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INSIDE PASSAGES

By

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Inside Passage

We wait for the all clear to board on a black night, the moon stitching a diamond pattern on the Gastineau Channel, the white rails of the Matanuska ferry glinting like a carnival ride. I want to be out there walking a dog, stretching my legs between rows of idling cars like the young couple holding hands and strolling slowly while their yellow lab pees on every third tire. Instead, I sit my dogless butt in the back seat next to Tekla and Camden, reading comics. As the oldest, the back belongs to me and I take the job seriously, doling out snacks and blankets and distractions to keep Camden's four-second attention span from driving Mom nuts.

Our favorite car game:

“Mom, where are we going?” we ask in turns.

“Crazy! Wanna come?”

“Yes!” we are pretty sure crazy isn't a place you can drive to.

By the time the first row creeps forward Tekla and Camden are asleep. I roll down my window and lay my head against the frame, breathing in exhaust and treated wood and ocean, anticipating. Ferry time is endless and cumulative, events strung together like Mom's Buddhist prayer beads. Individual trips merge into one journey so that every morning when I wake I recall a humpback whale escorting us from the harbor, but I don't recall that it happened years ago.

From inside our car the Juneau ferry terminal looks the same as Ketchikan or Sitka's: a small, gray building with huge windows, a parking lot big enough to fade to shadows in the far corners, and a

monstrous steel gangplank designed to rise and fall with the tide. The Juneau and Sitka terminals are both way out of town, on remote beaches with mountains rising up around them; Ketchikan's terminal dumps you in the lower right ventricle of the city's heart. The terminals look the same and smell the same, but in Sitka I feel my brother's warm house waiting; Ketchikan, my grandmother and uncles and cousins; Juneau, the promise of pizza and video games at Bullwinkle's.

Once our lane begins to move it doesn't matter where we're going or when we'll get there. I know that we will board slowly, each row of cars racing at turtle speed to a designated berth in the belly of the boat. We'll park between yellow safety cones and grab our gear – a backpack apiece, a tent, Mom's guitar and cello – and we'll race upstairs to the solarium deck to find a place to camp in the open air. I plan to get there before the crowd, push a handful of lounge chairs aside, and set our tent at the starboard rail, just at the edge of the solarium roof where the overhead heat lamps will keep us warm and the wind and salt spray will tickle the rain fly. Then I will sprawl out on a lounge chair and tap my heels three times and laugh because I'm already where I want to be. Ruby slippers be damned.

In an hour we will be underway, decks shuddering, lights dimmed, free to roam. No school. No classmates. No popularity contests or birthday parties or step-dads. Just three kids and a young mother and three hundred strangers going somewhere, eventually.

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Southeast Alaska – residents call it simply the Southeast – is mostly made up of island communities protected from heavy Gulf waters by a thin strip of coast, connected by a series of waterways called the Inside Passage. A few of these communities – Ketchikan, Sitka, and Juneau – went from village to city after the Gold Rush, when folks settled on other lucrative enterprises like cannery work and logging. Most of the canneries are gone now, and the mills closed, but a lot of pioneering families built lives among the wet Sitka spruce and red berried devil's clubs and they couldn't bear to leave, even when the jobs evaporated.

To get from one place to another in the Southeast it helps to own a plane or a boat, and a lot of people do. Those of us who don't own a plane or a boat ride the Alaska Marine Highway on merchant vessels that traverse the coastline from the northern tip of Washington to the Aleutian Chain. Thirteen ferries in all, ranging from two to four hundred feet in length. The bigger boats offer staterooms, multiple lounges, a bar, a theater, a play room, a restaurant, even gift shops. Their names are grand and inspiring: the Columbia, the Taku, Matanuska, Aurora, Tustamena, Kennicott.

It seems like five months out of any given year Tekla and I lived out of suitcases, doing our homework in the backseat of the car, or at a lounge table in one ferry or another. Camden had it easy, living with his dad in Sitka during the school year.

I finished first grade in Ketchikan, second in Juneau, and third in Fairbanks. In fourth grade I attended four schools; two in Fairbanks while Mom finished her first Master's degree, one in Ketchikan with Grandma Gorgeous Darling while Mom packed our things for the treacherous mid-winter Alcan drive from Fairbanks to the ferry in Skagway, then Harborview Elementary in the spring once Mom found a place in Juneau.

No matter where we hunkered down for winter we knew we'd soon ferry back to Ketchikan for Christmas, and then again as soon as the first spring cruise ships hit the Inside Passage, dumping glitzy passengers into Grandma's eye-popping tourist trap on Front Street. Before she changed the name to Madame's and imported a turn-of-the-century Victorian brothel theme, the store was called Tom Sawyer's, after the original owner.

I can still smell the heavily Windexed glass shelves, Grandma's perfume, the sharp zing of brand new clothing, and the musk of fur lined moccasins. When it was still Tom Sawyer's half the store held jewelry, the kind of stuff Mom herself couldn't afford – diamonds and pearls and gold nuggets the length of a finger. The other half held boxes of smoked salmon, chocolates, jams and jellies, tee shirts, sweatshirts, umbrellas, Eskimo yo-yos, ivory, polished stones, key chains and totem poles, some

smaller than my hand, others tall as Mom. After the renovation, Madame's interior went from blue to burgundy and held more delicate collector's items; finely wrought candelabra, Victorian dolls, handmade fudge. Madame's employees were required to dress in costume, which involved a lot of satin and lace and cleavage. Grandma Gorgeous Darling, of course, was the Madame.

Before the renovation Mom wore long flowing skirts and short jumper dresses in bright colors to offset her eyes, wide and brown as Hershey Kisses. She sold ivory carvings and diamond rings on commission, earning enough – after repaying Grandma the price of our travel – to make it through another year of folk festivals and art school and raising three kids.

We learned not to expect lazy summer days lounging in downtown Ketchikan. Once the cruise ships arrived our cafés, parks, stores, and docks became a sea of pastel sweatshirts, tee shirts, and rain slickers with *Alaska* stamped boldly over bears, wolves, sled dogs, forget-me-nots, and every kind of fish. I loved tourists and I hated them. They saw everything through a camera lens, walked blindly into traffic, demanded to be served first. But as fisheries, mills, and logging companies failed year by year, tourism kept Southeast Alaska afloat. You had to learn how to make the sea of strangers seem exciting. I peddled Dixie cups full of salmon berries on the dock across the street from Grandma's store in Ketchikan, and across the street from my favorite restaurant in Juneau, The Armadillo. Fifty cents per cup. I didn't make a killing, but kept myself in candy and squirt guns.

I first worked for Grandma at age six, stocking shelves and tagging shirts for a few hours before running off to spend my earnings at the deli on my way to the public library two blocks away, where I read books and watched movies. By fourth grade I could reach high enough to stock millions of plastic totem poles and key chains with “Alaska” or “The Great Land” on the front, and “Made in China” stamped on the back.

The ferry system lured a different breed of tourists than the cruise ship customers taking over my favorite places. I thought of them as sightseers, and I loved them for their adventurous spirit. They

roughed the Inside Passage without a heated swimming pool or dinner theater. Some of them slept right next to me on the solarium deck. They bought touristy stuff, but mostly spent their money on locally guided kayak trips or helicoptered to nearby glaciers during layovers.

Sightseers wanted to *be* in Alaska, smell my rainforest, hike my mountains. Because they asked, I told them what I knew: eat at the Armadillo in Juneau; take a tour with my step-dad and hit up The Back Door Bookstore in Sitka; stop in at Grandma's curio store in Ketchikan and say hi for me, she'll get a kick out of that. I also told them: no, we don't live in igloos up north; yes, we have telephones; no, most people drive cars in the city instead of dog sleds.

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Camden beat the hell out of every arcade game the ferries carried: Street Fighter II, World Hero, Hard Drivin'. Passengers gathered around to watch him play for hours, volunteering quarters. I say *volunteered* because I don't like to call it *panhandling*, even though the term might be more accurate. Nevertheless, at five years old Camden was a video game wizard, and practically a millionaire in my nine-year-old estimation.

When Camden rode with us, Tekla and I spent more time in the kid's playroom with its bright red plastic toddler slide, though we were all too big for it. We built forts out of giant Legos, played card games, and reminded Camden to go pee when he crossed his legs and started bouncing, or twenty minutes after he drank something, whichever came first.

Camden had made a premature entry into this world a month after my fourth birthday. His stomach wall had not finished knitting together, leaving his intestines exposed, a condition called gastroschisis. When the doctors were stitching organs back into his belly they might have jiggled his bladder some, or at least that's the family theory because in all his life Camden's bladder has never given him the early alert signal most of us enjoy, which tells you to make your way to the bathroom before it's an emergency. I didn't care about any of that when he came home from the hospital, though.

I loved hanging over the bars of his crib, tracing the scar running from diaper to ribcage like a zipper, singing *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star*.

Maybe my brother didn't always know his bladder was full and occasionally had to change his pants three times a day, but at four years old he could take a radio apart and put it back together. At five he'd begun building his own computer from spare parts. And total strangers spent a small fortune in quarters just to watch him play video games.

When we tired of watching Camden beat his own high scores, we moved to the movie lounge. We spread out blankets and piled up like piglets to watch *The Little Mermaid* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* before storming the upper viewing deck to practice our ninja moves. Camden only lived with us during summer and Christmas. When he lived with his dad I worried he'd forget me. Forget that I changed his diapers, held his bottle for him, taught him to read.

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Tekla doesn't always love the ferry. One year she doesn't want to go to Ketchikan for Christmas. "We spend more time getting there than *being* there!" she protests.

"But getting there is half the fun," Mom says. Which is why at the start of my fifth grade year I can draw you a map of the Matanuska ferry – where the bar is, the lounge, the arcade and the kid's playroom – but I can't tell you the name of a single one of my fourth grade teachers.

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The summer after we moved back to Juneau and I finished fourth grade, Tekla third, we were invited to join a group of musicians called Heliotroupe, traveling on a grant from the Alaska Arts Council. Tekla and I were invited along as an afterthought, but we still felt like stars.

On the ferry we performed twice daily in exchange for passage between shows in Juneau, Sitka, Ketchikan and Petersburg. With us were a sitar player, a standup bassist, a mandolin player, several guitarists, a cello player, a fiddler, a Celtic drummer with his bodhran and penny whistle, and an actor.

We took shifts in the cafeteria during lunch and dinner, stunning the diners with everything from blues to jazz to Beethoven and Irish fiddle tunes. The actor did monologues, striding quickly between tables and looking audience members right in the eye.

Tekla and I sang *a capella*: *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*, *When the Red Red Robin Comes Bob Bob Bobbin' Along*, *The Rose*. I sang melody while Tekla took the harmony. We didn't pass a hat around, but people folded ones and fives into our hands, gushing. One woman, plump with cropped blond hair fading pale yellow, held our hands when she gave us each a dollar.

"I used to sing," she said. "I gave it up, I don't know why," and she shook our fists, curled tight around the money like we were afraid she'd take it back. "Don't you girls ever give it up." The look in her eyes made me feel special and sorry.

Between shows the solarium deck transformed into a traveling folk festival. On a cool day the heat lamps burned the backs of our necks beneath the half open solarium roof. Lounge chairs spread out in a widening circle as music jams warmed up, sparked by as few as two chords laid side by side. Tourists left cameras with their spouses and borrowed a guitar or a fiddle. Some brought their own instruments.

Splinter groups formed when the sun shone so that walking from starboard to port was like setting a radio to scan: old-timey jazz, blues, rock, the thump of a bodhran and wail of a fiddle.

Most memorable of all: my mother playing alone near the aft rail, cello tucked between her knees, staring into the frothy sea as it parts, swells, and returns to itself. I climb the rail next to her, high enough the Purser will threaten to leave me at the next port for the thirtieth time if he sees me. Left foot on the second rung, right on the third, elbows dug in, I lean into the mist and watch islands swim up beside us – close enough to count twigs tangled in the seaweed – before fading into the horizon.

Every crop of land offers new possibility. Though I can't swim I'm sure to make it if I try. I could do it. One more step, a hard dive out and away, angling through the riptide precisely so: a new

home, just like that. I'll eat seagull eggs and weave a net from seaweed and grass to catch fish. I'll build my own boat from fallen trees. And a hut. If I have just one place to call home, maybe I won't mind being somewhere a while. Maybe I won't miss the only thing I consider certain and true and steady as she goes.

I mark how long it takes for the place I've lived so short a time in my mind to become a thin pastel line between sky and sea. *I've been there, I think. I'm somewhere else now.*

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All Captain's decks are invite-only and full of sea charts, black sonar screens with little green dots, three-hundred sixty degree windows, and men dressed in sharp white uniforms with black and gold bars stitched to their shoulders. On a sunny day the wraparound view gives the impression that the world holds nothing but gray-blue water, rocky islands, and our boat carrying all that remains of humanity. The Captain mans his steering console, confident as Noah.

I often wondered what it must be like to never leave the boat. I wondered if the Captain knew his way around it better than me. Not for a long time did it occur to me that there had to be people who knew these ships better than me, janitors and repairmen, at a guess. For a while I fancied the idea of becoming the first repairwoman to work for the Alaska Marine Highway.

During one visit the Captain twitches his drooping gray mustache and nods. "Orcas," he says, reaching for his microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain speaking. Grab your cameras and hustle portside for a spectacular sight. Looks like two, three... *four* orcas fishing for lunch."

The decks below fill up so fast you'd think he'd ordered an evacuation. People line the rails like seagulls outside a cannery, mostly sightseers in sporty windbreakers and sun visors, a handful of kids running up and down the walkway in search of a view. I miss the wind and the salt spray of the open deck, though I know that down there I would strain to see over and around and between short, fat women and tall men with broad shoulders.

Black and white finned backs roll out of the deep blue without a ripple, spout dreamily, and dip below the surface. I want to press my body alongside the nearest back, wrap an arm around that fin, and go places. Anywhere. Wherever. In a handful of breaths they are behind us, pursuing whale dreams. At the farthest reach of horizon a single Orca launches skyward, a black and white comma. *I've been where you are*, I say to him.

I decide I could beat the Captain in a game of hide-and-seek on his own boat.

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In a lounge belowdecks I practiced telling stories with the Heliotroupe actor, a handsome young man with black hair and dark eyes. I opened up to an imaginary audience, pulled my shoulders back, paced myself. “If you're scared, find one friendly face to look at on either side of you,” he said. “Or look right above everyone, like there's a real tall guy standing way in the back,” he stared at a blank spot on the wall.

I smiled.

I'd had my musical debut at the ripe old age of four – Uncle Rocky's wedding and the pews so full guests were huddled in the arctic entryway. We took the stage in frilly white dresses with thick tights and white shoes, Tekla taller than me as usual, which ticked me off because when people didn't mistake us for twins they assumed she must be the oldest. So I fought to keep my hand above hers on the microphone stand as we sang one of Mom's favorites, *Thanksgiving Song*.

Several sessions later and the actor finally gives me his nod of approval. I tell my first story to a lunch crowd already loose and laughing after twenty minutes of jumping bluegrass. *Stop me if you've heard this one*, I begin, launching into my favorite tale about a big-mouth frog who doesn't know what to feed her babies and gets into trouble when she asks an alligator for advice. My palms sweat and I talk too fast and all eyes are upon me. Halfway through the story I forget what comes next and am forced to improvise. The audience is slipping away from me, stifling yawns and grinning behind their

hands. Telling a story is not at all like singing. I force myself to slow down, relax my shoulders. The smell of fried halibut drifts from the kitchen. I can hear dishes rattling back there, the cooks laughing.

Looking an old biddy right in the eyes I deliver the punch line. She smiles vaguely and rummages through a handbag big enough to stow a Yorkshire terrier in, like Grandma does. She doesn't clap, but most everyone else does. I want to keep telling stories until her two hands smack together in delight.

~~~~~

Once, sailing from Juneau to Ketchikan for Christmas, we are caught in a storm. Beyond the rails the sky is black and grim as eternity. Our ship bobs like a cork in a toddler's bath. At first I brave sideways rain on the upper deck while everyone else hunkers in their seats, green around the gills. Eventually I get tired and wet and mosey inside, down to the big map by the mid-ship stairwell, hoping to divine our location.

The boat begins listing dramatically. I can't fix my eyes on the map because it is bolted to a wall and I am not, though suddenly I wish I could be. The lights overhead flicker momentarily and I am excited at the thought of a power outage right here in the middle of who-knows-where, with all this wet hell around us. But the lights come back on and I think it's probably for the best. Imagine stuffing all these people into lifeboats in this weather.

Out the starboard window to my right is furious black water chopping madly, spraying foamy spittle onto the top deck. To my left, the portside window shows black sky. Then everything shifts; black water through the starboard window, black sky to port. I grip a chair bolted to the floor beneath the map and watch an abandoned styrofoam cup roll twenty feet to the starboard wall in ten seconds, as though in a hurry to get somewhere. I decide I should be in a hurry to get somewhere too.

Hall railings heave up at me and away and the ship seesaws through the dark night. I fumble toward our sleeping nest in the forward lounge. The solarium deck is empty tonight. Generators hum

and the ship vibrates and lights are low in the lounge. A few restless folks are awake still, white knuckled in their seats.

Tekla sleeps belly up on the floor between a row of chairs, right arm thrown back in a tangle of strawberry blond hair, mouth open. I push aside a stack of books and stretch out next to her. Her chest rises and falls but I can't hear her breath above the sound of the boat. I hold her hand in the dark, smile up at the ceiling, and wait for the ocean to swallow us.

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We pulled into Sitka early, before the night's rain had decided whether to stay or go with the morning. Sitka's is the only port that actually faces the Pacific Ocean, though we travelled halfway around the island to reach it, through Chatham Strait, Peril Strait, and Neva Strait, until Olga Strait finally dumped us into Sitka Sound. The Sound is moderately protected by Kruzof Island from the harshest weather, and it is full of wildlife, anything the ocean washes in and everything the mountains slough off. It's not uncommon to see whales, sea lions, sea otters, porpoises, fish, brown bear, deer, and birds of all sizes and shapes while pulling into the terminal. Eagles always draw huge crowds on deck. I don't mind eagles, but you might as well stop to gawk at seagulls.

Imagine it: twelve musicians in various combinations of wool, denim, and leather, an assortment of bags and instruments strapped to our backs, hiking up the gangplank with cars stalled on either side. The air hung thick and moist, heavy with harbor smells, and it slapped the sleep from our eyes. Camden met us at the terminal with his father, Thom, a stocky man with thick black hair and a new wife. He and mom split before I'd started second grade and Camden went to live with him. After that I often crawled into Tekla's bed to hold her while she slept, so that if anyone took her they'd have to take me too.

Thom dropped Mom and the rest of the troupe at the Unitarian Church, then took Tekla and me home to stay with him while we prepared for the show at the Sitka Performing Arts Center. We

watched Kung-Fu movies and Star Trek re-runs and drank homemade milkshakes on the floor, while Camden trailed his favorite Legos through the living room like a puppy with a special squeaky toy. I knew Thom's house would never again be my home, but I pretended we were all one family until it came time to leave for the Performing Arts Center.

Thom sat through as much of it as he could after Mom, Tekla, and I finished our sets, but the performances stretched on and on, late into the evening. The early birds left, but the auditorium remained far from empty. Some of the people in the crowd were folks we'd met on the ferry. They'd spent the day touring St. Mary's Russian Orthodox Cathedral, the first ever built in America, and Tongass National Park.

Late in the evening we're invited to an after party and the venue changes, but the music never ends, which is why when Thom waves us off at the ferry terminal two days later I am almost too tired to cry at the sight of Camden's small face pressed to the car's rear window. He lays one hand flat against the glass, pleading for Tekla and me to stay, or take him with us. Sometimes I envy him, waking in the same place every day, going to school with the same people, walking the same streets. But I couldn't do it alone.

We are the last to board, hustling down the gangplank fast as our legs can carry us. I don't have time to notice the tide, or the sun stretching catlike across the Pacific, or to feel what it means to leave yet another place I love, people I love. I toss my bag in a lounge chair on the solarium deck and run to the forward bow, climb the railing, and pretend my face is wet with ocean spray. The thing to do is look ahead: tonight or tomorrow we'll be at Grandma's in Ketchikan, and a few days after that, Petersburg. Seagulls ride the thermals above my head until we pick up speed and leave them behind. The rail hums and red hair swirls madly around my face as we enter Olga Straight. I know that Sitka is already a thin pastel line on the horizon, but I don't look. I keep my face to the wind.

And Then There Were Three

I.

I did it because Mom told me not to. I looked her in the eye and reached right up to the wood stove in Grandma's living room, laying three chubby fingers and part of my right palm just above the little window in the black door as Mom vaulted over the couch toward me. She snatched me up off the ground and ran to the kitchen sink in that hot silence between shock and scream, already streaming cold water over my hand before I had breath enough wail.

The neighbors might have heard my cries. Tekla sure did. She crawled naked to the couch, pulled her feet under her and leaned against it, covering her ears with splayed hands. She did a worried jig, red eyebrows pulling together in a wrinkle at the power of my screams, lower lip jutting forward. When I reached back for her with my good hand over Mom's shoulder, Tekla's mouth fell open on a howl.

I imagine my mother, Fawn, a young woman returned to her mother's home after a handful of adult years. Unmarried, partially educated, running from the father of her two girls – both under two years old. She quit Anchorage on a one way ticket after a police raid on my father's trailer in Spenard, details of which she's never shared with me. It left her breathless, she tells me years later, the thought of her daughters growing up wards of the state, mother and father locked away on drug trafficking

charges. She didn't say to my father, Dude, *we're never coming back*, because he'd told her before the laws were wrong, and *what's a little pot?* She simply never went back.

Yet she finds no comfort in this childhood place either; her mother's home, the town where she remembers what her brothers have done to her, things her mother cannot acknowledge. For a long time she believed her life to be normal. Only after she left her mother's home did she realize that most middle children – even the girls – weren't expected to care for all their siblings, older and younger. Few girls her age could say they raised five kids before they left home; cooking, sewing, cleaning, laundering, and biting back the shame each time her oldest brother threatened her into submission in a quiet room.

She's learned a lot since leaving home. She is twenty-two years old, has two baby girls, and it is spring. She believes there are things she can do better.

A month after my birth Mom had flown from Anchorage to Petersburg to introduce me – firstborn, oldest grandchild – to Grandma and her third husband, Goody, better known as Papa. Grandma pressed red lips to my face and covered me in perfume, as grandmas the world over will do. When Papa held me in one of his big Nordic hands my feet did not dangle from his palm.

As an infant I must've seemed a changeling in my mother's arms, all red fuzz and ivory skin, eyes the exact shifting blue-gray of the Wrangell Narrows. In pictures I shone like a small surprise against the backdrop of her long black hair, wide coffee colored eyes and copper colored Cherokee and Black Irish arms. Four months I had her to myself. Then two cells became four, became eight, sixteen, thirty-two, until eventually they blossomed into a girl just like me, but longer and hungrier and crankier. A sister. With one nursing infant and another *in utero*, our mother tapered to a worried shadow.

Dude wanted to marry, but Mom playfully refused, pretending it wasn't in her nature. She'd married once before, a man she believed would be a good husband and father until he went after her with his fists. She didn't tell Dude she dreamt of suffocating in his cluttered trailer – even then he filled every room with keepsakes and trash until you couldn't tell the one from the other and a person had nowhere to stand. She worried less about the twenty year age difference between them, more about the future awaiting his teenaged children from a previous marriage, Zach and Cim. She didn't tell him she couldn't go on with the parties and the drugs and the cops at the door. Instead, she painted self portraits and etched still lifes into wood blocks and pressed print after monochrome print in green, blue, and red.

“This kid is going to eat me to death,” Mom told her classmates in the UAA art program, round belly stretching the bounds of a tee shirt even as her jeans slid from her hips. The baby thumped her fists on Mom's ribs hourly, demanding food. At her birth Tekla was already as long as I was tall at fourteen months, weighing in at nearly 8 lbs and spanning 22 inches. Afterward, Mom weighed less than before the pregnancy.

On a good day, she had just enough energy to feed the new baby, a hungry tyrant who ceased crying only during mealtimes the first three years of her life. They named her Tekla, meaning “pearl” in Finnish, after Dude's Finnish grandmother, the first to immigrate to America. Replaced by a newer, louder, model, I shrugged and threw my arms around anyone with a pulse who sat still long enough; Dude, Zach, Cim, friends, buyers, dealers, whoever.

Not for a long time did it occur to me how much the relationship could differ between a mother and a needy child and a mother and an independent child.

Uncle Rocky and Aunt Jolette were the only two children still living at Grandma's when Mom returned with Tekla and me to Petersburg. We spent long days touring the coastline on Papa's teak

wood yacht, *The Duchess*, dropping anchor now and then to fish. Though everyone called Goody *Papa*, I loved the sound of his real name, and the ropey muscles of his long-fingered fisherman's hands. Papa showed me to bait a hook and cast a line while I sat on his knee, rubbing my knuckles against his gray wool coat, watching the ocean unzip itself in our wake.

I knew to be careful on *The Duchess*, but on land I spun like a pinball off every hard surface and person. I won everyone over with my gummy smile and curiosity. I walked at nine months, but Tekla still struggled to gather her knees under her long body at that age. The family scratched its collective head at Tekla's slow, backward crawl. She watched me run circles around the coffee table, throwing her lower lip out at the unfairness of it all. On her knees she moved like a baby on rewind, eyes fixed straight ahead with each knee-hand reverse tug, until eventually she backed herself into a corner and unleashed her frustration in a torrent of wails.

Papa held her while she wept, utterly broken. Tekla had a habit of crying to be held then stiffening like a plank the moment someone picked her up, but Papa loved her indiscriminately, the way he loved us all. Though my mother had a special place in her heart for her first step-father, she loved Papa, her second, the only way you can love a generous old sailor with a deep, quiet voice and a smile for all the world around him.

My mother was the only girl in a family of five children until her father, Guy Mason, split shortly after moving the family to Petersburg from Washington. When they divorced Guy left behind three boys and a girl, all nearly identical to my mother in looks, and Grandma pregnant with my Uncle Rocky. My mother was already a dark-eyed five year old by the time Harry Waterfield arrived on the scene nearly two years later. Harry, a mining engineer instructor at the University of Alaska, had strawberry blond curls that descended into distinguished sideburns, a thick, drooping mustache, and eyes that twinkled even in black and white photos. He'd always wanted a daughter and my mother clove to him like moose moss to a spruce tree.

That first summer the new family lived in a surveyor's hut in the middle of nowhere while Harry did a magnetometer survey for a copper mining company. My five-year-old mother trailed behind Harry, lugging an old radio with which she relayed coordinates to a research assistant off the mountain. After that they spent time in Fairbanks before moving to Anchorage for a long stretch of years, to a house in Spenard that had once been Harry's hunting cabin. It was there, on 3313 Doris Drive, that my Aunt Jolette was born. A changeling, with delicate white-blond hair and eyes the ephemeral blue of cut topaz inherited from her father, Jolette was the family gem. That house stands still, just a small handful of blocks away from the trailer where I was born fifteen years later. Eventually, the family moved out to a homestead near Portage Glacier and Mom formally adopted her step-father, whose last name I carry still, and will until the day I die.

Back in Petersburg, population 2,800, Mom decided not to work at Grandma's shipyard, Mickoff Marineways, or at The Star, Grandma's curio store. Instead, she waitressed at the Harbor Cafe downtown. Locals call the town "Little Norway" in honor of the Norwegian fishermen who've called the tiny port home since the early 1800s. The population is evenly split: half Tlingit Indian, half Nordic. For several days in May they celebrate Norwegian Independence Day. Then, on the 4th of July, the town celebrates American Independence. The Tlingit's don't yet have their own independence day.

Mom had friends in Petersburg, people she'd known on and off since childhood, a few friends from her senior year in high school even, but she kept to herself outside of work. Two girls, a half finished art degree, and a sore heart seemed like enough trouble. Occasionally she sailed out to LeConte Glacier with the family, icing down *The Duchess* with great chunks of hard blue ice calves in anticipation of catching fish. She accepted flirtations and tips with equal aplomb, but didn't go out with the girls from work very often.

Thom wanted to change that, she knew. Every morning he stumped in with those steel-toed logging boots, his mustache a black dash above full lips, a promise in his eyes. Every morning she brought him waffles with strawberries and shook her head. *No*, she wouldn't go out with him tonight. She had a future in mind; an art degree, a good home for her girls, maybe play her cello with the local symphony. Thom could barely rub two vowels and a consonant together. How could a man rebuild an engine but struggle to read and write? She said no so often she finally said yes to put an end to it.

“Your Mom tried to run me off,” Dad liked to tell us. “Our first date she says to me, 'You know, I have two little girls.' She didn't think I'd like that very much.”

He liked us so much he fell in love with us before he fell in love with Mom. She brought him home to meet us after the second date, and I showed him the blisters from the black stove on my right hand, up and down the first three fingers and across the still-uncallused part of my palm. He pulled me into his lap, looked real hard at the fat white bubbles, and kissed them all. “I think you're going to be just fine,” he said huskily.

All my life I've judged the worth of a man on his ability to feel the small sorrows of a child.

Sometimes when Thom visited we said, “Dudesy?” and he hunkered down on the floor to look us in the eyes. “Girls, I'm not your father. I'm not Dude.” He'd carry us, one in each arm, into the hall, pointing out a photograph. “That's your father,” he'd say, finger pressed to the image of a big man with eyes blue as forget-me-nots, smiling under bushy red eyebrows and a beard.

I must have missed my father, worried on some level at his absence. What did I know then of choices? Of the hardships of parenthood? I knew only that happiness meant laying one eye on my mother and the other on my sister. Everything else was a question mark. Between Dude's disappearance and reappearance in my life twelve years later I learned to sing, to read and write, to love, distrust, forget, and buy bras. My right temporal lobe finally got down to making permanent memories long after my father had disappeared from my field of vision.

In August, after my second birthday, Thom and Aunty Jolette gathered salmonberries from the row of bushes that served as backyard fence between Grandma's house and the neighbor's. I saw them through the kitchen window, Thom laughing with his white tee shirt tucked into frayed work jeans and Jolette in her wide bell bottoms, blond hair feathered back from her cheeks. Beyond them the gray water of the Wrangell Narrows reflected sunlight with each slow wave. Boats nodded in the harbor beyond. I waited for them to see me, to come back to me. I pounded mosquito netting, calling through the screen door until I couldn't wait anymore and I pushed it open.

“Daddydaddydaddydaddy!” I screamed, taking the back steps slowly before hitting the lawn, then running in my diaper, hands outstretched until I reached Thom and wrapped myself squidlike around his leg.

He laughed through the right side of his mouth and offered me a berry. “You know, Punkin', my friends call me Thom.”

I knew that. But he couldn't fool me.

Dude made his way to Petersburg, I've been told. He called the house from the airport, a single dirt airstrip, while Mom was at work. He told Grandma he'd come to take us all home. Panicked, Grandma called Uncle Rocky and several of his high school buddies to the house. What she said to Dude I can't guess. Grandma says we girls climbed his thick legs like a mountain, screaming to be held, until he carried us out to the backyard for a romp in the grass.

Tekla, red faced with effort, had backed herself into so many corners Mom had finally taken pity on her. Lifting one chubby paw at a time, Mom showed her to put one in front of the other until her little brain took hold of the message and reversed order. By the time Dude visited, Tekla had mastered the forward crawl, learned to drag herself to her feet using furniture, and gathered her legs under her in a shaky two-step that went *one, two*, pause, repeat.

On the lawn Tekla practiced those jerky little steps and after that we sprawled on Dude's chest like a living room rug, one child's head for each half of his heart. At the edge of sleep I raised up onto my hands, wrinkled my nose, and said, "You smell." Then I laid my head on his chest and promptly fell asleep.

"He'll take the girls," Mom said to Thom after Dude left. "I don't know how, but he will." She chainsmoked, alternately pacing the back deck and painting furiously for several days. She painted in oil. The marina, boats, people, the view from Grandma's porch with its too-white railings and creeping flower pots, the sweep of lawn drifting towards the harbor. A wide sky somewhere out there, waiting.

A month later we piled into Thing, a 1971 blue Dodge van with no back seats, and we boarded a ferry bound for Sheldon Jackson College, in Sitka, where maybe Dude wouldn't find us. Mom took art classes and Thom took gen eds, with Mom coaching him in reading and writing. We settled into a rainy routine.

Winter in Sitka is a wet affair, like much of Southeast Alaska. Most of the winter a white mantle lies thick atop the bowled crest of Mt. Edgecumb, the dormant volcano on nearby Kruzof Island, but rarely is it cold enough for snow to cling to the rocky beaches for longer than a day or two. Between classes Thom liked to take us girls just out of town, traipsing through the red cedars, Sitka spruce and hemlocks of Tongass National Park to watch whales fattening up for winter from the shore.

Around Christmas doubt set in. Though Thom loved us deeply, irrepressibly, Mom worried that we'd forget our real father; she had long since forgotten her own.

"They ought to hear your voice at least," Mom said when she called Dude. Adding, "No, you can't visit. The Deacon has strict rules about visitors in student housing."

He came anyway, unlocking the front door with keys the Deacon had happily given him.

Though I don't remember his visit, I like to think I squealed when I saw my father, recognizing him even after so many months apart. I like to think I raised my chubby palms in the air, desperate for

the tickle of his beard and the warmth of his big arms. I imagine him dragging us girls to the marina to stomp around the docks and name the seagulls crying overhead, or rolling around with us on the snowy lawn, the steady growl of float planes exploding the sky overhead on takeoff.

Dude stayed for several weeks before returning to Anchorage to gather a few belongings. He planned to relocate to Sitka while Mom finished her degree, despite her objections. This time she felt real fear. If she wouldn't take us to him, he'd bring his lifestyle to us. She didn't doubt his willingness to steal us away if he had to.

She did not bother to waste time fretting. She packed. In a few short days we boarded a ferry bound for Bellingham, and soon found ourselves in Oregon.

II.

Mom left Sitka before Dude could return to find us that Christmas. We moved to Pendleton, Oregon with Thom, who enrolled in the Blue Mountain Community College when Mom did.

Despite his lack of education, Thom seemed always to know something about everything. He started most sentences with, "You see, Fawn..." and then followed up with something like, "the education system is designed to make artists feel worthwhile, but the real world doesn't support the pursuit of art."

I loved it when Thom hoisted me up to listen to Thing's slant six engine as he adjusted the timing. "You see, Punkin'," he'd say, "it's important to know what a healthy engine sounds like, so you can hear when something goes wrong." Then he'd demonstrate with a screwdriver, revving the engine too high so he had to shout over the roar: "Do you think the engine should sound like that when it's idling?" Of course I shook my head no.

It didn't work for Mom the way it worked for me. She felt hemmed in by Thom's presentation, belittled. Maybe she didn't know everything there was to know about engines or the world economy, but she knew enough to want to be treated like an intelligent adult. She watched us wrestle with Thom on the living room floor in student housing, he on his back, laughing, that little black mustache stretched wide on a smile, we girls tumbling over him and our own two feet like addle-brained puppies. When he came home from school we rarely waited for him to line up his black boots by the door before climbing him like a ladder, begging him to watch *Star Trek* or kung-fu movies with us.

“Why won't you marry me?” he asked over and over. She shook her head, *No*. Told him the same thing she told Dude: “I'm not the marrying kind.” But our love for Thom softened her, blinded her to their differences.

She said no so often she finally said yes to put an end to it.

Wrapping up the spring semester she flew with us girls to Petersburg to plan the wedding. There she met a one-eyed artist by the name of Ray, working at the airport check-in counter.

When I think back to our time with Ray it's easiest if I put myself in my mother's shoes.

Here is Fawn, an artist with two little girls and big dreams. She is engaged to marry an ambitious and intelligent young man who makes her doubt everything she thinks is beautiful about herself, though he's a terrific daddy. At the airport, where she's gone to buy the groom's plane ticket north for the wedding, she meets a tall man, thin, with dark hair and an eye patch. He's an artist too, he tells her, an observer of animal behavior. He talks her into grabbing a cup of coffee at the nearby diner after she tells him she has two little girls.

She sees in Ray a kindred spirit. He confesses he's always wanted a family, has a big old house in Washington in fact, an inheritance, just waiting for him to fill it with laughter. They talk about art

and love and being misunderstood and in no time she's on the phone with her fiancé, calling off the wedding.

“What about the girls?” Thom asks.

“It's me you want to marry,” she tells him. “You don't understand *me*.”

When we left Petersburg in the fall we didn't return to Oregon, but moved to Bremerton, Washington. Mom transferred her student loans to the community college there and put money down on an apartment, refusing to move in with Ray. “It's just for now,” she told him. He had a habit of sulking that unnerved her.

Shortly after the move she read an article in the paper announcing a new Sex Offender/Crimes Against Minors registry in Seattle. “It's about damn time,” she said to Ray, who sat silent on the couch a long time before replying.

“Sometimes kids are sexy, though,” he said finally. “They just act sexy. Don't you think?”

“What the hell are you talking about?” A host of memories flattened her. “Kids don't even know what sexy means,” she said, afraid the tremble in her throat might give her away. She'd carried her secret so long she didn't know how to give voice to it.

Since that conversation he'd been morose, mopey even. He sat on her couch in the darkest corner, staring at the ceiling for hours on end. Years later she tells me she worried that he knew her secret, that he resented her, thought her tainted. She thanked her lucky stars she'd had girls. No sons to do to us what her brother had done to her.

Two weeks later she drove to Oregon to pick up our belongings, leaving us with Ray for the handful of days it took to gather our things and say goodbye to Thom, returning to our apartment to find the door wide open, lights off. She pounded her fists bloody on every door in the building until she heard Tekla letting loose with a wail in a nearby apartment.

“I found them wandering the halls,” the neighbor lady said. “They were just filthy. Dirty diapers and screaming hungry.”

I remember the incident with Ray with the accuracy of a three year old child:

Gray light filters through a high, square window at the end of the bedroom Tekla and I share. The pillow I lie on is soaked through with tears. I am on the top bunk in our small bedroom, shivering and crying silently, while Tekla, in the bunk below, screams the kind of scream that makes your own throat hurt just listening. At daycare in Petersburg they'd called her The Screamer for her fits. This isn't the same thing, and I know it. At three years old I don't understand the things Ray says, only the meanness of it:

You think you're so sexy, don't you? Walking around like you own the world.

I see the way you look at me.

Think you're smart, huh? Thought I wouldn't notice you.

The gun he shows me is black as the patch over his left eye, and the smell of it makes my nose curl when he wands it over my body, head to toe. I know without a doubt what he means when he presses the gun to my temple and says:

If you tell your mother I will kill her.

It means she'll go away forever.

I don't remember the feel of his hands on me. I don't remember pain. I know I wanted to climb from my bunk into Tekla's and hold her until Mom came back from wherever she'd gone and we were safe. When I think of him now, I recall how Ray seemed like friendly pirate when Mom brought us to Washington to stay with him. Otherwise he is an indistinct blurr I only summon forth from the vault of forgetfulness with care. Tekla remembers less than I. For years she heard the soft voice of a man,

whispering at her while she played with dolls and stacked Legos. *You think you're so smart, don't you? But you're just a filthy little girl.*

If anyone ever puts a gun to your head and promises to kill you or someone you love if you rat them out, think about this: Whatever happens next, things are going to be different. And probably harder. Personally, I'd rather be a rat than live with such a terrible secret.

I only pieced it all together in my late twenties. When asked, Thom said, "Some things are better left alone," and Mom said, "I don't like to talk about that time in my life. I had my head so far up my butt I couldn't tell you if the sun was out or the stars were."

For years I thought Ray was a drug dealer, that my mother had left us with him to pick up a shipment of weed from her brother in Petersburg. I thought she had already married Thom and was having an affair with Ray. I thought it happened in Portland, because we were in Washington so short a time I don't recall the street lights of Bremerton, whether there are mountains there, or if it rains half the year. I thought Ray had been a bad guy through and through and Mom had known it. This is the faulty logic of a child.

I didn't tell Mom at first because I didn't want Ray to hurt her, but she knew something was up when Ray never returned to the apartment. She had a few things of his, a nice white Formica table he'd been storing for his boss, and other furniture. She couldn't believe he would vanish like that. Why? What had she done? She asked me over and over, *did anything happen?* I only shook my head.

I usually had two speeds: pedal to the metal and dead asleep. Now I wouldn't talk and barely ate, preferring to sleep all day. When Mom put me to bed I crawled from my top bunk into Tekla's and lay all night, inhaling her milky breath. It went like this for close to a week before Grandma flew down from Petersburg and flipped a loophole switch in my three-year-old brain.

He'd said I couldn't tell Mom. He never said I couldn't tell Grandma.

Mom married Thom in front of a Justice of the Peace in Pendleton the next summer. He'd rescued us from Bremerton just a month after we moved there, helped us into a new apartment in Pendleton, and almost never slept at his own place after that.

When the cops came looking to arrest Mom for stealing the white Formica table she'd been holding for Ray's boss, it was Thom who told them what'd happened. The world had not prepared my mother for con artists and pedophiles, and she feared judgment. When the cops asked why Ray had disappeared, left his things with her, she said they'd had differences. They'd quarreled and he'd left. How could she tell those men, representatives of the law no less, that she'd left her girls with a predator in order to leave her fiancé?

Thom sat thoughtfully in the interrogation room a long while before finally asking Mom to step outside. He laid the facts out for the men. In return, they told him Ray went by a few names and may or may not have been wanted in as many as fourteen states. Mom says Dad had a powerful urge to find Ray in a dark alley somewhere and rearrange his priorities, but the cops figured out what he was up to and only gave him vague details about the case after that. "You're fiance is a terrible liar," one officer said to Dad, shaking his head. "But that's not important. The important thing is she's in a fix now, and she'll need your help getting through this."

By Christmas we were basically one big family again. Then two cells became four, became eight, sixteen, thirty-two, until eventually they blossomed into a boy. A brother.

We spent a lot of time at the midwife's farm that spring. She lived three hours away, so sometimes we drove to her place for long weekends, others she came to us. At the farm Dad practiced

martial arts in the corral where Susie exercised her horses, while Susie badgered Mom into eating. Dad practiced Judo, Karate, Ueachi Ryu. He had a black belt in Tae Kwon Do.

Every visit, Mom arrived tired eyed, her olive skin dulled to a lusterless yellow. Susie fed her plate after plate of farm food with singleminded determination; buckwheat pancakes and bacon, hearty soups, farm grown vegetables and potatoes and beef. At the end of our three day stay Mom was always transformed by sun and food and rest, the freckles of her forearms golden to the point of radiance.

The midwife had chickens, which Tekla and I discovered one day when all the eggs hatched at once. We were smitten. Senseless. We gathered as many chicks as we could carry in our arms, pressing our cheeks to their yellow chests while they *cheep, cheep, cheeped* to be let free. We romped in the hen house until a chick jumped free from one of our arms and suffered an early death beneath our feet.

“You can't play with the chicks until they're bigger, girls,” Mom said after that. “You don't know how strong you are, they're just babies.”

Dad's boredom proved more problematic than our curiosity. Without an engine or a water heater or a tractor to fix he grew restless. Which is how he wound up riding the midwife's horse down to the river, where it bucked him off and stomped on his face.

I didn't hear the midwife say it, but I heard Mom say, “Don't you ride the horse down to the river, Thom. You heard what she said.” Dad came back a long time later with his right cheek busted open so you could see there were teeth missing through the hole in his cheek. He tried to explain, but it sounded as though his mouth was full of river pebbles. The look on Mom's face said *if you were my child I'd have you over my knee so fast you'd get whiplash.*

I thumbed the faded white scars on my right hand and watched Dad work his jaw around, confused. It's possible he didn't know yet that his jaw was broken, that it would be wired shut for five weeks and he would lose fifty pounds, most of it not recovered by the time of Camden's birth. He certainly could not have known that these medical bills, piled on top of the baby's multiple Medi-Vac

flights and three weeks of intubation in the neonatal intensive care ward at the Children's Hospital, would mean the end of school in Oregon. It meant the end of a lot of things. It meant moving again.

During the long drive to the hospital I sat in the backseat behind Dad, excited by the hole in his cheek because I didn't know he would be thin as a dying man soon. I didn't know that I would be sent to Petersburg to stay with Grandma because things would be hard for Mom. I didn't know that my baby brother would be born soon and that he would not be ready yet, there would be inside parts of him on the outside where they shouldn't be, so that the doctors would have to push those things inside and sew him up. I couldn't guess that we would blow raspberries on our brother's pink scar after it faded to white and hardened, or that we would call it his zipper.

I didn't know those things so I felt only excitement on our late night drive. Mostly because I could see inside Dad's face and I liked car rides, and when Dad pulled the towel away from his cheek I could see his teeth grinning in the green light from the dashboard.

In August we drove nine hours from Oregon to meet Grandma in Seattle, Mom in the passenger seat with a belly so round her back curved and she walked like a weeble wobble doll. I didn't like the big city, even then. In the last year I'd become paranoid about ninjas crawling everywhere, because whenever you saw them on TV they were climbing big city buildings like spiders. The only real ninja I wanted near me was my dad.

Grandma and I planned to fly to Petersburg the same day, where I would stay for a month and return to the midwife's farm by the time the baby hatched. Instead, Mom gave birth on the return trip, before the doctor even found her room at the tiny roadside clinic, just hours after she left me with Grandma.

Camden was five weeks premature. I heard about it in Seattle, where Grandma and I delayed our flight one day, just in case. I didn't know *just in case* meant a little coffin, barely bigger than a shoe box.

The little clinic had maybe two doctors, both on call. Camden had already decided to get things started early, and he wouldn't be stopped just because no one could find a doctor. He drew his first breath long before help arrived.

Dad, flush with his first solo delivery, laid the baby on Mom's belly and covered them both with a blanket, dimming the lights the way he'd rehearsed with the midwife. Then came the doctor and a fight over the lights and then the doctor's shock at Camden with his belly unfinished and a pile of intestines instead of an umbilical cord.

A special neonatal crew from a neighboring city whisked Mom and the baby to another hospital, but the doctors there insisted nothing could be done for him unless he made it to the Swedish Children's Hospital in Seattle. A Lear jet snatched them into the air and Camden underwent his first surgery at eight hours old, Dad still speeding down the highway with Tekla asleep in the back seat, me flying the wrong way with Grandma, and bankruptcy on the horizon.

III.

“Aunty,” I said, blankets up to my chin, “I love you so much.” I wrapped my arms around her neck and held fast. In four years I had never slept without someone else in the room. With my blue eyes and extra special sweetness I suckered her into lying with me until I fell asleep.

Jolette –sixteen years old and a sophomore in high school – curled her hair, painted her blond eyelashes black, pinched her cheeks, and dressed me in Grandma's bright silk scarves. We walked for

hours every day, all over town. Up and down the streets we went, stopping to admire the blue and purple and bright magenta flowers fading in every window box in town.

She carried me on her hips and her shoulders, swung me by my legs, upside down and laughing. She pushed my stroller along the docks and giggled when tourists from the cruise ships asked: "Is she yours?"

"No," she said, but her hand on mine said yes.

I watched her practice cheers in front of the kitchen window, so big and so black on a cloudy night it looked more like a mirror. I danced along, sometimes pretending my reflection was Tekla trapped in another world, trying to get through to me.

Grandma's house, white with a pink roof and chandeliers all over, had too many nice things. China dolls, silver, statues, and great big paintings of polar bears and storm tossed ships. There were also too many rules. Play quietly, be polite, no roughhousing, enough to make my four year old body shiver with pent up energy.

Grandma sang opera while putting on her face in the morning. She wore her nails long and red, gold bracelets up and down both of her forearms, rings on each finger, and a gold nugget on a thick gold rope at her neck. The perfumes of her boudoir made my throat burn, but I sat as expected on the king sized bed to watch Grandma, in bra and nylons, line her eyes and lips, pull curlers, and rat out her hair with a fine comb.

I wanted to dress up with her, but had only the one forbidden dress: arose-colored satin affair with antique ivory lace and little rose buds on the creamy ribbon, made just for me. Back home Tekla and I wore matching homemade dresses of sturdy linen. Our house might have been threadbare, but it was always clean. Among our second hand furniture there was nothing glittery, and nothing extra; no footrests or figurines. When Mom read stories about castles and magical kingdoms, I thought of Grandma's house.

The only time I ever wanted to be a princess was when I wore the special dress. Most of my fantasies involved captaining a pirate ship or exploring foreign jungles, but for a short while nothing in the world seemed as beautiful as that dress. I wore it only once, as a flower girl for Grandma's friend, and everyone at the wedding called me darling and precious and precocious. I thought precocious was the same as precious, but with an accent like Po-TA-to and Pot-Ah-to.

"Was I good, Grandma?" I asked at the end of the ceremony.

"Perfect."

"Am I pretty, Grandma?" I twirled so the dress flared like a rose-colored bell.

"You look *gorgeous*, dah-link!"

The next morning when Grandma turned from the mirror to ask, *well, what do you think?* I said, "Grandma, you look *gorgeous*, dah-link!" and it stuck. After that everyone called her Grandma Gorgeous Darling as though it were her real name.

Sometimes, when Grandma Gorgeous Darling went to work, I snuck into her closet to put my dress on. I powdered my cheeks with whatever I could find, pulled stringy orange hair from my face, and practiced cheers in Grandma's big mirror.

After dinner Papa read stories, me curled in his lap studying the goobers in his nose, which was big as a pear, deeply porous, and continuously runny. He kept a hanky in his pocket like the Norwegian fisherman he'd been all his life.

One day I woke from a nap to find Papa leaning on the door frame with his arms crossed, a smile on his thin lips. I'd been crying in my sleep, and I knew it, but couldn't unstick myself from the dream. It happened a lot in those first years after Ray.

"It seems you need a little protection," Papa said. I held my arms out to him. "I talked to this guy down at the store. He says he's up for the job," and into my open arms he placed a flat brown bear

with the word *Alask* stitched on the front. I named the bear Oscar Pepper, after Oscar the Grouch and my favorite spice, both of which seemed very fierce to me.

He may have been a throwaway toy, but I couldn't have loved the most perfect bear any more than I loved Oscar Pepper. In years to come he would move all over Alaska with me and across the country twice.

"It's yours, baby, but you can't have it," Grandma said when I tried to pack the dress up with my other things at the end of my stay, which is ridiculous because how can you have something and not have it at the same time? I balled my little fists up and gave Grandma the what-for with my blue eyes.

"It's mine fair and square!"

"I know, baby," the gold bracelets at her wrist jingled as she shook the dress out, tucking a hanger through the neck, "but it'll be here for you when you're all grown up and you have a little girl of your own." This knocked me out because I always wore every stitch of clothing until Mom called it an embarrassment and threw it away, and what if I didn't want a little girl of my own later on?

I stamped my feet and cried and pleaded until Grandma grabbed my arm hard and looked at me fierce-like, backing me toward the corner of the bed. "You just be grateful you had this dress for one day, and thank God it wasn't somebody else wearing it!"

Later, I heard her on the phone with Mom, arguing: *Wasn't it a shame I couldn't take it home with me and wear it a few more times?* and *I know, I know, it wouldn't be fair to Tekla, and I tried, but she used all the fabric on this one, she can't make another.* I hated that my sister had to have everything I had. I didn't mind that we shared toys, a bed, our mom, but I wanted this one special thing, this glamorous reminder of Grandma's glittery world.

Everyone agreed but me: if Tekla couldn't have a dress just as special and beautiful as mine, I couldn't have mine at all.

If Camden had bothered to obey the nine-month gestation rule, he'd have still been in Mom's belly by the time Grandma and I flew back to Washington at the end of September. By the time I met him, Camden was already a month old with a bright red scar running from diaper to breast bone, copper hair swirling around his head like a halo. The doctors had given him a ten percent chance of survival, but they hadn't counted on the world's leading doctor in this particular birth defect doing rounds at the Children's Hospital even as they loaded Mom and the baby in the Lear jet. Mom recalls two other babies born with gastroschisis that summer, babies that didn't make it.

We had an impromptu family reunion at great grandma Billy's house in Seattle. I saw Dad through the car window when we pulled up, standing in the yard full of bright orange and yellow leaves, Mom next to him with a bundle in her arms and dark circles under her eyes. Tekla squatted in the leaves in her pink coat, identical to the one I wore. She heard me pounding on the window and stood, holding out a bright red maple leaf, mouth open on a toothy smile. She clapped her hands, did a little foot stomping dance. The leaf floated away and she ran to me as I spilled out of the car, shrieking, "Sissie!"

We met in the middle of the yard, wrapped little arms around little necks, and we didn't let go. Mom stretched out a hand for me, but I didn't notice.

I imagine how it must have felt for my mother, faced with a lifetime of heartache for her two little girls. Reaching for her daughters, dressed as ever in twin tunics sewn by her own hands, she is surprised by the tight circle of their arms. How the shape of her worst fears must have changed since leaving Anchorage, the ghosts of her own childhood returned now to mock her with their visits, whispering *you promised to protect them, now look what you've done*. I've long since forgotten the

terror she can only imagine we knew at the end of Ray's gun, but in all the years to come, my mother never lost sight of it.

Looking back, it could have been worse. We could have had a hard life together, my mother and me. We might have buckled under the weight of our shared traumas, taken the easy way out, spiraled into despair. But we chose to stamp our feet and dig our heels in, rain or shine. Over the years I said it as I saw it: *you're drinking too much, moving too much, marrying too often*. She did too: *you're too independent, angry, worried what others think*. I tucked my chin in and weathered every surprise move in the middle of the night, every forgotten birthday, every year my dreams of normalcy went unfulfilled, because I wouldn't have traded my mother for anyone else in the world. *This too shall pass*, she would say when I went to her for consolation. I wanted more, then, but I know now that resilience is a gift. Always, her love filtered through, and her belief that if I could survive our life together, I could survive anything. After a hard Southeast Alaskan rain those slender green marsh grasses tilt skyward once more, anticipating the bright smile of the sun, as I have anticipated my mother's smile, every day of my life.

We grew up together.

Still, in that moment, our first reunion, I had eyes only for my sister. Nothing in the world mattered to me as much as the divit in Tekla's chin, the little bones in her neck against the scars on my palm when I hugged her. I knew I would not sleep alone again for a long time. Dad carried us into the house like that, tangled up in each other.

Pinned to the rocks

I'd been stocking groceries at the health food store in Juneau, Alaska, when it happened: *weakness*. Suddenly I could not lift a six-pack of root beer into the sweating refrigerator before me. My arms were useless clubs, the kind that haunt you in bad dreams where you try and try to swing at the world's fastest bad guy but your body responds in slow motion. Legs trembling, back aching, stomach doing loop-de-loos, I felt for fever sweats on my forehead.

In the bathroom I discovered a few things about womanhood. First, there's the horror of it. Then the shock of recognition and the fear of being found out, followed by a jolt of giddiness.

Then there's the reality of it: it's messy.

I fled the store with a wad of toilet paper crammed in my underwear, running two blocks to the house where my five-person family temporarily shared a single rented room. The toilet paper shifted with each step and I imagined it slipping down my pant leg to the sidewalk. I ran stiff legged through the front door and into a group of slit-eyed musicians, Mom the only woman among them. Inside, the house was like a smell attack: the combined reek of worn leather couches, body odor, stale incense, and distant pot smoke mixed with the tang of metal strings, musty guitar cases, and the fresh zip of rosin on Mom's fiddle bow.

Mom had the fiddle to her neck. The bow arced and dipped, arced and dipped. She had the faraway eyes of a dreamy jam session, but I sidled up and tapped on her shoulder anyway. I leaned in to whisper my news in her ear and waited. Eventually she nodded, but not as though she heard me,

more an acknowledgment that I existed, that someone from reality was at the door and she knew she must find her way back from the tune. It seemed a long time before she recognized me.

I stood, jutting my hips out like a model, ready to celebrate. Maybe ice cream at McDonald's, followed by a beer. Surely being able to make a baby would be a beer worthy event. Finally, my body had recognized my maturity. I'd long grown tired of people calling me precocious. I wanted to be recognized as a young adult. I already had an occasional job – though I had to work under the table because eleven-year-olds aren't technically employable. Soon I'd own a house, which I would not share with roommates. Maybe I'd work as a trail guide, or move back to Fairbanks to race sled dogs and make documentary films.

Mom squinted dreamy eyes at me, as though not sure what I needed. Finally, she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Well, you know what to do.” She rolled a perfect little white cigarette from a tin of Drum.

I did *not* know what to do. I'd only found out this was coming in fifth grade sex-ed class a few months before. And all they do in sex-ed is tell you it's coming, not What To Do. Then they tell you to talk to your parents about it, *hah, hah*.

Flustered, afraid of sharing this moment with the men sprawled out on couches all around me, I whispered fearful questions in Mom's ear. *What do I do now? Will it hurt? Will I have a baby soon? Will everyone know?*

Already men looked at me differently, assessing me, where before their eyes had slid off me after a curious glance. At a grocery store or a cafe, women looked me up and down, taking mental notes of my height, stringy reddish hair, widening hips and budding breasts. I knew myself judged. I had a feeling that if the sixth grade boys found out, what little self-confidence I had would be forever snuffed out. Fifth grade had been an embarrassment. The pain of being a new kid yet again at Harborview Elementary, coupled with the tenderness of budding breasts and the horror that my life as a

tomboy would come to an end, made the idea of middle school seem a secret new level of hell. Why couldn't I skip it and go straight to college, where the adults would treat me like a person, instead of a kid?

People my age were generally kids in a kid's world. They weren't required to negotiate the adult world – avoiding fights with drunks, worrying about food money, standing between their siblings and their step parents. Most of my friends couldn't even cook the easy stuff: soup, pasta, oatmeal. They seldom made their own lunches or bandaged their sibling's wounds. I thought of myself as a grownup in a kids body. Always the wrong age.

I tried sometimes to talk to my mother about it, but a secret switch got flipped during the move back to Juneau from Fairbanks at the end of my fourth grade year, leaving Mom on autopilot and us kids hungry for the way things had been before she married my second step-dad, C.A. For one thing, I don't remember her keeping company with cheap beer before we moved back from Fairbanks. And she'd quit making dinner, for another. “C.A.'s an excellent cook,” she said. “Besides, as a girl I cooked enough for a lifetime, raising those five kids,” meaning her brothers and sister and all the responsibilities she herself had as a girl.

Mom had married C.A. the end of my second grade year, before we left Juneau for an MFA program in Fairbanks. Since Mom and Thom split there'd been a few boyfriends that we kids were savvy to, others we only guessed at. We knew better than to mention any of her other beaus when one of them came around, because she'd told us, “don't mention so-and-so to so-and-so,” and we didn't bother getting to know any of them very well. In my book, no one but Thom could ever be my dad. Which is why it knocked me out when Mom picked me up from school one day and asked if I thought she should marry C.A. I didn't know who she meant at first, but it wouldn't have mattered. I wanted her to myself. Mom's smile, wide and hopeful, made my stomach flop and I said *yes* even though I felt the *no* burning in my throat. They stayed married until the end of my eighth grade year.

I remember my mother like a ghost during the six years we lived with C.A. We didn't talk about my friends at school or the books I read. We barely talked at all. I wanted to play with her the way we had before C.A., telling her awful jokes I learned at school about boogers and poo and making her laugh until tears leaked from her eyes and she begged me to stop. Where before we used to drag her into our imaginary games, spending time with our mother came to require a good book and endless hours of quiet absorption. She laughed the most when playing music with friends; otherwise I grew to expect her quiet eyes to be busy elsewhere. She rallied to send us off for chores and to bed, and in exasperation, to mediate fights between us kids and C.A., but the small happinesses and heartbreaks of our childhood seemed unable to reach her. Weekend cuddle puddles were a distant memory. We couldn't fling ourselves into bed with Mom at the crack of dawn and snuggle into her warm side anymore for fear of waking C.A., whose early morning demeanor resembled a badger's hopping, spitting, fury. Instead, we girls tucked our heads under the blankets and tried like hell to sleep through C.A. in the kitchen flinging dishes around and cursing through a hangover.

I made it hard for C.A., because I blamed him for changing everything. "You're not my dad," I told him at every opportunity. He didn't play with me, or watch *Star Trek*, or encourage me to think about the world. The way I saw it he'd married my mother and commenced bossing me around without bothering to win me over. I knew it could be different, because it had been with Thom, but I didn't see why we needed C.A. around at all. It never occurred to me that I could befriend C.A. myself, that maybe our lack of bond came from his not knowing how, and my own childish assumption that he didn't want to be close to me.

"Why can't it just be us?" I finally asked after we'd moved into the boarding house. Mom had already bought the renovated school bus we'd be moving into in the fall. "Us kids and you?"

We were on our way home from the grocery store with dinner fixings. Mom stared through a red light, her black felt Stetson hat pointing straight ahead. She didn't have wrinkles like some of the

other moms I knew, probably because she was younger. She never wore makeup, except the occasional dash of soft brown eyeliner to accent her cocoa-colored eyes. She didn't frown and she didn't smile, just stared through the traffic ahead of us. "Oh, Keema," she said after a while, the weight of her world in my name, "you don't know how lonely I would be."

I wanted to know why we kids weren't enough. I wanted to know what our step-dad and all the boyfriends before him had that we didn't have. But the faraway look in Mom's eyes reminded me of the way she looked playing music: unreachable. So I didn't ask and she didn't say.

It went just like that the day I started my my period. I itched to know things about her. Had she been scared when she started? Was it weird to be thirty-one and have a daughter who could have a baby herself? When she didn't immediately lay aside her fiddle at the news of my pending womanhood, I finally realized my mother would never be that kind of mom for me.

What good are parents when you have to figure everything out yourself?

I'd needed privacy and space during the summer months before I started my period. Our upstairs neighbors in the house on Starr Hill, the "Dump-With-A-View" we called it, had ruined that with their nightly drumming sessions. Neighbors complained and we'd gotten the boot in the spring.

After that there were a series of friends' houses, a stay with Grandma Gorgeous Darling in Ketchikan, then our annual trek to Haines for the Southeast Alaska State Fair, where we lived in a tent. My sister, Tekla, and I performed on stage and hawked Mom's flowered garlands, while Mom sold imported Alpaca sweaters. My little brother, Camden, made friends with everyone who owned a food booth and tied his pocket knife to a stick like a caveman. One night we went to a friend's a music party, and after, we slept in a tepee in their backyard, oblivious to rain clouds gathering in the black night. In

the wee hours of the morning we woke to a river running around us, our coats and bags slowly drifting out the tent's canvas flap like prisoners bent on silent escape.

In August we moved into the boarding house in Juneau, sharing a bedroom on the third floor with big windows and enough space for two full mattresses on the floor. Instead of privacy, I shared a bed with my brother and sister next to my mom and step-dad's bed. We actually had a home, the converted school bus, which we'd move into soon as our step-dad fixed it up to fit four or five people, instead of two, since C.A. made his living as a carpenter. But C.A. had been laid up with a back injury for months, while Mom worked seven consecutive part time jobs to pay for his medical bills and beer, so we were stuck with this one room and each other, like it or not.

The boarding house made me twitchy. Tenants came and went with the regularity of rain clouds, which is saying something when you live in the Southeast Alaskan rain forest. We three kids got outside as often as possible where fall grasses and wild strawberries sprouted up daringly along the roadside and in the cracks between sidewalks. Salmon berries grew fat on the bush, summoning us with the promise of their tart hearts. My siblings were my minions; berries gathered from the cruelest bushes their tribute to me. I gave them my protection, and my love.

We were close, we three. Bossy I may have been, but let one kid on the playground throw dirt in my brother's eyes or pull my sister's hair, and I would unleash like White Fang. The only times in my life I ever felt sure and cunning and unstoppable were moments of threat to Tekla or Camden. We played and fought like puppies, roaming sunny neighborhood streets on bike and by foot, screaming, singing, ringing our little bike bells. Sometimes we spent hours at the playground, heading home at dusk with mouths, fingers, and t-shirts stained purple with blueberry juice.

Other days I could not get out of bed.

“Let's go to the park, I'm *boooooored*,” Tekla would whine.

“No.”

“Play cards?”

“No.”

“Bike ride?”

“No! I'm bleeding to death, leave me alone.”

“You're such a bitch,” she'd say, the little divot in her nose flaring as she crossed her arms.

“What's wrong with you? You used to be fun.”

I wanted to have fun. To *be* fun. To even remember what fun felt like.

“You can't call me a bitch, you're not even ten years old. You're just a kid.”

Eventually I learned feminine supplies were in the bathroom and womanhood was not a beer worthy event. I decided I didn't need Mom's help celebrating my transformation. I could celebrate it myself.

In August, a few weeks after my first period, I made a pact with my friend, Lily, from Harbor View Elementary: we would have a grown up adventure. The previous spring we'd found an abandoned sweat lodge on a beach while out on a walk with Lily's dad, Bill. We begged someone to take us camping out there, but no one volunteered. In my new role as a young woman I decided I had enough growing up behind me to protect us. I had a job and the cramps to prove it. Plus, I'd been caring for my younger siblings all my life. “What could be the harm in spending one night on our own?” I said, eager to prove myself.

Even at eleven years old I knew that survival meant food, water, clothing, shelter. Between us we owned one sleeping bag. I figured we could share the sleeping bag, with trash bags over and under it to keep us dry and insulate us as we slept. I knew from every road trip to pack easy food: sandwiches, crackers, trail mix. Things that didn't require cooking. I knew we should wear a lot of layers.

Because I thought myself undefeatable, I did not bother to think about things a person might die from during a survival situation in the Alaskan wilderness: avalanches, falling from a high place, poisonous plants, hypothermia, gangrene, starvation, bears, drowning, freezing, giardia, falling into a crevasse or through snow pack into a river. Stupidity covers a lot of ground too. Surprisingly, moose attacks kill more people than bear attacks because a mama moose will happily stomp, charge, or kick you to death if you get near her calf. Bears usually run away or ignore you. But not always.

The first time a bear charged me I was seven, living in Gruening Park way out in Juneau's Mendenhall Valley. A dumpster diving brown bear caught sight of me riding by on my banana seat bike and chased me all the way to the front door of my apartment. My brain said, "play dead." But my body said, "like hell" and pedaled harder.

So, two weeks before sixth grade began Lily and I packed our sleeping bag and several heavy trash bags, some water, a can of olives, a few slices of bread, apples, crackers, and cheese. I felt pretty good about our preparations.

Technically, it's not running away if you say where you're going. At the last minute our friend Sidra joined us with her pet rats: a giant black and white spotted mama rat the size of a woman's shoe, and two babies. Tekla wanted to come, but I said no, I couldn't be taking care of her *too*. We left a note.

We trooped fearlessly out of town, utterly confident in our ability to rough it this one night on our own. We skipped a lot. And then, laughing, we hid among pine trees and devil's clubs at the side of the road whenever cars passed.

We walked an hour out of town to reach the shore nearest our secret hut, stopping by a waterfall to eat the can of olives, then traversing a mile of rocky gray beach before sighting the decrepit old sweat lodge. I imagined it dated back centuries to a real Alaskan Native tribe. It was small and round

and made of driftwood, with a sandy fire pit in the middle like a traditional sweat lodge. Were the entire structure dropped onto a river you might mistake it for a beaver dam. The hut sat in a rocky alcove that jutted skyward twenty feet or more, nearly a cave, but open to the sky at top.

The beach around us was mostly rock and shale, with very little sand. Long ropes of dried seaweed snaked across the shore and piled up at the base of the cliffs around us. Crushed shells and bird bones lay scattered like buckshot, but the higher debris was old and brittle, which meant the tide rarely climbed as high as our hut.

We lit a fire easily, though the beach wood we scavenged was wet and the fire smoked more than it blazed. I knew how to make wood stove roar, but knew exactly nothing about open fires and waterlogged driftwood. We tried to grill cheese sandwiches over a hot flat rock, but settled for moist bread with warm cheese in the middle.

After that it was dark and we were bored. To our surprise, the beach had neither television nor radio. The stars were hidden by fat clouds and the moon didn't bother showing itself. With the tide so low we couldn't see it in the dark, we didn't even have the luxury of gentle ocean sounds to absorb us,.

We were three girls on the hunt for adventure with nothing but a dull, gray-black sky and a few rats to stare at. Not one of us had thought to bring a deck of cards. The rats seemed edgy. It was all we could do to keep hold of them without breaking their tiny ribs. I wondered how well they'd do if we let them go.

“They're pets!” Sidra said. “They've never even fed themselves.”

Wouldn't instinct kick in, though? Wouldn't a tiny, wild, animal voice start shouting orders? *Build a nest; forage for food, no, not that kind, this kind; hide from big things with teeth chop, chop!* I thought it would be interesting to release one of them and come back every week to visit. Would it return to the sound of Sidra's voice? Would it remember us? Would it find a mate out there in the rain forest? Somehow, I didn't think rats were native to the island. It seemed a lonely kind of life.

Though we all felt it, none of us admitted our disappointment. What had we expected? A party? S'mores and Northern Lights would've been nice at least. Maybe a little music. We wouldn't have said no to a real bonfire either.

Eventually, with nothing else to do, we bedded down early, telling half-hearted ghost stories while lying around the smoky fire. We gave Sidra our sleeping bag, since she had to keep the rats warm. Lily and I curled up in trash bags and shivered. I'd tried to dig up the biggest stones so we'd have mostly sand to lie on, softer and easier to heat with our bodies. I'd also piled dried seaweed from around the hut into three little pallets, but cold rocks dug into our hips and backs anyway.

I slept fitfully, waking sometime later to a new sound among the crashing waves gulping hungrily at the beach, now half again as close as they'd been when we arrived. The nearness of the ocean startled me, as it often did when I was very little. How could one little stretch of beach change so drastically every few hours? At first I couldn't make out what had woken me, until the waves stilled momentarily and I heard it again, far off. The faint click of rocks knocking together carried on the wind, a tiny sound amplified by the cliff walls behind us.

Suddenly we were all awake, squealing, whispering: *Bear. Be quiet, it'll hear you. You think it's a bear? Shut up! Shhh. Oh my god. We're going to die.*

Why hadn't we thought of bears? I remembered the bear that chased me back in second grade, its easy speed, the size of it. I realized we were trapped, betrayed by this enticing sweat lodge and its false sense of security.

The crunch of beach rocks colliding drifted slowly toward us and we girls huddled tight as a pent up scream. I stared at the dark beach, forcing my eyes wide open. I wanted to see my killer before I died. We waited for danger to show itself as the ocean slowly chewed away the shoreline before us, one contemplative bite after another. We waited so long the sun might have expired and the earth devolved into space debris.

Finally, something showed against the black sky. Far away, a small white bouncing disc hopped around the beach like a sand flea. We trembled silently, until the disc of light became a beam of light, and then a flashlight. Now our thoughts were of bogymen and disappeared children.

Why had we not thought of murderers?

I decided bad guys were better than bears because I could confound bad guys and help my friends escape. It seemed the least I could do after dragging them out there, promising safety and fun. We lay still, afraid to breathe, until two figures emerged from the darkness: Lily's dad and her brother, Kahlil. Bill strode across the beach as calm as if it were noon and we'd planned to meet there all along.

“Ladies,” Bill said, shining the flashlight on each of us in turn. “Did you happen to check the tide table before you left?” I looked up at him from my garbage bag, blinded by the flashlight, shaking with cold and left over fear. We shook our heads dumbly, unsure whether to get up. He cast the light around the little hut, pointing out dried seaweed and debris. I hadn't noticed how seaweed hung from the driftwood walls of our hut like moss.

The year after our doomed adventure the news of Chris McCandless' death made headlines in the *Juneau Empire*. His story knocked me sideways. Here was a young man found starved to death in a bus out on the Stampede Trail, north of Fairbanks. According to news reports McCandless died because he'd been inadequately prepared for his trip: he didn't know the terrain, or how to skin a moose, or which plants were safe to eat. He didn't have a guide, only instinct. By all accounts he'd simply walked out into the deep Alaskan wilderness expecting to master it somehow. I kept thinking *how could anyone be so naïve?*

At twelve, I believed I knew more about Alaska than McCandless had. His story haunted me. His death seemed so avoidable, yet I envied his heroic life. And I wondered who he would've become had he lived. Had he known he was capable of dying when he set out on his journey?

I thought of Lily's dad calling my mom one night, telling her *the girls are gone*. I imagined a debate: *Were we safe out there for a night? Should someone go after us?*

The way people talked I could tell others envied McCandless too, and I feared a wave of copycats crashing down on us. Who does not believe their youth is an impenetrable shield, made of stronger stuff than anything else in the world?

“What you might have found if you'd looked,” Bill said the night he rescued us from the beach, “is that tonight is the highest tide of the year.” The disc of his flashlight arced up the rock face behind us.

At first I didn't understand the problem; surely the tide wouldn't come so far up as this? But then a little voice in my head said, *Where'd you think all that seaweed you're sleeping on came from, dummy?*

We crawled from our beds slowly. Afraid to look Bill in the eyes, I examined the moonlit cliff wall behind us. Tufty fingers of dried sea grasses clung to crevices, hung from ledges, wagged in the wind like a warning. *You should not be here, no, no, no*. Part of me wanted it to be a message for someone else, someone younger and more foolish. Part of me wanted to dig my heels in. Bill could take the girls; I'd stay with the rising tide and suffer the consequences. And I would survive it like I'd survived everything else: by sheer willpower.

Bill stood there, so calm, so quiet. One large vein thumped furiously in his forehead. We packed our things wordlessly, though my arms felt useless, like they had a few weeks before at the health food

store. I couldn't bear to look at Lily or Sidra. Willpower would not have saved us. That tiny, wild, instinctive voice I counted on had never made a peep. As I packed my things an image came to me of three little girls waist deep in salt surf, trying to climb the cliff face for hours and hours. Three little bodies pinned to the rocks by a crashing tide. Three little bodies swept out to sea.

Learning Curve

Even before Lily and I ran away to the sweat lodge with Sidra, Mom wasn't a fan of Lily's home school idea. For one thing, it meant she had to teach us at least one day a week. For another, she was afraid I'd fall behind academically and struggle when I returned to public school. I might have forgotten all about Lily's offer if not for our pending move onto the renovated school bus.

“We move onto that bus and I'm home schooling,” I tell my mother when she drives us out to look at it. Tekla and I are sitting in the back of C.A.'s Toyota King Cab, fighting for knee space. “I get enough grief for my red hair and my weird family and for always being a new kid.”

“What are you so afraid of?” she says. “Kids tease you because they like you. And they're mean because they're jealous.” When pressed, she is vague on just what exactly kids might be jealous *of*, however. “Well, you're really smart,” she says, “and that's saying something.”

I don't know a lot about being a pre-teen early bloomer, but I damn sure know that one thing kids my age aren't jealous of is smarts. They might be jealous of your Reeboks, or your Lego collection, or your Super Nintendo, but I never heard a person say, “Gee, I wish I had your brain.” Not once in almost two years living on the bus did I hear a kid say he wished he could live on a bus too.

It's not like the bus was all bad. We had a reading bench up front behind the driver's seat, the only seat left because, well, you needed it for driving. Except the bus doesn't have brakes, so for years it sat where the tow truck left it in our friend's driveway out on mile 3.5 of the Douglas Highway. Inside, the windows were dry-walled over and painted white. Where there once had been seats, now there were living quarters. Rows one-to-five became our living room, with our reading bench facing the

wood stove that cranked out enough heat to keep us in t-shirts most of the winter. Rows six-to-twelve held a small built-in kitchen on one side, cupboards on the other. Three bunks stacked by the rear exit occupied rows thirteen-to-eighteen. It couldn't have been much different than living in an R.V. dressed up as a school bus and painted forest green.

For Mom, bus life offered us a chance to appreciate the small things. Like the little wood stove that kept the bus toasty, and the honey bucket that saved us from running out to pee in the snow but had the unfortunate effect of making the place smell like a urinal. She might have been born too late to qualify as a real hippie, but my mother's heart beat to the drum of the back-to-the-earth movement.

Tekla and I were a long way from developing the fine art of inward thought by the time we finally settled onto the bus. Ages ten and eleven, we couldn't hide our dismay. "You'll remember it fondly when you're older," Mom said. When we pointed out that our living arrangement was ruining our social life *now* she said, "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger," a staple platitude for parents around the world. This is code for: *you should be glad you're not forced to work a coal mine every day like kids in other parts of the world.*

We didn't necessarily want to be stronger, though. We just wanted some of the luxuries other kids in America had, even the poor ones. A shower, for instance. Cable T.V. A real toilet, instead of a bucket with a seat on it stashed behind the same curtain where we kept our food and dishes. The closer we got to moving, the more determined I became not to set foot in Marie Drake Middle School as long as we called the bus home.

Looking back, I don't remember a particular incident from fifth grade that made me anxious about middle school. I can't imagine my fellow fifth graders were meaner to me than anyone else at hand. Children are equal opportunity monsters. But I'd never learned to handle the general unkindness of others. A taunt about my hair or my tattered clothes laid me out as heavy as jokes about my weird family. *You think you're so special*, kids loved to say if I refused to team up against another outcast, or

if I shushed the noisemakers around me when our teacher shouted in exasperation. Even I didn't realize that my wild-eyed, heart-thumping paralysis in the face of childish taunts wasn't a mark of anyone's playground prowess, but an older, deeper hurt resurfacing. All I knew at the time was that I hated it enough to leave public school without looking back.

Home school doesn't normally do a lot for your social life, but Lily, Geramie, and I thought we had the best thing going in town.

Geramie Garrison, a dirty blond with slate gray eyes and dimples, was the son of a fisherman and the third member of our home school trio. He wore rubber boots every single day I knew him, usually accompanied by a vest and one of those tiny ball caps that fit like a skull cap. He had small teeth with a gap, like Madonna's, which gave him an adorably roguish grin. He lived with his dad on a houseboat out in the Gastineau Channel. To reach their house we piled into a skiff and rode out of the protective marina barrier into choppy ocean waters. The house was just that, a house, plopped down on a floating platform. I don't remember it being damp, but I do remember it being dark. The lights, the T.V., the refrigerator, all were powered by generator, but I was afraid to use electricity with the ocean visible through every window. It went against everything I knew about hair dryers and bathtubs and I wanted no part of it. Fortunately, we only did school there once a week or so.

Mostly, when we were out on the houseboat we played with Legos. Geramie had more Legos than Douglas Island had spruce trees. We built massive fortresses for hours and then hid under his bunk bed to kiss, thrilled by our collaborative construction projects.

Some days we had school at the bus, but Mom's days usually entailed nature walks and philosophical debates so we were hardly on the bus itself. Mom was experimenting with a collage technique at the time, where she painted sheets of rice paper with watercolors, then glued strips of color

in place and painted over them. One of her paintings from that year depicts three figures in raincoats, walking the Douglas Island shoreline: me, Lily, and Geramie.

The way I remember it I learned more that year than I ever learned in public school. Practical things like: how to turn a cement repair dock into a fishing raft, how to avoid public school kids and their taunts, how to make out, how to avoid the tangled web of a love triangle, that boys may be in love with you sometimes even when someone else is in love with them. I personally learned, thanks to Lily's older brother, Kahlil, that I liked older boys. Kahlil had a quiet reserve that made me want to tell a joke or burst into song, just to see if I could coax him into smiling. Better yet, he came from a family as odd as my own. It all seemed preordained until one day I acquired a page boy haircut and Kahlil came home from school with a friend, took one look at me and laughed, saying, "You look like a boy!" After that I left good looking boys alone.

We also learned *really* practical things that year, like drawing up menus then shopping for, and cooking our own food. On our first day of school Bill had us memorize the recipe for bread dough. "You're going to eat a bunch of it," he said, "may as well learn how to make it." Throughout the year we stirred up homemade sauces, made our own noodles, and pitched a few disgusting concoctions onto the compost heap. One morning we sent our math papers flying and scrambled outside to coo over a black bear cub in the compost heap, covered in left over spaghetti.

"What's it eating?" Geramie asked.

"How'd it get there?" I wondered.

"Where's its mother?" Lily said, backing slowly toward the door. We'd heard all about sows and cubs and knew better than to stand between them. This little cub seemed too skinny and too little to be wandering on its own, small as a four month old Labrador, but though we watched him for an hour no tooth-bearing mama bear with revenge on her mind materialized. Bill helped us figure out how to report the cub, and while we waited for animal control he used the time to talk about human and

environmental interactions. Essentially, the way he laid it out, things went like this: humans = garbage; garbage = bears; garbage bears = dead bears. Which had us all howling.

“You had us call someone to come out here and *kill* this starving little baby?” I didn't calm down even when Bill explained that the cub would likely get placed in a zoo and live a happy life, because I had to know for sure. Mad with panic I plotted the number of steps it would take to scoop up the cub and run like hell, releasing it in the woods somewhere safe from idiots like me who threw my food outside to rot and attract orphaned babies who'd then be shot.

We each had our own way of dealing with things. Geramie dwelled on the cub's chances of finding a zoo, whereas Lily had a thing for ceremonies. While she did a blessing for the bear, asking the spirits to protect our cub, I readied myself for war. A war which the animal control guy saw coming right away and took pains to defuse, saying: “If he survives being orphaned so young we'll definitely find him a home.” Which broke my heart, because how could anyone survive all alone at that age?

That's how it went. Home school meant doing the mandatory pencil pushing, and otherwise learning from the world around us. Instead of regular classrooms and the chaos of twenty to thirty students, our lessons involved hands-on experience. For math we had a lunch budget. Science activities ranged from growing bean sprouts and avocados to designing and building complex dioramas to scale. While tourist season was still on we even started a small business selling freshly picked berries out of Dixie cups to tourists when the cruise ships came in.

I'd been selling berries for years, but working with a group revolutionized our sales prospects. Where one person alone could handle one corner during the busiest times, three people could tackle the crowd from multiple angles, tripling our profits. The mountainside behind Lily's house offered a small fortune in ripe salmonberries, ranging from orange to purple. We ate half as many as we sold, singing as we bucketed berries, as much for amusement as to warn nearby bears. Lily preferred knock-knock

jokes to singing, and it got so that you heard her mind click into joke mode and said, “Who's there?” before she warmed up.

The cruise ships lining the dock across the street from Lily's house were like self-contained cities. They sailed in, lights shining day and night, and hordes of people poured off the docks and into the streets like a slow moving mud slide. Sometimes I wanted to run through them yelling, “Fire!” just to see how long it'd take to get their attention. But the people who stopped to ask about our berries made up for the millions who never noticed us, and with all that loose change rattling around in my pockets I felt like a queen strolling into J&J Deli for candy.

We spent most of our school time at Lily's. She lived in an actual house with running water and toilets and bedrooms to sneak off and do eleven-year-old stuff. We loved it there, all the musical instruments and food smells, the parents who still lived together and seemed even to like each other.

Lily was an exact replica of her mother. Standing side by side you'd mistake them for sisters. Hardly more than five feet tall, with long black hair, deep set brown eyes, and smooth dark skin, they were beautiful Ravens of the T'akdeintaan clan. Lily had a slight under bite, the only facial feature that did not mirror her mother's. I never knew she was unhappy with her face. Years later she had it corrected, the way one might have overlarge ears pinned to their head by stitches. A simple procedure where surgeons peel away skin and muscle to shave off a few centimeters of bone. I loved that under bite. I wished my own jaw had a few extra centimeters, and tried to imitate Lily's speech by jutting my chin forward when I spoke. Things like that fascinated me.

Lily's mother was forever sewing buttons on enormous black and red blanket robes, the kind worn during traditional Tlingit Indian ceremonies, which might be why Lily specialized in made up ceremonies. One time she danced in a small robe her mother had made, chanting. I didn't understand the chant, but after she said, “There!” the way she always did, bright and crisp with a slightly bent “r” due to her underbite. “You are an honorary member of my family, and my clan. You are a Raven.”

Bill, a musician and an artist, wound up leading the bulk of our class time. He had the kindest eyes I'd ever seen. I never once saw him upset, not even the time I nearly chiseled the top of my left index finger off while carving wood in the basement. When I thumped up the stairs from the basement barking like a seal in my pain, he prodded the flap of muscle and skin, nodding. "Stitches for you," he said, swiping car keys from a hook by the door. I refused. I'd been lazy with the carving tools, and I knew it. I couldn't make my mother pay for my mistake. Bill clenched his keys but watched calmly as I leaned on the sink, absorbed by my own bright blood spiraling down the drain and shivering at the thought of stitches.

When we weren't doing school work we tromped through the wooded mountain behind Lily's house, or jumped off the docks into the bitter cold Gastineau Channel. We did art projects, from paper-mâché to block printing and wood carving. We went to the museum to study Alaskan Native exhibits and lounged at the Whale's Tale Emporium drinking hot chocolate. When we ran into kids from Marie Drake, I hid.

One thing I did not learn during the year of home school was how to deal with the reality of public school. I don't remember what was behind the decision to move on to Marie Drake for seventh grade, but I did.

Juneau had a record setting rains the first year we lived on the bus. The Juneau International Airport recorded 85.06 inches of precipitation. Everyone talked about it. Juneauites are used to rain, but no one quite knew how to deal with so much of it.

Four human beings cannot be safely quartered in such close confines as an old school bus while waiting out 365 days of rain. While Camden went off to Sitka to live with his dad during the school year, Tekla and I donned rain gear and spent our sad, gray days roaming our stretch of the highway. We didn't have a yard or a playground nearby, but we had beach access to one side and a dense rain forest

across the highway. We crawled among the giant crusty rocks and tide pools down at the beach, counting seagulls, catching minnows and rescuing star fish when the tide was low. We built tree forts with the smell of wet pine and damp earth in our noses, before curling up with hot chocolate to read while our clothes dried, listening to the steady ping of rain drops on the tin roof.

We rarely had friends over – where would we put them? Tekla and I did our best to amuse each other, but too many rainy days in a row and you got to feeling like a prisoner. We learned to take advantage of the slightest break in the weather. The lot next door had a wide, gravelly U-turn where we whacked birdies around with a pair of used badminton rackets we found at the thrift store. We played without a net, oblivious to the rules, aiming to keep the birdie aloft.

“If you drop it, it's a point for me,” I say one day, pounding the small rubber funnel right at her, low and fast. Tekla reaches a long arm for the birdie, dances over a tire sized puddle, and drops her racket.

“You always make the rules,” she says. Her long hair hangs past her shoulders in twin strawberry blond braids that sway as she shakes her head in frustration.

“We don't have a net,” I say, shrugging. “What else can we do?”

The sky overhead is unpromising, the color of dirty snow. The gravel is hard to run in, some of it small and round as marbles, some of it fist sized and irregular. We're both wearing too-big raincoats that will be drenched in seconds when the sky lets loose again, as it inevitably will. We sit together on a fallen tree.

On the bus C.A. is watching a taped Cubs game on the small black and white T.V. while listening to the Grateful Dead loud enough that we can hear it out here. Mom is in bed reading. It's Saturday and we'd both asked to stay over at friends' houses, but Mom said to ask C.A. since he had to drive us, and C.A. said no for whatever reason. You'd think he'd be glad to get rid of us for a while, since he doesn't really like having us around.

Sometimes it's easy to lie in bed all day reading, but sometimes, like today, I feel like I'll do a full head rotation if I keep still a minute longer. "We could go to the beach," I offer, but Tekla shakes her head, frustrated. "The tide's too high."

"Want to see if Mason's shooting hoops down the road?" I can't say Mason considers me a friend, but because he lives a five minute walk down the highway and there aren't many other kids nearby, I sometimes go to his place to blow off steam when I feel all cooped up and twitchy. Tekla shakes her head again, and I'm glad. Dribbling a wet basketball is as much fun as running full speed at a wall.

"What do you want to do?" There's not much left except crawl home to the bus, but I don't want to go inside. Not now, not ever again. I can't breathe on the bus. We don't have a room to go to, and my bed offers one foot of head space between the mattress and the raised ceiling, two feet higher than normal busses to accommodate our three bunks stacked on top of each other. I'd rather be at Lily's in the playroom writing a screenplay and acting it out. Still, inside is better than sitting out here in the wet with Tekla in a funk.

I toss my racket, catching it by the handle. "Why don't you make the rules?" I suggest. Tekla shrugs, a slow, dramatic, shoulder to the ear kind of *why not?* shrug, and drags her racket slowly across the gravel as she rises and moves back to her position. The best part about being the oldest is learning eventually how to make things right for sad siblings.

When I lost my sister to a bad day I felt like there was nothing good left in the world. Sometimes I bullied her till she cried, but twenty minutes later we'd be screaming and laughing and inventing alternate realities. We were mortal frenemies, which softened the blow of our isolated existence. I think I needed her more than she needed me. Tekla had a lot of friends at school. I had Lily and Geramie.

At the start of seventh grade I returned to public school as awkward as I'd left it: desperate to be liked, hovering at the fringe of every social scene. Few of the other girls had breasts, let alone wore bras, leaving me at the mercy of envious girls, and bra snapping boys. I didn't know which was more embarrassing.

By seventh grade you have an idea whether you're pretty, ugly, or not-pretty-but-not-ugly. I fell into the last category, not-pretty-but-not-ugly, but I had hopes that, like the ugly duckling, I'd someday transform. Which may or may not have happened. In my twenties I followed a guy from Alaska to Virginia who said, "You know, you get less funny looking with age." I guess that's saying something. But kids with mediocre looks needed something else to stand out, a sense of humor, rich parents, a problem with authority. My uniqueness stemmed mostly from living on the bus, and it made me want to die with the shame of it.

Somehow, despite the bus, I got a boyfriend, Kele, a white boy from Africa who claimed to have some form of albinism. I never met anyone from his family, and he had plenty of hair, so I wasn't sure I believed him on that front. But Kele had freckles the size of dinner plates across cheeks and nose, and that was good enough for me. He was also deeply involved with the popular crowd, and holding hands with him gave me a momentary boost in popularity. For a few weeks I roamed the halls with kids whose natural charms set them apart from the rest of us mortals. I liked it. I felt like Princess Diana marrying into royalty, though she had never been as common as me.

If you've ever been the last picked at dodge ball and the first one tagged out, you understand. How wonderful, suddenly, to have friends crowding your locker or your lunch table. I felt the target on my forehead fading. It all ended after a scene in the hall with Mark.

I don't know Mark's story, exactly. Just that he was about the most popular kid in our year, a handsome boy of middle-eastern descent. He and his younger brother were adopted young by a wealthy

family and brought to Juneau. A vague air of mystery surrounded them, invisible and cloying as burnt sage. Mark in particular swaggered through the halls of Marie Drake like a prince. He was athletic, lean, and assertive. If he deigned to acknowledge you long enough to make fun of you, you were blessed. Or so it seemed, until one day he backed me up against a wall, put a hand on the locker behind me, looked me up and down and asked, “You got a fire crotch?”

I looked around for help. Kele stood across the hall with the rest of Mark's posse, coolly indifferent to my distress. He wore hugely baggy jeans that fit him like an extremely wide karate gi, and he leaned against the wall with one knee raised, a foot resting on the wall behind him. He shrugged his shoulders at me, unsure how, or unwilling to help.

“I don't understand,” I said. Little beads of sweat popped up all over my body like condensation on a cool glass, though I had a burning inside me. It felt as though two little suns had been planted under my cheeks. “Do you think I have a *disease*?”

Mark threw his head back casually and laughed, a lazy, toothy, *Ha!* that reminded me of John Travolta from “Grease”. I stared at his adam's apple. The bad boy loved by all. The King.

I was a rabbit on a country road, zig-zagging back and forth, trying to escape the speeding car behind me, but unsure which way to run.

“You know what I mean,” he said, grinning. A toothy canine with lunch on its mind. “Does the carpet match the rug?” He looked me up and down again, this time staring pointedly at my red hair before dropping his gaze slowly until it hovered around the zipper on my jeans.

The boys across the hall laughed. There wasn't any meanness in the moment for them. They were just a pack of normal boys roaming the halls. If I were a normal girl I'd have laughed and said something witty or charming, but I hadn't yet learned that sometimes a tease is just a tease, not a life-or-death situation.

“I don't know,” I whispered, sliding sideways along the wall to escape Mark's confining arm, glaring at Kele. We split up after that, and I slipped back into obscurity.

I had good friends, too. Alexis Roberts, with her striped overalls and waist length hair tucked into a knit rastafari hat, and her ability to make anyone laugh. And David Sprunger, constantly drumming on our shared desk in Geography class and bobbing his head. I had a friend named Thuy Tran whose parents always laughed when I visited. I didn't know for a long time that my name translates poorly in Vietnamese. But I missed Lily. On lonely days I remembered our secret ceremony.

A small ceremony. A play ceremony. I realized for the first time a person could make family however they liked, and I wondered if anyone else would chose me the way Lily had.

We got our wish eventually. The couple who lived in the house where we parked our bus split up and we moved into the house midway through my seventh grade year. Tekla and I shared a room again, which we barely left because someone gave us an old Nintendo and we hijacked the black and white T.V. from C.A., who'd built bunk beds for us before we moved out of the bus. I sprawled on the top bunk, Tekla on the bottom, and we played Super Mario Bros. and Donkey Kong until our eyes felt like peeled grapes. We listened to Vanessa Williams on eternal repeat because I couldn't afford another tape after I spent my summer's earnings on a boom box.

“This is so much better than the bus,” I say at least once a day for the first six months.

“Totally,” Tekla agrees.

We get another wish the next year: we leave C.A. Except, by the time it finally happens it's the last thing we girls want to do, because it means leaving Juneau. Finally, I've made friends. Finally, I feel at home somewhere. Finally, I'm not a new kid anymore.

It happens so fast. One minute, Mom is in Anchorage with her adopted father, Harry Waterfield, who is dying of cirrhosis. While she's gone Tekla and I stay with separate friends to avoid fighting with C.A. and I love it, because I'm staying with my new friend Jenny Delp-Mallet and her lawyer dad, David, who treats me like his own kid. It's just the two of them in a huge house with tons of food and the biggest television I've ever seen, a short fifteen minute walk from school. And there is Toby Lee, quietly holding my hand on a late night walk with Jenny and friends. A pause under the glow of a street lamp, rain misting our hair. A kiss. Another. A giddy certainty that there will be more.

The next moment we are packing our bags. Grandma Gorgeous Darling's husband, Papa, dies. Mom, in Anchorage still, can't get back for Papa's funeral, with Harry Waterfield so near death. We hold Papa's service in Juneau without her. Mom holds a service for Harry in Anchorage with her sister, Jolette. Then she calls us girls home one morning out of the blue. "Pack your bags," she says. "We're leaving." She is resolute in the face of our tearful protestations. "It's time to go," she says. We pack through the night, bid a hasty goodbye to our closest friends, and board a plane for Anchorage early on a gray morning, eyes swollen with the shock of it all.

On the plane, I imagine my father at the airport in Anchorage, waiting for us. I wonder if I'll recognize him, how tall he is, what kind of clothes he wears. I wonder at the bruises under my mother's eyes, the hurt in her faraway gaze. Papa and Harry both, gone in an instant. Papa, the only grandpa I ever knew, who held me in his big paw just a month after my birth. I couldn't know the loss of a father, a dad. I'd never had the chance.

During the flight I write letters, to Lily, Jenny, Alexis, and Toby, which I forget to send when we land in Anchorage. I promise to stay in touch. I promise to return. Years later I try to keep that promise and discover Jenny in California, an aeronautics pilot, and Toby gone, killed in an avalanche while back country skiing. Alexis, though, she stayed in touch with me. Lily too.

When our flight lands the man waiting for us is not my father, but an old friend of his, Brian. We move into his awkward L-shaped apartment that requires Mom and Brian to walk through the small room Tekla and I share to reach theirs. Brian, we learn, has been our mother's secret love since way back before she had us. But as Dude's best friend back then, they'd never had a chance to be together.

We don't finish the last two months of the school year, but we do meet our father when Mom visits in search of weed. He is tall and thick and smells of herbs. His house is filled to the brim with stuff and it leaves me with the same sense of breathless confusion as the bus had. I don't like the way he pats my butt affectionately, or his wet kisses, but I put up with it now and then because he pays me five bucks to write short papers in response to the books I read.

Tekla and I spend the summer trying to convince Mom to let us return to Juneau. "I'll stay with C.A." I tell her. "I won't fight him. I promise." But it is like asking the sun to set at noon in July.

In August we packed once more and boarded a plane for Monterrey, California, where Brian had the promise of work as a humanitarian consultant. We couldn't afford to live in Monterrey, though, and wound up instead on Fort Ord, a decommissioned army base full of asbestos treated trailers.

On the first day of registration Mom drove me to Seaside High, where Administration kindly asked me to consider another school because I'd probably be the only white kid enrolled. That would have been fine with me, but I didn't know then that in the early 90's gang violence was roaring to a crescendo and public schools were under attack. I didn't know anything about racism. I'd grown up with all kinds of kids from all kinds of places, oblivious to racial tension, if I ever saw it at all. It must have been there, given the trials Alaska's original inhabitants went through as western culture infiltrated their landscape.

What with a shooting at Seaside High the year before, said Administration, wouldn't I be safer somewhere more alternative? I said I guessed so, already scared to death by a tall kid in cornrows who'd passed us in the hall and slid his finger across his throat in my direction. Which is how I wound

up at Monterrey High, two towns away from our new trailer, on the first day of my freshman year of high school. The new kid again.

Heart Conditions

I thought I would cry as the wind carried his ashes into the swift moving Talkeetna River. A raven croaked close by. Bits of bone fell heavily into the eddy below us even as finer particles spun dreamily upriver.

We crammed together on the footbridge, each with a can of beer and a plan for some portion of our father's ashes, Dude's progeny: Zach and Cim from his first marriage, Tekla and I from a union fifteen years later.

Cim stood to one side of me, Tekla's long arm draped over her round shoulders. She sang hoarsely *Dust in the wind*, tears tracing the curve of her round cheek, while Tekla hummed a pure, high, harmony. If you pretend its never been done before the song seems fitting. We raised our beers in unison and poured, the thin liquid blending with ash and river spray, as though we hoped this mixture would reconstitute our father.

Zach, on my other side, stood with his beer can resting just above the curve of his belly. He stared down on our father's favorite fishing hole with wet eyes, far gone in memory. I wished for a childhood memory of my own, but had only the afternoon's drive out to Talkeetna, the small black box full of ashes and my arms trembling to hold it, though it weighed very little.



Six years before the bridge and the box of ashes I was at work in UAA's Consortium Library while the Vikings played on the big screen at Pancho's Villa across town. My estranged father, Dude, had started the game with a homemade pot brownie, followed by 22 ounces of draft beer. Before halftime the Vikings were down, and so was Dude. He'd toppled to the floor, where he laid still as death until the paramedics arrived, jump starting his heart before carting him off to Alaska Regional Hospital, sirens blaring.

I got a call at the library, a stone's throw from the hospital. When I arrived minutes behind the ambulance and asked for Dude a nurse kindly informed me that they had a lot of “dudes” in I.C.U. at the moment, and could I be more specific? I struggled to recall my father's given name: David.

I found him lying beneath a thin blanket in the I.C.U., rivers of sweat dripping from his forehead, thinning red-gray curls damp and springy at his temples. At sixty-three, he was a big man, of football playing proportions. Beneath him the hospital bed seemed doll sized. His eyes gleamed whitely, only a pinprick of blue showing. That blue dot darted ceaselessly from the light ballast to a beeping heart monitor, to the door, to me, to the bathroom.

Normally my father looked like a cross between mountain-man and ne'er do well in faded army fatigues, natty t-shirt and a Smokey the Bear style brimmed hat. His beard, once many shades of red, had long since faded to many shades of gray, and, with the exception of a fur-lined parka during cold months, his attire never varied. The hospital gown fit him like a t-shirt and his feet hung from the bed.

Dude managed to still his gaze enough to look at me and raise one gnarled paw to his mouth. “I ate a *huuuuge* pot brownie,” he said in a big whisper, “and a giant beer. There's nothing wrong with me.”

I nodded agreeably, wishing I could blame the brownie too. The doctors diagnosed A-fib before they'd finished unloading the crash cart at Pancho's. A-fib, or atrial fibrillation, is a condition that causes the upper portion of the heart to beat rapidly – faster and more frequently than the lower chambers. The

fluttering sensation leads to dizziness, shortness of breath and utter terror. It runs in our family. Something else troubled my father's heart, though. Something truly broken that caused his blood pressure to drop until his heart stopped.

I considered leaning over to kiss him on the cheek but his body odor, a rich oniony man smell, rubbed up against the antiseptic hospital smells of Lysol, bleach, and plastic machinery.

“They want me to get a pacemaker,” Dude said. His eyebrows, gray caterpillars, rose up conspiratorially then collapsed, folding together in consternation. Again, he cupped his mouth with one big hand. “They want to make me a robot,” he whispered. I couldn't help wondering how, at twenty-three years old, I'd become responsible for this grown-ass man child.

“This is not a conspiracy,” I whispered, fighting back an involuntary eye roll. “These people want to save your life.”

His expression took on the round-eyed sulk of a dog smacked on the nose by a beloved friend. Could he trust me? Had I been compromised? Had I become one of them, the bad guys with the prods and whips? I wished for rescue, for Zach or Cim to come sit with our father instead of me.

A nurse entered, handing Dude a dixie cup of water and several pills. A young doctor trailed in behind her, flipping charts on his clipboard. “Hello, sir,” he said without looking up. “We need to take some pictures of your heart,” he slapped a blank monitor sitting near the head of the bed. Dude flinched warily. “It's a simple procedure. We're going to perform a transesophageal echocardiogram.”

“A what?”

The doctor smiled. “A transesophageal echocardiogram. We'll send a little camera down your throat and make a video of your heart. Don't worry,” he chuckled, pointing at the pills in Dude's hand. “One of those will knock you out, and the other will make you forget. You won't remember a thing.”

Dude murmured, nodding his head in false agreement, grasping his bed sheet in one hand. A good little boy. He didn't want to know what was going on, he wanted only to say yes the right number

of times to spring himself from the hospital. His eyes began jumping around the room again. I imagined him planning his escape even as he swallowed the pills.



One time I drop in on Dude spontaneously. I wander around the yard calling at the windows like any other visitor would, because he can't hear the average fist pounding on the front door due to the mounds of detritus in there muffling sound waves, absorbing them like so much Jell-o. I don't visit often. Maybe one or three times a year. At nineteen I'm always afraid an undercover cop car is parked somewhere nearby observing me. As I circle the house, knocking and calling, I find myself rehearsing what I'll say if a cop approaches me. "He's my father, you see. I don't live here. I'm not buying pot."

The house is a two story, run-down shack in Spenard that the city's been trying to raze for years. It's filled, floor-to-ceiling, with junk – almost all of it literally trash. There is a one-foot path through the maze, which he occasionally vacuums, and wild cats bear kittens in the holes in his walls.

Behind the house a carefully cultivated vegetable patch dominates. Broccoli, cauliflower, tomatoes, kale, catnip, carrots and sundry other leafy things grow fat and juicy beneath a lilac tree in the summer. He spends most of his time in this yard, sweating over his rake, or putting golf balls into an empty soup can. Friends visit. They sit on dusty chairs rescued from who knows where, drink beers, smoke pot, toss horseshoes. I can't imagine where they sit during winter visits.

My hand is sore from pounding and I'm ready to give up when the door cracks open.

"Oh! It's you," my father says. His eyes are bluer than blue, as though lit from within. He's wearing a red and black checkered flannel, unbuttoned, over a tee shirt and army fatigues. "Just starting the first fire of the year," he says, waving a wad of newspaper ceremoniously. He hugs me with his other arm, the top of my head nestled in his armpit. A musky odor wafts stale and manly from his clothes.

Inside, the wood stove is an inferno, the door wide open. Sparks pop. I rush to close the door but he stops me with a wave, already ranting about another guy clear-cutting trees somewhere. “People are disgusting,” he raves. “They don't care what they waste. All they want is money. What good is money when all your trees and animals are gone?” His chest heaves, causing his stomach –firm and round as an oaken keg– to rise and fall. It's hard to be sure he's not angry at me. He hits a joint and goes quiet, a can of Bud pressed between his knees.

I feel small in the lawn chair tucked into its tiny clearing beside the fire, mounds of random junk piled around me. Somewhere against the wall I know there is a couch. Unmarked bags and boxes tower, ceiling high. Here a bag of brightly colored beads and porcupine quills, there a pile of ivory, unidentified fur pelts, and wood carvings. At a glance you'd mistake Dude's house for a dump.

I don't feel compelled to tour the house on this visit. Every room is the same, except one in the back corner that sizzles with grow lights and dank greenery. Decapitated milk jugs line the stairs to the second floor, ready to serve as chamberpots. Newspapers dating to the late sixties stand sentinel beside the bed I was born on, a long time ago in a trailer a few blocks from here, the bed my father still sleeps in.

I can't make sense of my father: his lifestyle, his intellect, his history. He drinks curdled milk. He will eat food that is green and squishy with age. He sang opera and studied the bible in preparation for seminary school while at college, but came to Alaska on a fishing trip one summer, during the fight for statehood, and never left. One year I met an old friend of Dude's at the Talkeetna Folk Festival who gave me an old button that read *Carlson, of course!* in blue ink over a tarnished white background. I learned my father had run for congress three times, in 1982, 1984, and 1986. During his first campaign Dude ran against Don Young, garnering substantial support at some 52,000 votes.

It surprised me to learn my father had been a virgin when he married his first wife, Rita Mae, in his late twenties. My mother likes to say Dude didn't know anything about ladies or weed until a free

spirited nymph introduced him to his first joint at a festival. “He was never normal,” Mom told me once, “but after that first joint he was even less normal.”

During this visit I stay until the secondhand high sets my heart jackrabbiting against my ribcage. I wonder what happened to pleasantries. What about me? My life? Doesn't he care? The room begins to feel like a trash compactor inching shut. An avalanche could happen any moment. I am vaguely amused and horrified by the thought of a person crushed to death by all this *stuff*. You wouldn't find the body for weeks.

Dude walks me six feet to the door and I hug him, because I know I should. That's what daughters do. His eyes are red, his breath beery, and as he hugs me one hand slips to my butt while his kiss wanders from my cheek to my ear and I cringe as he sticks his tongue in there. The muscles at the back of my neck seize in shock, gluing my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Even if I could speak, I don't know what to say. I clamp one hand to my ear, paw at the blanket draped over the warped front door with the other, and escape into a furiously bitter wind, white knuckled and shaking.

In retrospect, I should have stopped right there at the front door and laid some ground rules for our future: feign interest in my life if you have to, expect that it'll take years to earn the right to criticize me, and my ass is always off limits. But what did I know about establishing ground rules with my father? I barely knew the man at all.



The first time Dude landed in I.C.U. he waited until morning and walked out of the hospital while the doctors weren't looking. He called me at work to explain.

“Those doctors don't know anything,” he said. “I will not let them make me a robot.”

I felt an anger I'd never known before, scalding the air in my lungs. I exploded. “Do you have a death wish?” Co-workers turned to stare, eyebrows raised, mouths parted in shock. Libraries aren't the place for such displays. I hunched, guiltily, behind my monitor to hiss:

“You’re a menace with a heart like that! What if you’re *driving* the next time your heart stops?”



My father's father, Jerome, died the year after I started getting to know my own father and my brother, Zach. I was fifteen. I'd never met Jerome. I wondered what he'd have thought of me, and whether I could love him the way I wanted to love Dude.

The flight from Alaska to Minneapolis for my grandfather's funeral is hazy in my mind, as is the funeral and the general crush of familiar faces I encountered there. I remember that Dude drove a borrowed car, an old one that must've belonged to a female relative as the faded interior was pristine and smelled faintly of perfume before we spent a week in it.

No matter the time of day Dude and Zach kept a cold beer between their legs and hotboxed the car. Dude and Zach found my pot sensitivity hilarious. I found their insensitivity to my suffering not so hilarious, but knew myself outnumbered. I sat in the back seat having panic attacks, because I'd had a don't-let-her-sleep-for-three-days head concussion in a bike accident the summer before, and ever since felt the wide disembodied realm of death pressing in on me that only people who have panic attacks understand. After the accident everything frightened me: bikes, stairs, food, medicine, new people. It felt like I'd left the courageous part of myself on the pavement. I sat meekly in the back seat counting my heartbeat, worrying we'd be arrested, and wondering whether they bought their pot in Minnesota, or stuffed it in their underwear for the flight. Which left me worried at the prospect of getting arrested on the flight home.

The entire week went like that, a blur of faces and names and anxiety. We were surrounded by red headed people with features much like my own, the blue eyes and rounded ski-slope noses of Finns. The boys dragged me to a Twin's game where Zach and Dude were convinced Ricky Henderson was flirting with me from the outfield and that I should marry him.

“She's single,” Dude shouted to Ricky, cupping two gorilla paws around his mouth. Ricky

waved politely while I pulled my flannel shirt over my face and wished like hell to be somewhere else.

We spent one day and one night at the family's cabin on Long Lake, where we fished from a small wooden boat with a weed eater of an engine. Dude and Zach drank Bud in a can from sunup to sundown, blowing raspberries at the sight of my life vest. All day, the sun remained a happy thought above the treeline and the water chopped listlessly in an indifferent breeze.

“This lake is so deep,” Dude said after lunch, sucking in a hit and holding his breath, “they can't chart it.” He exhaled and wagged his eyebrows at me, jiggling his fishing pole.

“Mmmhmm,” Zach said absently, baiting his hook. I tried to imagine the things that would live in an uncharted lake, getting as far as prehistoric creatures with teeth as long as my arms before my heart went nuts and I had to start thinking of something else.

The sun began its slow crawl to bed behind the trees before it occurred to me to be grateful for the pair of oars stowed politely in little aluminum hooks on either side of me. Picturing those two grown men staggering around in our small wooden boat, red eyed, stunning mosquitoes into a drunken stupor with every bite, I decided I might rather dog paddle to our cabin on the far shore than let one of them gun the engine. That is, until the sky went gray as dishwater and sucked up into itself and a sound like two trains colliding rushed at us from the near shore. It happened faster than eyelashes slapping together in surprise.

Wind screamed through trees and I screamed with it as a spinning black hole, big as the sky, swallowed the clouds and stretched earthward twenty boiling yards from our boat. It dropped from treeline to lake and ballooned outward, sucking up water and gaining momentum.

“Down!” Dude yelled, scrambling to get low in the boat, tucking his Sasquatch-sized body into a Leprechaun-sized gap between the wooden seat slats. I dropped to the floor, clutching at my heart inside the life vest and squinting up at the wall of water spitting fury on us. Individual drops struck my arms and face like glass.

I'd never seen heaven and earth move as one great, angry, hell beast. I had no precedence for this thing, this monster; I knew bears and moose and drunkards and blizzards. Should I jump in the lake? Should I try to reach the oars? If it sucked us up, where would it spit us out? When?

The spout swerved away just as I could see a place beyond the edge of its terrible mouth that looked still and calm and clean, like a place I might be willing to spend some time. As it meandered across the lake the cyclone slowed, swayed. It tottered forward like a wounded giant, stumbled, and dissolved quietly back into the lake. Like that, the sunset reappeared and birds called from trees gleaming wetly on the shoreline, as though to reassure me I hadn't fallen through a looking glass.

“Close one,” Dude said.

Zach popped the tab on a sun-warmed beer. “Mmmhmm,” he said. We turned the boat toward the cabin, where, over a game of cribbage and a bottle of whiskey, I would spend the night wondering how I could share blood with boys like my father and brother.



When he collapsed the second time the doctors forcibly installed a pacemaker. I didn't want to sit with him again. How had I become the care-taker child? Cim and Zach grew up with Dude. They fished together, cooked out in the back yard among the rusted out cars and cast off refrigerators, drank and smoked and shared the same friends. I'd been invited along a few times since moving to Anchorage, but I always felt like a working dog trying to fit in with a passel of cats in a field of catnip.

I found Dude in the hospital shortly after the pacemaker's installation. On this second visit the sight of Dude in his new hospital bed shocked me. He lay still, strong arms limp at his sides. As ever, sweat ran from the curls on his balding head. I assumed the strain on his body and the drugs coursing through his blood were taking a toll, but I had no way of gauging his pain.

He opened his eyes once, then closed them. The pupils were black holes that swallowed me. He'd been resuscitated three times in two days and I wondered what those eyes saw on the other side of

death.

The thought that he could die and we might never be more than we were invited two hot tears to my eyes, surprising me. I squeezed his cold left hand. The heart monitor beeped erratically, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. My own pulse echoed the beeps. Anticipating. I did not want to be standing there when it stopped for good.

He woke slowly, eyelids jumping a few times before parting with great effort, like the Red Sea rolling back. “You are so beautiful,” he said throatily. “You look like your mother.” The compliment fell on me like a down comforter in January. Warm. Safe.

He lay there, pale beneath a sheen of sweat, breath rattling like dice in a cup, and I felt tenderness for him. A new feeling. I liked it. For the first time since I’d met him, it seemed maybe I could love him as a daughter does.

“Will you marry me?” he asked, eyes drooping shut again.

“What?” I snatched my hand away. “Dude, I’m your *daughter*.” I backed up to the window until the sill pressed painfully into the back of my knees.

“I know,” he said, seeming to recognize me for the first time. “That was over the line.” I continued pressing my legs into the window sill to give the anger somewhere to go. I wanted to walk out, but the sight of his eyes drifting shut again and the muscles at his neck going limp pinned me to the wall. This old man, my father, a stranger. Alone in a foreign land populated by machines and short-tempered nurses. I wanted him to love me. I wanted to love him.

The heart monitor beeped its lonely call into the silence between us and I listened for a response.



My mother was nineteen when she met Dude, small, with a wiggle in her walk that made her art teachers think of marriage. At thirty-nine Dude, father of two teenagers already, struck a chord in

Mom's heart she hadn't heard before with his red hair, barrel chest, and eyes so blue they made your teeth ache. He owned The Bridge, a hippy restaurant on Northern Lights Boulevard. Mom waitressed there, recouping money spent traveling to folk festivals that summer, saving up for oil paints and brushes so fine they could paint air.

She knocked cats off the restaurant's counter, laughing as Dude, clearing tables, paused to eat bits of egg and potatoes and whatever else customers left on their plates. When he burst into song while washing dishes she laid her high sweet voice over his baritone, so deep it must have made water tremble in the drinking glasses. "I'm going to have your babies," she told him. He did not object. I was born a year later. Tekla, fourteen months after that.

It didn't take much to convince him to model for her art classes. He had a lot of clients on campus, and also Mom had way of attracting attention and he thought he'd better make it clear she was taken.

One time Dude showed me a portrait she made of him the year I was born, red charcoal on thick white paper, the bold lines suggesting this strong man knew how to be a lover. I wanted to steal it, hang it on the wall above my bed, study it. I wanted to get to know him, the man I never knew because Mom left before I turned two and he never called or wrote, and by the time I met him at age thirteen the years of hard drinking and pot, and harder stuff I can't guess at, had changed him. It seemed this likeness could tell me things, important things. I could ask my young father: would you have made me if you'd known I'd grow up without you? Did you want me then, the way I want you now?

The summer after I graduated college I met Dude for a beer at Pancho's. "Why don't you visit more often?" he said.

"Why weren't you around when I was a kid?" I countered. He ordered another beer. Since the pacemaker the lines of his face seemed heavier, his eyebrows bushier than ever.

“It was your mother’s decision,” he said finally. “Not mine.” He told me how he’d followed us to Petersburg, then Sitka. That my mother thought it best we didn’t see him. A stray wind could have toppled me from my bar stool. I couldn’t help but think he might have been part of my life if he’d truly wanted me. All those years of indifferent blame settled in my belly and I pushed my beer away.

I tried to see it from my mother’s point of view. Life with a pot dealer had been too dangerous, the horizon too vague. In addition to the visitors and the cops, the house was always a wreck. Even then Dude's home could not be navigated. Mom says that once, out of desperation, she convinced a friend to take Dude on a weekend trip. Probably there was fishing involved, some beer, maybe a few J's. Then she loaded up most of the debris in a dump truck, hoping that if he didn't do the throwing away himself he could at least bear to live in a clean house. She never told me the details, but she says Dude had a nervous breakdown after that.

I tried to summon a memory of his visit to Petersburg, one of my own that hadn’t been handed down to me by my family. I wondered: what did he say to me before he left? Did he promise to return? To love me always? When he looked into my two year old eyes, a foggier blue than his own, did he see the walls I would build around my heart to lessen the hurt of his absence?

I couldn't tell you if he wept when he left me, or if he hardened right there on the spot. I have no recollection of being held in my father's arms, of his beard, his laugh, the smell of him. My closet doesn't hold a shoe box full of letters and birthday cards from him. I don't recall a single phone conversation between us before I was fourteen years old.



My father and I had a rhythm. Sometimes I stopped at the bowling alley after class to cheer on his league team, sometimes we didn't speak for a year or more because the moment Dude asked, “You still wasting your time on college?” I hustled out the door, determined not to speak to him again. I worked full time to pay my way through school, taking classes in the evenings. I decided if he wanted

to spend time with me he could take off the black ski mask and grab a pom-pom the few times our paths crossed. I never felt good about it, though. Sometimes I laid awake, worrying at this thing between us, promising myself I'd call him. Somehow, I never did. When I left for Virginia with my boyfriend a few years after graduation it never occurred to me to say good bye. I'd told him I would be leaving several months earlier. It seemed sufficient.

I didn't call after I heard his house had caught fire, either. I meant to. A fire and the house so full of junk, they had to let it burn. I wondered if that portrait, the one in red charcoal, survived. I could see it so clearly, the bold strokes of his beard and his broad back crisping, fire nibbling the edges until with one hot bite there was nothing left but hot ash. The man who made me, the man I could never know, gone forever.



A month and a half before Dude died the family gathered in Anchorage to celebrate the birth of our little brother's daughter, McKinley. She summoned us with her milky breath and we came, Mom and Tekla from California, me from Virginia.

The first time Tekla saw Dude we were at the grocery store. Her flight had landed minutes before. I spied him in the dairy aisle, limping slightly, holding his stiff left arm awkwardly at his side. I'd come back to Alaska early in the summer to help my friend recover from a brain injury and had been shocked to find Dude himself recovering from a stroke. No one had thought to call me. Then again, I hadn't called either.

"I'm not ready to talk to him yet," Tekla whispered, tugging me toward the registers. Her cheeks went pink and her eyes roved around the store, as though afraid we'd be caught avoiding our own father. She hadn't seen him in nearly a decade. When she got married the year before it didn't occur to her to invite him. "Was I supposed to?" she asked me after the ceremony. Would she spend the rest of her life worrying, as I did, that she'd failed to try to know him?

I couldn't let that happen. Dragging her down the dairy aisle, past the sour cream and buttermilk, I called to Dud. His blue eyes went wide and he grabbed Tekla in his good right arm, hugging her as though an electric current ran through his body and she was the only thing that could ground him.

"Dudesy," she said, smiling into his flannel shirt. Later she tells me she really thought "*Dad*" but had never said it before and couldn't say it then.

My heart was a mewling kitten batting at my ribcage, desperate, but I had been hurt by him. Just a few weeks before he screamed at me over the phone in his post stroke rage *I'm your Dad, you owe me your time* and I, shaking, said *You haven't earned that right yet*. It felt like the beginning of something.

Tekla and Dude stood silently in the grocery store, twisted in a one-armed hug, tears in their eyes. I envied my sister her easy heart. For her there had only ever been his absence, and now this. She was ready and he was ready and they could simply love one another. I could only watch.

At the end of our visit, before going our separate ways, we gathered in Talkeetna on the property Dude gave us years before in lieu of outstanding child support. The drive up had been hot. Dude, Zach, Tekla, Mom and me in Dude's old Suburban, a case of PBR in the backseat between my knees, half empty before we reached Talkeetna.

Our property is a small rectangle of densely wooded land, measuring just over five acres. We gathered close in a sunny patch beneath spruce and birch trees, waving arms in unison to ward off mosquitoes. There'd never been a family outing like this that I could recall. Sweat dripped from Dude's nose as he crouched to sit on a fallen log. His tee shirt seemed dry only at the ribcage and the two inches around his belt line. We'd hiked around the property from edge to edge, planning where to build a dock on the lake, where the communal gathering lodge with its big kitchen and living room would go.

We staked out plots for our individual cabanas, far enough apart for privacy, but near enough to feel close and connected.

It didn't seem impossible. We could build a family retreat here among the pines, a place for my children to get to know their grandfather in ways I never would.



We don't leave all of our father's ashes in the Talkeetna river. We agree that some of his ashes should return to the family place. Tekla and I stalk the property vigilantly, searching for the exact log we sat on the year before. Beers in hand we wade through the undergrowth, seeking landmarks, but summer makes fools of us. The blueberries and fiddle head ferns are so lush and green it is hard to believe any man has ever set foot on this land. We spread out, trailing fine gray ash behind us like flower girls with rose petals. We trace the perimeter in opposite directions, welcoming our father home.

I stop at the lake to watch a loon dash skyward, spinning lake water cascading from tail feathers in its eagerness to get airborne. I'd thought there would be more time.

Beside me, a small birch sapling stands alone on a little rise, wide around as my wrist, verging on first blush. Finger-wide curls of ochre bark peel away, thin to the point of translucence, blurring the line where the tree ends and sky begins. This birch will live as long as I do. Longer maybe. It will grow to seventy or eighty feet, shading our family retreat on hot days. Its many leaves will clap with the wind.

At the base of the tree I lay a thin rope of ash, pour beer into the moss at my feet and raise my can high. "We were close to getting it right, Dude," I say. A breeze ruffles the lake's surface, tossing golden light from blue green waters. The loon circles back, cutting loose with a high, lonely call and I tuck what's left of my father's ashes into my coat pocket, listening for a response.