

SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE

A Memoir

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HONEY BADGER BOOKS
Fort Collins, Colorado

FIRST HONEY BADGER BOOKS EDITION
OCTOBER 2011

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Published by HONEY BADGER BOOKS
Fort Collins, Colorado
United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9840359-3-9 (ebook)
ISBN 978-0-9840359-0-8 (trade pbk)

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For Wynona

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“Girls stop being and start seeming.”

–Simone de Beauvoir

“Do your thing and don’t care if they like it.”

–Tina Fey

Contents

MAKE BELIEVE	1
GLAMOUR	15
STEALING SIXTEEN	30
AWESOME IS AS AWKWARD DOES	50
GIRL	68
JUMP	71
SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE	80
THE LOVE LAKE	100
BIG, SPLASHY, AND KIND OF CONFUSING	127
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	137

1

MAKE BELIEVE

I have a fabulous costume box. Camouflage do-rag? Got it. Fake chest hair? Check. Space suit? Yep, I'm just that kind of girl.

Open my costume box and you can step into the roles of Indian squaw, flapper, Lady Luck, hippy, heavy metal rocker, bride, groom, gangsta, witch, peasant, Chinese mistress, pimp, pumpkin, Girl Scout, rugby player, and astronaut. Start cross-pollinating and you could end up as a black rugby player with a taste for blood, a flapper on acid, a slutty headbanging pumpkin (what costume can't be made slutty?), or even Paula Abdul making a guest appearance on *Star Trek*.

I love my costume box.

Fortunately, I live in a town that sanctions dressing up not just at Halloween but several times a year.

When one of these festivals rolls around, I am proud to deck myself out as a Day-Glo hippy with a penchant for flowers and bridal veils, and then talk my husband into wearing the Lucha Libre Mask, spandex pants, and a tight little tank top that got smacked by the BeDazzler. And my friends can count on me to arrive at a theme party (Cowboys and Indians, Wedding Olympics, Made in the '80s) dressed appropriately.

But when I was a kid, dressing up was a torture that could only be rivaled by helping my friends choreograph dance routines.

We lived north of Chicago in a main street town with yellow brick schools and a lake surrounded by houses that were so pretty we called them "Painted Ladies." The elementary school was downtown, next to the Lutheran cemetery and just two blocks away from Center Street, the ideal location for trotting out the five-year-olds on a Halloween parade. This parade was the focus of playground discussions and homeroom arguments for at least a week. "Who are you going to be?" was the only question worth asking.

The boys had three answers: Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker, and Indiana Jones.

The girls were going as Little Orphan Annie, Cinderella, Princess Leia, or Jeannie. All of them. Except me. When asked who I would be, I proudly announced that my mom was making my costume.

"Oh," said Heather, dance recital star and future prom queen. "And what is she making?"

"I don't know. It's a surprise!"

I trusted my Mom, who adamantly believed that homemade was better than store bought, and I was duly impressed by the yards of red and green fabric and the bags of stuffing that surrounded her sewing machine that week. The night before the parade, Mom's Bernina sang as she made the final touches to my costume. When she called me into her bedroom to try it on, I was so excited I had to pee first. After a quick trip to the bathroom, I ran into the bedroom and saw my glorious outfit for the first time.

It was a giant strawberry.

I would be the only Fruit of the Loom representative in the Halloween parade.

We had instructions to wear our costumes to school, so mom dressed me that morning in green tights and a T-shirt, and then pulled the giant berry over my head, jerking and tugging until my face poked through the top. Only then did she realize she had forgotten the armholes.

"Oh well," she said, topping my head with a leafy felt hat and snapping the elastic into place under my chin. "You'll just have to be a good listener today. I'm sure Mrs. Woodruff will understand."

“Mom,” I whined, “It’s hot in here.” There was enough stuffing in that strawberry to fill two dozen Cabbage Patch Kids.

“Then you won’t be cold in the parade,” she said, helping me into my Velcro sneakers and pinning miniature strawberries around my neck, as if fruit wear their offspring.

Mom walked me down to the bus stop and lifted me onto the first step. I marched sideways down the aisle, the baby berries whacking kids in the face. Fortunately, everyone was so wound up that no one noticed me. The teasing didn’t begin until I squeezed through the door to Mrs. Woodruff’s class and all of the girls turned in unison to look at the fruit.

“That is so gay,” said Heather, her Jeannie wig shaking with laughter.

“Yeah, that’s gay,” echoed her minions. They were gathered around Heather’s desk, a harem of miniature starlets in petticoats, skirts, and wigs.

“No it’s not,” I mumbled, pushing past them.

I wasn’t sure what *gay* meant. Earlier that year, a fifth grader called my best friend Harriet and me gay. When I asked Mom about it she said, “Gay means happy.”

I knew from my sneakers to my stem that Heather wasn’t telling the whole class that I was *so happy*. Heather also liked to call me *spaz*, and although I was too young to understand that *spaz* comes from *spastic*,

it clearly meant I had a disability. My voice was always too loud, there was an extra pair of underwear in my cubby for accidents, and no one would sit next to me in art class after I accidentally poked another girl in the eye with scissors. Every day I said or did something that made the *spaz* label stick.

Mrs. Woodruff met me in the aisle and smiled down at me. “How creative!” she said. “I love it. Did your mom make it?”

I nodded, beaming. I would have traveled to the Temple of Doom for Mrs. Woodruff.

“And where are your arms?”

“Inside. My mom wrote a note.” I lifted my chin so that Mrs. Woodruff could see the slip of paper poking out of my neckline. While she read the note, I tried to figure out how to push my glasses up my nose without hands. I was mid-nose-wriggle when I looked up and saw Mrs. Woodruff trying very hard not to laugh. “When you need to go to the ladies’ room,” she said, “you just let me know.”

At noon, the kindergarteners lined up in pairs behind their teachers. All of the girls in my class were holding hands: Jeannie and Leah, Annie and Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty and the cheerleader. The boys didn’t want to touch, so Mrs. Woodruff made them hold each other’s light sticks, pistols, and bullwhips. I was at the end of the line with Mr. Spock.

We paraded down Center Street, where every parent and grandparent in town was out on the sidewalks with strollers and shopping bags. The farther we went the more our pairs dissolved, turning into two blobs of girlhood and boyhood. The girls leapt and pirouetted, and the boys hit each other and pulled on the girls' braids, and at the very back, fruity, genderless and dying for a pee, there was me.

Kids get one day a year to transform themselves from powerless bed wetters and whining siblings into superheroes, beauty queens, and presidents, one day to show the whole world who they are on the inside. And I showed up as a giant ovary.

Seven years later, I was in the midst of another crisis. My family had moved from Illinois to England and back again, and I was experiencing the kind of dislocation that only a child with a frequent flyer number can understand. After three years abroad in the United Kingdom of castles and cathedrals, virgin queens and talking rabbits, magic swords and secret gardens, we were back in the suburbs.

The worst of the suburbs, a land of sprawling subdivisions built from a hundred shades of beige, protected by cul-de-sacs, berms, and security systems, serviced by malls, megachurches, and Mary Kay. It was a flat place in every sense of that word—featureless, tasteless, soundless. When my little brother, Will, and I rode our

bikes through our subdivision, looking for some woods or a creek, anyplace where we could hide inside daydreams, I often glanced over my shoulder, expecting to see the homes collapse behind us like the false fronts of a movie set.

My parents built our new home in Hunt Club Farms, a tony name for a place in the sticks, where every house reigned over three to five acres and the mothers dreamed of watching their daughters ride thoroughbreds. It was not a place I would have picked, and yet it had been selected especially for me. I was the rider in the family, the twelve-year-old with skinny legs and a good seat, fearless in the saddle, ecstatic on the gallop.

I didn't choose horses either; they were my mother's dream. Mom grew up in Oklahoma and the only thing she loved about those hot, dusty summers was trail riding. When my father made enough money to buy a sports car, she went right out and found a barn where she and her children could ride, but out of three kids, I was the only one who cared for it. It was a great hobby. I always had a place to go after school, and I had trainers watching me, coaching and encouraging, and I had a horse to look after. Unlike most of the girls who rode with me, I didn't think about horses from sunrise to sunset or pretend to ride imaginary ponies over imaginary jumps. Horses were for going fast and far and high. They were not BFFs.

All of which brings me back to that big house in the suburbs and the crisis I was having on an August night in 1989. I was sitting on the floor of my bedroom with a notebook and pencil in hand, staring at the sliding door that separated my room from the bathroom. On the far side, there was another sliding door into my sister's bedroom. I imagined her sitting on the pink carpet, surrounded by trunks and suitcases, a Laura Ashley dress swirling around her, curly brown hair framing green eyes and cotton candy lips. At seventeen years old, my sister was a beauty. I heard adults compare her to Katharine Hepburn and Sophia Loren, women who warm rooms with a smile and crush men with a look. In a family of goofballs, she was the only one of us who came anywhere near perfection. She wore long dresses without seeming stuffy. She instinctively understood the etiquette of dating and parties. Every time we moved, she quickly became the most popular girl in her grade not by being mean or catty but because she was pretty and funny and nice to everyone (and never earned a grade higher than a B).

Everyone adored Kate, but at home she drove us crazy. She was so imperious and hard to please that we called her The Empress. Our new Jack-and-Jill bedrooms might have given strangers the impression we were close—that we whispered secrets in each other's ears, shared clothes and makeup, giggled over boyfriends and phone calls. Nothing could be further from the truth.

I was not allowed to look at her.

I could not touch her clothes, shoes, books, or music.

I must never talk to her in public or address any of her friends.

If I broke any of these rules she might pin me down and spit in my mouth, or remind me I was so ugly no one would ever love me. I know what you're thinking. *Sibling rivalry. Big deal! That's as American as bad sitcoms. I bet you really loved each other.* This was not that kind of rivalry. We did not learn a nice lesson about family and loyalty in thirty minutes. There was no canned laughter or misty-eyed reconciliation. If we were both lucky, she would go to college without convincing me I was sub-human and I wouldn't hate her for the rest of my life. That was the best ending we could hope for.

I should have been celebrating her departure, but I was searching for the words to say goodbye.

Every opportunity Kate declined, I snatched up, and every lesson she tried to share with me I rejected, which is how I had come to be a horseback-riding, black-belt wearing, book-loving 12-year-old with really bad hair and no fashion sense. I had kicked, punched, and *hi-yab*-ed my way through talent shows while the other girls pirouetted across the stage. I wore sweatshirts decorated with puffy teddy bears. I played bows and arrows in the woods with my brother. I was almost never invited to sleepovers. The closest I had ever come to

popularity was playing a mad scientist with a German accent in the school play.

Kate was mortified by my existence, and I couldn't blame her.

But earlier that summer she had taken the time to pull me aside and tell me that at my new school I should go by my middle name, Paige.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because Sarah is so old it's biblical! You don't want to be ancient, do you?"

"I like my name."

"Paige is your name too, and it's much better. It even has an interesting spelling. Do you want to be popular?"

I looked around, worried that Mom might overhear us. Mom hated popularity. She despised jocks and cheerleaders. The dorkier I was, the more Mom loved me. The cooler Kate was, the more they fought.

"Maybe?"

"Then change your name. Start over. Be Paige."

I didn't trust her. "Go away!" I said. "Leave me alone!"

"I knew it." She shook her head. "You'll always be like Mom."

I was afraid of her, but she understood people so well. Kate was leaving for college in the morning, and in a week I would start at a junior high where I knew no one, and there was so much I wanted to ask her about

school and friends and clothes. I'd spent my short life crafting an identity in reaction to hers, wrapping myself around her like a body cast. What would happen to me when she left? What would fill that space?

It was our last night together. It was my last chance to turn to Kate for guidance. Her last opportunity to play big sister. All that separated us was two doors and twelve squandered years.

If I could just pretend to trust her.

If she could just pretend I was the sister she wanted.

If we could just make believe for a little bit, it might become real.

After Kate left, the house felt empty.

For as long as I could remember, Mom, Will, and I had spent every day dancing around Kate's temper, and now there was a vacuum where that anger had been, and we were trying to fill it with kindness. Without discussion, we agreed never to fight, never to raise our voices or push each other's buttons. I didn't realize how quiet our house had become until I went to Sam's for a sleepover.

I met Sam on the bus on the first day of school. Her blonde bangs were frozen into an impressive six-inch tidal wave. She had braces and a perm, she wore little white shoes called Keds, she pegged her Guess jeans tightly above her ankles, and her T-shirts were tucked into the front and pulled out in the back. She was a seventh-grade fashion queen and she sat next to me and

talked nonstop for the whole bus ride. At the end of the week, she invited me to a sleepover at her house in Grandwood Park, a neighborhood of ranches and bi-levels that made Hunt Club Farms look preposterous.

I loved Sam's home the second the door opened. She had three sisters and two stepsisters and a stepfather, though you would never have known a man lived in that house. Bras and underwear were drying on a line in the hallway and a pile of laundry covered the kitchen table. In the living room, there was a bucket filled with more nail polish than I had ever seen and a dozen teen magazines, their pages bent and spines broken. (The quizzes in these magazines were taken multiple times in different colored pens, all of the sisters wanting to know if they needed more body confidence or had friends they could trust.) Jerry Springer shouted on the television, a tape deck blasted Madonna in the kitchen, popcorn was heating up in the microwave, and two Shih Tzus were yapping their heads off.

Sam took me to the basement, a subterranean den of estrogen where Sam's Club boxes of tampons and pads littered the hallway, various blow dryers and curling irons hung next to a mirror and posters of the New Kids on the Block, and used Popsicle sticks and cereal bowls were scattered around the floor. I thought of my sister in her dorm room at a women's college in Virginia and I wondered if it could even begin to compare to this chaos.

Wendy was already hanging out on Sam's waterbed. (I had only seen waterbeds on *Three's Company*. It had never occurred to me that someone my age could have one.) I'd tried talking to Wendy at school, but she wasn't very interested in me. She had red hair and a perm, sharp blue eyes, and countless freckles. She watched me sidelong as I tried to settle onto the waterbed without making too many waves, and then she returned to her conversation with Sam.

In England, there had been only two groups—nerdy and popular—and our classes were so small that it often seemed like we might all be friends. At my new junior high, cliques were more complicated life forms, and Wendy was a taxonomist. She could label our classmates by family (style of dress), genus (after-school activity), and species (sexual experience). Monica Worthington was *Prepa Cheerleaderum Virginis*. Brett Brandon was *Prepa Baseballerum Thirdbase*. Jared Stone was *Punka Nintendum Firstbase*. Taxonomy was an analytic art, and while Sam and Wendy discussed and dissected, I listened, impressed beyond words by their social acumen. Like my sister, they seemed to understand how others worked and to move through the world of homerooms and hook-ups with the confidence of battle commanders.

In the morning, I had to leave at dawn to go to the barn for my riding lesson. As I stepped over Sam and

SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE

Wendy's sleeping bodies, I promised myself that whatever it took I would be one of them.

GLAMOUR

Sam and Wendy were my new friends, but Mom was determined to keep Harriet in my life. I'd known Harriet since preschool, and even though we went to different schools now our mothers still attended church together. Mom liked Harriet because she was "unique" and I liked Harriet because, unlike my new friends, she was a bookworm. We both read anything with hidden worlds, magical animals, or plucky heroines. *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Secret Garden*, *Anne of Green Gables*, *The Dragonriders of Pern*. These were the stories we whispered about in our sleeping bags at night, worlds where orphan girls and fearless women find love and recognition through their heroic deeds and artistic talents.

But we were thirteen years old, too old to talk about fairies and dragons without blushing. When our moms sent us to Minnesota to spend a week with her bachelor aunt, we went looking for a new form of entertainment, and we found it in the back of a guest closet—a boxful of *Glamour* magazines from the eighties. When I opened *Glamour*, I inhaled the scent of sex, power, and submission for the first time. The working woman’s power clothes—stirrup pants, giant belted sweaters, spiked heels, shoulder pads, and suits with mini-skirts—barely disguised the sexual predator within, and the aerobic queens in their leg warmers, headbands, and ripped sweatshirts were in training for—what else could it be?—the bedroom. All those bare shoulders and pouting lips pulsed with the *Flashdance* tag line: “Take your passion and make it happen.”

Glamour cast a spell on me.

Harriet and I lay side by side on the unmade bed and put our honors reading skills to work, scouring the magazines for any mention of sex. I would grab a magazine from the box, flip through the dusty pages until a keyword—*bedroom*, *candles*, *orgasm*—leapt out at me, dog-ear the page and keep going. Once I had assessed how many articles in the issue referred to sex, I went back and read every one, and then exchanged copies with Harriet. Some of the magazines had been read in the bathtub, and their pages dried together in wavy clumps, but we peeled them apart slowly and patiently

so we wouldn’t miss anything. We didn’t talk much. If an issue was good (and most of them were), we simply said, “You won’t believe this.”

We pretended to be disgusted, but we were mesmerized.

I thought fantasies involved dragons and fairies, but in *Glamour* a fantasy was a series of questions: Do you want to be tied up? Do you want to be in control? Do you like carpenters or lawyers? Doctors or nurses? Good guys or bad? Would you do it on a desk? In a plane? Or a squad car? What do you dream about that you can’t tell your boyfriend?

By the time Harriet’s aunt came home to make dinner, I was hot down there, and I didn’t know what to do about it.

We were mute at the dinner table. The next morning, as soon as the aunt left, we returned to the stockpile. In a sexual health column, I discovered a new word: *masturbate*. After describing her first “accidental orgasm” (thanks to waves and a beach toy), the writer gave explicit instructions on how to experiment. She recommended tensing the thighs and gyrating on one hand, so I tried it that night in the bathroom, holding my breath until I nearly passed out.

Overnight, I went from reading *Anne of Green Gables* and *The Secret Garden* in a world where sex was essentially nonexistent to thinking about it all the time. I

might appear to be washing the dishes or playing with the dog, but really I was wondering when I could masturbate again. I couldn't get enough of it. The building of tension and then the explosive release and waves of euphoria—it was so unlike anything I had experienced before that I wanted to do it again and again and again—and I did. (I couldn't get over how *easy* it was. Why wasn't everybody masturbating all the time? How did anyone manage to go to work or school?)

As far as I was concerned, there was only one good place to masturbate—my sister's bedroom. Kate was away at college, so it had privacy, plus a lot of throw pillows. Pillows were key. Not only were they a nice prop for the act (think beach toy), but they were essential for silencing myself. I buried my face in pillows every time I came, confident that my world would end if anyone heard so much as a whimper.

I didn't want my family to hear me, but I also didn't want to hear myself, didn't want to writhe and moan in the room where I slept, in the daybed where I still dreamt about Aslan and Pern. My sister's bedroom seemed to exist outside of my family's everyday life. In her room, I could be someone else for a few minutes, and no one would ever know—not me and not them.

My family had a tradition when we watched movies. When a sex scene started, Dad shouted “Nosecrusher!” and covered our eyes with his giant hands, and we had

to cover our ears. When I was little, the Nosecrusher act was hilarious. My brother and I would wiggle and giggle, not quite sure what we were missing, yet confident that we didn't want to see any of that yucky grown-up stuff. Dad's technique wasn't always successful (I watched Tom Cruise and Kelly McGinnis tongue wrestle in *Top Gun*), but it sent a clear message: sex is off-limits.

Dad wasn't just shielding us from the mysteries of adulthood; he was also shielding himself. What was hilarious at eight years old was awkward and uncomfortable at thirteen. Kate started dodging the Nosecrusher in junior high, but I kept up the charade long after I knew what was happening on-screen. Refusing to do a Nosecrusher was tantamount to saying “I'm a grown-up now.” So long as I pretended to be clueless, we could all pretend I was still daddy's little girl.

The same summer I learned to masturbate, Dad brought home a video camera, the first one I had ever seen. It held a VHS tape and it weighed about thirty pounds. There was a big microphone on the front and when the lens zoomed in and out, the plastic casing creaked loudly. I let my friends play with it and they recorded an episode of *Lifestyles of the Rich and “Lonely”* in my bedroom. After that, I gave my Legos and the video camera to my brother.

While I hosted sleepovers in my sister's empty bedroom, Will and his friends made crime films, puppet shows, and TV commercials. They took turns as directors, actors, stunt men, and scriptwriters. Occasionally, they cast me as a housewife or a detective's girlfriend, but these appearances weren't convincing, so they collected makeup, skirts, and wigs and cast themselves as leading ladies.

I was relieved when they excluded me. Our whole lives, Will and I had shared everything—bunk beds, teddy bears, inside jokes, toy soldiers, and bedtime stories. We had called each other Best Buddy, Supersarah, Wonderwill. We were so close that strangers mistook us for twins. I never corrected them. I wanted to be inseparable from my brother, until I turned thirteen and decided that our bond was freakish. The more I thought about sex, the more determined I was to push him away, even as I worried that this person I loved more than anyone else in the world would stop loving me in return.

The next summer we went to Texas for our family vacation. Granddad had a small ranch but it had always been an endless playground for Will and me. In the mornings and evenings we climbed live oak trees, drove four-wheelers through the fields, rode horses, poked and prodded the cattle, poured grits on ant hills, and hunted black widows. During the hottest part of the

day, we delighted in the pool with our cousins, and after dinner, we ate our ice cream sundaes and collapsed soundly into bed.

Will and I stayed in the apartment above the garage with Nana, our ancient great-grandmother. One afternoon, I found a book hidden at the back of our closet. It was the thickest paperback I had ever seen. The cover showed a man and a woman in a telling embrace and gold letters spelled out *Desire*. The book fell open in my hands to a rape scene in a castle. I turned to another page and found a man and a woman making love in a field beneath the watchful eye of his stallion, and in the next chapter I discovered a Turkish harem.

For a few minutes, Texas and my family disappeared. I read randomly and voraciously and then hid the book under my pillow and went to tell Nana I wasn't feeling well and would take a nap instead of going to the pool. I spent the rest of the afternoon curled up in bed with *Desire*.

The novel had sex in four centuries and on five continents. It broke every possible taboo. Incest, pornography, pedophilia, gang rape, sex with animals, gay sex, group sex, sadomasochism—nothing was out of bounds. I can still paraphrase some of the better lines:

You're so tight he must be as small as a worm.

She leaned backwards over the chair and Charlotte untied her kimono.

Don't finish her off like you did with the Spanish slut.

She became hysterical when the director brought a German Shepherd onto the set.

“Roll over,” he said. She knew what was coming. He always liked it the Greek way.

The writing was bad and the plot was a joke, but that was not the point. The novel was made for skimming. Its best attribute was variety. Every scene featured a new power struggle, men and women in arrangements that I would never have imagined on my own. It was a comprehensive sex education.

Reading about things I didn't want done to myself made me feel a little dirty, but not so dirty that I could stop reading or masturbating. Instead of playing Marco Polo in the pool, I spent hours on the inflatable raft, savoring scenes from the book. Instead of hunting for black widows with Will, I yelled at him to leave me alone. Instead of playing baseball with my cousins, I lingered in the apartment, savoring every minute of privacy. I wasn't proud of my behavior, but I didn't know how to stop.

At the end of our vacation, I left the paperback behind. Reluctantly. I knew it was time to let go. My obsession was starting to scare me. Besides, the true owner would come looking for the book sooner or later and I didn't want to disappoint her. I wondered who had torn the cover and dog-eared the pages. My grandmother? My aunts? Nana? (Not Nana, I hoped.) I couldn't ask. The book was hidden when I found it—its owner, like

me, wanted or needed it to be a secret—so I returned *Desire* to its hiding place.

Previously, my fantasies had been nothing more than a shadow play of bodies and gestures with one faceless man and one faceless woman. Now there was a multitude of characters in my head—lovers, rapists, whores, kings, queens, serving girls, filmmakers, and more. Sex became a theatergoing experience, a spectator sport in which my only role was audience member.

At times, I felt only marginally more involved in my real life. My friends and I were freshmen now, engaged in an intricate pageant of watching and being watched. We spent the first forty-five minutes of the school day circling the school's ground floor like birds with faulty internal compasses. We tried to walk gracefully, giggle appealingly, and talk incessantly. We wanted to look funny, pretty, interesting, and sexy but not slutty. The rate of talking and laughing increased exponentially when we approached a group of popular boys leaning morosely against their lockers. We tried to gauge their reactions to us without looking directly at them. We could stare at the floor, or down the hall, or cast quick glances over our shoulders, but of course every outward look was also a look inside. Every gesture, every glance, was a question: *Am I okay?*

There was never an answer to that question. We weren't allowed to answer it ourselves. Maybe that's

why my friends never talked about masturbation. The idea of pleasing oneself was weird, even taboo. Life was not about what we could do for ourselves; it was all about what we could do for others. The incredible power I exercised almost nightly in my sister's bedroom had no place in high school. I built high walls to keep that part of my life separate from the notes and conversations that filled my waking hours.

There was another reason for not discussing masturbation with my friends—the nature of my fantasies disturbed me. Many of the sex scenes in *Desire* involved force. Women resisted intercourse, were coerced into it, and then participated lustily. From newspapers, school counselors, and gossip, I knew that rape was the worst thing that could happen to a girl, and yet I was fantasizing about nonconsensual sex. I didn't know the language of submission and dominance, had no idea that kinky could be okay, instead I thought something had to be wrong with me and I was darkly, horribly embarrassed by whatever was broken inside my soul.

Boys distracted me from the contemplation of my more serious defects. In typing class, alphabetical order put me next to Jared, a boy I would never have come into contact with in honors classes. Jared had a shaved head, a toothy grin, and a mean streak. He wasn't doing well in school, and he didn't give a damn. On the first day

of class, I was mortified, certain that he would exploit every opportunity to ridicule my dorkiness.

Typing class was synonymous with tedium.

Today, we will learn how to sit up straight and position our hands above the keyboard properly.

Today, we will learn how to type left hand asdfg right hand hjkl. Good job!

Today, we will type an entire paragraph using only the letters A S D F and L. You will probably want to shoot your eyes out, but please do not bleed on the keyboard.

I may have been an honors student, but I was no teacher's pet, and this teacher was begging for abuse. She stood behind us, frowning, while Jared hunched over his keyboard, pecking out the paragraph with his index fingers one letter at a time.

"Jared, please sit up straight."

Jared sat up but continued to hunt and peck.

"That's better. Now try positioning your fingers over the home row. The home row, Jared," she enunciated her words as if he was hard of hearing. "That's better. Keep returning to the home row. Don't get discouraged!"

Then she turned to me and frowned. Dad worked in computers so I'd been typing up my school papers on a desktop since seventh grade. My hands flew over the keyboard while I looked at the paragraph on my clipboard.

“Sarah, that is not the technique we are learning in this classroom. Follow directions. Show me you can type from the home row.”

I groaned, stopped, hovered my hands over the keyboard, and began typing at a snail’s pace.

“Much better!”

When she was gone, Jared leaned over and whispered, “Today, we will type a paragraph using only the letters F U C K Y O U.”

I snorted, hit the Caps Lock, and started to hunt and peck FUCK YOU over and over again.

“Good posture, Sarah! Great form!” Jared was smiling at me, the kind of grin that made me want to roll over on my back and let him scratch my stomach.

When I sat next to Jared in typing class, I was sure to get in trouble, but I didn’t mind. I would have been delighted to be sent to the principal’s office with him. We spent the first half of the semester parodying touch typing exercises and joking about the teacher’s sex life, and then we slowly began to talk about ourselves. Mostly Jared teased me about who I was dating and I teased him about all the girls who liked him, and that eventually led to innuendos about kissing and sex. A lot of these conversations took place on screen because we were too embarrassed or excited to actually speak them out loud.

There were only a few weeks left in the semester when he asked for my number, and I was ecstatic, enthralled with the idea of being liked by a boy who was hazardous. We flirted on the phone late at night when my parents were in bed and went on a clandestine double date. Our friends made out at the end of the night, but despite all our talk, neither Jared nor I seemed to know how to begin to touch each other.

A week before Christmas break, Jared stopped by my locker and handed me a present carefully wrapped with laughing Santas. Jared was red-faced and serious. “Don’t open it here,” he said. “Or on the bus.”

After dinner, I took the gift to my bedroom closet to open it in secrecy. Inside the wrapping paper there was a white box. I slipped off the cover and folded back the tissue paper to reveal a small pile of black silk and lace. When I picked it up by the shoulder straps, it turned into a teddy with cutout nipples and sophisticated crotch fringes. I had to stare at the crotch for a long time before I realized I was holding onto a proposal. My mind raced through the calculations of sex and romance.

Why would he give me lingerie?

He wants to see you in it.

So he’s pictured me in bed?

Duh! He’s fantasizing about you.

But that means . . .

That means he wants to have sex with you. Not making out, not dry humping. Real sex. Sex with complications. Sex with consequences. Sex with cum.

Months of flirting evaporated. Jared had breached the wall between my fantasy life and my real life, and I was outraged. My desires, my orgasms, my body—they were none of his business.

Trembling with rage, I stomped downstairs and got the kitchen scissors. Mom was on the sofa reading a mystery novel. Without looking up, she asked how I was doing.

“Fine,” I lied.

“Go to bed soon,” she said.

I marched back upstairs with the scissors and cut the teddy into a hundred tiny pieces, crying and shaking as I worked. When it was shredded beyond recognition, I threw the box into the farthest corner of the attic.

I refused to talk to Jared after that, in class or on the phone. I preferred the safety of my own fantasies, of men and women I would never have to meet in real life, people whose bodies came and went at my command. Those characters I met at fourteen are still with me. Their features are vague and they may be nameless, but they speak to me about their sex lives in explicit detail, and they have thorny relationships with husbands, lovers, bosses, friends, fathers, and strangers.

They repeatedly put themselves in hopeless situations that they can only escape by having compromising sex, and yet I never get tired of them. During sex, I flip through these pages of memory, and their pleasures become layered with my own until the real and the read are inextricable.

I have wondered if I should abandon them, but I suspect they are inseparable from my sex life. The summer of *Desire* tangled pleasure and secrecy, sex and language in a knot so intricate I will never be able to untie it.

3

STEALING SIXTEEN

The summer before high school started, dry humping and shoplifting were our favorite activities. Everybody was dry humping because dry humping was adaptable. It could go anywhere and fit any time span. It could last for minutes or fill entire afternoons. We dry humped in rec rooms and on sofas. We did it in cars and underneath roller coasters. Occasionally, scandalously, we even dry humped in a bed.

Kissing came before dry humping. You had to swap spit for at least fifteen minutes, and the boy could run his hands over your chest and even your crotch, but he couldn't unbutton, unzip, or unsnap. When the fever in your body had reached a sufficient intensity (somewhere between tingling pleasure and dog-in-heat insanity),

you positioned your hips against his and began grinding. Grinding was both pleasurable and infuriating. We suffered bruised pelvic bones and zipper rash from intense, prolonged grinding. It could last for hours without achieving any release.

When the hormones in my body weren't obliterating all rational thought, I understood that dry humping was humorous, much like my dog's furtive relationship with the living room sofa, but I agreed with my friends that it was too soon for sex. For now, we had to practice until our pelvises callused over and our zippers fell to pieces.

At sleepovers, *when* to have sex for the first time was a constant conversation. I didn't have much to contribute. I was a sponge, gleaning everything I could from Sam and Wendy, who had learned from their older sisters that fifteen was too young. Girls who had sex at fifteen were sluts, or they were being used. Sixteen was different. At sixteen, you were a woman who had demonstrated maturity and self-control by waiting.

Sam was our dry humping expert because she had an older boyfriend, a skater who wore shell necklaces from faraway beaches. Jesse had a perfect tan and baggy shorts. We met him playing soccer. Sam and I were the only girls on the team, so the coach put us in at defense. We watched the boys stride down the field on their long, lean legs, their chests rising and falling,

sweat dripping down their necks. When the ball came our way, Sam and I were a decent defensive team, passing it back to our forwards as quickly as we could. Even so, I wouldn't have spoken to the boys off the field if it weren't for Sam, who was never tongue-tied.

Sam and Wendy approved of dry humping like the UN approves of peacekeeping. It was a vital activity. It was a dress rehearsal. We were practicing for the big day without ever removing a tank top or unbuttoning our button-fly jeans. It was the summer of "Unbelievable," and Sam got a six-inch rug burn on her back by dry humping Jesse through the entire *Schubert Dip* album. She was proud of that rug burn. Jesse wanted to go all the way, but Sam wasn't giving in.

All summer, cranes, bulldozers, and semis were busy converting the old farmlands near my house into the largest mall in America. Behind high berms, they raised a mile of concrete and corrugated metal. From the top of the berms and across acres of freshly poured parking lots, we watched as decorative silos popped up near the entrances and semi after semi unloaded its wares into the anchor stores. Opening day was the event of the summer. The parking lots overflowed with SUVs, RVs, and trucks. Every family brought the largest vehicle they owned with the intention of filling it.

Sam, Wendy, and I joined the fray midmorning. We had to link arms to stick together in the crowd,

which had its own currents and riptides. It surged again and again towards one shop or another, and we moved quickly to avoid entering the Men's Warehouse or the Crystal Shop. Music and announcements blared from the loudspeakers, bands played in the food courts, and fights broke out over armchairs in the imitation living rooms that had been sprinkled throughout the halls. Overhead, a robotic mad scientist tinkered with his flying machine, shouting with joy when it flew every fifteen minutes. (I watched this piece of stagecraft for years and never understood its existence.)

At every entrance, greeters in the purple and green polos of Gurnee Mills passed out large welcome bags with maps of the mall, key chains, and flyers. The crush of bodies, the bright lights, the tidal wave of noise—it was all intoxicating. Signs and salespeople shouted discounts: *50% OFF! 2 for the Price of One, Buy 3 get the 4th for Free, One Day Only!!!*

We'd gone to plenty of malls before, but they were sterile palaces of glass, marble, and filtered air, temples to style and perfection. Those crystalline malls had nothing in common with this madhouse of consumption. Children threw tantrums, husbands and wives shouted at each other, and teenagers swaggered and flirted. The desire and frustration was so palpable, we could have drowned in it.

When I was five, I got caught shoplifting. We were at the grocery store, and while Mom was loading the cart with cans of chicken soup, fresh fruit, and paper towels, I stood in a checkout aisle and marveled at the candy rack. The rows of gum and candy bars glistened in their brightly colored packaging. The names—Snickers, Skittles, LifeSavers—were more familiar to me than the names of my relatives, yet we were only allowed to have candy at Halloween. The desire for sugar was so overpowering I grabbed a pack of Grape Hubba Bubba and slipped it into my pocket.

I would have gotten away with it, too, except I had no self-control. I popped two pieces in my mouth on the way home and started chewing. That unmistakable tangy purple odor quickly filled our station wagon. Mom pulled over and stared me down in the backseat.

“What do you have?” she asked.

I refused to answer because I knew if I opened my mouth, she’d see the grape-colored wad. I was about to swallow the gum when Mom held out her hand and ordered me to spit out the contraband. We went back to the store, and I handed the rest of the pack over to the manager while Mom watched. I doubt he heard my apology—tears and snot were streaming down my face and sobs of shame racked my tiny body.

That shame should have scared me away from stealing for the rest of my life, but it didn’t. On opening day at Gurnee Mills, the greeters passed out huge bags,

empty except for pens and key chains. The empty bags felt wrong; their weightlessness was a rebuke, a reminder that the whole purpose of a mall is possession. I have, therefore I am.

We had just enough cash to gorge at the food court, and not nearly enough for shopping. Hearts racing, armpits sweating, we went into Phar-Mor and slipped compacts, mascara, and lipstick into our bags. In other stores, we covered the makeup with headbands and magazines, and then T-shirts and underwear.

I can’t remember whose idea it was, if it began spontaneously or not, if I followed or led. That haziness, the indistinctness with which I recall my motivations and thoughts, is telling. At that age, in that body, I didn’t make decisions. I reacted.

Soon, we were just like everyone else, we were part of the crowd, racing from store to store, glorying in the unbeatable bargains, blood pumped full of endorphins. Shoplifting was just like dry humping, minus the zipper rash.

Nineteen ninety-one was also the year of *90210*. Aaron Spelling’s brainchild was the *Dallas* of America’s status-conscious teenagers. Postal codes already seemed nostalgic to kids who never wrote or received letters, yet we were tremendously aware of which neighborhoods our friends and crushes called home. My family lived in a subdivision of horse properties where most of the

kids went to private school. I attended public school and my friends lived in more modest neighborhoods. I cringed every time Mom drove me to a friend's house in her Volvo (I guess I could afford that kind of worry). I didn't want to be the richest kid in class, which is why I never talked about the only thing I did with passion—horseback riding. What could be more stuck-up than riding boots, barns, and horse shows? I went to ridiculous lengths to avoid discussing my only afterschool activity with friends and classmates.

Even so, my dramas couldn't compare to *90210*. My friends and I were addicted to the shopping, drinking, love triangles, answering machines, break ups, sex, and sideburns. In *90210*, parents were almost invisible and adults playing teenagers took center stage. We learned that appearances match problems. If Dylan looks like a bad boy whose parents are absent, and if Kelly looks like a pampered diva with a mean streak, and if Brenda seems to be the slightly lopsided twin, that's because they are.

We also learned how important it is to be part of a high school class. It doesn't matter if you are the nerdy newspaper editor or the self-centered jock; you've got to have a role to be in the show. As the end of summer approached, we obsessed about who we would be in high school. We knew who we were not in junior high. We were not cheerleaders, we were not jocks, we were not

do-gooders, we were not band members or math clubbers or artists or druggies. We were nonparticipants.

I would have happily remained a nonparticipant, but Sam wanted to change her status in high school. She wanted to be noticed. We would never be popular, but we could be recognizable.

We went to school the day before classes began to decorate our lockers. The building was even uglier than our junior high—acres of industrial yellow-brown carpet, concrete walls painted in pastel colors, yellow and blue lockers lining every hall—yet it was big enough to promise change and freedom. Sam's locker was our base camp. We filled it with photographs and magazine pages, a bulletin board, a bubble gum dispenser, a giant box of Blow-Pops, a magic 8-ball, a piggy bank, and even a boom box. There was no room left for books, so Sam stashed hers in my locker.

The lockers were just the start of Sam's makeover. She tossed her sweats and T-shirts and started wearing paisley button-up shirts and skintight turtlenecks, clunky black shoes, and loose jeans that she didn't peg at the bottom. Wendy and I tried to copy her.

The new look was perfect for the first day of high school, but it cost money that none of us had, and we couldn't steal all the time. We needed paychecks, so Sam and I got jobs at the frozen yogurt store in the mall. Weekends were insane. The line snaked through the seating area

and never got shorter no matter how fast we worked. The customers screamed their orders over each other's heads—Key Lime Pie, Vanilla Chocolate Twist, Peanut Butter—and we poured and weighed and rang, again and again and again.

Eight-hour shifts on a weekend were exhausting, but weeknights were wonderful. The manager was a 40-something Member's Only type who left one too many buttons undone, revealing wispy chest hairs and a gold chain. After a couple weeks of watching us like a hawk, he started disappearing on weeknights, letting us close by ourselves. At first, we were model employees, restocking the toppings, cleaning the counters, prepping the frogurt machines for the next day, and then we met the boys who manned the pizza counter on the other side of the food court, whose manager was also developing a disappearing act.

The boys would leave the pizza counter unattended and hang out in our shop, inhaling whippits and then giggling hysterically when customers walked up to the pizza counter and shouted for help. We made and devoured topping balls (Snickers, M&Ms, and Heath Bar glued together with peanut butter and caramel sauce), ate pretzels drenched in cheese sauce, and flirted shamelessly, miming fascination as the boys bragged about BMX accidents.

We rocked the food court.

Sam, Wendy, and I went to the amusement park on weekday evenings just to ride the American Eagle. The Eagle was a wooden roller coaster, the oldest one in the park, but it was our favorite. It climbed a long hill slowly, the gears clinking and groaning underneath us, the lights of our town and the other suburbs unfolding around us like a promise of better days to come.

When the Eagle eased over the top of the hill and plunged towards the ground, our stomachs rose into our brains and we screamed into the night, the wind whipping our voices away. We could not get enough of that rush. We rode the Eagle again and again, not even bothering to get off between rides, until the attendants kicked us out at the end of the night.

Maybe we were dreaming of that rush when we decided to start driving. We were fourteen going on sixteen. We had jobs and bank accounts. Being adults was so easy. Why not drive, too?

My family's cars were the obvious choice. Dad was usually out of town and Mom couldn't stay awake after dark. We had three vehicles: Mom's station wagon, Dad's convertible, and a hatchback for commuting. None of us had learner's permits and we only vaguely understood the difference between automatic and manual, but Sam's older sisters had taught her to drive up and down their street and she swore she could get us around town.

Years before, the neighbor's kid got caught driving without a license and his parents shipped him off to military school. Mom had already told me that she'd do the same, but like the shoplifting lesson, that warning didn't weigh much. This was another rule that I felt like I had to break. Like so many other things that were already traveling towards me—sex, love, drinking—this was inevitable. I believed that I had to say *yes*, to everything, to everyone.

We snuck downstairs after midnight. I lifted the key from the hook in the closet and we slipped out the garage door. The station wagon was parked outside. Sam climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. We waited a long minute for lights to come on inside the house. Nothing. She put the car in reverse and backed down the driveway. For a moment, I regretted our decision. I stared at the heavens and prayed for somebody to watch over us, but then we were speeding away and I was trying to forget all my fears.

Sam's sisters had taught her well. We drove with the music turned up and the windows rolled down. We howled along with John Cougar Mellencamp when he sang, "Come on, baby, make it hurt so good." We cruised down the country roads, heading north toward the Wisconsin border, running yellow lights and cresting hills at speeds that made my stomach flip. We drove to towns our parents avoided, went to malls, and circled the parking lots like moths to a flame. At the

McDonald's drive-in, we ordered our favorites: vanilla milkshakes and McFish sandwiches. Between bites, we sang at the top of our lungs. Music, speed, and sugar—I was so happy.

I was also scared out my mind. Leaning forward between the front seats, I laughed too loudly, I swore too hard. Sam and Wendy didn't seem nervous at all, but I figured I had more to lose than they did. They had big families and working moms. Their parents believed in mistakes. Mine didn't. I would be whipped. I would be sent to military school. For the first time in my life, I would be a genuine disappointment.

We returned home before sunrise and slipped into the silent house through the garage. I put the key on the hook and followed my friends upstairs. We collapsed on the bed and didn't speak for half an hour, waiting for a noise from downstairs, but my parents were sound asleep.

While I was stealing cars, my brother was building one.

When Will turned twelve, he and Dad began performing a script that took all of us by surprise. In this script, father and son bond over mechanical challenges. They built a hovercraft powered by the motor from a vacuum cleaner. They built an iceboat. And now, they were building a car.

These bonding experiences seemed to cause as much pain as pleasure for both of them. Dad threw wrenches.

Will got constipated. Neither of them slept well. They didn't know how to talk to each other, hadn't known for years, but Dad was trying, and that meant a lot. Dad worked so many hours and in so many countries that we only saw him on weekends. He was tired and often sick from travelling, but he dedicated his time at home to us. For years he had gone to the barn and watched my lessons. Now, he was making time for Will as well, and although my little brother missed his solitary weekends, he also felt obligated to be there in return.

I envied him. I was never invited to join them, and Mom and I weren't bonding. We had no script to follow—no car talk, no projects, no rituals. Every day I drifted further and further from my family. I felt like I had to—like this too was inevitable—but I didn't enjoy it. When I left for work, a wave of wretchedness often rose in my chest and I had to hurry away, into the crowds at the mall, or I would have turned back and reclaimed my old place alongside them.

Like stealing and dry humping, driving was so easy. Every time we got away with it, we grew bolder. We even took my dad's convertible for a ride in broad daylight with the top down. We picked up food at the drive-in and cruised around the mall, past the high school, to the bowling alley and the next town. We were thirty minutes from home when the thunder started. Twenty minutes when the first drops of rain fell. Ten minutes

when it started to pour. When we pulled into the garage, I was panicking.

"Relax," said Sam. "Find an extension cord."

She ran upstairs to my bathroom and got the blow-dryer I never used. I found an extension cord, Wendy grabbed some kitchen towels, and we started drying. We had one hour before my mom was due home, and I was convinced that if there were so much as one drop of rain on that car we would be caught. We mopped and blew and patted and rubbed until the convertible looked new. It hadn't been washed in weeks, and now it was too clean.

That close call was too close for me. I refused to take my parents' cars anymore and after just a few months of working at the mall, I quit the yogurt stand. I told my friends that the manager was a jerk, but really, though I would never have admitted it, I hated leaving my family every weekend and I didn't actually need the paychecks. That was where I differed from Sam and Wendy. If I wanted something, my parents got it for me, but they had to wait until Christmas just to get new underwear. We didn't talk about these differences and Sam didn't seem to care, but it angered Wendy, how much I had, how hard I pretended not to.

Wendy took my job and they met new boys at the food court who wanted to hook up on weekends. Wendy's mom was a night manager who collapsed into a virtual coma when she slept, so we took her car one

night and drove to the next town to meet the new boys. We listened to music and played pool, piled into the car, and drove around town. I was crammed into the back with three boys, squished against the car door, too scared and self-conscious to be much fun.

The next weekend, Sam and Wendy didn't call me.

The second month of school was torture. We had talked about our freshman year together for months, but now I was only invited along when Sam and Wendy were doing something "safe," like roller skating or making mix tapes. They whispered secrets they wouldn't share with me and laughed at jokes I didn't understand. The phone stopped ringing, the invitations ended. I was no longer one of them.

I had wanted more time with my family, and now that was all I had.

On weekends, Mom, Dad, and I ordered pizza and watched movies. I goofed around with Dad, read three or four books a week, wrote poems and stories, and tried to ignore the silence of the telephone.

When Mom asked what had happened to my friends, I gave her oblique answers. "Why not go to youth group?" she wondered. "Why not play with that nice girl down the street?" I politely ignored her. I loved my parents but they didn't know anything about being a teenager in the nineties. They'd grown up in the fifties and sixties. Dad's father hobbled together a living

from oil rigs and truck driving, so they had moved at least once a year. Dad didn't have friends and his only siblings were eleven years younger. He was a loner who loved airplanes and engines and computers, and he was happy that way. After school, Mom and her sisters sat on their front stoop in the clothes their mother made and shared a cold Coca-Cola. On weekends, they rode horses and played bridge. My parents loved us and strived for us, but when it came to adolescence, their advice had expired thirty years earlier.

Sam and Wendy's rejection cut to my core. I wanted their love and approval more than any boy's and even more than my parents'. At night, I sat in my room and wrestled with a suspicion that blocked out light and air and hope—if my friends didn't love me, then maybe I was unlovable. Maybe I deserved to be an outcast. Since our move to Illinois, I had labored to make sure I would never be the girl who spent weekends with her parents.

Now I was that girl and I didn't hate her nearly as much as I thought I would.

The hardest part about that fall was that my friends and I hadn't had a fight, so I was never sure where I stood with them. One morning, I found Sam and Wendy on my first lap around the school. They had gotten a ride from Sam's sister and now they were sitting against a locker, laughing over a note. Sam held a beautiful leather backpack in her lap.

“That’s so cool!” I said, reaching for the backpack. “Where did you get it?”

Sam pulled it out of reach and exchanged glances with Wendy. She smiled and said casually, “Oh, I just won it in a raffle at the mall. Do you like it?”

“Wow! You’re so lucky. I love it.”

After that, only Sam would talk to me, and her answers were all clipped. Wendy stared down the hallway and wore a tight little smile on her freckled face. She had a secret—she had lots of secrets—and she wasn’t going to share them with me.

They didn’t need me anymore, I didn’t know why, and I wasn’t allowed to ask. Rather than punish myself waiting by the phone, I tried to make new friends as I bounced from one group to the next. I practically threw myself at girls who didn’t have best friends, trying to win them over by sacrificing myself at their feet. One girl in particular slaughtered me daily, called me gay and rich and ugly, asked me to sit with her at lunch and then walked away, pushed me into fights in her place, ridiculed my good grades and conservative clothing. I put up with all of it, somehow certain that this was the punishment I deserved.

And then Gina transferred to our high school. Gina’s single mom worked long hours, so Gina was her own boss. We didn’t talk on the phone, we didn’t discuss our families, and she didn’t make fun of me. It was the perfect friendship. Boys liked Gina right away—she

had a smart mouth and she loved to party—and for some reason, Gina liked me.

Gina invited all the popular boys to my house to build our class’s homecoming float, and then we went to the game together, armed with silly string. It was a perfect fall day, red and yellow leaves raked into piles at the edges of the soccer fields, wispy clouds suspended at the top of a blue sky, waiting for a breeze to push them along. We sat in the middle of the stands, surrounded by the screaming, cheering, blue and gold fans, and I pumped my arms and shouted at the Patriots and cheered when our boys scored, but it was all a masquerade.

I searched for Wendy and Sam that morning. I wanted them to see me spraying silly string into the crowd, wanted them to know that the float had been built at my house, that I was more recognizable than they would ever be. But Wendy and Sam didn’t go to football games, and I kept wishing I was with them.

Gina and I took my dad’s car without permission because I liked a boy. We picked him up, drove around the subdivisions and strip malls, avoiding gas stations, restaurants, and streetlights. We didn’t want to stop. We didn’t want to be seen. In the backseat, Gina and another boy made out. In the front seat, my crush and I held hands and bragged about things we hadn’t really done.

We dropped off the boys around midnight. My parents had gone to a party in Chicago and they weren't due home for hours, but when we pulled into the driveway, their station wagon was parked outside. I went numb. There were no lights on in the house, but I was certain my parents were sitting in the dark living room, waiting to pounce on me as soon as the door opened. I backed out the driveway and drove away.

"Where are you going?" asked Gina.

"I don't know. I can't go inside."

I was thinking of Dad, how he had recently given me a lecture on swearing. He wanted me to stop saying "Geez" because really that meant "Jesus" and if you want people to respect you and if you want to show that you respect yourself, you can't swear like that. Even though this was odd coming from a man who never went to church, it wasn't obnoxious when he said it. It was sweet, fatherly in a Ward Cleaver way, earnest, sober, and naïve. I wanted to put my hands on his shoulders and tell him, *you have no idea how far I have strayed*. I didn't, of course. I promised to be careful about my language and then ran away to my bedroom.

I was running away for real now.

Gina didn't try to stop me. She had left home herself a few times. I stopped at the entrance to the subdivision and tried to pick a direction. The interstate was beckoning. I had twenty bucks, which wouldn't get us far, but I didn't care. I was terrified of going inside that

house, of confronting my father's disappointment and my mother's outrage.

But I loved my family, a love so immense it sometimes felt like a tidal wave, like the only real thing in my otherwise imaginary life.

Love has rules. I couldn't break their hearts. I couldn't just disappear.

I turned the car around, drove back through the subdivision, and parked beside my mom's station wagon. We entered through the garage door. No one was waiting in the dark for us. I hung up the key and we ran upstairs. I couldn't sleep all night, but in the morning they didn't call for me, and by lunchtime I thought they were intentionally tormenting me. I couldn't stand it anymore. I went downstairs, ready to face my parents, tell them who I was, and let them put me back on the right path. But they acted normal that day and the next. Finally, I asked a couple discreet questions and discovered that they had never noticed I was missing.

4

AWESOME IS AS AWKWARD DOES

I was five years old. Dad was home from work and I was following him around like a demented fan, gabbing about whatever had happened that day—snack time, preschool, our trip to the library. I followed him right into the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub and kept talking. I was wearing my favorite top at the time, a bright yellow T-shirt with a ladybug appliquéd over my belly. The shirt was too small, so it rode high, exposing my belly button. I was probably frowning—I already had two deep wrinkles between my eyebrows from worrying. Dad was sitting on the toilet when I said solemnly, “I love you more than Mommy.”

“Don’t say that,” he snapped.

“Sorry,” I said, staring at the floor, flooded by a sandbox shame.

“You love both of us equally, okay?”

I nodded.

In my family, it was always better to say too little than too much. Words could be embarrassing and secrets should be kept. Dad’s family took that lesson to the extreme when he was eleven years old and they sent him to live with his grandparents for two years without an explanation. When he returned home, he discovered that he had twin brothers toddling around the house. His mother had been put on bed rest, and rather than explain the delicacies of pregnancy and miscarriages to a boy, they had shipped him from Texas to New Jersey, to live with relatives he’d never met before, and for two years no one told him why.

I wouldn’t hear that story for years, but five years old was big enough to understand that love is too dangerous for words.

At the beginning of our sophomore year, Wendy and Gina moved away and Sam and I reunited. Without a word of reproach, I forgave and forgot the awkward silences and lonely weekends, desperate to have just one close friend. We ate together in the cafeteria where our revolutionary lunch ladies had installed a salad bar. Most students treated the salad bar with disdain, but Sam was trying to lose weight. Every day she bought either a small salad or a lollipop and nothing else. Not eating was a game, a demonstration of self-control.

According to Sam, the fat girls could lose weight if only they really tried. In nine months, she had shrunk from a size 4 to a 0.

Meanwhile, I was expanding, from a 6 to an 8 and finally, a week before my sixteenth birthday, a 10. I was in double digits, and I felt enormous next to my friend. I had learned to hate my stomach, my thighs, my butt, everything except my breasts, which everyone else seemed to appreciate. Unlike Sam, I was incapable of turning down meals, so I spent half an hour on my mom's treadmill every night to control my wayward body.

Every trip across the cafeteria became a performance. Is anyone looking? Is my hair okay? Is my butt all crunched up? Is my tummy sucked in? I tried not to leave the table before the bell rang, but Sam floated effortlessly back and forth across the room for more water or napkins or crackers, any excuse she could devise.

Scott met me at my locker between periods. He held both of our textbooks and tried to look cool, but Scott was only at ease on the soccer field. I asked about his classes, tried to be light and pretty and funny, the way girls are supposed to be, but I was unexpectedly sarcastic, and then clumsy, and then confused by the way my stomach dropped when he got close to me. I was in love with Scott's body, toned and tanned from years of soccer practice. It seemed like a man's body to me, a

separate thing entirely from his boy's face with its terrible acne.

Scott held my hand as we walked to French class, jostling through the crowds, leaning into each other.

"What a perv," muttered Scott.

"Huh?" I looked around, confused.

Scott pointed his chin towards the gym teacher's wide back and said, "That jerk was checking you out."

I didn't know what to say. It was old news. He'd been watching my breasts like a basketball referee since they exploded into C cups freshman year.

Outside of the classroom, I leaned against the wall for moral support while Scott kissed me quickly. The French teacher called out, "Depêche-toi. La classe commence."

Sam sat behind me in class and whispered in her smuttiest French accent, "Oh Scott, voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?"

Sam and I were counting down the days until my sixteenth birthday.

Scott lived in a bi-level, so his front door opened onto a landing. Stairs went up and stairs went down, and every time I entered the house I felt like I'd surprised it in the middle of a decision. Scott's mom and older brother lived there too, but I rarely saw them. We always went straight to his room, which was almost filled by a bed and TV stand. His walls were covered with

soccer paraphernalia and a poster of the Swedish Bikini Team, but it felt spartan. We were not allowed to close the door, so we made out in mad frantic spurts on top of his navy blue comforter, listening for his mother and brother's footsteps. At the last second, we would pull apart and pretend to watch TV, even though we were panting and sweaty from the effort of dry humping. Scott's brother liked to sneak up on us. Sometimes, we caught him watching through the open door, and he walked away as if nothing had happened.

I pulled a two-page advertisement out of the Sunday paper and thumbtacked it to my bedroom wall. It was a glossy black and white photo of a man standing behind a woman, their arms tangled in an embrace, sprinkled with water and sand. The photo framed their torsos, cutting off their heads and legs. I imagined they had just emerged from the ocean and were standing on the beach watching the tide come in. I painted her nails fire engine red, claiming them as my own.

The photo spoke to me not just of intimacy or romance, but of communion, as if the body and soul could become sustenance. It was a glamorous idea, but at fifteen, I knew it was a fairy tale, as unattainable for now as Prince Charming and fairy godmothers. If my heart wanted true love, my brain knew I wouldn't have it for years. My boyfriend Scott was a Good Guy, but I was not in love with him, and I didn't want to be.

I couldn't have love, but I could have sex. I had decided that my body didn't belong to my parents, to God, or to some future mate. In the newspaper, I read about purity balls where daughters made virginity pledges to their fathers and their fathers promised in return to protect their innocence. Dad would have been as horrified as I was by the idea of a purity ball, though for different reasons. I wasn't pure in mind or body—I didn't know any girls my age who were. More importantly, my body was mine to do with as I wanted. I did not control where I lived or went to school, when my days began or ended, but in this one thing—my body—I was autonomous. In martial arts and riding lessons, I had learned to follow my instincts and trust my body, and I was going to do just that. In the weeks before my sixteenth birthday, I became a missile, advancing on my target with cold precision.

Dad and I were running errands together on a Sunday afternoon. I loved driving around the suburbs with Dad, even if we were just going to the hardware store or the car wash. We cracked silly jokes and talked about horses, cars, and action movies.

Annoyed by an intense ache in my lower legs, I mentioned I had growing pains.

Dad looked terrified. "Do you want to talk about it?" he asked seriously. For the first time in our relationship, Dad was asking about my adolescence.

CHANGE THE SUBJECT! I thought. *RUN FOR COVER!*

“I mean my legs hurt. I’m growing and my shins are killing me.”

Dad looked relieved. “You must need calcium. You should drink more milk.”

“Good idea.”

For the millionth time I felt like the five-year-old in the bathroom who had just learned that she must not reveal her feelings. Our relationship was based on equal parts adoration and omission. I couldn’t tell Mom or Dad that I was ready for sex. Either they didn’t see my body changing, or they weren’t ready to deal with the implications. When I had my first period at thirteen, Mom gave me a box of raft-like pads and we never talked about it again. We achieved a non-ritual. A passage without the rite.

In Sam’s family, everyone talked about periods and pills, even her stepfather. In my family, nobody said a word. It was as if my torso did not exist. Since my first period, the only conversation Mom and I had had about my sexuality was an awkward exchange about birth control in which we both acknowledged that it existed, but we didn’t discuss when I would need it or how I could get it. If I told her I wanted to have sex she would probably tell me to wait, but I was done with waiting, and she wasn’t ready to hear that. If I could just keep

quiet, I could do all my growing up without hurting them.

On my birthday, Scott bought a dozen red roses and took me out for dinner. Then we went back to his bedroom and made out while pretending to watch a sitcom. After fifteen minutes, I was dying to take off my clothes. I whispered in his ear, “Do you want to have sex?”

He froze, wondering if he heard me right, wondering what he could say that wouldn’t upset me if he’d heard wrong. Finally, he managed a weak, “Do you?”

“Yes. Let’s try it.” I started to unzip his pants but he stopped me.

“Not here. My mom.”

He rushed from the room and quickly returned with her car keys. “I told her we’re going to Dairy Queen,” he said as he pulled a string of condoms out of his underwear drawer and shoved them into his back pocket.

His mom’s car was an old station wagon with a rust-colored interior. We drove around for fifteen minutes while dusk turned to night, looking for a place to pull over. Finally, we found a cul-de-sac near the highway with no houses on it. Scott parked and put the backseat down and spread out a towel.

Quickly, clumsily, we took off our clothes, trying to kiss each other at the same time, trying to be as affectionate as we were eager. I’d never seen him naked

before and I was shocked by the presence of his body, whole for the first time. Scott slipped on a condom (he'd been practicing) and rolled on top of me. *Let's do this*, I thought, but I was no longer excited. I was nervous. There was no going back now.

Scott spread my legs and lined his penis up with my vagina, and I tried desperately to relax. When he entered me, I was wet but so nervous that my muscles clenched and the pain was searing. Scott grunted and pumped while I closed my eyes and thought *it'll be better next time*. My head was banging against the front seat, so I tried to tilt it to the side.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, keep going."

He finished quickly with a little cry and then collapsed on top of me. I wanted to hug him, but I wasn't sure that was the right thing to do. He seemed so remote. After a few minutes, he slid off me, holding the top of the condom. I was wet and burning and cold. The windows had steamed up and every ten or twenty seconds the headlights of a passing truck grazed the station wagon. It wasn't pretty. I hadn't expected it to be pretty. But I also hadn't expected it to be so plain.

Scott held my hand, "Are you okay?" he asked again.

"Yes."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Yes."

"It'll be better next time. I promise."

"I know." I cut him off, annoyed by his need to reassure me. I didn't care if it hurt. I didn't care if it I didn't enjoy it. I was just relieved. "Was it good for you?"

"It was awesome."

"Let's go. We have school in the morning."

I hadn't hit my target. I thought I was aiming at the loss of virginity, but that was just a technicality. The true target was pleasure. After my birthday, I only went to Scott's house when his mother and brother were at work. We had sex in his bedroom with the door open and the TV off. We were as loud as we wanted to be. I tried to become one of the women in my fantasies, lusty, enthusiastic, uninhibited, but sometimes when I was on top of Scott, I felt horribly confused. The orgasms that were so easy to find on my own were light years away from his bedroom. One afternoon, I stopped mid thrust, slipped off him and walked down the hall and into the kitchen where I stood naked by the sink and drank a glass of cold water. When I returned, the condom was gone.

"What happened?" he asked. "Is something wrong?"

It wasn't possible to tell him about how I touched myself when I was alone, so I just shrugged and said I was thirsty.

On another afternoon, Scott asked if I wanted to see something new. He led me into his brother's bedroom and shoved clothes and magazines off the bed so

we could sit down. The TV was just a few feet away. He turned it on and hit play on the VCR, and the screen filled with a man and woman having anal sex. The man pumped back and forth violently, and the woman screamed and grunted, her body trying to absorb his force, her balloon breasts bouncing from side to side. For a few seconds I was mesmerized, and then revulsion won and I bolted from the room.

I was so confused. I had fantasized about anal sex, but I'd never seen it, and now that I had, I was horrified. I couldn't tell my sweet, soccer-playing boyfriend about the cast of men and women inside my head. Even worse, I didn't want to know who lived inside his. Scott apologized profusely, and I pretended it wasn't a big deal. The only defense mechanism I had was denial.

After Junior Prom, I decided that I was bored and I didn't want to share any more of myself with Scott, so I went to his house and broke up with him in the driveway. He cried and asked why. I was embarrassed by his tears, which were so feminine and vulnerable. *You've never known me*, I thought. *You have no idea who I am*. I realized the whole soccer team would call me a slut, and I was thrilled by the prospect.

I was sixteen, I was not a virgin, I was single, and I had a driver's license. It was going to be the perfect summer. Sam and I went to work, strutted around the mall, cruised around town at night, and snuck out to dance

clubs in the western suburbs where we could bump and grind with white boys, black boys, Latin boys, until we were soaked in sweat, drunk on our youth, ecstatic, and untouchable.

We felt invincible. The boys around us were so spectral they could have been figments of our imagination. We were in love only with ourselves and our bodies.

Too quickly, the summer ended, our junior year began, and it was even more boring than the last. Classes were long and monotonous, punctuated by neither learning nor happiness. Many of our classmates were drinking and drugging, not just pot but also cocaine, Special K, Ecstasy, whatever they could get their hands on to make this no man's land of adolescence bearable. The only drugs Sam and I would touch were dating, dancing, and sex. We thought our refusal to get high or stoned would somehow protect us.

"How do you like your men?" asked Deon.

"Tall, dark, and handsome," I said and we both giggled over my cleverness.

Deon wasn't just dark, he was coal black, six feet tall, lean, and handsome except for the scars that dimpled his high cheekbones. He was a senior, but he looked much older, and he was a charmer. He could *yes ma'am* and *no sir* his way out of trouble and whisper his way into girls' hearts.

Deon was a player. When we started seeing each other near the end of my junior year, I was positive he was with other girls, but I didn't care. I was dying for something, anything, to happen. Scott had dated me sweetly, tenderly, like the good boy in a romantic comedy, the fellow who is neither too handsome nor too smooth. Deon was the anti-Scott. He wanted to seduce me, and I wanted him to succeed. With every late-night phone call and invitation to a motel party on the wrong side of town and suggestion that he wanted to do things to me that I couldn't even imagine, he drew closer to his goal.

When no one was home, I took Deon on a trail ride around our subdivision. I sat behind him in the saddle, my arms wrapped around him so I could hold the reins, so proud that we were defying the color lines. This was as close as we would get to intimacy. We carefully kept our real lives and emotions out of sight, reducing each other to our most basic traits: man/woman, black/white, poor/rich.

On the first day of summer, I met Deon for breakfast at Denny's, and when I walked through the door, he stood and clapped as if Princess Diana had arrived. The old men and truckers joined in. I blushed from my face to my underwear, but I felt sexy if not beautiful. Afterwards, we went to his house and tried everything but intercourse. At seventeen, I was learning about

foreplay, learning that anticipation could be more enjoyable than penetration. Twice, I almost let him enter me and then changed my mind because he didn't have any condoms.

Later, we were sitting on the sofa when he held a ruler between his legs and wondered how a girl could take a 12-inch cock. I noted where the ruler hit his thigh—it was not much longer than his own penis. It made me afraid of him, and that made me want him more. My life was beige and white but I had this notion that a little jeopardy would turn it neon. After a few weeks of flirting, we had sex. It was rough, hungry, loud, fast. He was in charge. Above me, behind me, but never underneath me. I felt like the woman in Scott's porn, grunting, straining, submissive. I couldn't come—the sensations were too intense, and I recoiled from the loss of control. Deon didn't notice. He always wanted more.

The seduction was over. Now, we were just trying to consume each other, as quickly and completely as possible.

Mom and I were driving to a horse show in Indiana. She tuned the radio to a Mexican station so she could work on her Spanish skills. I hated the corny deejays and endless love songs, but at least the mariachi music was too loud for conversation. When Mom and I talked it was about school or horses, but lately all I could think

about was boys and sex. We often drove for hours with barely a word for each other, lost in our private selves.

Mom was pumping gas when I realized that far too many days had passed since my last period. When she got back into the car, I was so pale she asked if I was feeling okay.

“A little carsick,” I said.

I had always used condoms. Always. But maybe one broke and he didn’t tell me, or maybe he had slipped it off, since he didn’t want to use them anyway. Or maybe it had happened during foreplay. I’d heard about pre-cum and had scoffed at the idea, convinced it was one more way of scaring girls into keeping their chastity belts locked tight.

This is not fair, I wanted to shout, I was careful!

Instead, I kept my lips sealed. I had to hold it together at the horse show. For two weeks, I did everything I could not to think about the future. I was the perfect helper, grooming, feeding, watering, polishing boots, and cleaning tack. With every sweep of the broom or swipe of the sponge, I tried to erase the possibility that my afterschool activities with Deon could intersect with the rest of my life.

Sam waited in the hallway while I peed on a stick. Almost instantly, the blue cross appeared. Sam screamed and cried, but I couldn’t. I had been silent for two weeks already, so it was easier to stay mute than

to protest. There were so many decisions to make. Sam wanted to help me raise a little boy. She said we could get an apartment together. We could get work schedules that would let us take turns babysitting. She would be my Lamaze partner. We’d shop for baby clothes at Salvation Army and save money for a crib and stroller.

I wanted to believe in this fantasy of friendship and motherhood, but I knew how easy it is to make promises, and how hard it is to keep them. This would be my baby, not hers, forever and ever. Was that what I wanted?

I went to Planned Parenthood and they confirmed the pregnancy. I had only seen my mom’s gynecologist before, an old man who interrogated me about my sexual activities, frowning down at the girl in the paper gown like she was just a teenage fuck up. I expected the same treatment at the clinic, but they touched me gently, spoke respectfully. When they gave me information about my choices and their time frames, their calm helped convince me that the world was not ending.

Deon wouldn’t return my phone calls, so I drove to his house on a Saturday morning. His stepfather answered the door and frowned. He’d never seen me before, but a white girl knocking on his door before breakfast couldn’t be a good thing. Deon came outside in sweatpants and shut the door behind him.

“What do you want?” he asked impatiently, folding his arms across his bare chest.

“We have to talk.”

“Yeah, this thing with us isn’t working anymore.” He smiled, prepared to be charming and evasive. “I don’t think I’m what you need—”

“I’m pregnant.”

For the first time since we’d met, Deon was speechless. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me away from the house and down the driveway. He looked at me like I was the fallen woman in a soap opera, the one who dissolves into tears when she doesn’t get her way, who screams like a child and throws vases at her life. I would show him I was not that woman.

“What do you want me to do about it?” he asked.

“It’s yours.”

“We used condoms.”

“I know. It’s definitely yours.”

“Are you getting an abortion?”

“Is that what you want me to do?”

He looked away and said, “I’m going to Arkansas for a few months.”

“How convenient.”

We were both quiet. Deon took a step toward me and I slid out of his reach. I would not let him touch me again. I wanted to feel nothing towards him, no connection, no need.

“When are you getting back?” I asked.

He shrugged. He was probably in some kind of trouble with his stepfather or the police.

“That’s it then? You don’t want any part of this?”

“I can’t help you,” he said.

I turned to go. For the first time in weeks, I felt calm. He didn’t want to be involved and he didn’t care what I did. I realized that raising a child with Deon was the nightmare I’d been trying not to have.

“I’ll call you when I get back,” he said.

“Don’t bother.”

5

GIRL

With Deon out of the picture, I felt free to start thinking about my options.

In 1994, there were no reality shows about teen pregnancy. Everything I knew about it came from school (where pregnant girls disappeared as soon as their bellies were big) and work (where the teen moms were tired, confused, and frequently fired). To be sixteen and pregnant wasn't glamorous, it was shameful, the surest of exiles.

I did not want to be pregnant, and I was not ready to be a mother.

The pro-life movement was everywhere with their posters of aborted fetuses, tiny skulls, broken limbs, images that were supposed to make me abhor the thought of an abortion. But I thought the tiny bundle of cells

Girl

growing inside me was not a person, not yet. There were too many maybes between that blue cross and the delivery room. I dared to think that my future was more important than the unrealized one of the baby I *might* give birth to.

My life was worth a fight.

I remember white tiles, the tumble of nurses' voices, the quicksand of unconsciousness. In the recovery room, there was a middle-aged woman with a business suit on a hangar and a briefcase next to her bed. The nurse warned her that it would be unhealthy to have any more abortions. She caught my eye and then looked away. There were other women too, hidden behind curtains and whispers.

I am one of them, I thought.

I considered all of my mistakes—shoplifting, driving illegally, dating bad boys, getting pregnant. I felt shame for violating my parents' trust and for being less intelligent and responsible than they had raised me to be.

But I didn't feel shame for this choice, or regret.

I felt only relief, the rising tide of my life carrying me forward into a future I had not ruined. For the first time, I understood that my actions really did have consequences. I was not invincible. My youth was finite and disposable. I had been lucky so far, but luck runs out. From now on, I would be smarter and I would not

SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE

have sex again until I was old enough to deal with the consequences.

I never talked about the abortion.

I couldn't tell my brother. He was too young to carry that secret.

My parents couldn't know. I had to protect them and their love for me. I would need it to move forward.

I considered confiding in my sister. She was an adult now and her hostility had transformed into concern. When she called home, we often chatted on the phone for a few minutes. She warned me away from drinking and acting like an idiot. I was beginning to look up to her, to admire her as a woman. And yet, I was too embarrassed and unsure to reach out to her.

More than ever before, my family resembled a solar system, an assortment of planets locked into distinct orbits. The pull of gravity and the vacuum of space made it impossible for sounds to travel from one planet to the next.

Instead of talking, I holed up in my room to write short stories and poems. In "Girl," I wondered about the person I would become. As if casting a spell, I pictured myself doing humanitarian work, flying airplanes, traveling, learning languages, writing books, and growing old. Most surprising perhaps, I pictured myself as a mother and a grandmother.

6

JUMP

For the rest of the summer and my senior year, I spent all my free time at the barn, drawn more than ever to my trainer. Adina was a lion. She had a tremendous mane of thick blonde hair that she kept pulled back in a braid as thick as my wrist. She wore conservative clothes—collared shirts, cabled sweaters, ironed jeans—and only on the hottest summer days would she trade her starched button-up for a T-shirt. She lifted weights every morning and was built like a boxer, but she rode with grace and daring.

Her barn was full of girls and women who were looking to be pushed, and she seemed to understand each of us and our horses. Mine was a young thoroughbred we called Cartoon, a fast, light, wild-eyed gelding that Adina had found at the racetrack. I had always

had big, slow horses, as calm and implacable as mountains. Cartoon was more like a tornado, squirrely, easily distracted, frightened by his own shadow. Instead of riding a mountain, I had to be a mountain, steady and certain. When I rode him well, he could fly, and Adina had promised me that if I worked hard enough we'd enter a Grand Prix some day.

At home, I recorded Adina's maxims on a poster in my bedroom.

Ride with your body, your mind, and your heart; all three must be brave.

Never take a jump for granted.

Nothing can be accomplished without courage, desire, and hard work.

A good rider knows when she's right.

Ride up—you are strong enough.

With Cartoon, she was teaching me about heart, faith, style, and strength. She was teaching me how to be human, and in the process, she may have saved me.

Adina was the first lesbian I ever knew. My friends and I had been joking about dykes since junior high, but women who love other women seemed more like folklore than reality. When I started riding with Adina I knew she was masculine, but it took me years to recognize her sexuality. Rachel finally made me see it. Rachel was a student who floated in and out of the barn at the whim of her divorced parents and boarding school

schedules. She had long, curly hair, perfect clothes, and lots of freckles. One day she showed up with a new nose because her old one was "too Jewish."

We were gossiping about the barn when she said, "Can you believe Leah and Adina *do it*? Gross!"

I was floored. Leah was the other trainer at the barn, and I knew she and Adina were close, but no one ever talked about it.

"Yeah. Gross. Like how long have they been a couple do you think?"

"Just a year. Leah was straight before. I think she'll go back to dick one of these days."

"How do you know?"

"She's not really a lesbian. She's just trying it out."

"Ewww!" I pretended to dry heave with disgust, but I was so embarrassed, for Adina and for myself. How had I not known? It wasn't just that I was naïve. Adina was a master at concealing her private life. She was never physically affectionate with Leah, and she never talked about her life outside the barn around clients. On the hunter-jumper circuit, nobody rode side-saddle anymore, but those days weren't too far in the past. In that environment, Adina couldn't be open or outspoken.

After the conversation with Rachel, I couldn't stop seeing Adina's sexuality and trying not to wonder about it. There was a small mirror in the tack room so riders could check hairnets and straighten collars before

competing. I saw Adina in front of that mirror one morning. She was brushing out her golden mane and for a moment, she was gorgeous, bold, and feminine, and then she lashed her hair down in its stern braid.

Afterwards, every time I looked in that mirror, I wanted it to tell me who I really was.

That winter, Adina hosted a George Morris Clinic at her barn. George Morris is a legend in the hunter-jumper world. Riding for George Morris is like playing soccer with Pelé or writing a poem with Frost. The year before, I had watched from the sidelines as George berated one of Adina's students for riding like a sack of meal and kicked another girl out of the clinic for being lazy with her talent. George had a famous temper. He seemed to think that most riders were dolts and his job was to give them opportunities to prove otherwise.

There were about ten of us, and we spent four hours on horseback for three days in a row with a gallery full of parents and students watching. The arena was not large, so George set up jumps and tricky combinations just a stride or two out of the corner, and we bunched up in a line at the other end of the arena, waiting nervously for our turn. There was no small talk among the riders. We were all eyes and ears, critiquing the ones ahead of us, combing everything George said for clues to success.

The first day he separated the weak from the strong with small jumps and equitation exercises. The second day, he raised the stakes and the jumps, and a few girls buckled.

I rode my brains out.

Adina found me in the stables afterwards, clapped me on the back, and said, "Don't let it get to your head. You're not done yet."

On the last day, George set up the nastiest obstacle I had ever seen. He took our rolltop, a solid 3-foot wide monster of plywood and fake grass, put a pole over it, and a water obstacle in front of it, and pointed the whole contraption at the corner where the spectators sat. A horse approaching that jump was thinking of three things—the water, the rolltop, and the crowd—which is three too many. To get over that jump, the horse would have to trust his rider absolutely. He'd have to let his rider think for him and the rider would have to trust her horse's commitment and her own judgment.

The first three girls couldn't do it. Their horses refused, and one of them nearly broke her neck in a nasty fall.

In the corner, I gathered Cartoon's stride and impulsion, waited as we came out of the turn for the inside distance, and then rode straight and hard for the rolltop. Cartoon had hated water obstacles just months before, but that day he didn't care about the water or the spectators who watched openmouthed as we soared

over the jump, took one stride, and then turned to avoid them. He only cared about me, my hands, legs, and confidence saying he could do it.

Twelve years of training for that small victory, for confirmation that I was so much more than a teenage fuck up.

I first wondered what life outside the barn might be like for Adina when we were in her car on our way to a horse show. Adina had figured out that I rode my best when I was tired, so she made me rise before dawn and go to the barn with her to help the grooms prep for the day. I watched the streetlights and gas stations flash by while she tuned the radio to a country station. There was a parade of songs about good ole American values—straight marriages, hometowns in the heartland, raising your kids to do right, loving and serving the country—and Adina knew the words to every one of them.

It was too disturbing to laugh. She was conservative, but that vision of life belonged to straight people, and even I could see that there was no room in their dreams for women who don't desire men. If she had been listening to this music her whole life, how did she ever manage to come out of the closet? Once she came out, how could she stand to keep listening?

There were so many questions I wanted to ask her, but I had learned that silence is the truest gesture of love and respect.

The last month of high school dragged on with only two highlights: the Senior Section of our school newspaper and the yearbook.

I saved the Senior Section every year. It was full of inside jokes and rips on the school and the teachers. There was the fill-in-the-blank section:

I'll miss the chocolate milk because it blended so well against the yellow walls.

I'll miss the movie we watched in Health class because I learned about Shankers.

I'll miss the P.E. swimsuits because they're the only suits that grow four sizes in the water.

There was also the awards page: Best Dressed, Class Clown, Teacher's Pet, Most Likely to be a Millionaire, Future Host of *Saturday Night Live*.

The Senior Section felt like high school porn to me. As a freshman, I thought I might become a member of that community. By senior year, I knew how unlikely that was. So I was very surprised when one of the newspaper staffers called to set up a photo shoot.

My award? "Biggest B.S.er."

"What does that mean?" I asked Sam. She shrugged and dipped her breadstick in the marinara sauce. We were at Pizza Hut, our favorite Friday night hangout.

“Well, you’re always making stuff up.”

“Like what?”

“Like that thing about dogs being allergic to chocolate.”

“But that’s true! And that was three years ago! Is that my defining moment?”

“It sounds like you made it up. And the lit mag published all those poems and stories you wrote. It’s weird.”

I licked my finger and shoved it into the hill of Parmesan cheese on my plate. “Fuck them,” I said. “They don’t know me.”

I paid for an ad in the yearbook and put a farewell note to Sam in there.

Through all the names, all the rhythms, all the sticky (you know!) situations—you’ve been there. We’ve gone from Troopies, to soul sisters, and now we share cereal bowls! So my heart is yours, these hands are for you, and this shared smile will last for a lifetime. Promise me you’ll never forget to wake up and dream. To: Troopie dust, photo booths, breadsticks, ragtimes, “Brown Eyed Girl,” cruising hours, languages, pinky swears, daboots, voulez-vous’s, and Anne. See you in Paris.

When Sam’s sisters read it, they cracked up and said, “Now everyone will *know* you’re gay.”

It was my last summer at home. In August, I would attend orientation at the University of Virginia. All my riding dreams had to be squeezed into a couple months. Adina had finally said I could go to Calgary, my first and last international show. To get me ready, she built one monstrous jump after another in the outdoor arena. These were Grand Prix jumps, as high and as wide as 6’6”, with lots of room for neck-breaking errors.

One day, when I was struggling to find the precision and control those jumps required, Adina walked up to Cartoon, took hold of the reins, and squinted up at me.

“You’re a doubter,” she said. “You need to have a core of self-confidence that is unshakeable, that cannot be taken away from you, not just for this—” she waved her arm at the arena, taking it in but also dismissing it—“but for life.”

She meant that I doubted myself, my horse, my decisions, my authority figures, and just about everyone and everything, and she was right. I didn’t want to be a doubter anymore. I wanted to discover the antidote to doubt.

SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE

At the frat house, a brother beamed his flashlight in our faces, considered our potential, and then waved us inside. I followed my suitemates, Jess and Jill, into a dark hallway where we pushed through a crowd of warm bodies to reach the keg. Another brother handed us plastic cups of beer and we pushed through more bodies to reach a large room where girls with long hair danced to a soundtrack of Dave Matthews and The Allman Brothers. Pledges watched the flock from the margins of the room, hungry and hesitant. Now and then, upperclassmen culled some first-year girls and led them upstairs. My friends wondered why some of us were picked and others weren't. I wondered how in the world I had ended up at The University of Virginia.

The Insider's Guide to Colleges was my best friend during my senior year. We went to the bathroom together, we ate meals together, we slept together. I read every profile like a horoscope, trying to find my future in descriptions of class size, party life, and hip professors. Was I a small school or a big school? Urban or rural? State or private? Big 10 or liberal arts? I was so eager to reinvent myself that the answers changed every day. Ultimately, I picked Virginia, a school that had a riding team and earned my sister's stamp of approval.

During orientation, we were instructed to call it The University, as if there were no other. We toured The Rotunda. We walked across The Lawn. We signed The University Roll and joined The Community of Trust. We were supposed to understand that we were lucky, chosen, honored, and honorable, but I suspected otherwise when Greek Week started and I stood outside my dorm and watched the stream of boys and girls heading for the fraternities and sororities that lined Rugby Road. The girls wore J. Crew dresses, tasteful heels, and pearls, and they carried tiny purses just big enough to hold their room keys and lipstick. The boys wore polos, flip-flops, and khakis frayed to perfection. They spit into obligatory dip cups and peered out from under their caps with weary eyes.

The girls in my suite wouldn't admit to wanting to join a sorority, but they all said that "rush is a great way to meet people." On Rugby Road, they spent twenty

minutes at a house meeting the sisters, exclaiming over small coincidences and swapping bite-sized hopes and fears, and then they were shepherded to the next house, until every pack of girls had made a complete circuit of U.Va.'s finest. My friends weren't just taking a tour—they were on tour. After they left, the sisters took notes on who had dazzled and who had disappointed.

This was a horrible way to meet people.

After Greek Week, the girls in my dorm split into those who had been invited to pledge, and those who hadn't. We all headed to Rugby Road on Friday nights, but the pledges went to a Rugby Road of sisters, slumber parties, and formal dances, while the rest of us got no further than the basements and backyards of frat houses.

I chugged my beer with Jess and Jill, descending into a warm buzz from which the party seemed safe and benevolent. I knew the boys we admired would never notice us. We were invisible, and for once invisibility was a superpower. If everything went well, we would stumble home together, order a pizza, and pledge our hearts to the men in the J. Crew catalog.

But I hadn't gone to college to get drunk and moon after boys who couldn't see me.

Why had I gone to college?

It was Thanksgiving Day. The campus was empty except for hard-working graduate students

and self-appointed loners. I stood on the steps of The Rotunda, looking out over The Lawn and The Colonnades where The University's most accomplished fourth years were invited to reside.

I didn't think I was going to make it to my fourth year. The riding team had been a bust and I'd quit going to practice after the first show. Except for creative writing, classes were dull. Most importantly, although I had made many friends in my dorm, I didn't feel any more authentic in those relationships than I had in high school, especially when I tagged along to one frat party after another. Mom and Dad had sent me to college with one piece of advice: Work hard and do well. That was easy. The challenge was making it matter.

The Rotunda steps glowed in the moonlight and the stars above shimmered with the promise of other worlds. I decided I'd finish the school year and then leave. I could take classes at home, or work my way around the country. I didn't have to stay at The University—there were other options, something somewhere would be right for me.

I ducked behind one of The Rotunda's columns, peeled off all my clothes, and rushed down the stairs and across the cool, wet grass to the statue of Homer. In keeping with tradition, I politely kissed his ass and then sauntered back up The Lawn, enjoying the sway of my breasts, the chill in the air, and the promise I'd made to myself.

I was trying to squeeze my head between two girls' thighs when they leaned forward and I looked up in time to see a big girl snarling at me. My running shoes slipped in the mud and I fell, pulling my teammates down with me. The other team won the ball and their backs ran away with it. I untangled myself and followed them, woozy with the violence and intimacy of the scrum, hurling myself at every girl who crossed my path. My ears were covered in athletic tape so I didn't hear the other team shouting obscenities at me. There aren't many rules in rugby, but my coach had forgotten to mention the most important one—you can only tackle the ball carrier. After eighty minutes of tackling, sprinting, and screaming, I felt alive for the first time since I'd arrived at college, and I stopped planning my escape.

I had tagged along to rugby practice with a guy friend on a whim, and I'd fallen in love with the tackling drills, the sprints, the mud, the bruises, and the parties. Every weekend, we joined the men's team for keg stands, beer bongs, and, oddly enough, singing. The singing went on for hours. We stood in a big circle and the men led us through "I Used to Work in Chicago," "Yo-Ho," "The S&M Man," and "Monday's a Working Day." Everybody sang the chorus and then individuals volunteered for the call-outs by holding a beer cup to their shoulders. A song like "I Put My Hand Upon

Her Toe" could last for half an hour. It started with a rucker meeting a whore in the park and touching her on the foot:

I put my hand upon her toe

Yo-ho, yo-ho

I put my hand upon her toe

Yo-ho, yo-ho

I put my hand upon her toe,

she said hey rucker you're way too low.

Get in, Get out, quit fuckin' about

Yo-ho, yo-ho, yo-ho.

The song works its way from the whore's appendages to her orifices (*I put my dick into her mouth / She said mmm, mbmh, mbmbm*) until finally the whore dies (probably from an STD) and even then the rucker still isn't done with her (*I dig her up every now and then / She did me before she'll do me again / Yo-ho, yo-ho, yo-ho*).

It was the dirtiest, most misogynistic stuff I had ever heard, but at least it was out in the open. At the frat houses, the misogyny was less visible but just as present. I often heard it in a brother's drawl, or caught a whiff of it when a girl disappeared upstairs with a shaggy-headed fourth year, but no one talked about it, no one acknowledged that women were merely a means to an end. At that first rugby party, I thought I had found my own secret society, one that accepted women and men as equals.

That spring, my sister Kate got married. I was flattered when she asked me to be her maid of honor. Once we were no longer under the same roof, Kate and I began to treat each other with respect. She'd helped me get a job over winter break, she took me shopping, and we even talked a little bit about dating. It was slow and stumbling work, but we were beginning to be real sisters.

At her wedding, I wore a lavender silk pantsuit and makeup. It was the closest I could get to girly-girl, unlike Kate's college friends, a collection of southern women, grown-up versions of the sorority sisters on campus.

Before the wedding, I asked Kate how she'd known that her husband Joe was the one. She looked me in the eyes and said, "Because he has a good heart."

I didn't believe it could be that easy.

My roommates occasionally asked questions about rugby and my teammates. *Did they have boyfriends? Were they all lesbians? Did they hate men? Did they hit on me?* These questions made me uncomfortable because they led one after another to a question I wasn't ready to consider: *Was I going to become a lesbian?*

I knew that rugby players had a reputation for being gay, but I was adamant that playing rugby didn't make me gay, anymore than playing chess made you smart or basketball made you tall. I insisted that sexuality had nothing to do with rugby or the decision to play rugby.

And yet, I knew exactly which of my teammates were gay, and which were not, and I knew that those two groups mostly didn't mix off the field. They treated each other as if they were contagious, but as a rookie, I could move freely between the groups, and I could pretend for now that I belonged to both.

When my roommates asked too many questions, I made a point of going to Rugby Road with them and pretending to drool over frat boys. I no longer wanted those boys, not because I was a lesbian but because I was tired of being so very straight.

When I returned to The University for my second year, our coach had quit and a bunch of fourth years had graduated. Our small and scrappy team was even smaller and scrappier than before. We showed up for our first game at Virginia Tech with barely a full side and jerseys that hadn't been washed in three months. Tech grimaced when we walked onto the field caked in last year's mud and sweat. We played two games back-to-back, running, tackling, and screaming like madwomen for 160 minutes. We swapped inhalers and popped ibuprofen and we lost. That's how it went every weekend. We left everything we had on the field and still walked away defeated.

We were losers, but that didn't stop us from recruiting new players. That spring, we had an impressive line-up of characters on our roster.

Tigger was a five-foot-tall tornado who had recently quit the diving team. Before her first rugby practice, she had never, ever caught a ball. I knew her for a year before I heard her talk about anything other than sex and rugby.

Rutro was a former track star who moved like a mountain lion. The first time she tackled me, I saw a flash of blonde hair out of the corner of my eye, and then I was flat on my back and seeing stars. Rutro stood over me, laughing, and said, "Rutro!"

Ace was quiet and reserved, but she always had a drop-dead sexy girlfriend. She was also obsessive about personal hygiene. No matter how muddy the field, she walked away from the game spotless, until we started dropping her in mud puddles.

Heidi was a tall, striking, giggling girl who belonged to a sorority before joining the team. She talked about fish and boys incessantly, and when she found out I might take her position in the scrum she became my lifting partner.

Gloria was out and proud. She had a big, slow smile, and she spoke in a lazy way that suggested she was either awed by the beauty of the universe or had just woken up from a nap.

My nickname was Flash, not because I was fast (I wasn't) but because my clothes had a habit of coming off at parties. Partially dressed, I liked to stand on tables and perform the I-Wanna-Have-Sex Dance, a

combination of judo chops, face contortions, and pelvic thrusts. I was finally able to be a total goofball without worrying about what my friends would think.

Gloria was our captain and I was the co-captain. We spent a lot of time together, strategizing about positions and plays a bit, but mostly talking about the beauty and intelligence of our teammates. I had a crush on all of them, and so did she.

One night, I stayed at Gloria's house so I wouldn't have to drive home drunk. I wasn't attracted to Gloria, but I hoped she would roll over and put her arm around me. I blushed as I thought about Gloria's favorite artist, Ani DiFranco, singing *both hands, now use both hands*. I wanted her to show me how girls touch each other. When we lay down for the night, I was almost sure she would, but in the morning, I was still wondering what it would be like to use both hands.

We ended the year without winning a single game, but that summer we got an email from an alumna named Nancy who was moving back to Charlottesville and wanted to know if we needed a coach. I tried not to get too excited. Our last two coaches had flaked out. She might be as ill-equipped as they were for dedicating all her time to a team full of misfits.

Nancy observed our first fall practice. She was a middle-aged dyke with short blond hair and wire rim glasses. At just over five feet tall, with a decent amount

of padding around her middle, she did not look particularly athletic, an impression that was reinforced by her T-shirt. It had a picture of a snail carrying a ball above the words: *We may be small but we're slow.*

Nancy didn't give us drills or shout instructions. She just watched and at the end of practice she said, "Losing is fine but it's a lot more fun to win. Do you want to start winning?"

At our initiation party, the rookies drank cheap beer, wrote skits, and made a list of team goals that included having good sex and forming complete thoughts. Harding was my favorite rookie. She brought her own six-pack of Milwaukee's Best and a bottle of malt liquor and she drank them way too fast. By the end of the party, she was scribbling a love letter to Ani Difranco on a paper bag.

I couldn't take her back to the dorm (she'd already been "invited" to talk to The University's president about her drinking), so I took her back to my house. I steered her to the sofa and went to the kitchen for a big glass of water. When I returned, she was mumbling.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Whiskey Wednesday," she said. "We should all get together on Wednesdays and drink whiskey."

"Drink this," I said.

She looked at the glass warily. "Beer?"

"Water. Drink it."

She stared at me, her eyes trying to focus. Harding was the butchiest newbie I had ever seen. She was an army brat who had signed up for ROTC. She walked around campus in her green BDUs and shiny black boots, and when she saw a teammate, she let loose an ear-splitting *whoop-whoop* that made all the khaki-clad boys duck.

Instead of taking the water, she leaned back and announced, "I love the team."

"Me too. Drink some water." I sat down and wrapped her hand around the glass. *Does she know she's gay?* I wondered. *How could she not?*

She sat up and looked at me. "You're awesome, Flash."

She leaned towards me and, not sure what else to do, not wanting to disappoint her, wanting to know what would happen, I kissed her.

It was a first for both of us.

Harding pulled away, her bushy eyebrows flattening into one long line of frustration and remorse, and then she leaned in for another one.

We kissed again, and then it was my turn to pull away. I could feel the yearning in Harding's chest. She was dying to take off her BDUs and try me on, but in the morning when she sobered up, she'd be in turmoil. She'd turn to me for guidance and I wouldn't be able to help her. I felt sure that there was something fundamentally different about us. Harding needed to be

with girls. She had no choice. But I did. I was kissing Harding because I could, not because I had to. I was surrounded by choices, and for that reason alone I couldn't be her first.

"We can't do this," I said.

"I don't care." She put her hands on my shoulders and pulled me towards her. "Come on."

"No." I pushed her away, went to my room, and shut the door. She was going to need a real girlfriend, someone who was so certain that there'd be plenty of room for Harding to be uncertain.

The men's team invited us to a party at their house, a dark place with too many mysterious stains on the walls, too little furniture, and a Confederate flag in the living room. Everywhere I looked, I saw a rookie surrounded by broad male shoulders.

I wasn't a freshman anymore, happy to be drinking with the boys and singing a bunch of raunchy songs. I knew the men's team better now. I knew they had given our old captain the nickname *cumbucket* because she slept with a few of them. I knew that some of the guys were in their thirties and forties because university rules allowed community members to join their club. I knew that they liked us more when we lost our games than when we won. And I knew they might sleep with our players but they wouldn't take the same girl out to breakfast in the morning. We were kind of like

mouthguards, indispensable on the field, completely embarrassing anywhere else.

I drove a few rookies to their dorms and then went back to see if anyone else needed a ride. The kicked kegs had been thrown into the front yard and the dark rooms throbbed with techno. Heidi was sprawled on a sofa surrounded by men. Harding and Tigger were trying to make her move, but Heidi was almost unconscious and the men kept shouting at the other girls to leave her alone.

We half-carried, half-dragged Heidi out the door and into my car while the men cursed us out. "Crazy bitches," they shouted. "Stupid dykes."

In the morning, there was a giant box of human shit on Heidi's front porch. The team officers got together and agreed that our relationship with the men's team was over. Two weeks later, Tigger broke into the men's house and covered their living room with bloody tampons. We would never party together again.

We were finally the outcasts we imagined ourselves to be.

I asked Tigger to shave my head. I felt like a badass on the field. I wanted to look like one, too. I wanted to wear my self-possession like an overcoat and make every khaki-clad frat boy and blazer-wearing prof confront it.

I sat on a chair with a towel around my shoulders while Tigger buzz cut my head. When she was done, I looked in the mirror and I saw my eyes first. They were huge. I ran a hand across my head. I was pared down to the essentials. It felt good but also frightening. When I walked around The Grounds, they would have to look me in the eyes and see that I was beautiful.

“What do you think?” asked Tigger.

“I don’t know. It’s scary.”

“You are one hot piece of ass,” she said.

I looked in the mirror again and I believed her. To prove it, I did the I-Wanna-Have-Sex-Dance.

My new uniform around campus became T-shirts with the sleeves ripped off, bell-bottom jeans covered in hand-painted flowers, and a silver vest with a button that said “This Isn’t A Vest, It’s A Solar-Powered Sex Machine.” In my shaved head and rainbow-powered clothing, I felt liberated. I wasn’t coming out of the closet, just sticking an arm out and waving it around to see what would happen.

Nancy was right. Winning was a lot more fun than losing. We won all of our games that fall, and the more we won, the more we loved each other.

Occasionally, the first-year rookies brought their boyfriends to our parties. They were probably nice guys, but they cowered in the corners of the room while we took over the sofas and danced to “I Touch Myself.”

Heidi stood on a chair and pretended to be shocked while we took turns spanking her, and Tigger and I grabbed each other’s breasts just because we could. It was a dancing, hugging, kissing, wrestling, girls-only, alcohol-fueled free-for-all. And if two teammates went home together, that was just fine. We were tossing out the old labels: *gay, straight, bi, butch, fem, dyke*. The more we won, the more we trusted each other, and the labels became unnecessary. A teammate could hook up with a girl or a guy without changing identities. We could be ambiguous without scaring each other.

We were so much fun we even had fans. A few members of the women’s soccer team started hanging out with us, and then there were the randoms, like Summer. She looked like a boarding school heartthrob, but she had gazed in the mirror at the tender age of eight and told herself, “You are gay, but you must never let anyone know or you will never be president.”

At parties, I looked for Summer first. Her pretty blonde hair was easy to pick out from across the room, and her laughter was infectious—she could have been the love child of Robin Williams and Helen Hunt. It was impossible not to lean in closer, to laugh harder. But Summer was still involved with her high school sweetheart and out of my league.

At the end of one party, I went home with a soccer player. Shannon looked like she would know what to

do. We sat on the edge of her futon and shared a beer. I was grateful for the cold can of Milwaukee's Best because it delayed whatever was going to happen next. When I put the beer down, Shannon leaned over and kissed me. Her kiss was searching, aggressive, none of Harding's tentativeness. We lay down, still kissing, and after a while she straddled me and took off her T-shirt and then her sports bra and her large white breasts spilled into my hands.

I was a little proud and a whole lot of scared. What was I supposed to do with them? I tried to imitate the boys I'd had sex with, squeezing, biting, pushing them around. I was like a kid at a table full of Play-doh. When she started to undo my pants, I wriggled my hips away and tried to kiss her again.

"You don't want to do this, do you?" she whispered.

"Sorry," I said. "I just don't want anything serious tonight."

We slept with our shirts and bras off, her breasts pressed against my back. I stared into the darkness and tried not to panic. *What did I want? What was I looking for?*

Since my freshman year, I had hooked up off and on with a male classmate. We had recently had sex for the first time, and I enjoyed it. It had taken three years, but my body finally felt like my own again, like it belonged to me and my future and not the mistakes I'd made in high school. Even so, I didn't feel close to him. After

three years, he was as remote as every other boy I'd dated.

I was beginning to wonder if it'd be different with a woman. My friends on the team had shown me what trust and intimacy felt like. I wanted to feel that with a lover as well, but I just wasn't sure I was physically attracted to women. The more I thought about it the more frustrated I became with my uncertainty.

I didn't expect my teammates to fit strict definitions of identity or behavior, I didn't expect them to know if they were in or out, but I had no patience for my own ambiguity.

Every year, our team hosted a tournament at the end of the spring season. For the first time in a decade, we won that tournament. We also finished the season without losing a single game. Our record was 544-5. We deserved a big party, so we rented out a frat house for the last night of the tournament. A few brothers watched as a hundred girls in sports bras and sweat pants went through round after round of rugby songs. "The Marrying Kind" was my favorite:

*If I were the marrying kind
I thank the Lord I'm not sir
The kind of man that I would be
Would be a rugby
Prop sir
Prop sir?*

*'Cause I'd support hookers
 And you'd support hookers
 We'd all support hookers together
 We'd be all right in the middle of the night
 Supporting hookers together.*

The songs were even more audacious when there were no men in the chorus. The violence and misogyny were ours now, and our singing diffused their power. Circled up in our sweaty bras and bruised bodies, raising foamy mugs of cheap beer to the sky, we were casting a spell, driving out the dangers that loomed so large, charming the world into loving us.

I had earned enough credits to graduate a year early, but I was heartbroken about leaving my team behind. Only public nudity could make me feel better. On the last day of classes, Tigger and I met at The Rotunda to streak The Lawn. I asked Tigger to write "Get Naked Class of '98" on my back. Gleefully, she wrote the words in huge letters with a permanent blue marker. When she was done, we sprinted down The Lawn together. There were half a dozen classes taking place on the grass. The professors and students stopped talking and watched us. I ducked a Frisbee while Tigger performed a series of round-offs and back flips. We rounded Homer's statue and headed back up The Lawn with half the team cheering us on. "Class of '98!" I shouted, pointing at my back. "Oh yeah baby! Get naked! Oh yeah!"

At a party that night I told Heidi about the streaking and pulled up my shirt to show her my back. She was silent for a moment. "That does not say *get naked*," she said.

"What?" I tried to look over my shoulder but could only catch a glimpse of tall blue letters.

"That says *I'm a slut*."

I laughed so hard I peed my pants and then I went to find Tigger, who had been waiting for me to discover the prank. I hugged her and told her we were both sluts. It was as true as it was false. "Slut" didn't mean *slut* anymore, not to us, just like "gay" didn't mean *gay* and "straight" didn't mean *straight*. We had spent a year rewriting the dictionary of gender, and every revision moved us further away from convention and closer to the truth.

When I looked in the mirror and saw those words on my back, I thought of eight-year-old Summer, staring into her own eyes and whispering, "You are gay but you must never let anyone know or you will never be president." How many bargains did we have to make to be loved and accepted? Were any of them worth it? The more I knew about myself and the women around me, the less willing I was to make another deal.

8

THE LOVE LAKE

After college, Tigger and I moved in with my parents and had a raucous summer of bad dates, casual work, and lots of fooling around. Most weekends, we drove to Wisconsin with Heidi and Ace (and sometimes Rutro) to play pick-up rugby. After games, we went to the local dive and danced on (or fell off) the bar, made out with girls and boys indiscriminately, and did the I-Wanna-Have-Sex Dance, with poor results. During the week, Tigger and I worked as a secretary and carpenter, respectively, and lifted weights at a nearby muscle gym.

It was awesome. We were best friends and we were having so much fun I often woke up from my dreams laughing. On one of my favorite nights, we went downtown to a gay bar called Reflections. Heidi brought

along one of her roommates, Travis, a tall boy with hazel eyes and a bold laugh. From the moment we met, I wanted to kiss him and slap him at the same time. He was a loudmouth who liked to tease Heidi, got a kick out of Tigger's antics, and didn't mind my crew cut and ripped-up tank tops. In fact, he was the first boy I'd met in years who wasn't either offended or intimidated by my style. We verbally sparred until there was nothing left to do except make out at the bar while Rutro downed Amaretto Sours and moaned about all the cute girls who weren't interested in her. With Travis' tongue in my ear and his hands on my ass, I couldn't console her. Finally, the bartender threatened to kick us out. It was a proud moment for both of us.

As the end of summer approached, I started to feel nervous. Tigger was moving back to Virginia for her last year of school, so I would be alone in the suburbs if I stayed. I didn't care much for my carpentry job where I was the only woman on a team of men who didn't talk to me. I didn't want to keep living with my parents, but I was intimidated by the prospect of moving to Chicago where I didn't know anyone and didn't have a job. Most importantly, I was an English major who had never had any real plans for making a living, except writing novels, and although I'd managed to pound out two manuscripts in college, they were just freshman efforts, destined for the desk drawer.

In August, I packed up a U-Haul and drove back to Virginia with everything I owned and, miraculously, I landed the perfect job as the assistant editor at a little magazine about outdoor sports. My only colleagues were the publisher, the editor, and two advertising execs, all men. It was such a boy's world that the magazine's nickname was *BRO*. I loved my job because I could almost pretend I was working for *Outside*, I didn't have to wear a dress or makeup, and I was the only girl.

Of course, there were a few drawbacks. My salary barely covered rent and food and I didn't have any benefits. The publisher, Mick, liked to call me "Smithers," after the groveling assistant to Mr. Burns on *The Simpsons*. And I constantly had to prove myself in strange rituals like the gallon challenge.

Mick showed up at work with two gallons of whole milk and asked if I was tough enough to drink one in an hour.

"I'll kick your ass," I said.

"Try me."

I filled my plastic cup and downed it in one gulp. Besides being the queen of keg stands in college, I beat football star Tiki Barber in a donut-eating contest, devouring nine Krispy Kremes in two minutes. I figured I could handle a gallon of milk. Mick sat at his desk and we matched each other drink for drink. With ten minutes to go, we each had about an inch left in the jugs. I poured another glass and just stared at it. There

was a Holy War taking place in my stomach. I grabbed my garbage can and threw up a massive pile of curdled milk. So did Mick.

Afterwards, I took our trash bags of vomit out to the dumpster behind the building, and then stood there empty-handed and wondered about the challenge. Why had he picked me? Why not the editor or one of the advertising guys? For unknown reasons, I was the one who had to prove herself.

Even so, I wanted to win them all over by being the best little worker I could be. I showed up every morning, bright and sparkly, ready for another proofreading marathon. I was soon conducting interviews, taking photographs, and writing stories. The first time my byline appeared in the magazine, I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I didn't mind that I worked most weekends—dashing off on an overnight backpacking trip or learning how to kayak in a snowstorm—since work looked a lot like play. I also didn't mind that on those trips I had to sleep in my car and eat oatmeal because there was no money for travel expenses. There was one mantra in the offices of *BRO*: complaining is for pussies.

I would show them that I was as tough and competent as any man.

One of the unexpected benefits of my return to Charlottesville was spending time with Summer, who

had finally broken up with her girlfriend. For her birthday, we drove to Sugar Hollow and hiked along the river. Summer explained how she dated boys in high school to hide her real relationships with girls, how they had even gone on double dates together, the boys oblivious to the meaning of the girls' silent touches and secret looks. I was in awe of her cleverness, her conviction in a hostile world.

After the hike, we snuck into a hay barn and climbed the stacks of round bales. We crawled across their tops to lie down in the last rays of sunshine and watch the shadows lengthen across the fields.

Summer said, "This is the most comfortable place I have ever been."

I was on my belly next to her, nervous with our closeness and the day's perfection. Everything seemed so complete that I had the urge to sing a goofy, off-key jingle that I made up on the spot.

"I'm sitting on a big hay bale, drinking a watery beer, sitting on a big hay bale, got straw in my pants and my ears," I sang.

Summer laughed. "Do it again."

Together, we sang, "I'm sitting on a big hay bale, drinking a watery beer, sitting on a big hay bale, got straw in my pants and my ears."

"Had the perfect day at Sugar Hollow," I sang alone.

"Saw a lake and a river and trees," she continued.

"Had the perfect day at Sugar Hollow."

"Sat on a log and swallowed a bee?"

We cracked up, falling silent as we finished the beer. I wanted to kiss Summer, but I was too afraid. I could have opened up my fears like Russian nesting dolls, each one smaller yet more ornate than the last. The first one, clothed in homespun and straw, was my fear of not being as amazing as she. Inside that one, there was the ugly armored fear that without a man in my life I would become a frumpy and childless lesbian, and then the jeweled fear of being an outcast in the straight world, and so on, one fear revealing another until I would have reached the center and found the smallest, heaviest fear of all, the fear of being alone.

My love life was a mess. I longed for Summer, but lacked the guts to act on it, and when she asked if I would be her girlfriend, I told her I wasn't ready. I had a huge crush on the editor at the magazine, and although he sent some mixed signals, he also made it clear that I wasn't girlfriend material. And then Travis moved to Virginia for grad school and we started meeting up on weekends. He was always game for joining me on assignment. We went canoeing down the New River, backpacked Mt. Rogers, and hiked the Cranberry Bogs of West Virginia. The more time we spent together, the less I saw of Summer and the guys at work.

For my birthday, Travis came to town and we went swimming in a lake and then hiked up Observatory

Hill, where we sat in the sun and kissed each other for so long I thought I was melting.

We had sex for the first time that night. When Travis touched me, his hands were warm and confident. Afterwards, I rolled away, so accustomed to independence that it didn't occur to me this time would be different. Travis reached out and pulled me into him. He wrapped both arms around me and sighed.

I felt something in my universe realign. For so long, I had been orbiting the planet of Self-Reliance. Suddenly, there were two new heavenly bodies within sight—Trust and Happiness.

After six months at the magazine, I was promoted to editor. With Travis' encouragement, I asked for a big raise, earnest, and hopeful, confident that my new title deserved more than \$250 a week. Instead, I got a hundred dollar bonus and a card made out of two circles of paper joined in the middle so that they looked like breasts. On the inside, my boss had written: "Flashiepo—No one will ever accuse you of being 'flat' . . . but just in case, here you go."

I was bewildered. The year before, I'd been at the heart of a team of women who loved and fought and won together. All you had to do to join that team was play and party. That's exactly what I was doing at *BRO*, but the more I tried the more loudly they insisted I was not one of them. If anything, I was just their tackling

dummy. My presence in the office let them pretend they liked women and practiced equality, and because I never challenged their behavior or acted like an adult I gave them free reign to treat me as an inferior. I thought that by being tough and never complaining, I would prove I was strong, but all I proved was that I didn't respect myself.

Travis was the only person I could talk to about work. He listened and he cheered for me. I discovered I could tell Travis anything. I told him about high school and the abortion, about wanting Summer and then pushing her away, about my disappointments and disasters, my hopes and fears and fantasies. I told him everything I thought was ugly, and he told me I was beautiful. And when I admitted how often I felt bad because my emotions weren't what I thought they should be, he told me I didn't need to do that. I didn't need to feel guilty anymore.

I'd never given myself permission to accept my feelings just as they were.

At the start of summer, I needed a few days to clear my head, so Travis and I drove to Cumberland Mountain on the Virginia and Kentucky border for a weekend backpacking trip. On top of the mountain, we walked through a community where twelve families had settled in the early 1900s. They built homes, barns, a schoolhouse, and a church with chestnut logs and shake roofs.

The empty buildings were whitewashed and thigh-high grasses grew all around them, rippling in the first cool breeze we'd felt in hours. We camped nearby, and in the morning, we hiked to Sand Cave at the north end of the mountain. Water and wind had worked on the soft sandstone mountain for millennia, carving an amphitheater that was two hundred feet long and eighty feet tall. Sand filled the floor of the cave and spilled into the forest below, and water trickled somewhere out of sight.

I sat on the sloping sand and Travis sat behind me so I could lean into him. It was cool and promising in there. It was soothing and magical. The water laughed with its knowledge of the earth and the sky, and we held onto each other as if we had survived a shipwreck.

After a year at *BRO*, I quit my job. My boss asked what I was going to do with my life and I told him I'd be a writer. He laughed and said, "What books have you published? You're no writer."

I hoped that he was wrong. I applied to writing programs and planned a solo trip to South America so I could have an adventure that was all my own.

In Chile, I traveled south from Santiago into the wine country and the lake district, went backpacking in the Andes, hitchhiked into Argentina and back, took a ferry from Puerto Montt down to Puerto Natales, and backpacked the ten-day circuit of Torres del Paine. I spent three weeks sharing a tent with an American

boy who was pining for a girlfriend at home, so our nights together were never more scandalous than playing blackjack for the last packet of oatmeal. I climbed mountain passes, crossed rivers, gazed in awe at glaciers, bathed in alpine lakes, and shared boxes of cheap red wine with travelers from all over the world.

Back in Virginia, Travis and I had made plans to live together when I returned. I carried a letter from him in my backpack and I loved every simple word on that page. He was warm, tender, funny, odd, generous, difficult, and earnest. He was everything I needed. I daydreamed about the life we were going to live together, the noisy, outspoken children we would raise.

For spring break, Travis scraped together enough money from work and loans to join me in Chile. At the airport, I stood in a crowd across from the International Arrivals door. Every time the doors opened, we leaned forward collectively, hoping to spot the one we loved. I kept worrying that Travis wouldn't appear, that he missed the flight, or changed his mind. My mouth was sour, and I was so nervous I wanted to pee.

At last the doors opened and there he was, carrying a huge backpack, heavy leather boots hanging around his neck, a boyish grin on his face.

I knew I should rush to him and enclose him in my arms and jump up and down with childish glee.

I wanted to share his elation.

But I didn't.

I couldn't stop looking at those boots, swinging and bumping uncomfortably against his chest. For two months I had been wondrously, gloriously free, and now I felt as heavy as they looked.

We hired a fisherman's boat to take us across the Lago de Todos los Santos. Behind us, the 9,000-foot peak of Vulcan Osorno was still covered in snow. Ahead of us, Mount Tronador towered angrily over the lake, its massive bulk guarding the entrance to Argentina. A storm was breaking up and a rainbow appeared over the bow of the boat but it could not pierce through my gloomy thoughts. The fisherman dropped us off at an isolated beach on the north side of the lake and we headed up a trail.

I was itching to put some distance between Travis and me. He was nothing like the backpackers I'd been hanging out with for months. All week, he had leaned on me, counted on me to translate, to make decisions, to check bus schedules, buy tickets, and find a place to stay. He asked too many questions. He laughed too loudly. It felt like I was carrying those heavy boots around my neck and I couldn't take the bumping and swinging for one more minute. I threw myself into the climb, trying not to think about what I was planning to do.

After a few miles, the trail arrived at a roaring river. The bridge was a single log laid across the gully and

supported by two other logs. There were no obvious wires or bolts holding it together. It looked like magic, a piece of artifice created to beguile unwary travellers.

When Travis arrived, we argued about what to do. I was convinced the bridge wouldn't hold his weight with a backpack. Even though I didn't want to talk to Travis, the thought of seeing him hurt made me panicky. *I must still love him*, I thought, strapping on his forty-pound pack and getting down on my hands and knees to crawl across the log. The pack threatened to push me face first into the river, so I had to move forward inch-by-inch, fighting for my balance while the river rushed below. I finally put my feet on dry land and seconds later a Chilean couple on a day hike arrived. They exchanged a few words of greeting and then skipped across the bridge before we could warn them of the danger.

Travis laughed. I fumed.

I spent the rest of the trip being difficult, until Travis was so frustrated he stopped talking to me, and it was that silence, that shutting down and cutting off that made it possible for me to break up with him. On his last night in Chile, in a hostel with paper-thin walls, I told him it was over, and we bawled in each other's arms.

Travis calls that Sarah One.

Sarah Two began a couple years later. We both moved to Chicago—me for school, him for work—and

although we hadn't talked since Chile, we reconnected and soon we were dating again. He could still infuriate me, but he was also my best friend in a cold and chaotic city. For his birthday, I gave him a photo album with this message inside it: "Travis, I trust you and I love you. It amazes me to say so – because you weren't the answer I expected. You're better. You make me laugh. You surprise me. You warm me. I love you because you are fully yourself. You challenge me because I cannot put you in a box or make you less than you are. I love your heart. I love you."

When Travis moved to Colorado, I followed him. We spent a weekend driving around our new town, shopping for homes. With every glossy flier's description of bedrooms, bathrooms, and remodeled kitchens, I felt walls closing in around me. Square footage, down payments, interest rates. It was all so much more than I wanted. By the time we returned to our apartment, I was ready to knock down some walls.

"Don't you dare ask me to marry you," I told him.

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm not ready. It's moving too fast. Just give me time."

Travis looked like I'd just jabbed a knife under his ribs. I didn't know it at the time but he'd been shopping for engagement rings and planning to propose to me when we travelled east that fall for a friend's wedding.

I was so perplexed about our future together that I even called Mom for advice, which was a bit like asking a campaign manager if she'd vote for her candidate.

"How do you know when you're with the right person?" I asked.

"Well, first of all, is your sex life satisfying?"

"Yeah, Mom, it's fine. That's not the issue. I just don't know about, well, everything else. How do you know you're with the right one?"

"You have to be able to wake up next to that person every morning for the rest of your life and be glad you're there."

I had wandered into a life-size circular argument. I asked, *How do I know?* And she answered, *When you know.* I thought of Kate and her husband Joe and how she knew he was the one. Maybe it was that easy after all. "Travis has a good heart," I said.

"Yes, he does."

We were silent. Finally, Mom said, "I'm worried that if you don't marry Travis you'll be alone for the rest of your life."

"That's ridiculous."

"Is it?"

And there was my life in front of me—filled with long nights in an empty apartment and the frigid blue light of loneliness. The daughter in me wondered if my mother knew better than anyone else what possibilities and pitfalls my life might hold. The adult in me

dismissed her suggestion as outdated, a 19th-century notion of women's lives.

We were on our way to a wedding in the Adirondack Mountains. Travis was standing next to the car, watching the Lake Champlain ferry dock, when I looked at him and knew that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. The knowledge flooded me—clear, confident, and luminous—unlike anything I'd ever felt before, a lighthouse manned by the woman I would be someday.

When Travis hopped into the car and started the engine, I stared at him with googly eyes.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"Are you okay? You look weird."

"Fine," I squeaked.

I couldn't say anything else. The knowing was unlocking doors in my brain and opening windows in my heart. All my life, I'd been a skeptic. I'd scoffed at love and ridiculed faith and second-guessed myself out of happiness. But this desire to be together for a lifetime was stronger than doubt. And it demanded action.

We parked in the belly of the ferry and Travis went upstairs to the deck. I told him I'd join him in a few minutes. I sat in the car gathering myself, marveling at what I was about to do. When I joined Travis on deck, he was standing at the bow, looking lonely and sad as

he gazed at the distant shore. Two men were near him, taking photos and holding hands. I stood by Travis, fighting the urge to push the couple overboard until my meaningful stares forced them to wander away. Finally, it was just the two of us and the wind and the water rushing by. I wrapped my arms around him and looked into his eyes.

"What's going on?" he asked. "You're being all romantic."

"Will you marry me?"

I expected an immediate affirmative, but instead Travis looked shaken. "What did you say?"

"Travis Scott Schmidt, will you marry me?"

Travis looked around suspiciously. "Where are the hidden cameras?"

"This isn't a joke."

"Are you feeling okay?"

"If you don't answer me, I will throw you off this boat."

Travis looked into my eyes and started crying. "Yes."

We hugged and cried. The boat kept racing across the lake towards New York, the shoreline transforming from a blue-green neverland into coves and houses, gardens and flagpoles, the kingdom of the everyday.

That night we called our parents for their blessings. My mom said yes before I could finish the question. Travis' parents were also happy for us, although Travis

insisted that since I asked him they should demand something—chickens and goats perhaps—in return for their son.

After the phone calls and congratulations, Travis explained that he had planned on proposing to me on that ferry. When he stood on the deck looking forlorn, he was mourning our future. In the reversal of grief and the unexpected joy, there was a glimmer of something greater than ourselves at work. Even I could see that.

Heidi sent me her wedding binder, already divided into categories: Dress, Guest List, Ceremony, Caterer, Photographer, Music, Honeymoon, Ideas. Heidi included pages she thought might be useful for me: explanations of reception etiquette, descriptions of wedding favors, and brides' quotes about their favorite part of the day.

I tore through bridal magazines with the same ferocity I had once used to learn about sex from *Glamour*, ripping out pages and punching holes, filling the binder as quickly as possible. I couldn't help myself. The glossy spreads of flower arrangements, table settings, and satin dresses were wedding porn. I added little notes to myself on the pages: "Good idea." "Would Tigger wear this dress?" "Do this!" As a girl, I never *ever* dreamed of my wedding day, but suddenly I was hooked on visions of the perfect dress, the perfect ceremony, the perfect

party. I was high on perfection, and at the end of a magazine session I felt dirty and a little bit ashamed. I followed Kate and Mom up the white-carpeted stairs and into the sunlit attic-turned-fitting-room of the bridal shop. Two walls were lined with dresses in every possible variation of white and cream, and when I brushed against them they rustled like a flock of doves. Another wall was covered with a floor-to-ceiling mirror. A quick glance at the mirror confirmed what I already knew: I did not belong there. Who wears a sports bra to a bridal shop?

"Tell me what you had in mind," the salesperson said.

I froze. Photos of beautiful dresses flashed through my mind, but I had no idea how to describe them.

"Simple or ornate?" she prompted.

"Simple."

"Okay, that's a starting place."

She pulled dresses from the rack and I gave them a thumbs-up or thumbs-down. Pretty quickly, it was obvious that I didn't want a beaded bodice, taffeta or bustle. In short, I did not want to look like a princess. Soon, there was a pile of gowns waiting for me in the dressing room, as well as a few more appropriate bras.

The first dress was a simple ivory slip with an empire waist, long sleeves, and a scoop neck. I looked like I was going to spend the day sipping G&Ts and watching a cricket match. When I stepped out of the dressing

room, Kate shrugged and Mom frowned. I spun around for them, trying to feel like a giddy girl instead of a pincushion, but there was no transformation. Back to the dressing room.

The salesperson helped me into the second dress. It was ivory satin, with a sleeveless bodice gathered elegantly on the side and an A-line skirt with three origami-like layers of fabric. When I stepped out, Kate smiled and Mom started to snifle. One look in the mirror and I understood why. The dress had done the impossible. It wiped away all my awkwardness and turned me into the kind of bride whose groom bursts into tears at the sight of her.

In two months, we picked the date, the location, the dress, the caterer, and the photographer. We were both in a hurry to get married, before the doubt could creep back in. Sometimes, I wondered if we could even make it through a long engagement.

We were living in a new town where I didn't have friends and couldn't find a job. Travis was consumed by grad school. I was consumed with loneliness. We fought over dishes, laundry, grocery shopping, cleaning. We were struggling to live together and still love each other and it wasn't easy. The only thing that came easy was making decisions about the wedding. That ivory dress became my polestar, guiding me through rough seas. After every argument, when I started to wonder if

I'd made a terrible mistake, I thought back to the ferry ride and the marvelous certainty that had flooded my soul, and I pictured my dress.

Even so, the arguments got worse—longer, louder, angrier. Afterwards, my emotional hangovers lasted for days, and any negative word could start another round of fighting. When we got engaged I made a promise to Travis: I will always be difficult, but I will never make your life hard. That promise was becoming hard to keep. When I suggested premarital counseling, Travis readily agreed.

At our third counseling session, we sat on an overstuffed blue sofa across from our counselors, Matt and Roy, graduate students in psychology and future Marriage Healers of America. (Grad students were the only counselors we could afford.) Our sessions with Matt and Roy were videotaped and later examined by their teachers and peers, so we were on our best behavior as we navigated the tricky landscape of our relationship, trying to appear loving, generous, and reasonable even as we explored emotional quicksand.

For homework, Matt had assigned us a chapter from *The Seven Principles of Making Marriage Work*. "Principle 1: Enhance Your Love Maps" told us we could improve our relationship by mapping each other's emotional expectations and priorities. Travis and I spent Saturday afternoon on the sofa, plowing through the cheesy

self-help writing and checklists, trying to predict each other's love maps. It was fun, but we both knew that love maps wouldn't help us stop fighting. Matt agreed. We needed the Love Lake.

Matt drew the Love Lake on the dry erase board, a misshapen oval with five rivers flowing into it, and one river flowing out. The in-rivers were Verbal Communication, Physical Intimacy, Acts of Kindness, Time, and Affection. The out-river represented whatever problem drained our relationship of love and affection. To keep the Love Lake high we needed to keep all the rivers flowing. If the in-rivers were dammed, and the lake level dropped significantly, the whole thing would stagnate and have an algae bloom like a city beach in July. After some discussion, we agreed that our out-river was Laundry. In our house, *I did the laundry* meant *you owe me*. It meant *grow up*. It meant *I'm trying to change*. Sometimes it even meant *I love you*.

While the River of Laundry was overflowing, our River of Kindness was perpetually low. My grad student fiancée was too busy or absentminded to bring home flowers or make dinner. And even though I was unemployed, I did household chores begrudgingly. The truth was I would rather donate my heart to science than become a housewife, so the acts of kindness that I performed on a daily basis were done with more venom than virtue.

Acts of Kindness wasn't the only river with an environmental crisis.

We spent Christmas with Travis' extended family. For a week, ten of us were wedged into his parents' townhouse, munching on cheese balls and downing Old-Fashioneds, the family's favorite holiday drink. On Christmas afternoon, Travis, his grandma, his aunt, and I played Canasta and drank Old-Fashioneds for six hours straight, while his brothers, cousins, and parents drifted around us, feasting on leftovers, watching TV, and doing crossword puzzles. I was high on a lethal mixture of maraschino cherries and canned onion rings, and Travis was getting louder and more obnoxious by the minute.

Either because Grandma and I were winning or because I had just asked him to shut up, the next time I went for a refill Travis followed me into the kitchen, pinned my arms to my side, and shouted at his aunt to give me a super-wedgie. The aunt grabbed my underwear and, ignoring my squawking, hauled it halfway up my back. When Travis let go, I staggered to the counter and grabbed the first weapon I could get my hands on.

An ice cream Oreo pie.

The pie just grazed Travis' ear before hitting the cabinets with a wet splat. There was an open tub of whipped cream on the counter and Travis grabbed it and started scooping out handfuls and flinging them

at me. The only thing that stopped me from throwing a hot apple pie at his face was his mother's objections.

When we returned to the table, cleaned up but still sticky, his grandma looked at us over her reading glasses and said, "I don't like how you two treat each other. If you ask me, you're more like brother and sister than husband and wife."

Roy and Matt would have told us that our River of Affection was a toxic swamp.

The argument began in the airport in Maryland and lasted through two flights and a layover. After a week with the in-laws, I was unrelenting in my criticism and Travis' communication skills had reverted to junior high.

We collected our bags and took the bus to our car in a snowstorm. Travis cleared the ice off the windows while I sat inside, fuming, tallying. As soon as he got in the car the argument began again and it continued down the toll road and up I-25, until finally, impossibly, we argued ourselves into silence.

Travis was too tired to keep driving. He exited the interstate and stopped at the top of the ramp. It was one in the morning in the middle of a snowstorm and there was no one else on the road. Travis cried. My chest ached. We got out to change drivers, but we stopped in front of the car and held onto each other while the

traffic light changed colors. The falling snow was so light, and we were so heavy.

Roy and I sat across from each other on the overstuffed armchairs. To our left, behind the wall-sized mirror, a video camera was recording our session. I tried to ignore it, but cameras were part of the problem. When I thought about what a marriage should look like, I didn't think of my parents or my friends. I pictured Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks, Sandra Bullock and Bill Pullman, Tom Cruise and Renée Zellweger. I imagined bliss, and Travis and I did not have bliss, and that terrified me.

I should have gone to a palm reader instead of a counselor. I wanted Roy to look me in the eyes and tell me that Travis and I would live happily ever after—or that we were a shipwreck and I should run—but he wouldn't. Instead, he listened for an hour while I worked my way through a box of Kleenex and a chest of fears. I unpacked the fears, smallest to biggest, holding them up to the light where they looked like fishing nets, as menacing as they were insubstantial. (The smallest and least menacing was the fear that my Travis was also the Travis I met on summer vacation when I was eight, the little boy who stood over a line of ants and cut them in half with his pocketknife.) At the bottom of the chest, I found the biggest net, tangled and barnacled, the fear

that if I stayed with him I would lose my independence and if I left him, I would lose even more.

After eight months of counseling, we were ready for graduation, but we had one last assignment. We needed to find a symbol for our relationship.

“How about an inflatable raft?” I joked.

“A wrestling mat?” asked Travis.

“A noose.”

“A bullwhip.”

“An electric chair.”

“A cage.”

We spent most of the week joking about the symbol. When we finally got serious, we considered a kayak paddle, a globe, a pair of hiking boots. Eventually, we settled on binoculars, a symbol of vision and foresight, cooperation and adventure. We were both looking forward, and we were starting to believe that we could see further together than we could apart.

It was Saturday morning, eleven hours before the wedding, and even though we told everyone we didn’t want to see each other until the ceremony, Travis and I snuck out of our hotel rooms and met in the Starbucks down the street.

We were not meeting for a romantic tryst or a reprieve from the pre-wedding hustle. No, we still needed to write our vows.

We left it until the last minute, and the procrastination put me into a tizzy. It didn’t help that Travis was fifteen minutes late and I forgot my wallet. When he finally arrived, I had pages of sample wedding vows spread out on the table but no food or drink. Travis quickly assessed the situation and returned with two tall Americanos and a Danish. When he sat down, I hissed at him, “Look at us! We’re writing our vows on our wedding day! This is never going to work! We’re never going to make it!”

I was trying to keep my voice down, but the couples around us turned in their chairs to get a better view.

“And you’re late! You can’t even take this seriously!”

“I’m sorry. Let’s not fight. Let’s just focus. It’ll be okay.”

“No, it won’t!”

“Yes, it will. You can choose to let this ruin the day or you can calm down and we can just write the vows.”

He was right. I took a few deep breaths and we wrote the words that would bind us together for the rest of our lives.

The wedding was in a flower shop. My bridesmaids were my brother, my sister, and Tigger. Heidi and her dad wrote and performed the ceremony. Travis cried when he saw me, and then we couldn’t stop grinning at each other. My face hurt from smiling so hard. I was happy, terribly miraculously earth-shatteringly happy,

SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE

and all the worries of the prior year disappeared. This was meant to be.

When we exchanged rings, I tried to slip Travis' band onto his middle finger.

"Wrong one," Heidi whispered.

"Oops," I said too loudly. "It's my first time."

Our friends and family laughed softly, generously, and we kissed.

BIG, SPLASHY, AND KIND OF CONFUSING

Travis and I waited nearly six years before trying to start a family. We wanted conditions to be just about perfect. He finished school and then got a good job. I taught English at a community college and then a university. We bought a house. We paid off most of our debts. We made friends and lost friends and built a community of people we could trust. I did a lot of the things I had dreamt of as a teenager—I flew planes, travelled to Africa, wrote books, learned French and Russian—and I grew a core of self-confidence that would have made Adina proud.

I wanted to be a mom so badly, but I had seen my sister and my friends struggle with fertility. It seemed wise not to get my hopes up. Travis and I even talked about what we'd do if we didn't get pregnant—how

long we'd try, if we'd use fertility treatments, when we'd consider adoption. Travis liked to remind me to be optimistic. After all, we'd had years of "practice."

God love him, he was right and we got pregnant quickly. I was finally able to take a deep breath and believe what I'd told myself for years: the universe would not withhold a family from me just because I hadn't wanted one at seventeen.

The baby was due in August.

We set up the nursery on the hottest day of the summer. Our house had no air-conditioning, but I couldn't stop moving furniture, hanging pictures, vacuuming and cleaning until everything was just so.

My brother had given us three wall hangings from his time in Africa: a lion, an elephant, and a monkey. I hung the lion over the crib. We didn't know if we were having a girl or a boy, but we were definitely having a Leo. I couldn't help loving the characteristics of a Leo: confident, ambitious, independent, and creative. Leos are considered the most dominant and extroverted of all the signs. It gave me a thrill to think of my son or daughter moving through the world with the force of a hurricane.

The due date came and went.

We sat in a dark corner of Canino's and I ordered the spumoni, rumored to have sent countless women

into labor. We went for a hike at altitude. I got a prenatal massage. We had sex. I raged against the tyranny of the due date, wishing for the hundredth time that I lived in France where women are given a "due month" instead of a date. I felt like our baby was holding me captive. My world had stopped spinning and it wouldn't start again until it joined us.

On Thursday night, some friends came over to play poker. We sat in the backyard, the summer night warm and dry. Everyone was in good spirits but I was too tired to enjoy it so I laid down inside, listening to the clink of beer bottles and the clatter of chips through an open window. When Travis came to bed smelling of beer, I rolled into him and said, "I'm glad you got to blow off some steam, but I need you to be ready now. This could happen any moment."

Travis hugged me and laughed. "Don't worry, baby. I'll be your Pacific Life whale."

He was referring to the television ads in which a cyclist or an attractive retired couple pauses to admire a humpback whale breaching. They were pretty and dramatic, but we could never figure out how they were supposed to sell insurance.

"So you're going to be big, splashy, and kind of confusing?" I asked.

"I'm just saying I'm here for you," he huffed. "Besides, you're not going into labor tonight."

I love a challenge. The contractions started around two in the morning.

It was our sixth wedding anniversary and I had been in labor for thirty hours. We had decided we'd go to the hospital when the contractions were five minutes apart, but with a few exceptions, they never got closer than seven. Nothing about my labor was happening by the book and that made me irrationally angry.

Worst of all, the hemorrhoids had started. My asshole felt like the Hoover Dam.

Even so, it was a golden August day, so we drove up the Poudre River, joking about the symbolic folly of *going up the pooder* when we were trying to get someone down my pooder. We hung out on the riverbank and threw rocks in the water. I felt like we were practically holding our child in our arms at long last.

Late that night, a tugging pain rippled through my side. Once, twice, three times.

Was the baby okay? Did she need our help?

We drove through empty streets to the hospital. I worried we were going in too soon. I worried we had waited too long. In the birthing room, they hooked me up to every monitor available and everything checked out fine. The baby's heartbeat was strong and steady. The midwife checked my cervix and I was already dilated to five centimeters.

She looked surprised. I was relaxed, optimistic, and in active labor. "You're not going home," she said.

When I rested, the contractions slowed down, so we walked. And we walked. The contractions racked me. I let go of everything. I pressed my head into Travis' chest and I *Om*-ed. I let that ancient sound rise from my gut and carry everything that was me, every fear, every worry, every piece of self-control and notion of strength, real or imagined, away with it. There was nothing but the pain, and the spaces between the pain, and the shorter they got, the stronger I felt.

I was in the pain cave and I heard the drums beating.

My cervix was stuck at 7 centimeters.

I tried lunges, stairs, a hot bath. We broke my water. Nothing would make my cervix budge, and after sixty-one hours, I was too tired to hang in there for much longer.

It was time for the drugs.

My midwife put me on Pitocin. Without any warning, I went from the pain cave to the pain ocean. There were no more drums to keep me company. There was only wave after wave of pain. Travis kept me from drowning, holding my hands, stroking my head, talking to me calmly, lovingly, proudly. I heard my own voice screaming and whimpering. When the contractions relented, it was for less than a minute, just long

enough to poke my head above the waves and realize I was terrified.

After an hour, my cervix was still stuck. Every nerve ending in my body was telling me one thing: Get the epidural already.

When the analgesic took effect, the pain was sucked into a vacuum. It disappeared so quickly and completely that I was punch drunk, teasing Travis, laughing with the nurses and a friend, singing along with Vampire Weekend. I took a long nap, and when I woke up, I was fully dilated, rested, and ready to push.

I got so excited the midwife had to remind me not to push between contractions. The baby's heartbeat was strong and steady, my blood pressure and temperature were fine. We were all bopping along with our mixed tape.

It was my last push. After forty weeks and sixty-eight hours of labor, I felt the baby leave my body. The midwife grabbed her, placed her on my belly, and yelled, "Floppy baby."

It was as if an alarm had gone off deep inside the hospital. New staff flooded the room, pushing equipment I'd never seen and I thought, *Floppy baby? That doesn't sound so bad.*

There was a baby girl on my belly, still and quiet and blue. I reached for her, but before I could touch her body, a nurse whisked her away.

A floppy baby is a dead-on-arrival baby.

A floppy baby might have a heartbeat, but it isn't breathing or crying.

A floppy baby doesn't look around at the world, doesn't wave her arms, or kick her legs.

A floppy baby is *floppy* in the sense that there's no animation, no spirit, no genie or being.

From my bed, I watched the doctors and nurses intubate her, forcing air into her lungs. I couldn't see if she responded.

We had taken classes, read books, talked to friends and doctors and nurses, and no one ever mentioned a floppy baby. But we did have a plan in case of emergency. Travis would go with the baby, and a friend would stay with me.

Before they took her to the NICU, I got to take one more look at my daughter, and a voice in my head asked, *Will she be alive the next time I see her?*

Travis followed her to the NICU, where she held onto his finger while they labored over her tiny lungs. I stayed behind in the delivery room. A pediatrician came to my bedside to explain what was happening. "Is this my fault?" I asked.

He assured me it wasn't and in a day or two I'd believe him, but for now I only knew that where my baby should have been resting on my chest there was a hole, growing darker and colder and bigger by the minute.

SOLAR-POWERED SEX MACHINE

She fought.

She breathed.

She grew stronger.

The doctors wouldn't say what to expect or how long she'd be in the NICU, but on the second day she got a little hand loose and tore out her ventilator tube. The nurses rushed to replace it, but she was breathing on her own. It was a good sign.

Travis called my parents that first night and they rushed to town. Dad has always been afraid of hospitals and he didn't want to visit the NICU, but I insisted that he meet our baby girl. When my parents stood beside her crèche and she held onto their fingers, I felt a chasm close behind us once and for all.

On the evening of the third day, I held her for the first time.

She had been a possibility, and now she was real. I cried and I laughed. I promised her so many things—that I would always see her and listen to her. I would help her grow with wonder and joy. I would raise her to be kind to herself and others. I would teach her to love and trust and fight.

I was a mother.

It was the end of my story and the beginning of ours.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Solar-Powered Sex Machine would not have been possible without the members of the Old Town Writing Group who encouraged this project and commented thoughtfully on too many drafts to number: Kimberly Fields, Dana Masden, Leslie Patterson, Laura Pritchett, Molly Reid, Laura Resau, and Carrie Visintainer.

Hugs and unicorns to all of my friends turned readers, cheerleaders, and sounding boards: Sabina Bailey, Dana Barclay, Liz Beck, Marilee Boylan-Miller, Brenna Brooks-Larson, Carol Busch, Karen Campbell, Amy Gannon, Tessa Johnson, Heather Mathews, Leah Moyers, Stacey Reherman, Megan Ryan, Will Ryan, and Liz Stone. Special thanks to Liz Jackson for her critical insights into family, friendships, class, and narrative.

I am indebted to the booksellers, publishers, agents, and editors who shared their wisdom so generously: Jacqie Hasan, Krista Lyons, Karla Oceanak, Holly Root, and Todd Simmons. I also owe a huge debt to Beet Street and Creative Capital for the transformative workshop that gave me the motivation and dedication to bring this project to life.

Sam Estok is the genius behind my website.

Special thanks to Mike Knaggs, creative designer extraordinaire. I hope everyone judges this book by its cover.



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