the sexual situations that they will inevitably have encounter⁵, and, furthermore, what would happen if we went beyond that? I think we need to do more than teach our kids which part is which in their reproductive systems and give them easy access to contraception if they want it -- which is already radical sex ed by our current national standard.

⁴ Of course, if he catches the writing bug or simply becomes proficient at writing in the most basic sense, that's always a plus - reading comprehension and writing skills are probably the most valuable skills when it comes to success in high school, as well as higher education.

⁵ Please, for the love of *God*, let's do away with "the twin assumptions that American teens are too innocent to know about sexuality and too sexual to be trusted with information." (yes, I lifted this quote from my sociology textbook, C.J Pascoe's *Dude, You're a Fag*.)

My son and I will talk about consent in a nuanced way, and hopefully he will understand. I know nobody else is going to tell him consent is so much more than “no means no,” or even “yes means yes.” I’ll tell him, a successful sexual encounter is not one in which you make advance after advance until the girl is so exhausted she figures it’s easier to say yes than no. And I probably can’t forget to say, you’re not entitled to a woman’s body. Ever. No, not ever. Not if you’re dating, or married, or she was into it at first, but then changed her mind. Not if she’s dressed provocatively, not if she is drunk, not if she can’t speak English but you think you’re reading the signs right, not if she’s vulnerable; just, in general, *a woman never owes you anything.*

Male readers, did anyone ever spell that out for you?

I can’t stop there, either, because sexual violence is only part of the way that men choose to exert authority over women. I know that my son will have to come to terms with the facts that a lot of us try not to think about. It’ll be a real bummer to have to tell my son about the 200 million women and girls that have undergone Female Genital Mutilation, but I’ll have to. I don’t want to have to be the bearer of the news that millions of women in America will be victims of Intimate Partner Violence, but someone’s gotta. I want him to be better than the benevolent sexists, the homophobes, the nice guys, and every man who thinks that women like it when they’re “aggressive.”

I’d like to teach him to be an ally, that is, to not just *know* that other people in the world have it harder than him, but to actually give a damn. To use his voice to uplift others. To be willing to give up some of his privilege so that others can benefit equally.

I suppose more than anything, I want to live in a world where parents actually talk to their kids. From what I know, children understand a lot more than we’d like to think. What if I

talked to my kids and I was frank: *today at work*, I might say over dinner, *a man I worked with implied that I was not knowledgeable about the field I've been working in for the last decade*. Or even, *today I failed at being a feminist* -- as we all sometimes do -- *and I stereotyped a woman based on her body*. What if I was proactive, and I started the dialogue about these issues before my children even had questions about them?

It is difficult to imagine a stage of my life wherein my identity is so wrapped up in the stereotypical wifely vocation of raising well-adjusted kids, but between now and whenever this might actually be relevant in the future, I will be trying to reconcile the woman I am now (along with her basic desires and fears) with the woman I hope to be. Maybe more to the point, I hope to be in a partnership where radical feminist parenting is something we are both committed to, something for which we are both willing to make equal sacrifice. I have to assume that we will look at bringing a child or children into the world for what it is: a grave responsibility that requires close attention.

Maybe this is only a fantasy. It is possible that I will fail despite my efforts, because there is no exact formula I or anyone else can follow to definitely produce a decent human being. I'm reckoning with the possibility of failure, or at least the possibility that maybe none of the I effort I could put in would make much of a difference. After all, parents try to raise their kids all kinds of specific ways, and I think it rarely goes exactly how they planned. Still, I think it's worthwhile to try. I get it -- I probably haven't found the remedy to all of the world's ills. But maybe I can help my future child be a *little* better at loving other people, and maybe that will be enough. I'm holding out hope that if I give my future son the right tools, he can be the right kind of man. I

hope he'll be nurturing and empathetic. I hope that he forms his own unique construction of masculinity, and that he'll be happy in that.

Oh, and one more thing: I don't really believe in corporal punishment, but if I ever find out any son of mine has catcalled a woman in the street, I will personally beat his ass.

8. Surrendering to the Tangle

One day, at the beginning of cheerleading practice, I was stretching beside this girl Olivia. She was sturdy with broad shoulders and strong looking legs, yet she was above average flexible, too. She could put her palms flat on the ground while standing with her feet together and could kick her leg up and catch it by the heel. Olivia was a year older than me, fourteen, and if you asked me then, I'd probably have described her as a frenemy.

"Ugh, I missed a spot shaving," she said. She ran her fingers along the skin that ranged from her ankle to her inner knee, where there was a skinny strip of neglected hair. We were sitting on grass doing butterfly stretches, near our school's baseball fields. She leaned forward and pressed her thighs to the grass.

I squinted. "I never shave there."

"Where?"

"The backs of my legs," I said.

Olivia eyed my calves. The hairs there were darker, undisturbed and, I'd assumed, unnoticeable. "That's disgusting," she said.

At age eight, I started getting my eyebrows waxed. It wasn't something I did frequently, but I'd tag along if my mom or older sisters were getting it done. They refused to include me when they saw *Mean Girls* in theatres when I was nine, but perhaps they thought I needed to decompress with them at Ursula's Beauty after my jam packed days of second grade. It gave me a sense of maturity, and I enjoyed the hot lava feel of the warm wax as it adhered to the skin between my eyebrows. Later, I started getting my upper lip waxed, too, or else I would have my sister Victoria treat it with an at-home bleaching kit. I started shaving my legs at age ten or so,

because my friend Destin, who had gone through puberty early, showed up to school one day with *touchably soft legs*. “Feel them,” she told the rest of us, and we did, hyper aware of the peach fuzz that lightly dusted all of our legs.

Then we were in middle school, and we all had armpit hair and bottles of name-brand women’s shaving cream and Venus Divine Ultra Deluxe Closest Shave razors on the side of our showers. Nobody told me how dangerous it would be. One day, I was taking a razor to some hard to reach part of my knee, and I sneezed. The blood flow was instant and unceasing. Everyone I knew was shaving their pits every day or so, but I found when I tried to keep up that regimen, I reaped only angry red bumps and ingrown hairs. The breakouts were ugly and irritated, and they didn’t go away. I had never seen any of that on a Gillette commercial.

One day, in eighth grade, I was changing in the locker room for P.E., listening to the gossip of girls. Apparently, this girl Lydia, who went to a nearby public school, had gotten felt up and fingered by some boy we all knew.

I heard the details, relayed breathlessly by my friend Sam, who broke the story for us: “Apparently, she hadn’t *shaved*, and now everyone is calling her Chewbacca!” Everyone shrieked with laughter, incredulous and satisfied.

I wondered what it felt like to be Lydia in that moment, to have that piece of information spreading wide and far. She didn’t even go to our school—I had only met her a handful of times—and yet now I knew *that* about her.

At the same time, I felt myself break into a cold sweat. I was stricken, wondering how long it would be before someone found out about my budding bush. I knew that I was years away from any sexual activity, but someone might notice in the locker room one day. Or maybe they could just tell without even seeing it for themselves. Maybe I really was somehow less

clean. How long until I was publicly shamed? How long did I have before I was outed as a prickly girl?

Most likely, in the moment, I widened my eyes and said something like, “*Oh.*” I had to be complicit in the condemnation of Lydia, this girl who hadn’t adhered to norms I was learning about in real time.

Nobody I knew ever talked about what they were or weren’t doing to their pubic hair, so moments like these were precious education.

I think I knew all along that people were removing that hair, but I wanted to pretend that it wasn’t true. Because, *ouch?* A couple of years before, when I’d been in elementary school, my best friend Raven revealed to me that she had taken scissors to her new pubic hair and chopped roughly. She didn’t even know why, she told me, and I didn’t know what to make of it. Later, when she was asleep, I thumbed through her copy of *The Care and Keeping of You*, the “body book” that explained puberty and everything for parents who were too passive to do it themselves. I hadn’t gotten a book or a talk. Instead, I gleaned what I could from a secretly borrowed book. The advice from this particular manual was my first glimpse of body positive literature: *shave if you want, it said, but not everyone does—and that’s fine!*

You might think after that incident in the locker room that I would have started shaving my pubic hair, but you would be wrong. Oh, sure, I gave it a couple of half-hearted attempts, but I could never get over the inherent danger (you’re supposed to shave *with the grain*, apparently?!). The savage itch of the area when the hair started to grow back was enough to deter me, and anyway, how often was I supposed to subject myself to this torture as a fifteen-year-old virgin? If hairlessness sends a signal to the world, mine was a blip on a radar that no one was watching.

But when I was sexually assaulted, one of first places my mind went to afterwards was to the state of my pubic hair. I was eighteen, out drinking on a throwaway January night, drinking heavily on a throwaway January night, and then it was late, and I was in the woods, pinned down by a stranger on a throwaway January night.

When I woke up in the painful light of the next morning, I had the audacity to think: *At the very least I shaved*. It was such an odd coincidence. Just days before, I had shaved my pubes for the first time in a year, just to see if it was as bad as I remembered (it was), and for the first time it had actually mattered.

I didn't think that because I was worried about what he had felt, but because I knew people were already talking about how messed up I had been and how I'd gone with that stranger and how I had lied to him about what my name was. Later, I would hear that he had walked around the party and offered his fingers to the other guys there, my friends. Smell them, he had said.

At the very least, I had shaved. At the very least, I hadn't let myself become another Chewbacca.

Once I was out of high school (and I wasn't required to wear a plaid skirt five days a week) I started going easier on myself. Within the first couple of weeks of college, I celebrated my nineteenth birthday. I felt alone and confused, but I dressed nicely and went out with some friends from high school. I wore a skirt that grazed my ankles, so I reasoned I could get away with not shaving my legs. Later, I went off with a boy I'd just met to escape those high school friends I was realizing I didn't even really like and he lifted my skirt to stroke my bristly legs.

And he didn't say a word.

My decision to end the war on my body, the war against hair that was determined to grow, did not end because this boy still found me desirable in spite of my leg hair. It didn't end that day or that year. There were many nights when I found myself contorting my body in a tiny shower stall in the communal dorm bathroom, bending or propping up a foot against the grimy wall to shave the back of my calves.

But maybe I did have things to offer besides legs that were smooth as a tasteful granite countertop.

It was this past July that I officially ditched the razor, possibly for good. I was in London, anonymous and alone for a month and a half. I was hardly speaking to anyone, and I spent the majority of my days walking the streets, stopping to eat and read until the sun began to go down. I packed a razor and a blade attachment that never got opened.

To be fair, I wasn't shaving a ton before that. I would do it for formal events, when it was too warm to wear tights and sleeves, and I thought there would be photographic evidence of what I had been wearing or doing. Still, these instances were few and far between.

I knew that there would be no one to view my clean-shaven pits while I was in London, so what was the point? I graduated from fuzz to actual hair, from prickly to natural.

Perhaps my perspective switch changed in the face of new standards of beauty. On the warmest July day in London, I looked around my car on the Underground. Almost every woman in eyesight was *still* wearing black jeans. On the streets, I admired women in flowing trousers and gauzy maxi skirts. As I walked, I didn't see, as I would have in the south, any startling flashes of long tan legs.

How many times had I walked around my own university feeling isolated, because I didn't fit the narrow standard of what Oxford, Mississippi believed a woman should look like. I would never be one of the modern southern belles that engulfed me: I was shorter, less polished, with a Middle Eastern coarseness to my hair that made the way I presented myself a little different and difficult. I'd never have that easy grace.

Here I could be Casper-pale and wrapped up in a scarf in the middle of July. Here I was anonymous, but I didn't feel alone.

There was some line I crossed without noticing, a state of hairiness that would be more difficult to remove than not. In pursuit of smoothness, was I willing to deal with the inevitability of a clogged drain? Was I going to spend actual U.S. dollars on Drain-O just to maintain the approval of Trump's America? I wasn't sixteen anymore—if someone called me Chewbacca or told me I was disgusting, I would laugh and laugh until I dropped dead.

At the beginning of August, I returned to Mississippi in the last swell of the damp summer, and I was a little different. I had spent the last couple of weeks wearing jeans and coats, shielded by a perennially overcast English sky.

It was too late, I thought, to begin my shaving habits of summers past. I was too tired to be self-conscious or to deliberately avoid lifting my arms when I was in public.

I could lift my arms. I could wear miniskirts as usual. I could exist as intended and stop subjecting myself to the razor, the wax, the tweezers, not because all hair removal is inherently evil, but because it made my life heavier. Because in the time spent worrying about the patchy five o'clock shadow all over my body, I could be catching up with my mom on the phone; in the

time spent scheduling and receiving a wax, I could be reading a book, or baking carrot cake, or taking a walk. What if I chose to be good to myself?

A month later, I went to the spa for my twenty-second birthday at my mother's behest—she never knew how to pick out gifts for me. I had never expressed any desire to go to a spa before, but I was game to try it, and, anyway, who was I to turn down a massage?

I think I liked the *idea* of the massage more than anything else. Like, I didn't think I was going to come out of it a new person or anything, but I sort of hoped I would. And the spa was great! After the guy at the front desk confirmed my age ("You have to be over eighteen to go in." "Right, I'm twenty-two." "...oh"), he offered me a selection of beverages from the mini fridge. I got both apple juice and a mini bottle of water. It was exhilarating.

After a minute, Alyssa, a plump brunette in her thirties came out to show me into the spa. She gave me a code for a locker that my brain immediately erased and showed me the sauna, hot tub, and bathroom.

"There are robes and sandals in each locker," she said. "Clothing is optional beyond this point." My eyes widened, but I tried to be chill, like, *yeah, I totally see the sagging breasts of old white women all of the time*. "Feel free to use any of the stuff in the bathroom. Autumn should be ready for you in about ten minutes." With that, she left.

I peeked into the lounge, where a couple of older women were sitting in the provided robe-and-sandal combo, eyes fixed on a television screen that was only slightly larger than a bread box. That wasn't where I belonged. Even though I was wearing a bathing suit, I didn't

really fancy a dip in the hot tub, either. Its location (just beyond the Clothing Optional point) was far too public, a level of vulnerability I didn't wish to share with every incoming spa guest.

Instead, I went into the bathroom to investigate the “stuff” that Alyssa had mentioned. Before me, on a gleaming marble counter, was a glorious array of toiletries. Practically anything you might ever need to cleanse or better yourself was represented. Disposable toothbrush and toothpaste? Check. Hairdryer? Check. Gold Bond powder? I didn't know what the hell that was for, but it was all mine. I knew I could spend all day in there, flossing and rubbing lotion into my body, but I also knew I needed to make these precious moments count.

There was a full-sized container of women's shaving cream near the edge of a large basket, and that was what I kept gravitating toward, mainly because it had been ages since I'd seen one. The whole bottle was pink, and there was a garland of freshly plucked spring flowers on the label. *Skintimate Hydrating and Refreshing Shaving Gel*. I'd considered this stuff a necessity until I was probably sixteen, when I found out that conditioner worked just about as well. Before me was name-brand female shaving gel that cost, like, seven bucks at CVS. A relic from my past, those forgotten days when I would shave on Thursday nights, in preparation for the tiny cheerleading uniform I would don Friday afternoons.

I had to use it.

I reached into the basket to find the saddest looking disposable razor I had ever seen. It was a vibrant royal blue, with two blades, and about two and a half inches long. I pumped the shaving cream into my palm and smeared it haphazardly into my armpit, praying that none of the other spa-goers would happen to come in.

I raked the cheap razor over my armpit again and again, tapping it on the side of the immaculate porcelain sink and rinsing occasionally to loosen clumps of hair from the blades. The hair swirled its way down the drain.

Afterwards, the remarkable slickness under my arms was impossible to ignore. The patch of skin I had uncovered was smooth and delicate. It had been months, maybe, since this skin had seen the light of day.

I didn't feel any different. There was no rush of relief. No evaporation of anxiety now that I had subtracted some unsightly piece of myself. The stubble would be patchy and uncomfortable for the next week, but it would grow back.

It was just hair, after all.