From Inside the House

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From Inside the House

Essays

Emilie Shumway

Thesis submitted
to the Eberly College of Arts and Sciences
at West Virginia University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in
Creative Nonfiction

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ABSTRACT

*From Inside the House*

Emilie Shumway

*From Inside the House* is a collection of eleven creative nonfiction essays, nearly all segmented and nonlinear. The essays take place across a wide span of time, from childhood to the author’s current age, and feature her hometown in Michigan, post-college life in Chicago, and time spent in West Virginia. Themes that feature prominently include anxiety, class, relationships, politics, alienation, fear, failure, and ambition.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Preface</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relations</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parasite</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Singer</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Tablespoons</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Life Outside of Us</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Hate Story</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Inside the House</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Faith</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleepwalking</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Likeness of a Wolf</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimized</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
 Preface

Reading *From Inside the House* in its entirety, the most striking characteristic to me is my unwillingness to be bound—whether by time, location, or story. In prose, I can’t sit still. Each essay is broken again and again as the prose jumps from one relevant moment or memory to the next, and often backtracks. In “The Likeness of a Wolf,” I stitch together bits of post-election 2016 with a 1589 werewolf trial outside of Cologne, Germany, and a few days of travel with my mother in present-day Germany. Many essays feature moments from both childhood and adulthood. Even “Parasite,” which manages to stick to a two-week span in my life, veers back and forth in time and breaks scene frequently to change focus.

This reliance on white space could be seen as a crutch, or a way to avoid transitions. I have sometimes wondered about its effectiveness. The risk in breaking scene so often is that I’ll leave a moment too soon or fail to render its relevance. But I’ve found no more efficient way to represent how I’ve come to change, which is by tiny moments that build and gain clarity over time, and by the media I’ve absorbed to contextualize them.

Due to the stubborn nonlinearity of *From Inside the House*, essays cannot be and are not arranged chronologically. The organization is more intuitive. “Relations,” one of my most personal essays, was the first I wrote in graduate school and somehow could only ever be my opener. It feels like a stage-setter—a way of getting to know the narrator quickly. The first half of the collection is less overtly political, more interested in personal anxieties and dramas. The latter half takes a turn toward more explicit social critique. This arrangement mirrors my own evolving interests in subject matter (and an increased awareness of what’s more urgent). Overall,
though, my goal throughout is to show how individual and broader cultural anxieties intersect—under-explored ways of how, as the platitude states, “the personal is political.”

I write toward authors whose sentences and depictions entrance me. “The Fourth State of Matter” by Jo Ann Beard showed me what an essay was capable of, in terms of content, language, and thematic connections. Her movement from time spent alone with weak-bladdered dogs, to time spent at work with her friend and supervisor, to the final tragedy at the end illustrated for me how energy and emotion can be generated by movement, revelation, and subtle connection.

An elusive element in my work—one I consistently struggle over in the revision process—is how to balance themes between an implicit gesturing and an explicit telling. Meghan O’Gieblyn’s essay “On Subtlety” explores her own love of subtlety. She also examines its pitfalls:

*I wanted to write stories that were like the stories I loved: oblique in their approach, buttressed by themes that revealed themselves upon multiple readings. But in workshops, my classmates were vocal about the many problems lurking in my stories: the character's motivation was not clear; the backstory should be addressed, not alluded to; the conclusion was too cryptic. For a while, I dismissed this as obtuseness. People wanted things spelled out. They weren’t reading closely. But there comes a point when a reproach is repeated so often it becomes impossible to dismiss…*

I share O’Gieblyn’s love for obliqueness. In my own reading, and especially in personal essays, I prefer for an essay to be more of a puzzle—one in which the reader is provided all the
pieces, but is forced to put it together—than a statement. My writing is approachable and my themes accessible, but I admit to wanting the reader to work. Sometimes, as my peers can attest, I’ve subconsciously kept hold of too many pieces. The result can only be reduced engagement; a lack of connection where I’ve hoped one could spring up organically. In revision, I’ve tried to seed more clues and be more explicit with some of my ideas. I remain ambivalent about the success of this fix with some essays, though I imagine the ideal degree of subtlety and the strategy of proper disclosure will reveal itself in time, as I inevitably continue to tinker.

Structuring and ordering my essays can be a challenge, and I’ve found the use of repetition to be grounding. Megan Stielstra makes use of a similar style of repetition in The Wrong Way to Save Your Life, introducing a sentence or phrase and then employing it again, with a different gravity, further into the text. I like the way repetition can anchor the reader, can provide a clue or a shortcut through the maze the author has erected. It emerges as a way to subvert explicitness but still guide the reader where I’d like them to go.

Overall, I am both proud of my collection and indecisive about it. All essays have gone through some degree of revision, from cuts and additions to a total rewriting. Some, like “Relations” and “A Life Outside of Us,” feel close to finished. My weakest essay, “Bad Faith,” seems to need something more, although I haven’t been able to pin it down. “Sleepwalking,” deeply tied to a certain American consciousness in early 2018, already feels a bit dated.

The old Paul Valery quote—that a poem is “never finished, only abandoned”—turns out to apply just as readily to prose. Even up to the submittal of this thesis, I’ve continued to replace words and phrases, add and delete details and paragraphs. I remain unsatisfied in small ways with each essay, just as I remain unsatisfied with essays that have already been published.
But every essay in this collection has also surprised me in the writing, and with each rereading. Each one feels like a small world to me. Each has been stretched and improved with feedback. Before the program, I rarely finished an essay, my writing folder full of disparate fragments. I’ve now come to a place where even in their state of abandonment, I can look at my essays as whole, vibrant, and meaningful.
Relations

Like my father, I wander in cemeteries. I always know where they are. In my hometown, most people settle down in one of two: massive and sprawling Riverside, spilled across two sides of a curving highway on the way out toward Lake Algonquin, or small and tidy Mt. Calvary, right in town, for the fussier Catholics. The more recently dead—the still remembered—receive occasional tokens. Solar-powered lamps glow next to their gravestones at night. Weather-beaten artificial flowers lie strewn in the grass beside some graves, their pink and blue petals streaked with dirt. I am always touched by these gifts when I pass by, visiting the dead. Considering them.

My father wanders with more of a purpose. He’s looking for our people, Shumways from the past and their associates. For decades, he’s taken it upon himself to remember the forgotten members of the clan, the people no one still living ever knew. He researches in dusty libraries, cracking the spines of books no one else cracks anymore. He locates his dead in cemeteries across southwestern Michigan, writing down their plot numbers and driving up empty, flat county roads to reach them. When he finds a grave he’s looking for, he dusts it off and takes a photo. He used to nestle the grim packets of developed pictures in a plastic file cabinet beside his desk; more recently, he loads up the files in his computer and keeps them in digital folders. Relations dead and lost and found again.

* 

When I was nine, I traveled with my father to Sackets Harbor, New York, so he could meet with a group of genealogy enthusiasts he chatted with online. My mother stayed behind, citing work obligations. At the time, she was traveling across Michigan’s lower peninsula every few weeks
to inspect nursing homes for quality of care. The care tended to be bad—drug mix-ups, bedsores, even abuse—and she was drained, careful about the time she took off. A trip to northern New York didn’t make the cut.

I relished the chance to hang out with Dad. He’d recently bought a Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons tape, and I insisted we listen to it on repeat. Pop music from the ‘60s was a new fixation of mine. The stories told by the singers tended toward the simplistic and, for me at nine years old, understandable: either I am in love, or I am heartbroken.

We drove through Canada and stopped at Niagara Falls, leaning on the wooden fence into the mist. We loped down the steps and took a ride on the Maid of the Mist, getting an awkward photo taken of us in clear plastic ponchos. Regarding Dad as all-knowing, I pelted him with questions. Do you think anyone’s ever gone over the Falls in a kayak? What do you think the Indians thought of Niagara Falls? What would happen if I tried to swim at the bottom of the Falls?

We left and drove up the nape of Lake Ontario, finally arriving in the village of Sackets Harbor. Dad and I stayed at Madison Barracks, refurbished soldiers’ quarters from the War of 1812. The first person we met was Kathy, a tired-looking divorcée from Washington with a 14-year-old son named Dustin. I already knew Kathy from times I’d asked who my dad was chatting with, when I’d bound at the screen like a dog and insist on saying hello. She went by the screen name Dahlia, which I liked for its roundness in my mouth and its rarity.

At the Visitor’s Center, we watched a filmed re-enactment of the Battle of Sackets Harbor. A nearby screen invited us to use a joystick to sink cannonballs into enemy warships. “Good! Shot! Into the Hull!” yelled the game’s British-accented narrator again and again as I drove one cannonball after another into the body of a ship. “Good! Shot! Into the Hull!” I
mimicked at random thereafter for days, like a song I couldn’t get out of my head. The phrase sent Kathy into cackles every time, long after it stopped being funny.

The four of us ate that first night back in the barrack apartment I shared with Dad. Together, we cooked a meal of spaghetti, and together we sat in a circle around the small table, like a family. When we finished, Dad turned to me. “Why don’t you and Dustin go out for a walk while we wash the dishes?”

When you’re nine and comfortable in the world, dark mysteries unfold for you slowly. Dustin and I walked the grounds, an unusual pair. I was skinny, with conspicuously self-braided pigtails and a tie-dyed tank top. He was large for his age and sullen, with plump lips that pulled downward. He seemed a little embarrassed by the circumstances. *Because I’m younger than him*, I thought. *He doesn’t want to be hanging out with me.* We tried to talk, but we didn’t have much in common.

We sat down at the harbor’s edge for a bit, ripping fallen helicopter seeds apart and tossing them into the water. We ventured across a field and peered through the windows of imposing brick-and-stone structures, careful to avoid getting cobwebs on our faces. When we came upon a cannon, I climbed up on it, balancing on the iron shaft in my sandals while Dustin watched impassively. I wondered why I had been sent out alone with this quiet teenage boy. I felt this had something to do with an adult world I couldn’t quite access: a darkened house with a locked gate.

A day or two earlier, listening to The Four Seasons in the car, a lyric had caught my attention. “I felt a rush like a rolling ball of thunder,” Frankie Valli cried in falsetto. “Spinning my head around and taking my body under!” I’d stared at the dashboard, turning the words over in my mind. What was he talking about? A medical condition? Extreme weather? I finally asked
what it meant. Dad mulled the question for a moment, embarrassed. “I’ll tell you when you’re older,” he managed. I blushed, shamed. Locked outside the gate.

When Dustin and I felt enough time had passed, we headed back. Dusk settled pink on the horizon.

* 

When I was thirteen, my father taught me my lineage like a British child learns the royal line of succession. Peter Peter Jer-e-mi-ah Isaac Isaac David. You follow the men; it’s easier that way. Having already charted the men, Dad has branched off in his endless quest and followed certain matrilineal lines. He talks of his great-grandmother, the Scottish immigrant Emma Clara, who married into the family in their early 1900s and has been retroactively suggested as my namesake. He follows second and third cousins into unfamiliar surnames and new villages.

In his office, Dad hangs in a frame the bullet that killed William Henry Wheeler, his 3x-great grandfather, just a few days before Lee surrendered at Appomattox. He also inherited a chest of William’s letters from the war—tiny, yellowed envelopes full of precious wartime mundanity. During my adolescent years, he spent hours in his office hunched over the delicately curved handwriting, converting it to type. I sometimes thumbed through his binder of typed, printed letters. He let me look at the originals, too, provided I was careful.

Most of the letters are addressed to Sarah, William’s grim-faced wife. Sarah sits beside him in the frame above the bullet, her bowl cut severe. Only in their mid-thirties at the time of the photo, William and Sarah look elderly, with deep wrinkles cutting valleys in their foreheads and dark bags pulling down their eyes. The two farmers scowl. As a teenager, in my less charitable moments, I wondered how William could write home so devotedly to a woman who looked so stern and unforgiving.
“Sometimes I think Dad might be having an affair,” my sister confessed one balmy night in May. We were instant messaging, our primary form of communication since she’d moved out five years before.

Usually we talked about music and guys and school and work; this was a sudden and radical departure. I stared at the screen, willing the words to disappear, but instead she added to them: “The trips he goes on. The way he and Mom are. I just have a feeling.”

It had been six years since the trip to New York, but still an image flitted through my mind, the delayed dropping of a second shoe: Divorçée Kathy and a slow summer night spent wandering an empty military barracks with her sullen son. Of course.

I crept out of my room and into my father’s office. I was fifteen, operating on impulse. ICQ was on—the messenger he used to chat—but he was away, downstairs. My next steps were a series of frantic lurches. Hand on the mouse. Chat History. Dahlia. I scanned, eyes darting.

Wish it didn’t have to end

Me too

Doesn’t have to

Sweetheart

Think about

That night

Lyrics from a stupid country song, something by George Strait. He likes country? I thought, revolted. Another log and another and enough. Enough.

I confronted him in the back room, where he was watching television. I couldn’t bring myself to approach him at first, so I sat on the floor in the kitchen, weeping audibly. He
beckoned me in, unprepared for what was coming. It took a few seconds to gather myself, but I
got to the point quickly. “I saw some interesting stuff on your computer upstairs,” I sneered.
“Are you having an affair?”

The loss of innocence doesn’t happen when you read the messages. The full loss—the
circling of the drain—happens when you see the shock and panic and weakness in your father’s
eyes. See it flash there, even though he tries to hide it, even though his expression is frozen. Even
though he tries to lie, tries to calm you by saying it was only words. It’s that surreal flash of full-
cover lightning on a stormy night, rendering everything disconcertingly clear, turning night to
day.

* 

One Christmas when I was in college, my father gave me the Genealogy of the Shumway Family
as a gift. A hardbound book in red cloth, the genealogy had been compiled by Asahel Adams
Shumway in 1909. He spent years conducting research, gathering information through letters to
the family, government records, newspaper clippings, town histories, and information from old
family Bibles.

Everyone with my last name is traceable to a French Huguenot named Peter, who came to
Massachusetts between 1660 and 1675. After crossing the sea to escape Catholic persecution, the
family’s patronymic Adam allowed the sensual mouthful Chamois to be converted into the
phonetically straightforward but culturally ambiguous Shumway. It took a while for the spelling
to stick; Peter’s will from 1695, which survives and appears verbatim early in the book, shows
Peter (or his transcriber) trying out variations: Showmway, Showmwaye, Shamway. His wife
Frances, who died a few decades later, settled firmly on Shumway.
Like a Bible character, Peter begat seven sons in the young colony of Massachusetts. The book follows each line as it unravels exponentially, each line of descent ending abruptly with the date of publication. At first I flipped through just to contemplate the names, many of them vividly outdated: Electa, Elbridge, Sylvanus, Lucretia, Danforth. Some are plainly strange: Square, Read, Preserved. I began to notice how many children had died before they reached twenty, and how often families named a newborn after the child who had just passed, like a replacement, a do-over. In one remarkable case, seven-month-old twin girls Octavia and Olivia died the same day, only to be replaced the next year by another set of twin girls, also christened Octavia and Olivia.

Countless other intimacies hide in the book’s text, resurrecting hundreds of years of relations. Their lives seem to me strange, fantastic. Lucy Shumway, who died July 4, 1789, “was killed by lightning while standing in a doorway between her two daughters.” Jeremiah Shumway was “hospitable to homeless men and tramps, frequently giving shelter and care to such for two or three days,” before being murdered by one of them in 1901. Edward Benjamin Shumway “walked nineteen miles to enlist [in the Civil War] when he was thirteen years of age,” before being sent back home “to grow.” Reverend Salem Munroe Shumway was a pioneer “circuit rider” in Indiana’s early days, “active on the underground railroad.” Deputy Sheriff Solomon Shumway was “absolutely fearless, and more than once faced the muzzle of a revolver,” according to his colorful bio; he was a “great lover of speedy horses,” owning “some of the most famous horses of the time.”

I’ve returned to the book again and again. While some are out on Friday nights, eyes searching a bar for someone to go home with, I’ve studied the book’s pages under lamplight. I linger over its characters. I get to know them.
After I confronted my father, I went to my room and blasted my music, feeling unhinged. I wanted the whole house to shake. He knocked on my door and I opened it. “I’m worried about you,” he said gravely, and I closed the door in his face. He knocked again a few minutes later and passed me the phone.

“I’m coming to pick you up,” my sister said, sounding anxious.

I spent the next three days—school days—at my sister and her fiancé’s apartment in Grand Rapids, recalibrating. I read in her guest room and cried and stared out the window, occupying a pocket of purgatory. Mom still didn’t know, and wouldn’t until she got home at the end of the week. Dad must have been preparing his confession. Gina and I sat on her futon and watched Buffy, eating store-bought cheesecake. She would stay in her apartment, with her Toulouse-Lautrec posters and pet mice. I would return home to face three years of aftermath for my actions. Or his actions. I couldn’t decide which.

On Friday, after my mother received the news, Gina drove me the half hour home. We parked in the driveway and I walked up the steps to find Mom in the doorway, wearing an apron, red-eyed and stunned. Later, though I didn’t want to know, she told me about their conversation. He’d remained calm—I imagine a surreal civility between them as he sat at the table and damaged her beyond repair—until she asked why their daughter had to be the one to find the evidence. That, she said, was the one thing that made him cry.

Mom kept talking, long after filling me in about the conversation. She was an open book that I wanted desperately to shut. I learned through her admissions that Dahlia was just one flower in a bouquet (I didn’t know how many, exactly, but I now know it was more than two); that it started when I was three, when the alcoholic mother of my best friend just across the
driveway crept into our house while I slept upstairs and Mom worked the night shift at the hospital; that he felt a lack of companionship; that he lived in terror his indiscretions would leak out. He was an officer in local service clubs, a member of the zoning board committee, executive director of the county’s substance abuse counseling services. Reputable, well known, well liked. A good man.

Mom claimed her disclosures rose from a newfound devotion to transparency, though the information came tinged with bitterness. I didn’t know where to put this reframing of the past, so I absorbed it reluctantly—my price for being fifteen and impulsive, for opening Pandora’s Box. My father moved in and out, in and out, clinging to the marriage. My mother lived in drawn-out indecision. Eventually they reached an armistice—they would live together and remain married; she would reserve the right to hold him in contempt.

We were family insofar as we lived in the same house, watched the same television, drank the same coffee. But we built our own worlds on our side of the fracture. By seventeen, I’d dealt with my parents’ marriage the only way I could. I’d divested entirely.

* 

When visiting new places, I’ll often spend time in their cemeteries, studying their dead. I like the unexpected flourishes. Seattle’s Lake View Cemetery is home to hundreds of Japanese gravestones, scripted in vertical *kanji*. Trinity Church Cemetery spreads across a block in Lower Manhattan, acid-worn gravestones jutting out of the ground between the skyscrapers, like a gothic vision.

Three times I have bumped into dead relatives in far-flung cemeteries, every time a fresh surprise. First came Henry and his family in Boulder’s Columbia Cemetery. I stumbled across his simple military slab after working a shift at the bookstore, intrigued by the old graveyard in
the shadow of the Flatirons. I looked Henry up later in the cemetery’s website directory, learning
that he went by Hank among his fellow miners and died by “wasting away from pulmonary
tuberculosis.”

Years later, on a cemetery tour in New Orleans’ lavish Garden District, a guide joked
about certain residents’ insistence on securing a sprawling plot to show off their wealth. He
pointed up and I followed his finger to the spacious grave of Edwin Shumway and his family. I
didn’t find Edwin in the genealogy, but I did find Charles P., another name on the tomb. The
book offers scarcely more information than the grave itself, stating only that he was born in
Connecticut and—like many others in Lafayette Cemetery No. 1—died of yellow fever.

Most recently, during a run near my apartment in Chicago one spring morning, I stopped
off to wander through Rosehill, the largest cemetery in the city. Inside, the paths loop in great
circles. It is possible to get far enough into the graveyard that it’s all you can see in any direction.
I’d wandered down by the pond to visit the ducks and was on my way back out when I had an
eerie inclination to glance up and to the left, my head jerked like a puppet’s on a string, straight
at a grave marked SHUMWAY. I shivered.

When I got back to my place, I looked up Charles William. After graduating from
medical school in New York City, he practiced in Essex, where “many could have testified to his
courageous, long rides through drifting snow on the shores of Lake Champlain to relieve their
sufferings.” I blinked at the richness of the image—Charles rubbing his hands together in the
blustery New York winter, wind ripping through his carriage, bound toward some convulsing
patient, undeterred.

Charles later arrived in Chicago, setting up a practice in the 1850s on the city’s troubled
West Side. “He was esteemed by a large circle, both as physician and friend,” the book
describes. “Probably no other physician in the city had a larger list of patients where no charge was ever made.” Opposite his biography is a photograph. White-bearded Charles stares out, making cryptic eye contact with me.

I revisit them often in my mind: the miner, the doctor, the man felled by yellow fever in New Orleans. Those in the book, too: Lucy, lit up by lightning in her doorway, literally shocked; the original Peter, long before standardized spelling, hoping for a “glorious and blessed resueurerecktion.” I have only sketches of them, tantalizing facts, and yet they seem to live somewhere inside me. Familial strangers far beyond arm’s length. Abstract blood. I love them for their potential, for their deadness. Maybe my dad does, too.

The doctor’s son, Noble, is buried beside him in Rosehill. Righteous, good, honorable: noble. Good men, I think. They’re dust now; they can’t prove me wrong.

* 

As a family, we don’t talk about the affairs much anymore. After I initially confronted my dad, he and I never spoke about it again. I didn’t apologize for invading his privacy, and he didn’t apologize for what I found there. I stewed in quiet rage for years, and he offered a wide berth. I wrote, “My dad is a monster” in my journal, and then, frightened by my own feelings, tore out and ripped up and threw away the pages. I avoided him entirely for whole stretches of my teenage years, cycling from fury through indifference and back again. Eventually I arrived, somewhat sadly, at a tired lack of respect. I cast him out into the sea of men, just another one who will disappoint you.

If anyone brings up the affairs to me, it’s always and only Mom. Recently, she surprised me on the phone by bringing it up.
“You know, your dad told me again how sorry he is about everything he did,” she said. It took me a second to realize what she meant. “He hadn’t mentioned it in a couple years. He must have been thinking about it for some reason.”

“Huh,” I said. “Well, that’s good.”

“And he said he felt responsible. For how you are with men.”

This was new, but I knew what she meant—what they both meant. Mom had been suggesting this for years.

I spent my twenties perpetually single. I went on what might have been a thousand first dates, and turned down nearly every second date. I could rarely coax a relationship into existence. I knew the confines of singledom. I liked being alone. I liked controlling my own mornings and not having to fake a laugh and not having to worry. When I’d find someone to hold onto, it would be the man who was foreign, the man who was moving, the man who didn’t want a relationship. By six months, it’d be through.

Before the age of 30, I’d never told a man I loved him.

The theory may be too textbook for me to buy, in a psychotherapeutic sense. Still, it’s strangely satisfying to know that while he has never said anything to me, Dad feels responsible. It’s a vindication of my teenage rage, connecting the past to the present. Maybe that girl was right to be so angry. Maybe she could feel what was coming.

* 

I started watching Ken Burns’ Civil War while home alone one autumn night a few years ago. I remembered then that my father had the soundtrack, mainly a mix of short fiddle and brass band tracks. The disc ends on the famous letter from Sullivan Ballou, a Union officer, home to his wife, Sarah—read over the stirring Ashoken Farewell, a slow, painful waltz. Even as a preteen
listening in the car, the letter seemed to me extraordinarily tender. *Sarah, my love for you is deathless,* he writes. *It seems to bind me to you with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence can break.* It struck me then, at 27, sitting in the lamplight, as almost unbearable. How could anyone be loved this faithfully? Who could be so lucky?

I opened a tab to search for the full text, wanting more information. Sullivan wrote the letter in July 1861, a week before he was killed in the First Battle of Bull Run at the age of 32. As though he knew. He was a lawyer and a politician, elected to the Rhode Island House of Representatives. And then I saw it. He married Sarah in 1855. Sarah Shumway. One of us.

*When my phone buzzes and I see my parents’ landline on the screen, I know it’s my mother calling. She calls often, several times a week, sometimes daily. Small urgencies fill up her mind like a cloud of gnats she has to swat away: am I eating? Do I have enough money? Did I see that shooting on the news? How is it going? Am I happy? How is the cat? Am I seeing anyone? She complains about politicians and tells me about her teeth or her hip or her sinuses. She tells me what she’s reading and who she bumped into at the grocery store.*

Sometimes I miss the call or am too weary to pick up the phone. When I call back, my dad sometimes answers. He asks how I am, and I tell him I’m fine. That there’s no news to report. We could talk about more, like how he used to rock me on the porch when I was a baby, singing *Lazy Bones.* How I rode in the toddler seat on the back of his bike, or on his shoulders. How, as a five-year-old, I hammered nails into a piece of particleboard while he worked with his tools in the basement. How he got me a kayak after I swam 50 laps in a hotel pool. How he used to be a runner, and I ran in the town race he helped to organize—fiendishly, competitively. How he sold popcorn with the Lions Club at high school football games, and I stopped by to help,
feeling powerful as I handed out the greasy bags and took people’s money. Feeling potent in the way only a ten-year-old daughter who loves her father can. How he’s spent the week with his dead relations, and I with mine. But we let a moment pass in silence.

“You’re looking for your mother?” he asks, before passing me on.
I stood outside the library in the mid-September heat, staring at my right arm, speaking on the phone to my mother. When people approached the doors, I veered off toward the bushes, hoping the distance would muffle the conversation. I raised my arm within a few inches of my face, tilting it slowly in the sunlight.

“—a bump. On the skin,” I described, examining through squinted eyes.

“Well… do you have spiders in your room?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess?”

“Well, I don’t know what to tell you. Mosquitoes?”

“There are a few of them, though, actually. The bumps. Do you think it could be… I mean, do you think it could be scabies?”

“Scabies? Where would you have gotten scabies?”

“I don’t know. I just—”

“Well, if it was scabies, your boyfriend would have them too.”

After kissing me for the first time five months earlier, François had looked away and said, “I wouldn’t be a good boyfriend.” It was the fourth time we’d seen each other and we were lying on his bed watching YouTube videos in a fog of sexual tension.

A few long weeks before that kiss, a mutual friend had introduced us at a bar, excusing herself after she’d had one drink and noticed our preoccupation with each other. A few hours
later, he’d walked me home and given me soft *bises*—French pecks—on both cheeks. I’d drifted up to my second floor apartment in a daze and played *La Vie en Rose* on repeat, knowing I was doomed.

I spent the intervening weeks signaling to him in an agony of restraint: adding him on Facebook but saying nothing; refusing to let my friend facilitate; staging myself strategically around campus. I spent my spring break alternating obsessively between reviewing his Facebook profile and reading *Madame Bovary* poolside. Then, unbelievably, my planning and staging and game playing paid off.

The kiss was good—was great—but the bit of honest follow-up was not what I expected. He was focused on his work, he said. He’d be at the lab all the time, and he’d only recently gotten out of another relationship.

“Let’s talk about it later,” I said.

I lay back on his pillow and he leaned over and kissed me again. My hands found their way under his shirt, my fingers beginning to travel up the notches of his warm spine.

He stopped kissing me abruptly.

“I have to get back to the lab,” he said. As a geochemistry PhD candidate, he was on a strict schedule with the university’s single mass spectrometer. When the machine finished measuring the mass of his sample element, he was obligated to return to the lab, record the data, and input his next sample. The university’s machine was state of the art and in high demand.

I frowned. He’d pulled me out of a haze—all warm and whiskery, dark cotton below us and tea candles burning on his dresser.

He registered my disappointment. “Want to come?”
At the lab, François buttoned me into a white coat, smiling. Saturday night at 11pm and we stood in the glowing emptiness of the laboratory as he adjusted knobs and collected data. While he set up the next phase of his experiment, I wandered out of the lab and down the bright hallways, reading signs and peering into dark rooms, into worlds far outside my own. Clean, stark, empty, white tables; sharp angles; negative space. Here things were measured, numbers recorded, conclusions drawn. The science of it—the process—calmed me.

When we left half an hour later, I followed him home to his bed.

I chose him for all the dumb reasons: the laugh, the hair, the height, the hands, the scent. But there was something else, too. I was graduating in a couple months. Everyone around me was excited to enter the professional world, but I was dreading it. Getting to this premium university had been my dream, but it felt like I was operating on borrowed time. I knew how to earn a high GPA, how to take things seriously. But I had no connections through my parents. I didn’t know who to talk to, how to sell myself. I’d begun to notice how many of my friends went to private high schools, how many had family in high-level corporate or government positions, how many at the apartment parties I went to talked about the politicians their parents knew. A gulf was opening.

Having recently moved from France to Chicago, François was navigating a foreign world with confidence and precision. I watched him write figures on the page, his hand steady. He seemed so solid, so measured and controlled, so like the elements he studied.

*I would not be a good boyfriend,* he’d told me immediately. I did not heed his warning.
The Internet provides everything a hypochondriac needs to perpetuate her paranoia: boundless (and often conflicting) information; little context or perspective; a cautious tone that registers as dire. A term—cyberchondria—has even been coined to describe the escalating panic caused by looking up symptoms online.

A person who suspects herself of harboring parasites should avoid microscopic images of them. Scabies look like obese, hairy, many-legged manatees. Their near-spherical shape implies insatiable hunger. Image searching returns a perfect mine of psychic horror: illustrations of mites caving through the dermis, depositing their oblong eggs behind them; bites ranging in appearance from a thick constellation of angry red spots to a few pale, barely visible dots connected by faint tracks; worst-case-scenario photos of those with subpar immune systems, scabies crusting their skin.

I had only dabbled in hypochondria before that summer. In high school, I’d once visited the doctor for run-of-the-mill tension headaches and requested a CT scan. A few years later, I misdiagnosed myself with a panic disorder when I was actually just drinking too much coffee. While I’d always been high-strung, the past year had been especially rough. Around Thanksgiving, I’d contracted a hellish case of mononucleosis after sharing a chai latte with a friend whose own infection was still gestating. Some people have a tame version of mono that mimics the common cold; mine left me bedridden for weeks. I hobbled to the bathroom and back, spine slumped, like an old woman.

When the mono finally subsided, it left an exhausted immune system in its wake. Springtime was dotted with illnesses. A few weeks after I began to date François that April, I caught a cold, which included an ear infection—something I’d thought couldn’t be contracted after the age of six. I passed my cold to him, turning him stuffy and snotty.
Then came cold sores—two or three over the course of the summer, triggered by sunburn or stress or abrasion from kissing a stubbly face, and unchecked by my still-underperforming immune system. I’d gotten cold sores since I was a child. The herpes virus was a family inheritance, like alcoholism or passive aggression. Still, they were painful, oozing things—freshly revolting each time. Worried François would be disgusted, I withdrew into a self-imposed purdah for the seven to ten days it took for the sores to disappear.

By September, it was becoming clear I couldn’t count on my body.

Through the early spring, François and I developed a routine. He’d drop by for tea in my bedroom as I worked on my BA thesis and we’d talk and kiss for a while. Nights we were both free, once or twice a week, I’d go to his place for dinner, a movie, sex. The last of these was new for me. I’d been waiting years. Not for love, exactly, but for something nearly as elusive: desire.

He lived near the top of Regents Park, an apartment complex at the foot of Lake Michigan. The apartment wasn’t grandiose, but the view was. From the windows in the living room, we’d look out over the city glowing orange. François’ own room overlooked the lake. I’d stand at the window at night and take in the darkness that spread out vast and empty. Calm like an ocean. The candles would flicker in the smooth glass, the reflection mixing with the view, like sky lanterns floating out in the still darkness. I’d stand transfixed, arms crossed, staring out. And then from behind, a hand would glide gently over my pelvis, downward, until I turned around and inched with him back to the bed.

I’d always wake first in the mornings. In my underwear and one of his shirts, I’d be drawn again to the window, to look out over the water. There’d be sailboats bobbing, and along the lakeshore path, joggers in nylon. They’d run a consistent track, tiny and rhythmic, like
motorized toys. I could see my placid face in the window. Could I be this girl? I’d wonder. Someone intimately tied to an eventual French science professor. Someone with a window view high over the lake. Someone who cooked dinner with French music playing in the background and had sex on navy, high-thread-count sheets and planned annual trips to visit in-laws at their spacious home in the South of France.

In my apartment a mile away, my roommates and I had a sticky linoleum kitchen floor, which I couldn’t get clean, no matter how much I scrubbed. We had mice that skittered across the room and left me screaming.

This life all seemed wonderfully extravagant, a world beyond my purview.

In early June, days before graduation, François met me in the quad to dump me. He told me a story: He’d met a girl on a bus. He and the girl had gotten coffee. The girl had a boyfriend, but that coffee was more substantial than our past two months. That coffee felt like love.

While I’d been staving off the creeping intuition this was coming, the intense physicality of my reaction suggested shock. Do not let him see you cry, my brain transmitted. Eyes getting shiny, I nodded at his explanation, then turned around and walked home. The tidal weeping that followed over the next few days left me bewildered. You didn’t love him, I kept reminding myself. This was what I’d been telling friends over the past couple months: I like him a lot but I don’t love him.

I reached out to Mark, an older friend.

“‘It’s possible to hurt a lot,” he’d said.

“And not know why?”
“You know why. Your body thought it was home.”

François continued to contact me, and for the next few weeks we met up occasionally to talk. We explained and analyzed and historicized until we were both satisfied with the narrative of what had happened and why. Still, we continued to see each other: getting coffee, getting dinner, practicing French, taking walks.

In late June, in the middle of a conversation in my room, he leaned over and kissed me. I asked about the girl, and he said she was gone for the summer. He’d asked her not to contact him. But if he saw her back on campus in the fall, he disclosed grimly, he didn’t know how he would feel. Her departure, the weeks of pleasant talking, the kiss—I was drawn back in. I followed him back home to his bed.

In the weeks we’d been split up, friends had investigated and leaked details to me about the girl: her name, soft and feminine; she was beautiful; she was a dancer. She hung above us like a specter.

The night after talking to my mom on the phone, I woke up scratching.

Panic stuck in my throat like trapped vomit. François slept beside me in the blackness, eerily still as always, and I mirrored his stillness while I considered my options. My arm screamed, the urgency building, and I peeled off the sheets, slithering toward the foot of the bed. I always got the wall side.

In the bathroom, I flipped on the light and examined my skin. My right forearm was dotted with seven pinkish welts; moderate bumps with faint marks in the center. I dug into my
arm, making red and white streaks. I stopped and stared down, believing somehow that if I could focus intently enough, the cause of my affliction would reveal itself.

Scabies straddle the line of naked-eye visibility. The American Academy of Dermatology claims the scabies mite is “so small you cannot see it on the skin,” while WebMD suggests they “may look like tiny black dots.” My arms are near-translucently white, with a northern European’s signature blotchiness. I saw flecks of the mildest pigment everywhere. The bumps themselves had hyper-itchy centers—dots. The web literature also emphasizes “track-like burrows,” often compared to pencil marks, and I saw a sinister dot-track on my arm, Morse code for freak the fuck out.

My brain looped an alarm: You’re infested with parasites. You have parasites. Parasites are living in you. You are a host. You are infectious. You are full of bugs. You are different and disgusting. Your boyfriend will be disgusted. Everyone will be disgusted. You cannot blame them. You would be disgusted too. You. You. You.

I chased myself in a circle from the sink to the edge of the bathtub to the toilet seat, spinning. If I stayed still, I’d have had to figure out how to manage this—the potential colony of parasites tunneling through my arm, the man I may have exposed to them just across the hall. Sharing parasites with a partner is the kind of intimacy that requires excessive, almost hubristic security to weather, like shitting with the door open. Our relationship was fragile, fawnlike. Over the course of five months, we’d broken up once already. The balance between us felt tenuous, easily tipped. I couldn’t even bring myself to pee without him playing music in the next room.

Panic crying is borne of exhaustion. It’s the body breaking down under a hungry emotion. The itching and the inscrutability of what had happened, was happening, would happen— it’s
relentless. There’s nothing you can do to appease the urgency of 3am. It’s an hour that demands a solution when you’re least able to provide one.

I turned on the faucet and stuck my arm under the stream, thinking maybe it was possible to drown mites. Maybe this was Niagara Falls. I wondered if I could dissociate myself from the itching. *This is just your nervous system telling your brain your arm is irritated. The scratching will do nothing. It’s a trick.*

When François appeared at the bathroom door, rubbing his eyes under a soft halo of brown curls, I was still leaning over the sink, studying my toweled-off forearm, tears streaming down my face. I couldn’t tell if he looked more tired or concerned or confused.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, and I wanted both to shrink back and to crumple into him. I did neither.

The dermatologist took my arm in her gloved hand, needing only a split-second. “Yeah,” she said. “That’s not scabies.” Relief rushed over me.

“You’re sure?” I asked.

“100% guaranteed,” she said, backing away and pulling the gloves off. “Spider bites, maybe. Do you have a lot of spiders? In your room?”

I texted François the good news on the way home. I was in between apartments, spending a week with him while waiting to move into my new place. The timing couldn’t have been worse. When I’d asked him if I could stay the month before, the prospect had seemed fun. By September, it had begun to feel needy and calculating.
The previous few weeks had been tense. François’ sister, Claudine, was visiting on an extended vacation, and they played tennis and toured the city during the day. Like him, she was beautiful—long blonde hair, olive skin, soft brown eyes. Together they seemed to glow with the ease of their upbringing. He’d shown me photos of growing up in Bordeaux: poolside gatherings behind their large house, spreads of meaty pâtés in silver dishes, private-school peers.

Initially, François’ wealth was quiet, subtle. I’d known about it—the grandfather who’d invented some obscure gadget and accrued a windfall—but it had been a hum in the background. He hadn’t flaunted it; he wore the same few monochrome shirts and had a sparsely decorated bedroom full of IKEA furniture. But the hum was getting louder. His father sent him $10,000 to buy a car, and Claudine was traveling the world. He’d dropped a couple thousand on, of all things, a marble table.

Meanwhile, I was still working at the university library, a work-study job set to expire in a week. I hadn’t gotten a bite on my applications and I had barely any savings. If I didn’t find something soon, I’d have to move back in with my parents in small-town Michigan, an isolation I didn’t know if I’d ever find my way out of.

Back in July, François had returned from a brief vacation and told me, unexpectedly and with a great deal of gravity, how much I meant to him. He’d been to the Grand Canyon and returned with a rose pink quartz for me, shaped like a heart. But his mid-summer surge of affection had cooled. Fall was moving in. François went from the lab to entertaining Claudine to squash with a friend he’d made recently. I sat in his apartment with my laptop, sending applications into the void, looking out the window at a view I didn’t feel entitled to, and scratching my arm. He seemed unconcerned about the itching and dismissed my fears, but he touched me less. And looked at me less. And talked to me less.
By that evening I had another bump. I called my mother to schedule a dermatology appointment for later in the week, when I’d be visiting home.

Parasitism is distinguished by its non-symbiotic quality: there is a giver and a taker. Parasites access the most intimate parts of us, burrowing under our skin and surfing through our blood. Lice cling to the base of your hair follicles and gnaw on your scalp. Tapeworms catch a ride on undercooked meat and set up a home in your digestive tract, lengthening themselves like unspooling thread.

The intimacy of this setup makes us queasy, but it doesn’t fully explain the intensity of our disgust. Like any other animal, humans at their cleanest are still home to many billions of gut microbiota, a kind of benign internal city, synthesizing our diet for a cut of the profits. We eat Greek yogurt and sourdough to make them more efficient. We take probiotic tablets, introducing billions of colony-forming units to our intestines, hoping they’ll take root and reproduce.

But parasites only drain us, siphoning blood and living rent-free. We don’t even know they’ve arrived until the unsettling, ambiguous signs: itching skin, abdominal discomfort. Even after we know they’re there, we’re powerless until we access the cream or the shampoo or the pill. Once we finally know something is eating away at us, nothing feels more urgent than ending it.

Like many children, I once had lice. The teacher’s aide caught it as she did one of her monthly checks, carefully separating the strands of hair on my scalp with a sharpened no. 2 pencil. The source turned out to be Martin, a boy who lived next door. He was a few years younger and he got on my nerves, but I’d played with him barefoot in the grass of my front yard anyway.
When my mother learned the cause of my infestation, she told me to stay away from Martin. She’d already been suspicious of his family. The mother had too many kids and couldn’t seem to care for them properly; the baby’s used diapers sometimes ended up blowing into our yard, like tumbleweeds. The boys were wild and crass. But there was something under that, too. In a town as small as ours, there was always an anxiety in the air—the sense that poverty and instability might pass from one family to the next, like lice.

In a good mood the night after my appointment, I decided to make mushroom bourguignon for François and Claudine. The kitchen counters were crowded with strips of portabella, diced onions and carrots, bottles of red wine, fresh herbs. It smelled like heaven. The choice had been nostalgic. Our first night together, the night of the first kiss and the trip to the lab, I had made the same meal in a bid to impress him. We’d stood together in the kitchen, cutting and peeling the vegetables and taking glugs of wine. It had worked.

This time, though, it was just me doing the cooking while François entertained Claudine in the other room. He drifted in and out of the kitchen.

“Are you almost done?” he asked more than once, growing irritated.

Over dinner, François and Claudine spoke in French while I picked at my noodles. I thought back to months before, when he seemed more out of place than me. When he’d gotten upset with himself while trying to order eggs one morning, unsure of how to interpret the waitress. Sunny-side up? Over easy?

“I’ll never figure this out,” he’d said, distraught. This meaning English, meaning America. His flash of vulnerability had surprised me, but I knew how he felt. All spring I’d been
looking at job descriptions, clicking back to the blank Word documents I’d been trying to convert into cover letters. *Unpaid? Five years’ experience preferred?*

We were both vulnerable, I’d told myself then. We were both in new situations. We understood each other.

But the moment over eggs turned out to be only a moment.

François had the lab, the apartment ten stories up, the friend to play squash with. He had adapted. Most of my friends were gone, on to new cities with new jobs. My work at the library was wrapping up, and soon I’d be looking for work as a barista. While François measured the masses of elements from space—while he literally uncovered the secrets of the universe—I’d be frothing milk and washing dishes. In that moment, like a final joke, I was technically homeless, crowding François’ bed with my itchy arms. The shirt he handed me each night began to feel like charity.

I got up from the table and headed down the hall toward the bathroom, then veered into his room instead. It was Claudine who found me 20 minutes later, sitting on his bed, impassive and wet-faced.

He was surprised to see that I’d been crying and didn’t know how to manage it. But there wasn’t much to manage.

“I don’t feel like your girlfriend anymore,” I said.

I texted a friend and asked if I could sleep on his couch.

I was awake before anyone else the next morning. Lying on the overstuffed sofa in the murky light, I navigated to YouTube on my laptop. Months before, in mid-April, I’d gone to a Florence
+ the Machine show at the House of Blues with a friend. I only knew one of the band’s songs at
the time, but in person, I found Florence Welch striking: otherworldly, theatrical, vividly
redheaded. Her features were large and severe, her beauty unconventional.

François and I had only been dating a few weeks at the time. I had just finished my thesis
and begun applying for jobs. I was preparing to hatch into something colorful. At my core,
beneath my anxiety, there was an undernourished sense of potential, possibility. I’d looked at
Florence and felt a creative, loosening impulse. I loved her. She was herself—a strange and
wondrous spectacle.

One of the encore songs stayed in my head. When I tried to show François the video a
few weeks after the show, he’d only watched a few seconds before taking his eyes off the screen.
“I can’t even look at her,” he’d said, repelled. I’d been struck silent, jarred.

Headphones already in, I searched for and clicked on the video. In it, Welch wears a veil
of pearls and a white dress, a goddess at a pre-Raphaelite feast. I watched her spin and cavort and
I waited for the lyric I wanted: *I must become a lion-hearted girl, ready for a fight.*

I looked down at my arm. The welts hadn’t changed, but they seemed more contained,
somehow: just a handful of bumps. The itching bothered me less.

I drove back to Michigan later that day in a haze of calm. The drive was familiar: grey, flat,
boring. Big-box stores, strip malls. I relaxed into the familiarity of it. The view from the car
window wasn’t grand or glistening, but at least it felt like mine.

In my hometown clinic, the dermatologist examined my arm, the second to do so in a
week. Like the first one, it didn’t take her very long.
“This doesn’t look like scabies to me. I think you have allergic dermatitis. I think you touched a plant or something.” Then, glancing at my face, she added gently, “But I’ll prescribe you the cream anyway. I know how it feels to need the reassurance.”
The Singer

One afternoon in early July 1937, a fifteen-year-old named Betty Klenck settled down in front of the radio console in her home in St. Petersburg, Florida. She liked to listen to music and cruise the short wave radio, which, due to a long antenna wire her father had installed in the back yard, could pick up signals from around the world. Betty was scanning the short wave when she picked up a woman’s voice.

*This is Amelia Earhart*, the woman said, repeating herself several times.

Startled, Betty grabbed the notebook she used to sketch drawings and jot down song lyrics and began to record what she heard. Fading in and out over the course of three hours, the woman frantically sent messages and Betty wrote them down the best she could. Betty heard a disoriented man, too, and what sounded like a struggle for the transceiver. Eventually, the signal faded out completely. Betty sat for a long stretch of time before the radio, alone in the room with nothing but static.

The notes in Betty’s book are confusing, rendering a chaotic scene:

*SOS / Stop — Amelia [male voice] / Speak / Uncle / Oh oh / (Crying now) / Help / Help us quick / I can feel it

*Airport / Marie / Oh / Where are you? / Waters knee deep / Let me out [male voice—yelling] / Where are you going? / We can’t bail out

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*Hear from me, hear from me / George / Get the suitcase in my closet / California / Are you / Marie, hey! Marie [male voice] / Amelia Earhart*
Days earlier, on July 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Amelia Earhart’s airplane had gone missing on the last leg of her journey around the world. She and her navigator, Fred Noonan, had taken off from Lae, Papua New Guinea, over the vast and largely uninterrupted Pacific Ocean. Their destination, 2,556 miles away, was Howland Island: an uninhabited, bean-shaped island fewer than 2 miles long and half a mile wide. To help guide them to the tiny island, the \textit{Itasca}, a Coast Guard ship, was stationed at Howland. But Amelia never made two-way contact with the \textit{Itasca}. Her messages came through for hours: she reported the weather (cloudy and overcast) and her last position over land (the Nukumanu Islands, 800 miles out). At 200 miles from Howland, she requested the \textit{Itasca} use its direction finder to provide her a bearing, and began whistling to provide them a steady signal to home in on. The \textit{Itasca} complied, but she heard nothing. At 100 miles out, with increasing anxiety, she sent a similar message.

The \textit{Itasca} couldn’t make contact. Desperate, the ship used its oil-fired boilers to send up smoke for Amelia and Fred, but they didn’t seem to see it. At 7:42 am, Amelia transmitted: “We must be on you, but cannot see you—but gas is running low. Have been unable to reach you by radio. We are flying at 1,000 feet.”

At 8:43 am, her final message was recorded by the \textit{Itasca}: “We are on the line 157 337. We will repeat this message… We are running on line north and south.” Then she was gone.

Betty’s father came home while she sat on the floor, several days later, writing down Amelia’s words. Catching the end of the transmission with Betty, he took off to report what they’d heard to the Coast Guard. There, he was turned away—told they’d had what they needed. Amelia was never found. It was conventionally assumed she ditched at sea near Howland Island, though no wreckage was ever recovered in the search. Amelia was declared dead \textit{in absentia} on January 5, 1939.
Years later, as biographers pored over her belongings, a letter written from Amelia to her mother in December 1934 came to light. “G.P. said you were an awfully good sport to stay alone in the little house,” she wrote, referring to her husband, George Putnam, and her mother’s willingness to stay in their California home while they were both away. “I have taken possession of the stuff in the zipper compartment of my brief case. Put it away until I turn up and if I don’t—burn it. It consists of fragments that mean nothing to anyone but me.”

Like an echo from a dream, the letter seemed to recall a moment from Betty’s transcriptions: *Get the suitcase in my closet.*

* 

I return to Amelia again and again, and, via glowing screens, to the remote Pacific into which she disappeared. YouTube offers a multitude of documentaries, short clips, and rabbit holes. Late at night, wrapped in a blanket in my bed, I type *Amelia Earhart* into the search bar and work my way through the results.

I consume a 50-minute documentary from Naked Science, which culminates in the insistence by a group of Iowa navigation experts that Amelia ditched into the ocean around 50 miles to the northwest of Howland Island, her intended target. I watch a 25-minute history and aerial tour of the footprint-shaped atoll Nikumaroro—an uninhabited part of the Phoenix Islands approximately 5 miles long by 1.5 miles wide, where Ric Gillespie, founder of The International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery (TIGHAR), believes Amelia crash-landed and lived briefly as a castaway. I watch nearly five minutes of “Medium Interviews Amelia Earhart from the Afterlife,” an hour-long production, before scanning the comments and learning the medium never even asks what happened to her.
I clear the search bar and type in *Amelia Earhart voice*. Few video clips exist of Amelia, and even fewer videos of her speaking—audio-visual technology was in its infancy at the time she disappeared. Still, the search brings up a short clip of Amelia describing her first solo trip across the Atlantic to an English interviewer. She stands before a chalkboard with a pre-drawn map of her course, using a piece of chalk to indicate where she hit turbulence. She sounds awkward, and it quickly becomes clear that she’s reading from something off-screen. “A weld… broke… shortly after I left… Harbor Grace,” she says, squinting off to her left.

In *As Modest As She Is Brave!*, a 30-second clip for London’s Pathé Gazette—something that would have been shown as part of a news package in a cinema—Amelia seems similarly uncomfortable. “Were you very excited when you saw the land?” the interviewer asks eagerly. “I wasn’t exactly excited,” Amelia says, looking impassive. “Because I had expected it, momentarily, for about an hour. I was very glad to see it, however.” She gives the interviewer a tight, closed-mouth smile, covering the wide gap between her two front teeth.

I watch these clips of Amelia—along with a few others—repeatedly, trying to read her complex expression. She’s withholding something. She seems uncomfortably self-aware, something beyond camera-induced awkwardness. In a highly staged video of Amelia meeting actress Mary Pickford, the latter expresses her gratitude to Amelia for her work to “eliminate the limitations placed upon women for centuries.”

Amelia glances around uncomfortably. “I can’t help feeling my flight meant little to aviation,” she says, “But if it means something to women, then I feel it justified.” She seems shy, perhaps, but there’s something else in her face—she’s *embarrassed* to be giving these interviews. Her accomplishments by this point are fine, she seems to be tempering, but they’re
also standard for the field of aviation. *I encountered turbulence; I was supposed to see the land; this flight was not strictly record-breaking.*

In 1932, Amelia expects more from herself.

*Amelia didn’t discover her love for flying until she was 23, after dropping out of college twice and leaving behind a brief career as a nurse during the war. Flying was hardly a career track, and during the early years of learning, she worked as a teacher, a social worker, and a newspaper columnist. But she always prioritized flight.*

Amelia learned to fly from Anita Snook, taking lessons beginning in 1921. In 1923, she became the 16th woman to earn her pilot’s license from the World Air Sports Federation. Snook liked Amelia—they were close in age and became friends in their time together—but she expressed some reservations about Amelia’s skill. During one of their early flights together, Amelia crashed their plane into a field after it failed to gain enough altitude to clear a eucalyptus grove on takeoff. Both women were safe, though the propeller and landing gear were damaged. Snook later reflected, “Perhaps I had misjudged her abilities.”

Snook wasn’t the only aviator to get nervous around Amelia. On her first attempt around the world in March 1937, Amelia ground-looped while trying to take off from Pearl Harbor, one wing jutting up suddenly while the other tilted down to the ground. The action grounded the plane and stalled the flight. While Amelia thought a tire had blown or the landing gear had collapsed, Paul Mantz, Amelia’s technical advisor aboard the plane, cited pilot error. Mantz, a stunt pilot who later wrote an autobiography, *Hollywood Pilot*, felt Amelia was being pushed too quickly beyond her abilities by her husband and PR champion, George Putnam.
Putnam scheduled Amelia for a grueling speaking tour, including 136 speeches from the time she committed to her flight around the world to the time she embarked—more time than she was able to practice flying, Mantz noted. Amelia was tired. When the trip was refigured following the repair of her Lockheed Electra, Amelia reversed course, taking off from Florida and heading east. The decision was made to accommodate changes in expected wind and weather patterns, but it would put her over the most difficult stretch of the trip—the vast Pacific, from Papua New Guinea to Hawaii—near the end, when she was at her most exhausted. The flight to Howland Island was approximately 20 hours straight, and Amelia herself was anxious at the prospect of making it.

“Not much more than a month ago, I was on the other shore of the Pacific, looking westward,” Amelia reported from Lae in her last letter to the press. “This evening I look eastward over the whole Pacific. In those fast-moving days which have intervened, the whole width of the world has passed behind us, except this broad ocean. I should be glad when we have the hazards of its navigation behind us.”

Amelia was right to be concerned. She had received only a preliminary training with the newer radio navigation that her Electra was equipped with, and her trailing antenna, which would have allowed her to pick up greater frequencies, was either voluntarily removed early in the trip, damaged in her final flight, or not properly equipped to descend. Neither she nor Noonan knew how to read Morse code, and they’d left their Morse equipment behind to save weight. Some reports even indicate they’d left their life raft behind.

Further, Amelia had complained cryptically of “personnel unfitness” in a telegram to Putnam from Lae, which could have been anything from personally feeling ill to problems with Noonan, a rumored alcoholic. They were peering down a voyage laden with risk.
Despite all this—the danger and discomfort, the skepticism—Amelia sent a farewell telegraph, buckled into her airplane along with her navigator, adjusted the dials, and taxied off the runway into twenty hours of near-endless Pacific Ocean.

*I*

I didn’t fear flying when I was young, but I grew to fear it as I moved into adolescence. In the weeks leading up to overseas flights when I was 12 and again at 16, I vividly imagined crashes, always into the ocean—the total lack of control in my stiff seat, the anticipatory drama of the death. According to a study by the National Institute of Aviation Research, if Amelia ditched in the ocean properly—if her lap belt was working correctly—she could have survived the impact. She would have had about eight minutes to get out of the cockpit before the plane sunk. Without a raft, she would have been exposed to the elements in the open ocean, and likely would have drowned.

I never imagine surviving a plane crash, like I never imagine surviving cancer. To me, all major threats, when abstract, are fatal. But things tend to look different when you occupy the besieged territory. For all my fear of plane crashes while on land, I lose most of that fear while flying. In the soft white-noise hum of the aircraft, cutting upward through piles of clouds, I never stop looking out the window. The patchwork fields of the Midwest, Chicago’s circuit-board night-lights, the gape of the Grand Canyon, sky-glowing rivers, the disquietingly empty ocean: my head clears.

My fears now, the ones that stir me awake at night, are rarely as concrete as a plane crash. They’re existential, inexorably tied to the path I set out for myself as a child—a path I didn’t realize at the time would be difficult, discouraging, littered with failure. And yet I could no sooner give it up than cut out an organ. *I want to be a writer,* I started saying at thirteen. But it
wasn’t enough just to write. Once I began to entertain the concept, I had a certain vision, a notion of what I could be: Good. Successful. Some big talent.

A few years ago, mulling over applying to MFA programs, I sat in a lavender-scented room and tried to explain one of my pressing fears to a therapist: why I was reluctant to apply myself fully to writing.

“I guess I just think of the singer,” I said, glancing nervously at the pre-emptive box of tissues on the side table.

“The singer?”

“Yeah. You know how when you’re growing up, there’s always that person who thinks they’re going to be a singer? They really think that’s what they’ll do. And everyone is encouraging, but then behind their back, everyone knows and agrees they’ll never make it as a singer. They’re not good enough—the talent isn’t there. And so it’s actually really sad. That’s what I worry about, but with writing.”

The therapist looked confused.

“I mean, it doesn’t have to be a singer,” I clarified. “It could be an actor or an artist or whatever.” I couldn’t name the singer I was talking about—no one specific came to mind, but the truth of the scenario seemed potent nonetheless.

“But does it matter what other people think? If that person is happy?”

Yes, I thought. It does.

“I don’t know,” I said.

*  

In truth, had Amelia lived to be an old woman, I would probably not be very interested in her—certainly not obsessed, as I am now. Straightforward stories of success tend to bore me, even
when they’re groundbreaking. Amelia has been given the sainthood treatment standard for a handful of recognized female trailblazers—we learn about her in our textbooks; toddlers read books about her; we name schools and parks and bridges after her. Gawkers are waved away from her final moments, assured these aren’t important—we should focus on her life, they emphasize. Still, few of those who are captivated by her can leave her death alone.

The theorists have split into bitter factions. The “crash and sink” adherents—least sexy of the theorists—have the respectable distinction of holding close to Occam’s razor. Amelia said she was near Howland and said she was low on gas; likely she ditched at sea. Yet lengthy searches of the seafloor have turned up nothing.

On the other side of the spectrum, one group of theorists has Amelia and Fred crash-landing on Saipan in the Mariana Islands, which was under Japanese occupation. The pair were kept for a time, this theory holds, and then executed. In 2017, this theory took on sudden momentum when a photograph of a Caucasian couple sitting on a dock in the Marshall Islands was shown in a History Channel documentary. But the evidence was ultimately debunked when the photo was revealed as being from a Japanese travel guide published in 1935.

Perhaps the most beloved theory is the one that TIGHAR and its Executive Director, Ric Gillespie, has been chasing since the ‘80s: Amelia and Fred crash-landed on Nikumaroro, an atoll located approximately 350 miles south of Howland—right on the line Amelia claimed to be running on. There, they lived for a brief time as castaways, and then died within weeks or months. TIGHAR—which, despite its broad name, focuses primarily on Amelia Earhart—has led close to a dozen expeditions to Nikumaroro, turning up odds and ends each time: a 1930s Cat’s Paw heel, though two sizes too large; fragments from an empty jar matching a kind produced in America in the ‘30s; a scrap of aluminum that could have come from her plane.
In 1940, a skeleton was found near the “Seven Site,” a seven-shaped clearing on the island where most of the other artifacts were recovered. Over nearly 80 years, the bones have been a major topic of interest. Taken to Fiji after they were discovered, the bones were analyzed by a doctor who declared them to be that of a small man. While the bones were lost soon after, forensic anthropologists revisited his measurements in the ‘90s, determining they were likely from a Caucasian female of Amelia’s stature. More recent findings are no clearer; in 2015, a team of anthropologist re-examined the measurements and agreed with the original findings, while in 2018, American anthropologist Richard Jantz used photographs to estimate Amelia’s bone length and declared her to be a 99% closer match than all others in a large reference sample. Jantz’ findings, however are complicated by his “collaborative” relationship with Ric Gillespie and offer no real evidence.

TIGHAR has found compelling clues, but has yet to produce the smoking gun. And Gillespie has a lot of fans, but his reputation has also been called into question. Doubters say he raises millions for quixotic quests to the Pacific, that he falls victim to confirmation bias and the objects he produces could conceivably be explained by subsequent attempts to settle on the atoll.

Despite the shakiness of the data—and the reluctance of most credible establishments, like the National Air and Space Museum, to get on board with Gillespie’s findings—the media loves the castaway theory. “Amelia Earhart’s Last Chapter Was as a Heroic Castaway” CNN declared definitively in November 2016. “New Evidence Reportedly Indicates Amelia Earhart Survived Crash,” Fox News published in September 2016. By November of that year, Jezebel was done even considering other possibilities: “Amelia Earhart Died on a Desert Island in the Pacific, We Get It.”
The castaway theory would mean Amelia succeeded in a small way, even in her catastrophic failure. She may have gotten off course, but she landed the plane. It would also mean that as one of the most famous women in the world at the time, she’d spent the last few weeks or months of her life in total isolation.

* 

Before setting off from Lae, Amelia and Fred were grounded for a day due to adverse weather. The entire trip had kept her on a tight schedule, and this was one of her first opportunities to explore the land. She walked through a coconut grove to a village of stilted huts formed around a central, open plaza, and saw native women, some of the first women she had seen in Papua New Guinea. She saw dogs and pigs wandering freely. She was captivated.

“I wish we could stay here peacefully for a time and see something of this strange land,” she wrote to her husband. But conditions cleared the next day, and she and Fred took off.

* 

After Betty’s father was waved away by the Coast Guard, he hardened. He didn’t go back in the weeks after, even as the search for Amelia took over the news. Betty tried multiple times to get someone to listen to her. She contacted someone in Washington, D.C., who transferred her to a dead phone line. She wrote to a television broadcaster, who wrote back that he wasn’t interested. Her story would go ignored.

Over the years, Betty replayed the desperate voices of Amelia and Fred in her mind (Help / Help us quick), feeling compounding guilt that she couldn’t do anything. She remembered them often at night, Amelia’s voice breaking in while Betty thought over her day. She would tell people: I know what happened to Amelia.
Finally, after sixty years, a friend of Betty’s reached out to TIGHAR. In the context of Gillespie’s castaway theory, which has Amelia landing on a flat reef surrounding Nikumaroro—dry at low tide, covered in up to three feet of water at high tide—the notebook conveys a vivid scene. Amelia and Fred sit in the broiling aircraft, the water rising on the reef around them (*Waters knee deep*). Fred has been injured in the crash and is out of his head with the heat—all he can think about is leaving the plane (*Let me out*). Eventually, the gas runs out and the plane must be abandoned. It is swept around in the high tide like a toy, and finally plummets over a steep drop at the edge of the reef toward the ocean floor.

After high school—after several abortive attempts to convince people she’d heard Amelia—Betty stopped trying. Amelia was lost, she’d decided. But Amelia’s voice, relayed through the urgency and intimacy of radio and replayed again and again in her mind, as if Amelia was whispering to her and her alone, unlocked something in her.

Betty learned to fly.

* 

In one of my earliest memories—I must have been four years old, maybe even three—I am standing in an airport before a display case in the middle of a terminal. Inside the case is the massive shell of a sea turtle, recovered from some Pacific island beach. I stare at the shell in awe, a kind of euphoria settling on me.

I traveled internationally throughout my childhood—always back and forth, to and from Germany, my mother’s homeland—but the shell felt like a different kind of promise: *there’s more than you know out there. There are colors and creatures you can’t even fathom. Worlds are waiting.*
In the fall of 2015, after enough nights spent staring out my office window from behind my computer screen, I started searching: funded MFA programs; MFA creative nonfiction. I looked over the lists of requirements and made a spreadsheet. I didn’t know what would come after. It felt like the height of impracticality. It felt like I was preparing to step off a cliff. But it also felt like exhilaration—like the ecstatic weightlessness when the plane leaves the runway.

* 

When I think of Amelia, I don’t think of her the way people want me to, the way I know I should—up in the air, smiling, sailing through clouds. I don’t think of her founding the Ninety-Nines or giving speeches on women breaking into new fields. I don’t even focus on her pre-nuptial letter to her husband, fabulous though it is (I must exact a cruel promise and that is you will let me go in a year if we find no happiness together).

Instead, I think of her sitting on a palm on an island atoll, looking weakly ahead at the S.S. Norwich City, a shipwreck stranded and gradually decaying on the reef in the middle distance. Her throat sticks from lack of saliva and, cruelly, her body keeps producing sweat. Fred has died and she would bury him if she could gather the energy, but it’s a low priority right now. She knows she has maybe a day or two, unless it rains again. The sky is cloudless.

As she sits, she feels the hint of a breeze coming in from the north, tussling her bangs. In between her plans, broadcast as single-word directives (fish, fire, coconut), fragments of thought find their way through.

She sees Anita flinching as Amelia brought down that first plane in the field, the way she was quiet for a while after that. She thinks of Paul on the plane back in Maui, the way he shouted Jesus Christ at her as the plane skidded up, before he could stop himself.
She sees an image of herself as a nurse, before she dropped out of school to pursue her dream of flight. She treats a wound, changes out of her scrubs, and leaves the hospital. On the street, she passes all the people safely tucked into the city, all going home. She sees how this would have happened, day after day, a comfortable unfolding. How this life was made-up and readied for her, like a soft bed, and she’d rejected it. If she had the energy, something in her midsection would ache.

Then she shifts her focus to the foreground, where a group of crabs, bigger than she’s ever seen, have scavenged the carrion of a massive sea turtle and are working it over. They tug, pulling out scraps of white flesh, and for a moment, she’s back here, and a euphoric calm settles over her.

*What a thing to see,* she thinks.
Three Tablespoons

“I could see she had blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her... wherever” – President Donald J. Trump

On July 4th, 2000, in an outhouse in southwest Michigan, I pulled down my underwear and found a pinkish smear. I stared for a long minute, considering my options. I’d learned from fourth grade sex ed that this was my period: a monthly signal that I was not pregnant, but now could be. I was twelve and a half, which is, according to OGBYN.net, almost exactly the age at which the average girl starts her period.

In class a few years before, we’d watched a video to introduce the concept. The girl in the video was anxious she hadn’t gotten her period yet. She’d wanted it badly. I couldn’t remember the rest of the narrative—it wasn’t that important—except that when it finally happened, she was overjoyed. She told her mother, who was also thrilled. Her mother unloaded a paper bag of products on the table, explaining each one. Her directness intimidated me. Insert it into your vagina, she said, holding up a cotton stick. I thought of the confusion of terrain between my legs and tried to imagine impaling myself. When the girl went back to school, she ran through the halls, feathered bangs blowing off her forehead, to tell her friends on the bleachers: she was finally a woman. She and her friends smiled shiny white smiles at each other. Then the screen turned black and the television was wheeled out of the room.

I was not excited to be a woman. I felt rushed, hustled out of my youth. By the natural light in the outhouse, saturated in the rich smell of human excrement, I wadded up a ball of toilet paper and pressed it into my underwear. My mother and best friend had gone home that morning, and I would head back with my father later that day after one more kayaking trip with family.
friends. I would tempt fate by donning only a bathing suit and heading out onto the river. The water would inhibit blood flow. I would later form another toilet paper ball in the outhouse and another in a gas station on the way home.

I would say nothing.

* 

A little over two years later, in my last class on my second day of high school, I got up from my seat, walked to the front of the room, and turned in a geometry worksheet. I returned to a muffled red splotch on the beige plastic chair. I registered this without expression or gesture, sitting down and staring forward robotically. I tried to prioritize the flood of panicked thoughts entering my mind: did anyone see? How would I manage this? Maybe I could say I have a cut on my upper leg? Nobody said anything—nobody laughed. Maybe nobody saw.

A more immediate concern: class policy required placing our chairs on top of our desks at the end of the day, in preparation for the janitor. This was out of the question. I would sit and wait.

When the bell rang fifteen minutes later, my classmates gathered their things, put their chairs on their desks, and shuffled out the door. I remained sitting, eyeing Mr. Metzger, who was grading papers near the front of the room. He seemed not to notice that I was still there.

I stood and wrapped a flannel around my waist before approaching my teacher, a warm and pleasant man. He looked up expectantly.


His eyes widened almost imperceptibly.

“The janitor will take care of it,” he said.
We stood in silence, my eyebrows arching into a ragged peak. The corner of his mouth tugged upward just slightly. Pushing himself out from the desk, Mr. Metzger rose and walked to a cabinet toward the back of the room. He pulled out a roll of industrial-grade paper towel and a spray bottle. He walked to the front of the room and placed them in front of me.

For years, this was my most embarrassing moment—made up of the stuff girls confessed to in teen magazines. I took a certain pride in the sheer horror of having endured it. I told it in in a lowered voice to a small group of friends in the bleachers at a football game. I offered it up anonymously on Internet forums. My natural instinct was to hide this memory, to keep it close to the vest. But buried under that was a stronger, deeper impulse to reveal it.

* Estimates of how much blood the average woman loses per cycle vary, though most sources suggest it’s in the range of two to three tablespoons. I’d first heard this number more than five years ago while channel surfing during spring break and pausing on The Tyra Show. Tyra Banks was “breaking the stigma” about periods and quizzing audience members on menstrual facts. A girl guessed several cups—a number that seemed accurate to me—and Tyra corrected her. I stared at the television, stunned, wondering if I’d misheard.

“How much would you guess a woman bleeds on average per period?” I messaged my friend Mae recently.

“I don’t know. Three… cups?”

When I showed her the estimate I’d found, she accused me of gaslighting. I tried another friend, who guessed “a pound,” and another, who guessed roughly a cup. We all found the luxury and insignificance of three tablespoons to be irritatingly comical, akin to the propaganda—spread by scandalized teenagers everywhere—that women don’t defecate.
Three tablespoons is for the fictional character in the tampon commercial—the woman who cavorts in meadows and rides horses, wearing white linen. Menstrual Cycle Barbie might bleed three tablespoons.

Such a number could never justify the urgency and uncontrollability, year after year, decade after decade. The casualties pile up and get tossed out: the underwear, the jeans, the skirts, pajamas, bed sheets. One night, well into adulthood, I bled straight through several reinforcements (tampon, pad) and woke up damp and upset, like a child who’d wet the bed. My IKEA mattress bears a faded brown bloodstain from the night, which I get preoccupied with every time men help me move.

“Google was made by MEN,” Mae joked. Of course. Why else would this representation be so muted and downgraded? What else could explain this apparent gap between felt experience and lived reality?

Three tablespoons? Where was all the rest of it?

* 

During my last year of college, I lived with a guy who routinely peed and forgot to flush the toilet. Occasionally he even left the door open while he did it. When I noticed this, I was more irritated than disgusted. Mostly, I gaped at his comfort with his body—his ability to see it as a natural extension of his environment, down to its waste. Meanwhile, I carefully wrapped my menstrual products in toilet paper, covering any trace of visible blood, before I put them in the trash.

Eventually, I made a passive aggressive sign and hung it above the toilet: Please CLOSE DOOR and FLUSH TOILET. The sign came down after a while, the message delivered. I continued gently wrapping my products.
One evening in the summer of 2015, I logged off my computer at work, put my keys in my purse, and rode the elevator down to the lobby of the John Hancock building. This was in the nerve center of Chicago, and like every other day, the plaza outside was packed with people. I waited in the crowd at the bus stop, climbed into the crowded bus when it arrived, and rode several miles north along the lakeshore to the grocery store, where I meandered, gathering a week’s worth of groceries. When I left, I caught the Foster Avenue bus a mile and a half west. Finally, I walked into my apartment and set down my bags, then headed to the bathroom to pee.

This is when I saw the blood: through my tampon, through my underwear, blooming on the back of my black and white skirt. Black and white and red all over. I rewound my last hour: wandering through the grocery store, standing on the bus, waiting at the bus stop, walking through the lobby, leaving work. I thought of the faux-leather chair in front of my desk. I felt dizzy and reached for my phone.

“I bled through my skirt,” I texted two friends with whom I shared an ongoing group message. “I was on the bus. I was at work. I just now saw it.”

“Do you want me to bring you chocolate?” one of them asked.

“Yes. Yes.”

When she arrived, I pulled out the skirt and presented the evidence.

“Look at it,” I gestured.

“It has a pattern, though,” she said, shrugging. “So that helps.” I eyed her skeptically and she handed over the chocolate.

The next morning, I woke up and headed into work an hour early to ensure I was the first one there. I’d engineered a plan: if the chair was compromised, I would look for disinfectant
spray; if there was no disinfectant spray, I would go to the corner Walgreen’s for cleaner; if the cleaner didn’t work, I would cover the seat with a sweater and confide in one of my favorite coworkers, the tech guy, John. He knew how to clean everything. I’d even planned for the worst-case scenario: if the chair could not be cleaned with whatever he brought me, I would offer to buy a new one, and together we would develop an excuse for the original chair’s destruction. Coffee? Acid? Just not blood—never blood.

When I arrived, I crept through the dark hallway like a spy. I approached my desk and pulled out the chair. Clean.

I exhaled.

*  

Occasionally, I come across news stories of women using their menstrual blood to make art. In May 2015, *Buzzfeed* published a story about a photographer named Jan Lewis, whose latest project, “Beauty in Blood,” consisted of capturing ambiguous reddish drizzles—her own menstrual blood—suspended in liquid. Most of the images look like ethereal jellyfish. Lewis stated that her goal for the project was to “normalize the menstruation process.” She said the idea had come to her one day after she’d switched to a menstrual cup, when she noticed how similar the blood was to paint.

Below the article, commenters were decidedly unconvinced.

“I am beyond grossed out by this,” one woman said.

“I’m not saying menstruation should be taboo,” another clarified, “But this is too much.”

In November 2016, the Daily Mail featured a 20-year-old named Jess Cummin, who “collect[ed] her menstrual blood on a brush or using tampons” and painted a series of images in her sketchbook of women meditating. The headline was suggestive of a scandal: “People feel
uncomfortable and disturbed by it’: Student artist uses her MENSTRUAL BLOOD to recreate ancient female cave paintings.”

In the article’s first picture, Jess smiles out in her long, white dress, lightly tanned, with cropped hair and a nose ring. Speaking to the Daily Mail, she must know she’s in for a hit job, but her expression is less naïve than irreverent. Yeah, that’s right, her smile says. Fucking look at my blood. Photographs of her painted meditating ladies are presented prominently throughout the article.

Unlike Buzzfeed’s gentler demographic of commenters, the Daily Mail attracts a crowd ready to be provoked.

“She must be sick in more than one way,” an Australian said.

“Disgusting.”

“WHY????”

“Self-indulgent attention seeker.”

Like Lewis and Cummin, I’ve always noticed this quality of menstrual blood—the viscosity, the plasma-like consistency. The slow drain of it, like paint. I’ve been fascinated by the beauty of the way it swirls in water, and uncovered a twin shame in finding that beauty. This shame has gnawed at me.

Lewis and Cummin aren’t quite the isolated freaks the media makes them out to be. Menstrala—menstrual art—has a naturally self-limiting community, but it flourishes nonetheless on blogging sites catering to young and earthy feminists, like Livejournal and Tumblr. Clicking through these sites brings the viewer up close to astrological conjecturing and she-wolf awakening. The brown-red of the art is off-putting, even a little sickening at first. The compulsion is to look away. But the more you see it, the more you dull your innate responses,
and the more interesting it becomes. I clicked on posts expecting to laugh, but found myself strangely moved instead. “I was worried people would think I was doing it for shock value,” one artist wrote. “Truth is, I don’t think it’s shocking.”

I’ve stopped short of putting blood to canvas, but I’ve understood the compulsion.

*Look at it. Look at it. Look at it.*

Less than a year ago, I had a brief relationship with a friend before I moved from Chicago. It was a muggy June, leafy green, and the city was breaking sharply into summer. We’d kissed standing ankle-deep in Lake Michigan, after walking the length of Foster Avenue. We slept together some days later, after watching *Mulholland Drive* and cradling sweaty beers. We realized we wanted to be having sex only a few weeks before we wouldn’t be able to anymore.

We lay in his bed one night a week before I left, kissing. He moved a hand down my stomach, toward my waistband.

“Mm,” I said. “I’m on my period.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. His hand circled my waist. We continued to kiss, and I felt something in my midsection stir. My body wasn’t powering down like I hoped it would.

“Actually…” I said, breaking away. I’d grown tired of the obligation to shield men from the reality of womanhood—the vibrant red blood, the uncontrollable mess of it.

“Fuck it,” I said. “Go get a towel.”

He fumbled in his closet and I left for the bathroom. I removed my tampon and used a mound of toilet paper to clean myself. I wasn’t right at the beginning or near the end of my period, but in the peak—bleeding heavily.
When I came back to his room, I saw he’d laid a dark green towel over his blanket. I lay on top of it and we resumed kissing for a few minutes before I found his belt buckle and worked it loose. Moving him into position above me, I felt driven, assertive.

Later, after we finished, I focused on the scene between my legs. We were red and sticky, covered in rapidly drying blood. I reached down and wiped my hand along my inner thigh, through a red bead traveling slowly down my leg, then lifted the hand for us both to see.

“`I like this,” I said, smiling at him, dazed. “I feel primal. It doesn’t bother you?”

“Nope. I’m just sorry you guys have to go through this.”

“It’s okay,” I said dreamily, gazing at my hand.

Look at it.

*

Not long ago, 32 days after my previous period, I woke up, peed a bloodless pee, and stepped into the shower, thinking: *I may be pregnant.* The thought was quiet at first, a rustle at the back of my skull. My cycles were routinely unpredictable—anywhere from 27 to 35 days—but I’d relied on withdrawal recently when my boyfriend and I didn’t have a condom. I thought of a friend’s response when I’d mentioned this: *You know about pre-cum, right?*

I made myself coffee and a bagel, gathered my things, and headed toward campus.

As I sat in my office trying to read, the thought seemed to awaken and inflate. It insisted on itself. *You may be pregnant. You may be pregnant.* I drank cups of tea and peed again and again, hoping for blood and getting none. I checked the period tracking app on my phone for the date of likely ovulation. Based on the tracker’s estimate, things were not looking good.

By the time I entered my classroom to teach at 1:00, the thought was congealing into a half-certainty. I had Schrödinger’s womb: both pregnant and not pregnant. I took attendance and
began talking about the upcoming narrative assignment, half looking at the class, and half imagining my expanding abdomen. I assigned a freewriting assignment, sat down at my laptop, and opened Facebook.

“I want to take an OTC pregnancy test,” I messaged my boyfriend. “I think we slept together when I was ovulating.”

“!!!!”

“I just want to know that I’m not. This is a very florid and bad type of anxiety.”

“Okay, we can get one. Wait… are you teaching right now? And talking about pregnancy tests with me?”

“They’re freewriting. I’ll disappear in a second,” I typed.

“Freewrite: talk about the dread of pregnancy in America,” he offered. I smiled faintly and closed the tab.

By the time he arrived later that afternoon—with both a pregnancy test and a large pizza—I was in my bed, shaking under the covers and scrolling wearily through Instagram on my phone. I looked up at him, forehead rippled with concern.

He walked over and smiled sadly. “You okay?”

“I don’t want to have an abortion,” I said. “But I would.”

This was the lesson. I could not be pregnant so I would not be pregnant, even if I were pregnant. I would end it. I would tell no one and do it as soon as possible, in a race against dividing cells—*your baby is the size of a pea, a grape, an apple.* I would take the pill that ends it if I still could. I would swallow a Xanax and drive to the nearest Planned Parenthood—Pittsburgh?—and risk the protesters. Every minute I would think about it, and fret about it. And still I would do it.
I’d written pro-life papers for my ninth grade English class. Later than year, I was confirmed Catholic—the last ritual—walking down the aisle toward the priest in a snow-white eyelet skirt. I thought of these things as I lay in bed waiting for the test. I thought of a student from my fall semester of teaching, who I’d overheard tell another he would vote for the candidate who was against “baby killing.” I thought of a conversation I’d had just a few months earlier, when I’d said I was pro-choice, but I could kind of understand where pro-life people were coming from, in a certain philosophical light—

“I don’t want to have an abortion,” I repeated. I meant not that I wouldn’t, but that I didn’t want to have to. I needed him to see this—the anguish of my position, the frustration of bearing this anxiety, this potential consequence to my body. Mine alone.

“Oh,” he said, petting my hair. He handed me the box and I unwrapped it, disappearing into the bathroom.

I emerged a minute later and set the wand down on the table.

“We have to wait three minutes,” I said. I climbed onto the bed and rested my head on his warm chest. He read me the news from his phone. A series of thoughts wove into each other, and a sentence from a news interview I’d heard months before echoed in my head: There has to be some form of punishment for the woman. I gritted my teeth.

After a few minutes passed, I got up and walked over to where the wand was sitting, approaching it like a snake. I leaned over to look at the tiny screen. “One line. Not pregnant,” I exhaled.

“Yeah?”

“See?” I said, pointing to the stick. “Look at it.”
The summer I was sixteen, when the rooms inside my parents’ house began to feel too small, I developed a habit of crawling out onto the roof. The window in the guest room could be jimmied up, if you stuck both hands against the pane. There was no screen—everything in our hundred-year-old house was either broken, or in the process of breaking—and through the window, the gently sloping roof with grey and blue shingles was a kind of empty non-space, where I seemed to exist less. Below, my parents were likely watching television news, a blinding, continuous shudder of rapid-fire, primary-color graphics. Up there, it was silky night, night-bug chirps.

Sometimes I sat up and looked at the neighborhood: the Murphys’ house next door with its bright kitchen light over the sink, where dark-haired Mr. and Mrs. Murphy occasionally entered into a play, talking and gesturing; the church steeple that played the same tired organ recording through town every day at noon and again at 6pm; the cars taking Church Street downtown.

Mostly I lay on my back and looked at the stars.

Back inside the house, inside the boxy PC in my bedroom, lived Pip. Though it seemed like a paradox, two things were true of Pip at once: I had never met him, and I was in love with him. I had been for more than a year, after encountering him in a forum on a music website, adding him on MSN messenger, and downloading a scanned photo of him laying PVC piping as an Eagle Scout project. Golden curls sprouted out from under a spelunking helmet, and he smiled widely up at the photographer, blue eyes wrenching my stomach. A Greek god, I thought. I printed the
photo and stuck it in a drawer. In return, I sent him a photo someone had taken of me from a stairwell above. I sat cross-legged on the floor wearing pajama pants and a tank top and headphones, gazing upward, blank-faced at the camera. A deer in the flash.

“You’re pretty!” he’d said.

Our lives seemed to be reflections of each other. There were the American generics: he, too, had two siblings; lived in a small town; suffered nobly through Catholic mass on Sundays. But there were also pin-prick specifics, a whole shared emotional register. We read the same books, found the same music, liked the same lighting, occupied the same imagined spaces. He let me call him Pip because I’d remembered the beginning of *Great Expectations*, because he was the first Philip I knew.

In those early moments, we talked about Weezer and I sat in my room, shivering with feeling, playing “El Scorcho” on repeat—I’m a lot like you, so please: hello, I’m here, I’m waiting.

I’d stand up and walk around my room in circles, restless and stuck. I’d looked up the directions to his house on MapQuest again and again: 642 miles away. I walked the square-grid blocks of the neighborhood, giddy and nervous, internal newsfeed reporting a major, private headline. *I’m in love with a boy from the Internet. I’m in love with a boy from the Internet. I’m in love with a boy from the Internet.*

We wrote back and forth for days, then weeks. Then months.

Now it’d been a year and a half, and Pip had gone away to college, a local state school in Maryland. He’d been sending updates over instant messenger. Among them was a girl named Chantal, whose hair he’d held back while she vomited up college-party beer. He thought Chantal was attractive; he didn’t know if she liked him back.
I had been renting seasons of *Sex and the City* from the Family Video and practicing yoga with a DVD and mat my mom had bought and never used. I was practicing being someone who could stop being in love. I was practicing detachment, becoming. I brought my palms to my chest in *Anjali mudra*: prayer hands.

“I think if you like her, you should pursue her,” I typed to Pip. I closed the chat window and left the room in my bare feet, heading for the guest bedroom.

Dad had moved out and back in enough times that I no longer remember, looking back, when he was and wasn’t living in the house. I’d discovered the affair—the affairs—a year before, shortly after I’d fallen in love with Pip. I’d been looking in the chat windows on his computer, tipped off by my older sister, who lived forty minutes away and talked to me mostly through chat windows on my own computer.

The most recent affair was with a woman he’d met on a genealogy forum, someone who shared his interests in a way Mom didn’t. Their chat service of preference was ICQ, one of the few I hadn’t used. She was a divorcée who lived across the country and flew to meet him when he went on “business trips.” I’d even met her once, when I was nine, on a trip with Dad to New York for a genealogy conference. I remembered her vaguely—dark hair, deep voice. A photo negative of Mom.

Though my sister had suspicions, this auxiliary life was a shock to both Mom and me. Our home strained with fraudulence in the wake of the exposure. I avoided Dad whenever possible, taking privacy-maximizing routes through the house, studying the floor. Mom couldn’t make up her mind. She’d forgiven him too quickly, reserving the right to ask follow-up questions, to be resentful, to pierce him with poisoned quips, like a Voodoo priestess with a doll.
Some nights, she was in a good mood, and we played along that we were a functional, normal family. Some nights, she stewed heavily, and we orbited our own private planets. Mine was my PC, where the mp3 files I loved lived in hundreds of folders, where the people I loved lived in chat windows.

•

Early that summer, my friend Shelby went with her family on a trip to Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, where they rented a house on the beach with her cousins from D.C. It was under two hours from Pip’s house in Maryland. Shelby was one of my few friends who knew about Pip and me. I’d printed out our relevant conversations and had her read them while we sat on the bleachers waiting for gym to start. They’d even talked online a few times—everyone becoming part of the same amorphous, unbounded network. I convinced him to drive down and meet her.

Before she left, I decided I would give Pip a tour of my life. I rooted in my dad’s file cabinet for his video camera, which we’d stopped using. I put on a green and blue flowered skirt and a white blouse and stood in front of the mirror, rubbing foundation into my skin and adjusting to understand my angles.

My friend Meg and I left the house and walked the few blocks downtown. She held the camera on me.

“This is Secondhand Corners,” I explained, and Meg panned the lens around the dingy resale shop. “Remember when Meg and I told you about that dirty romance book we bought? That was here. Also, check this out,” I said. Meg followed me up the creaking wooden steps past the motorcycle jackets and helmets and onto the third floor, where plastic-covered mattresses on bed frames covered the room. I pointed toward the corner and she turned, centering the camera on a standing stuffed grizzly, so mangy its fur was falling out in patches.
We took Pip across Jefferson to the hunting shop, looked up and down the street for cops, and ran up the metal fire escape in the alley to the roof. We showed him the broken glass bottles and approached the roof’s edge, raised up Western-style, panning the camera over the top for a wider view of town.

“Well, this is Hastings in all its glory,” I said. “Wish you were here. Or wish I was there?”

That night, after all the work Meg and I had done, I watched part of the footage and recoiled. My upper arms were chubby in my white shirt; the outfit was dorky; my face was a pale, greasy mess. My expressions were stupid. My voice was nasal, unbearable. I’d imagined myself cute and witty; instead I was embarrassing, desperate.

I rewound the tape back to the beginning and walked downstairs through the dark. In the backroom, I set the camera on the coffee table. I walked into the bathroom and turned on a light, then came back out and closed the door all but a crack, letting a faint glow into the room.

I’d sat on the couch opposite six months before, quietly, in the dark, with Pip on the phone. His voice was a pulse in my ear.

“I love you.”

He’d said it suddenly, while we were getting off the phone. My breath had caught in my throat. We’d typed it before. First love, over and over, delicious pronouncements; then luv, for a moment, when we’d gotten cautious and practical (“We haven’t met, really; how can we know?”); then lov for a while, which seemed better somehow, more unique and less childlike, though still compromising; before finally circling back to love again, because dropping a letter didn’t really hedge any bets.

“Are you okay?” he’d asked.
“I… I want the first time I say it out loud to be in person,” I’d said. I’d had a plan. It was going to be real, perfect. We’d be able to touch each other. We hadn’t had a chance to start yet.

“I understand,” he’d whispered. “I understand.”

I adjusted to night mode on the camera, turning myself into a warm animal, whites of the eyes, white camisole, and blonder bits of hair tinted bright green. I set the camera back on the table and pressed the record button.

“Hey. Meg and I made you a video today, showing you all over town, but I decided I didn’t like that. I wanted something simpler. I just wanted you to see me. So. This is me.”

When Shelby stopped by before her trip, I took the tape out and handed it to her. I decided not to watch the second version.

“Listen,” I said. “I want you to give him this, but only if he’s the guy we’ve talked to, the guy in that picture. Only if you think I’d be in love with him.” I knew she would know.

When she called me a few days later, after I’d spent all day pacing and writing and trying to read and nervously cleaning, she sounded calm and sure: “Emilie, it’s him. It’s the same guy. I gave him the tape.”

On the roof, you could see both the Big and Little Dipper, and what I was pretty sure was Orion’s Belt. I liked that they were so far away and yet there in my line of sight, reliable. Back against the shingles, I saw something else: the apartment Pip and I were going to rent in Chicago, on the second floor, above a combination coffee shop/bookstore we would own. The apartment was a studio with a queen-sized bed opposite tall windows to the street and a kettle on a stove in the kitchen. I’d written a poem about the apartment, about waking up to his sleeping face beside me, to his eyelashes flecked gold in the rising sun through the window.
We’d planned it out when we were both going to go to Chicago for college, before he revealed his end of the plan had fizzled—that it was cheaper to stay in state, and anyway his grades weren’t good enough to get out. I let the apartment dissolve into space.

“I wonder if he’ll end up with her,” I said. Meg, on her back beside me, didn’t need to ask who I meant.

“Ugh,” she said. “Who is named Chantal, anyway?”

“Someone sophisticated. Maybe she’s from a big city,” I said, pulling myself up to a seated position. I folded my legs lotus-style, bare feet facing upward, and breathed in deeply, closing my eyes. “Maybe she’s French.”

“She’s probably annoying,” Meg said. “Didn’t she throw up on him?”

I looked out at the neighborhood, thinking: sophisticated. I imagined Carrie and her girlfriends holding clear-colored drinks in shallow cocktail glasses, condensation beading on the sides, a single green olive resting at the bottom of each. Chantal was living her life. I had never even been drunk. Off to the left, across the neighbors’ yard and across the street, I focused on a house on the corner of Church and Green. It had always blended into the background of our rooftop panorama, but for some reason, this time, I focused.

“Hey,” I said, pointing. “Have you ever noticed that house never has lights on?”

Meg sat up, running her fingers through her brown curls. “You’re right,” she said. “It doesn’t.”

“Should we check it out?”

•

It was sprinkling the next morning when we walked over. There were neighboring houses behind the corner house on two sides, and two in line of sight across the street. We walked quickly but
nonchalantly up the driveway, then tilted off into an alcove hidden from both streets. The yard was unmowed and covered partially in debris. I scanned the ground and picked up a baseball, dappled with neglect and stuck with bits of grass. I turned it over in my hand, finding a signature.

“Who is…?” I focused hard. “Pete Rose?”

Meg shrugged.

“Look,” she said, pointing to a spread of logs below a set of bay windows. “Let’s pile them up and see if you can look inside.” Meg was four inches shorter than me and might not have been able to reach it, but I definitely could. We moved quickly, aware we could still be seen from certain windows in the neighbors’ houses.

When we finished, I climbed on the stack, which held steady against the house. I was surprised when I touched the window’s rail and it budged. Curling my fingertips around the wood, I pried it out, then pulled the whole pane outward, leaving the window wide open. Framed in the opening, I leaned into the house.

“Well?” Meg called out. “What’s it look like?”

The smell was awful—stale and rotten at once. The sink was piled with dishes. Children’s artwork hung from the refrigerator. Dishes and rags and fast food bags and appliances cluttered the countertops, and garbage bags full of bottles huddled on the floor.

“It’s gross,” I called down. “I’m going in.”

Leveraging myself on my elbows, I hoisted my body up and crawled through the casing. I scooted over the counter and dropped to the floor. Moments later, I saw Meg in the frame, her eyes scanning the room. She looked behind her for witnesses, then pulled herself up and crawled through. She dropped to the floor beside me.

“Oh my god,” she said.
We pulled out drawers to find silverware still stacked in trays and rags clean and folded. Meg pulled open the fridge to find Tupperware and takeout boxes still inside, full of untold horrors.

“I can’t believe they left the dirty dishes in the sink,” she said.

“I can’t believe they left any of this.”

We crept around the debris in the kitchen and walked into the carpeted living room. An armchair faced a television surrounded by VHS tapes. Framed photographs still sat on the tables and dotted the walls, children smiling complacently in front of a hazy blue background. In the rotting corpse of family routine, a sinister second life was sprouting. Garbage bags full of bottles lined the floor, the apparent residue of partying squatters. Things felt touched, violated. But it was unclear how much the family itself had contributed to this condition before their flight. Clothing was strewn across the floor. Junk piled up in corners, valueless objects no one had bothered to pitch. We stood dumb in the center of the room for a moment. Then we followed a cleared trail to the stairs.

“Should we go up?” I asked Meg, suddenly nervous. Breaking onto the first floor of an empty house had struck me as nearly an invitation, somehow, but there was a heightened invasiveness to going upstairs, peeking into the rooms where people dressed, slept, dreamed.

“Well, we’re here,” she said and laughed, tracking in front of me.

At the top of the stairs, we glanced into a bedroom, which was strewn with clothing and furniture, too much of a mess to enter. A mail console stood in the hallway, unopened letters pouring out of it.

“Oh, my god,” Meg said, while I examined the mail closely.

“What?”
“Look. Right there. In the corner.”

I bent down long enough to see a small brown mouse, clearly dead, lying on its side.

“Oh, my god,” I breathed.

“Do you think it committed suicide?” she snorted.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Let’s check out the last room so at least we’ve seen everything,” she said, pointing to a door down the hall on the right. It turned out to be a small bedroom, with a twin bed tucked inside. On the floor, along with piles of clothes, was an impressive stack of pizza boxes.

“God, this is disgusting,” I said. Meg was scanning the receipts taped to the lids of the pizza boxes. “Let’s just go.”

We turned around and crept back past the bathroom, past the dead mouse, past the mail console, and started down the stairs. The momentum had started us into a tiptoed jog.

We hurried through the piles of clothing and bags full of bottles back into the kitchen. Using a stool, I crawled onto the counter and pushed my feet backward out the window, lowering myself until I felt the logs under my feet. I breathed in the scent, relieved: summer rain, wet grass. I watched Meg’s feet come sliding out the casing, watched them hit the wood. She gingerly closed the bay window and hopped down.

•

I put the baseball in my closet. My thoughts returned again and again to the unopened letters. They were addressed to the name Bellinger. There were many Bellingers in town—they seemed to reproduce rapidly, though I didn’t know if it was a religious thing or just a kind of carefree, easy fertility. I’d had a Bellinger in my French class freshman year. He was a junior and had the
ruddy cheeks and shorn blonde hair of a boy who baled hay in the summers. I’d nurtured a brief crush, imagining for him an inner life that was complex and moving.

Days after Meg and I crawled into the house, she and another friend got into the detached garage, where a car had been left parked and unlocked. While rifling around inside, they’d found a disposable camera and taken the film to be processed. Meg brought me the photos and we went through them together. It appeared to capture a family vacation to Philadelphia: a baseball game; some famous local buildings; a photo of the Liberty Bell.

“Maybe they were on the run from the law. Maybe they killed someone,” Meg speculated. We were walking around the few blocks of the downtown, trying to think of something to do. It did seem like the residents had left in a rush: dirty dishes in the sink, clothes strewn across the floor.

“Maybe they just… moved somewhere else?”

“Without taking any of their stuff?” she balked.

“Yeah,” I conceded. I thought of the children’s drawings, the years it must have taken to pile up all those movies. I thought of the clothing, each piece carefully selected, tried on in a fitting room, admired, purchased. I tried to imagine how people might abandon everything it had taken them so long to cultivate.

School started a few weeks later. I sat in class with the same people I’d known for years and mostly tuned out. I read while my classmates turned in their seats to talk to each other about football games and parties. I wrote in my notebook.

Pip was adjusting to college, though I could tell he didn’t love it—that he still felt out of place, just as he had at home. Before leaving that summer, he’d weighed other possibilities. He
was smart and skilled, if undedicated. He’d played soccer, was a lifeguard, knew how to do CPR and use a compass and write HTML. But he was also increasingly disillusioned. When we’d started talking, we’d shared everything, laying ourselves bare. We’d imagined a vibrant life for ourselves, for the two of us. In the year and a half since, I’d followed him through a thicket of ideas that left me feeling wiser but colder: into atheism, into a broader distrust with the world around us. I was willing to engage, to trade comfort for closeness. But when he withdrew into depression, he locked the door behind him. It was the final chamber I couldn’t enter.

Pip’s dad, a West Point graduate, had brought home military pamphlets, hoping his son would stop being so sensitive, so aimless. College was a compromise, a way for him to get out of the house.

That fall, Pip picked up a shift at the college radio station, and sent me a link to listen from the Internet. If I’d been better at detachment, I’d have left it alone, but instead I rushed home from school, typed in the link, and waited for his gravel voice, heart in my throat.

“The next song is dedicated to Emilie, the indie rock queen of the Midwest,” he said in the middle of the show, and I flopped sideways onto my bed, hand over my heart, the opposite of detached.

A month or two later, Pip dropped out of school abruptly and moved to San Francisco—three times as far from me as he’d been before. He began building a life there. Our conversations dwindled.

•

One night that fall, Mom discovered the ugly mauve carpeting, which covered half of the floor downstairs, was loose in a corner. She’d pulled it back to reveal an elegant hardwood. I came downstairs to find her pulling the carpeting clear out, the matted pink folding back on itself in a
pile in the middle of the room, exposing a bright yellow foam pad beneath. I grabbed an edge and began to help, moving furniture and ripping the carpet. It felt wonderful.

“Does Dad know you’re doing this?” I asked.

“I don’t care. I’ve always hated this carpet.”

We pulled up the foam and folded it back into the piling carpet. The floor below was beautiful: along the perimeter of each room a more expensive walnut, and in the center, a lighter pine. It was the original flooring, I realized—there since the house was built in 1900. Someone had covered it up before my parents had moved in.

Over the next few days, we pulled out and rolled up all the carpeting: from the dining room and living room through the hallway and up to the top of the stairs. The wood floor was scuffed and worn, but the house seemed to breathe better.

For a few nights, I sat alone in the dark on the living room floor, adjusting to the new scene. The furniture had been removed in anticipation of someone coming in and giving a quote on refinishing, but I’d brought in and plugged in the stereo. The room felt clean, stripped to its bones, and the moonlight through the big window made the floorboards shine.

I was listening to Coldplay’s *A Rush of Blood to the Head*. I knew Pip wouldn’t like it. It was too conventional. He’d started playing the guitar and singing, and his opinions about music, like everything else, had begun morphing into Truths, proclamations he would dispatch to me.

But I liked the way Chris Martin’s voice resonated in the empty room, and the ethereal current of the piano calmed me. The music swelled and slowed, mimicking my heart. Martin’s lyrics were simple, quiet confessions: *the truth is, I miss you so.*
Pip wouldn’t need to know. About the abandoned house, about the ripped-up carpet, about the truth of the lyrics. I was learning how to keep things to myself—how there was romance in these private moments, too.

•

On the roof, in the last few warm nights in September, Meg and I plotted. We were still going to Chicago, the two of us. She’d study fashion merchandising or advertising and be like those women in movies we watched, working in tall buildings, wearing sunglasses and pencil skirts. I’d study anthropology or international studies, learning about distant places—China, India, Egypt, Peru—while bent over a book beside a candle, like a shut-in at Oxford. She’d get a dog and I’d get a cat and on Sunday mornings we’d get brunch. On Saturday nights, the wind off the lake whipping our hair, we’d walk along downtown avenues beside buildings full of lights. Artificial constellations.

•

Meg and I tried to research the house at the library, but we found nothing. That winter, we’d open the local paper to find a short notice that the house had been reclaimed, had been bought and would be gutted. I was surprised, somehow, to know prospectors were onto it, that even in its state of abandonment, it had a life outside of us.

The article had no information about why the house had been left as it was. We were left to wonder. Its moldering rooms implied a dark past—family turmoil, financial crises—but I liked to imagine it differently. Maybe the residents just had enough of the routine of a small Michigan town. Maybe the house closed them in. Maybe they’d moved somewhere grander, somewhere with a golden bridge, or with tall buildings that glowed at night. Maybe they’d just needed their lives reframed.
A Hate Story

Sam situates the camera at himself in the bathroom of the Terrell, Texas home he shares with his wife, Nia. He whispers to the imagined audience on the other side, sharing his cunning plan. Nia, he says, texted him during his nursing shift that she was two weeks late on her cycle. She pees throughout the night and doesn’t flush, he explains, as she’s afraid of waking their two young children. Now he has a “specimen,” and hopes to fulfill his “dream” of “announcing Nia’s pregnancy to her.” So begins an eight-minute-long video that went viral in early August of 2015.

Sam samples a bit of urine from the toilet bowl with an eyedropper and then deposits it carefully on a pregnancy test he’s brought home from work.

“Two lines is pregnant,” he explains, focusing the camera on the test. After a moment, two dark pink lines appear. Sam gasps dramatically, spins the camera back onto himself, and spends a few moments vocalizing his surprise: oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh. He raises his eyebrows, covers his mouth with his hand.

“She’s really pregnant!” he exclaims. Nearly 20 seconds of reaction scenes in the bathroom are spliced together. He spins around, as if dizzy, putting a hand on the wall and then grasping his own forehead. All the while, throughout the production, he glances at the indifferent eye of the camera over and over, interacting with it like a friend.

By this point in my own watching of the video—one minute and 48 seconds in—I realized I was in the grips of a sensation I had experienced only rarely, but could never mistake: the purest, most luxurious loathing.

Sam decides to surprise Nia, who is in the kitchen preparing breakfast for their two children. He peeks the camera around the corner at Nia before entering the room, behaving
strangely. Every time she turns away from him, to put something in the sink or serve the kids, he
turns the camera back on himself, pantomiming suspense and excitement.

“Are you getting wine for us?” he asks, while she roots around in the pantry. “Oh, that’s
right. You can’t have wine. Why don’t you make a bologna sandwich, honey? Oh, that’s right,
you can’t have bologna.” Nia laughs, looking confused.

After Sam draws it out a little longer, he produces the test and reveals the pregnancy. Nia
improbably hits on both the method and result: “Did you get a dropper out of the toilet?!” She
is surprised and overjoyed, and really, truly, *tender guitar strumming* begins playing in the
background, dubbed in after the fact.

I no longer remember how I came across the video—Facebook’s trending panel, maybe,
or Twitter. What I do remember is how certain I was that I reviled this couple. My hatred was so
pure that it fascinated me. I needed support, explanations, but most of the human-interest
Internet, from the Huffington Post to Vanity Fair to People, was milling the announcement into
cuteness clickbait.

I finally found my brethren among the dark cynics of Gawker. “Nightmare Man
‘Surprises’ Wife with Her Own Pregnancy,” the headline read. But the writer’s central thesis—
that Sam should have left Nia control over this discovery—wasn’t even my primary issue with
the video. Theoretically, this type of surprise could, under the right circumstances, be okay, I
thought. I wanted a name for my issue.

*  

Twenty-four hours after I’d watched the video, before I’d even finished processing my hatred,
Sam and Nia were back in the news: only three days after uploading their first video, titled
“HUSBAND SHOCKS WIFE WITH PREGNANCY ANNOUNCEMENT,” they uploaded a
jarring update in a new video, “Our Baby Had a Heartbeat.” They’d had a miscarriage. The video (since deleted) is a tearful confessional in which the two say that in the few days since they found out, Nia miscarried at home. Despite the early stage of development, they refer to the baby as a girl, and express gratitude for all the people she brought to their YouTube channel. That same day, they reiterated their gratitude with a tweet: “Our tiny baby brought 10M views to her video & 100k new people into our lives. She turned our life around and brought us closer together.”

At this point, it wasn’t just Gawker and me—people began to turn, and quickly. Buzzfeed News interviewed doctors about Sam’s method of urine collection. (“I would not recommend this method,” an M.D. told Buzzfeed, adding it could “theoretically lead to false positives.”) A pregnant woman with a YouTube channel called “shayleeandbaby” recreated the toilet bowl pregnancy test to see if it would reproduce a positive result (it did). The Washington Post included their story and its circumstances in their segment, “What was fake on the Internet this week,” noting the couple’s story was skepticism-inducing, if not outright verifiably fake.

In the days after their first video went viral—between the announcement and the update—Sam and Nia watched and reacted breathlessly on social media, updating their viewers as their numbers climbed. “WE’RE GOING VIRAL!!” they posted on YouTube the day after their pregnancy announcement. The next day, Sam quit his nursing job to focus full-time on vlogging. Buzzfeed News interviewed Sam, who admitted to hoping the video would go viral. “I’ve always had a dream to be famous,” he said.

The couple had, it turned out, “gone viral” once before, to a lesser degree, after uploading the March 2014 video “Good Looking Parents Sing Disney’s Frozen (Love is an Open Door).” This video is shot inside the car, with a camera mounted and facing the couple. This video also
had the hallmarks of excessive crafting: referring to themselves in the third person on their own video clip; the perspective coming from a camera anchored on the windshield, implying preparation and extraneous equipment, time spent comparing prices and features in Target’s electronics section; the perfectly timed gestures and lip-syncing suggesting plenty of rehearsal. During the video, their young daughter sits in the backseat, stretching her arms, fumbling with a book, and then sucking resignedly from a water bottle. This isn’t her first rodeo.

*  

In August of 2015, the world was just beginning to tilt off axis. While Sam and Nia taped their pregnancy announcement from their small town outside Dallas, Donald Trump was not only still in the presidential race, but gaining steam (on August 23rd, my friend Jesse sent me a picture of Trump, pointing out his hair: “I’m confused about the directionality. Is it going backwards or forwards?”). Refugees were pouring out of Syria and Iraq while ISIS spread across the region, kidnapping and enslaving and destroying ancient ruins. Jon Stewart left the Daily Show. A team of hackers stole a treasure trove of personal data from Ashley Madison dot com, dumping it out online for the world to pick through the names of would-be cheaters. People everywhere seemed to be acting out.

    Chicago was muggy and bright, cicadas roaring in the trees around Ravenswood at night. Shootings, confined mainly to the South and West Sides, were nearing their peak for the year. On Saturdays, people in sundresses and sunglasses, bikini strings tied at the backs of their necks, waited at bus stops to be carted east to the lake, where they’d lie flat on the sand and roast.

    And I was mulling over Colin.

    *
I first met Colin more than a year before, in April 2014, after sending him a message on OkCupid. In his profile picture, he was lazily stretched across a couch in a powder blue button-up, smirking. His profile was a long, frenetic, stream-of-consciousness mess—smart, manically but earnestly written, daring to look like a red flag. It mentioned both baseball (“I promise you it’s not stupid”) and housing policy.

The initial message turned into a few days of constant texting, during which I learned that he’d used to have a Livejournal, that he’d studied English but was now doing data work, and that he was a wonderfully charming pain in the ass. When we met a few nights later at Scofflaw—a dimly lit bar where they play Nancy Sinatra at just the right volume and hand out free cookies at midnight—I tried to keep my hands from shaking, terrified I wouldn’t be attracted to this person I was enthralled with.

But Colin was confident, which was all it took. He noticed me in a way that I needed, in a way that the last man I’d dated hadn’t bothered to. Still nervous a few minutes into the date, I looked over a menu and fidgeted, openly debating whether or not to order something. I was starving.

“Listen,” he said gently. “I think you’re hungry. I think you want to eat.”

It felt good to be seen. I calmed down.

An hour in and just a few drinks oiled, we’d already found the best ways to tease each other. We skipped the rote first-date talk, the careful early-stage structuring of normality, in favor of excessive banter. I’d already called him a dick, which made him drop his head and laugh quietly, pleased.

“Of course you were a vegetarian,” he said at one point as we talked through our college lives. “And I bet you didn’t grow up with a TV, right?”
“Hey—I know what you’re thinking,” I said. “You think I’m from a wholesome hippie family. You think I grew up in one of those families where you could only have, like, two cookies. No. You could eat all the cookies. No one monitored my cookie intake. And I wasted so much of my childhood watching TV.”

“Sure,” he nodded approvingly. “Like a good red-blooded American kid.”

We picked at a plate of fries and I drowned them in a series of cocktails, getting increasingly drunk as we wandered a dense conversational terrain, adding bookmarks and footnotes and forgetting the subject again and again. We left the bar around closing time and kissed urgently in the middle of the crosswalk, under streetlights, with no cars around.

*  

Colin and I dated for a few months, instant messaging almost daily on our Gmail accounts—often for hours throughout the day, as I glanced around myself at work to make sure no one was looking at my computer screen. We filled in all the details. He’d graduated late from college, after descending into a state of anxiety and depression his senior year, refusing to leave his apartment and self-medicating with a near-constant haze of weed. He took a long hiatus and lived at home, where he repaired himself with TV comedies—Arrested Development, 30 Rock—and cognitive behavioral therapy. He’d just left a terrible sales job in San Diego and gotten a new one in Chicago doing market analysis. He liked to toy with spreadsheets, liked the objectivity of numbers.

The day after our date at the bar (and a fuzzy, ill-advised night together), while I nursed my hangover at home after calling in sick to work, I steered our conversation toward what the previous night had meant.
“Some of your profile stuff worried me a little,” I said. “‘Interested in: short-term dating’.”

“I think you should consider my profile not to be a totally honest assessment of who I am,” he hedged.

At first he seemed interested, very interested, enough so that I worried I wouldn’t be able to catch up. A few weeks in, he said his parents’ friends had dropped out of a group plan to go to a Cubs game, and asked if I wanted to come. I conferenced with some friends about how to handle it. Meeting his parents this soon?

But things started to unravel as summer approached. I began to notice that he wasn’t keeping weekends open for me, reserving me for weeknights instead, and even those only occasionally. He wanted to read, he said, to watch TV, to spend time alone. We began to talk a little less. Then we didn’t talk for two weeks.

In early July, curdling in resentment, I sent him a message: “I'm sure you're trying to communicate you don't want to date me, but another to do that would be to use words to say you don't want to date me. A way that would feel slightly less harmful and frustrating, I mean?”

He responded that he had been busy, had been feeling anti-social, hadn’t been doing a lot of hanging out, that I could message him whenever.

“You’re not engaging with half of what I said,” I said. “Just tell me please directly that you are not interested. I can handle it? And it would be helpful info.”

“I like talking to you! We just didn’t last week,” he said. “That’s it.”

“I'm not sure what your ideal situation is, or how you see us relating to each other,” I typed, beyond exasperated. “Friends? Friends with the door open for occasional sex? People dating so slowly and one-sidedly that it's not actually really dating?”
“I think friends with the door open for occasional sex is where we're at, right?” he asked.

“I mean, no? Like, okay, fair enough, I haven't been extremely explicit. But that was my working assumption.”

“I don't typically kiss my friends,” I said.

“Fair,” he said. “I can walk back the default intimacy.”

“If by walk back,” I countered, “You mean stop completely, then yes.”

“Okay then,” he said.

*

I spent a couple weeks angry, and then I moved on. I began seeing an odd but sweet guy named Nick, who drove a scooter and wore crisp shirts and skinny ties to work and had a shoebox of drugs tucked neatly into a cupboard in his room. He talked a lot about his recent ex-girlfriend, with whom he’d had a passionate connection, while I listened patiently. One night we got high and made gnocchi in a tomato broth, which took hours and hours. I felt less high, mostly nauseated, as we finally inhaled our dinner at 1am. We crawled into bed afterward and fumbled around half-heartedly, and I felt myself drifting away, shutting off, thinking of Colin.

We’d started talking again, after a week off from each other, willing things to be fine and normal. We talked about my new job, my move across town, his job frustration, politics. In my mind, a state of equilibrium had been reached. *We can be friends*, I told myself. It wasn’t as though I loved him. It was enough, I thought, to have him see me, to have him react to what I had to say.

In mid-August, I received two free tickets to a White Sox game from work and used it as an excuse to invite him out. At the stadium, we drank 20-ounce beers and fried in the sun. I made jokes about the players and questioned arcane rules and he rolled his eyes at me, smiling. We
were both drunk when the fireworks exploded over the field at the end of the game, and we went back to my apartment afterward, filing onto the L train north like cattle with the rest of the crowd.

That night on my couch we fell into each other. We did not stop completely or even walk back the default intimacy.

* 

While I kept going on dates with other people, I went back to Colin again and again throughout the fall. In October, he invited me at the last minute to a show in Lincoln Park. Though it was only a few hours ahead of time, and though I had another date that night—with a friend I’d had a crush on two years prior—I took a bus straight to the concert hall afterward anyway to meet up with him. I caught the last song and then we found a booth, sitting beside each other and ordering drinks.

As I drained, slowly, the last of the amber beer, the staff sweeping and turning up the lights around us, I steered us back into familiar territory, trying to get him to pinpoint for me why we didn’t work. He spoke in riddles—no answers, only a combination of flattery and stonewalling.

“With my ex, I always felt like I was responding to an emergency. I know you’ve got your shit together—that you can take care of yourself. That’s what’s sexy about you,” he said. We weren’t dating, but the implication tied us together. But it was a false premise—a flattering way of admitting he liked how I didn’t seem to need his attention, that I could get on fine by myself.

I splayed my arms on the table and laid my forehead on the backs of my hands, a self-calming ritual of exhaustion with this conversation.
He lifted a warm hand to rub my back, seductively gentle. Appeasement. “I forgot how good that feels,” I mumbled into the table.

I finished the beer and we drifted out and into the bar directly next door, where he ordered a complex, violet cider and we leaned into each other even more.

“I was wearing this dress,” I said.

“I know. That’s the dress you wear on first dates,” he said. I sipped from his drink.

“No, it’s not,” I deflected. “I just wore it. That’s not why I wore it. There wasn’t any reason.”

But he was sort of right—or at least, I wore the dress because it looked good on me. I felt the charge in the comment, one he probably didn’t even intend—I go on the dates, I wear the dress, I say the things, I go through the motions, I play the part. And here I was again, as he knew I would be, responding to his call.

“Everything we wear is for a reason,” he said. I looked at his shirt, a flannel, and reached out to put a hand slightly inside and under the unbuttoned opening to touch his chest. A strange gesture, but one that felt natural.

We kissed in the street and he urged me to come home with him. Tired, I demurred. When I got home to my bed, I found texts on my phone offering to pay for an Uber to collect me and bring me to him the next morning so we could have coffee together.

“I don’t even know how to respond to that,” I replied, before falling asleep.

*  

We didn’t see each other that often—only a handful of times over the course of several months. One Saturday night, after meeting a friend in a neighborhood near his apartment, we texted back and forth for a few hours, and then I let him know I was coming over. I wondered what I was
doing walking alone down Western Avenue, glancing at the yellow leaves glowing in the gutter and the shuttered storefronts. I’d begun dipping into transparent neediness, thinking constantly about how to see him again, whether I’d be near him in the city, how I could reveal my availability, how I could get him to spend more time with me.

When I got to his apartment, he was watching Gilmore Girls in his slippers, eating Indian takeout. We curled up and he explained the current plotline—Jess is the bad boy, and Rory is the good girl, but they’re right for each other. Jess has left town and Rory is chasing after him. I drank tea from his mug and felt good and warm and calm again.

* 

Colin fills up the space in my head through that whole year, though my memories are mostly from sitting on buses and trains, imagining what wasn’t happening. I listened to a song he sent me on repeat and felt myself caught in its swells: \textit{During the summer take me sailing out on the Atlantic/I won’t set my sights on other seas, there is no need to panic}.

Walking to the train in the morning, I could imagine the spot on the sidewalk where he’d find me, where after realizing his idiocy he’d track me down and kiss me. I thought of the way he looked worried when he was listening, furrowing his brows up. I pictured running into him on weekend mornings while I stood at the counter of the coffee shop, waiting for my order.

As my desire for attention fed on itself, Colin kept finding ways to disappoint me. He’d cancel plans at the last minute, or fail to follow through on setting them up, after I’d been looking forward to seeing him all week. He’d not respond for days at a time, or drop suddenly out of a gchat, only to pick it up again two days later. I began timing, calibrating myself. \textit{Be no more invested than he is}, I told myself. \textit{If he takes two hours to respond, you take four}. I rarely followed through. I was there immediately when he reached out, ready to be seen and heard.
The fixation continued throughout the winter and into the spring.

We saw each other in early June 2015 for the last time, a Friday. I’d bet him a bottle of gin that the Mad Men finale would reveal Don Draper to be D.B. Cooper. The plan was to sit on my back porch with fancy cocktails, but it rained, so we stayed in. I don’t remember much about the night, but I remember the feeling of his arm around me in bed, and the way it was too much, and how I got up too early to lay on the couch and try to process things, and how he left too soon that morning, with a weary smile.

Tuesday morning I made a last attempt, feeling pathetic, knowing it would fail. I sent him a message. “Friday felt really intimate to me,” I said. “Maybe I wasn't expecting it to, I don't know.”

“No, yeah, I agree,” he said. “I had a lot of fun.” Fun.

“Can I ask how you actually feel about me?” I asked. “Because I don't think I've ever really been fully clear on that.”

“I have a lot of affection for you, if that’s what you mean,” he said.

“Affection is an intentionally vague word. I have a lot of affection for my cat.”

He took me through the usual route: he likes to spend most of his time alone, he doesn’t want to be in a relationship, he’s spent so much time the past few years in relationships, he needs to be by himself. It was what he’d been saying for a year, and what I had been hearing and ignoring, hearing and hoping away.

“I need to go,” I said. “Let’s not talk, okay? I can’t really put up with this.”

* 

I spent the rest of the summer conditioning myself to expect and welcome silence. Despite my moratorium, Colin contacted me a few times after June. For the most part I’d ignored him,
though there were certain psychological loopholes I’d found. Most of my tweets were crafted with him in mind—thoughts I really wanted to share with him. He’d continued to like them, as I’d hoped. Two people still trying, sort of, covertly, from behind screens.

But I wanted to retrain myself away from this need for him to look, to pay attention. It didn’t matter if he could see me, read me like a book and probe my motivations. What good was his attention without his investment? Our relationship was interesting, entertaining, addictive—and ultimately hollow.

* 

“I’m obsessed with how much I hate this couple,” I messaged a friend that August, at the height of my Sam and Nia fixation. I walked her through the video, through the responses, like a crazy-eyed conspiracy theorist: “It seemed EXTREMELY staged.”

For most people who create “shocking” or elaborate videos—wedding proposals with dance routines, athletic stunts—the virality feels earned, even if the concept is annoying. *We hope you like this cool thing*, those filming the video seem to be saying. *We put a lot of time into it.*

Sam and Nia were different, trying to convince us that there was no craftsmanship, that we were watching something organic unfold. But Sam’s acting is just too poor, his expressions feeling practiced and overdramatized. Nia, making breakfast in the kitchen, is just a little too ready for the strange news. The two were a little too prepared to orient their lives around the newfound attention. “A SAM AND NIA REALITY TV SHOW?!” they posted in the days after they’d reeled in the eyes of the world.

You could see the puppet strings, their maddening need to be seen.

I hated them for reflecting me.
That kind of hatred burns itself out.

A more considered look at Sam and Nia’s viral video reveals a modest home, a tired-looking young mother feeding two small kids on paper plates. A closer survey of the channel suggests nursing is far from Sam’s passion. The couple uploaded videos at a breakneck pace, hoping to go viral, hoping to YouTube their way out of Sam’s draining job. To find yourself so young and so stuck—it must have felt good to be seen.

I don’t think Sam and Nia made up the pregnancy or the miscarriage, though I’m still skeptical of the original video. The two received their karmic due, anyway. Sam’s name was found among the data dump of Ashley Madison subscribers barely a week into their spotlight, and they were kicked out of a live event called “Vlogger Fair” a few days later, after Sam “threatened violence” against another attendee.

I eventually stopped seeing myself in Sam and Nia’s updates and wide-eyed expressions and calls for attention. I started a book club that August, and began spending time with acquaintances I hadn’t looked at closely enough before. I formed a group of friends who had open weekends and wanted to spend them with me. I holed up and wrote in coffee shops on Sunday mornings. I applied to grad school.

Recently, I learned Colin moved in with a girlfriend of a few months. He still texts me sometimes, though I’ve moved away. He sends funny tweets and articles I might like or asks if I’ve seen new TV shows. Sometimes I forget to respond.
From Inside the House

Nearly every woman I know is obsessed with murder. We ferret away the grim details of our pet cases: lampshades made of human skin, trap doors in basement floors, techniques used to lure. We watch docu-series with cheesy re-enactments; we listen to true crime podcasts; we read the full Wikipedia pages. We do image searches and scan the men’s faces—and it is almost always men—for signs and symptoms of monstrosity.

The eyes are vacant, we think, staring into Ted Bundy’s otherwise handsome face. I could spot a psychopath if one came up to me at the bar. But the eyes are only vacant in some photos, the vacant-eye photos. We pass over the other ones that pop up, the ones where he looks like any other guy. We might especially choose to ignore the one in which he sits in a tailored suit, hand in a thoughtful pose at his mouth, eyebrow slightly arched, hair curling in a way we might, on any other man, deem charming.

*

I grew up in the ’90s, a decade punctuated with murdered blondes. My earliest news memory was of the OJ Simpson trial, which dominated television screens for over a year, from the early days of the Bronco chase to the acquittal. I was seven years old, spread across the floor with coloring books and Lincoln logs, looking up often enough to lodge images deep in my brain: that infamous Bronco, careening up a desert highway beneath palm trees; OJ the football player, the actor; the bloody glove; the courtroom. Beyond the images were the certainties I absorbed: this famous man, this star, had killed someone. I don’t remember absorbing a thing about Nicole Brown Simpson or her paramour. They were simply bodies in the ground.
I was nine years old when JonBenét Ramsey’s murder overtook the news. She was younger, only six, but she seemed close. I was thin doe limbs still, scraped knees, barefoot in the grass. On the TV, she pranced on a stage, removing her jacket to twirl in a synthetic onesie. She wore hats and sunglasses and white gloves and cherry red lipstick. She’d died in her house in the night, wearing pajamas. But in the days after the murder, each network played and replayed the same series of pageant videos, solidifying a narrative so natural it wrote itself: some pedophilic old pervert had watched her, found her, violated her, and killed her. It wasn’t until I revisited the case years later that I realized it was likely an inside job, either her parents or her then-nine-year-old brother.

The final memorable blonde was Elizabeth Smart, who disappeared from her Salt Lake City home in June 2002 at the age of fourteen. Only a month older than I was, Smart had felt even closer than Ramsey. She had a spray of freckles across her tanned button nose, hair pulled back demurely into a bow, and thoughtful eyes. When she was taken out of her bedroom window, I wanted to hope she was alive, but I felt sure she was dead.

I was shocked when, nine months later, Smart reappeared in plain sight. Two witnesses who recognized her haggard abductors, Brian David Mitchell and Wanda Barzee, from an episode of America’s Most Wanted, had spotted the three walking along the road in Sandy, Utah and called the police.

Two weeks after she was rescued, Smart appeared on the March 31, 2003 cover of People, Smart smiles at the camera, wrapped in the arms of her parents. “Her Amazing Story,” the cover reads, followed by a quote from Smart: “I am the luckiest girl in the world.”

Smart’s “amazing” story turns out to be vividly harrowing. She had been forced from her bedroom at knifepoint by Mitchell and led to a campsite just outside the city. There, she was
forced to change into a robe and participate in a marriage ceremony. From then on, she endured constant rape at the hands of Mitchell—sometimes on a daily basis—and was forced to ingest drugs, alcohol, and even garbage. Mitchell, who claimed to be a prophet, told Smart she was the first in a line of “virgin brides” he planned to kidnap.

Looking at the cover of the magazine on a warm spring morning, it seemed possible Smart could be the luckiest girl in the world. To me, she’d come back from the dead.

*

My hometown of Hastings, Michigan has a Mayberry quality, but things look a little dirtier if you peel up the carpet. A sign on the edge of town marks us as “one of the BEST 100 SMALL TOWNS IN AMERICA,” which stood as a point of pride for me growing up. You can see the same sign posted as you enter the town from at least six different directions. But if you drive further out, to the edge of the county, you will see a different sign: “Entering Barry County. METH WATCH!”

Growing up there as a child, Hastings seemed like the perfect place for a murder. Summer storms leave sickly yellow and purple bruises on the atmosphere at twilight. Lightning illuminates skeletal trees in the late autumn. Matted, wet leaves cling to the earth. In the winter, great mounds of dirty snow accumulate in embankments. All year long, West Michigan’s proximity to the lake lends the sky an impenetrable, cloudy whiteness. It’s a good place to go quietly dark and unhinged, a good place to hide bodies.

My older sister, Gina, developed an interest in horror. She read Christopher Pike and then Stephen King, rented Child’s Play and Candyman. She liked to create simulations, building a haunted house in the basement and forcing me through it. The final room included a prop man
lying horizontal on a table, in a stuffed set of my father’s hunting clothes, a knife sticking out of his chest, splattered with artificial blood.

Mom had a respect for the macabre as well. I’d walk into the backroom and find her engrossed in *Unsolved Mysteries* or some other show focused mainly on men who murdered women. Often, there’d be interviews. I’d watch for a little while, getting increasingly disturbed.

“Why do you watch this stuff?” I asked her once.

“I can’t imagine being this way,” she said. “I want to know what makes them like this.”

At night, I cowered under my raggedy pink blanket, only my eyes peeking out. The closet door of my bedroom opened on squeaky hinges to reveal another door within it. This one led up a set of creaky wooden steps to the third floor, a giant attic space with insulation fluff sticking out between the vaulted rafters. From the ages of five through eight, all the murderers in Hastings spent their nights in that attic, creeping around, making the floorboards creak, and waiting until I fell asleep. I’d hold my stuffed animals close and breathe into their fur, staring at a notch of pale moonlight on the wall and knowing I’d be dead or abducted before my parents could get to me. I stayed in bed, counting to ten over and over. *It is important that I stay here*, I thought, training myself. *Even if I don’t feel safe.*

* 

Mom’s true crime intake left her suspicious of our town and its potential. “There’s a killer behind every tree,” she’d warn before Gina and I went out. It became a parenting mantra, repeated often enough to lose its edge and soften into a family joke.

The area around Sweezy’s Pond, located on a trail behind the high school, was the wildest part of town. The dirt path ran back behind the football stadium and practice field and
disappeared from an open meadow into a thicket of woods, shaded over by tall trees. Gina and I took the path behind the high school and walked around the pond with her frog net.

At some point, either via childhood rumor or Mom’s warnings or Gina’s free-form myth making, I began to believe someone had once been murdered in the woods behind the pond. I didn’t know who had committed the murder, or when, or who had died, or what the consequences were. It was less a narrative than a feeling. Someone had been killed back there, probably on the path that split away from the pond and wandered up the knotted hill through the trees.

It wasn’t until I was a teenager that I realized I had no basis for this belief. A surreal idea, a warning, had embedded in my mind and bloomed into delusion.

* 

The first time I experienced the futility of no, I was twelve. I’d gone to the movies with my friend Chelsea and a boy I barely knew from the grade ahead of ours, Mitch. In the darkness of the theater, Mitch slipped a hand onto and then around my upper thigh. I tensed up, alarmed.

“Please don’t,” I whispered.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I don’t like it.”

“It’s okay,” he assured me. He kept his palm in place. I poked Chelsea, who looked over at the situation, and then I leaned forward and told him we’d be right back—we were just going to the bathroom.

In the ladies’ room, we paced the tiled floors. How could we resolve it without upsetting him?
“I know,” Chelsea said. “When we go back in, I’ll sit next to him. You can sit on the other side of me. He probably won’t bother me. We won’t say anything about it.”

The plan worked—for a few minutes. Then Mitch got up and left for the lobby. He returned with a bag of popcorn, sat down beside me, and resumed his grip on my thigh. For long minutes, I deliberated with myself. Then, finally, I leaned forward and tried again.

“Listen,” I said. “Can you please not do that?”

“This is just how I communicate,” he said, smiling under thick eyelashes. I sat through the rest of the movie this way, in defeat.

* 

The summer before I left for college, I worked as a barista at State Grounds, the local coffee shop. Working at the coffee shop was one of the cushiest jobs in town, and I’d wormed my way into the position by hanging out there steadily for years beforehand. The owner of the shop, Bob Dickinson, knew more about me and my life than my own father. As I filled the rinsing sink or scooped muffin batter into tins, I’d explain about the boy I’d loved who’d moved on or my parents’ tumultuous marriage, and he’d listen without judgment.

That summer, I worked with a range of people, but mainly Kevin and Laura, Bob’s two children. Kevin was a year older than me and had been my first kiss back when I was in seventh grade, when we’d dated for a week after he’d given me a pink teddy bear on Valentine’s Day. He called me everyday that week and we talked, discovering we had nothing in common and didn’t really even like each other that much. By the summer I was eighteen, though, this was no longer awkward—between customers, we sat on milk crates behind the counter and talked.

I didn’t know Laura as well. She’d had a number of jobs close by, at the jewelry store on the corner and the health food store across the street, and was just picking up some extra hours at
State Grounds here and there. Laura was 22, tall, blonde, and sunny. She was headed back to Eastern Michigan University in the fall to pursue her degree in nutrition. I liked being near her. I found her easy to talk to.

Laura had a calmness, a coolness about her. She was confident, but kind. She was planning out her life—where she’d travel after her degree, what she’d do. I confided in her my crush on Andrew, a guy who’d grown up in town but since moved to San Francisco. But he was back, coming into the shop and setting up his laptop and asking about the music I’d burned to CDs playing in the background. One day after work, she offered to show me where he lived with his family, just a few blocks away. It felt a little creepy, but we kept a distance, and anyway, it was understood to be harmless—we were girls. I wondered if I should tell him about the crush.

“Why not?” she said. “Life is short.”

* 

That December when I returned home for winter break, I was drawn back into my regular orbit. One morning, I brought my laptop to the coffee shop and set up in the window, wondering if I might run into Andrew. It was only me in the shop, and Bob, who was being unusually quiet, until the woman who ran the jewelry shop came in. I was lost in thought, looking out at the December overcast, when I heard a high-pitched wail from the back. I jerked my head back and saw the dark-haired woman collapse into Bob.

“Em?” he called. Our eyes met. His face was inscrutable. “We’re closing up.”

I understood. I grabbed my things and quickly packed them up, then disappeared out the front door, the shopkeeper bells jingling behind me.
The news came out that night. Laura had been found dead in her dorm room in Ypsilanti. No one understood how or why, though she’d had a heart arrhythmia, which was speculated to be the culprit.

Days later, shuffling up the stairs of the funeral home for the visitation, I locked eyes with Bob. He had a look that would prove to be semi-permanent—wrung out, sunken-eyed, run over.

It took two months to learn Laura didn’t die of complications from a heart arrhythmia. When a custodian discovered her body on December 15th, 2006, following complaints of an odor by her dormitory neighbors, a pillow covered her face and the lower half of her body was naked. Her tampon was discovered flung across the room. A man’s semen was collected from her inner thigh.

For two months, university police secretly conducted an investigation before finally arresting Orange Amir Taylor, III, a fellow student at Eastern Michigan, on charges of rape and murder on February 23rd.

Surveillance footage and crime scene evidence created a fairly detailed picture of the murder. On the night of December 12th, Laura had attended a Christmas party at work, returning to her dorm at 11:12pm with a green-and-white Secret Santa gift bag in hand. She’d called her boyfriend, Travis. It was her final phone call.

In the early morning hours of December 13th, Taylor was caught on tape sneaking into the dorm. Ninety minutes later, he was captured leaving on the same tape, carrying one of Laura’s gift bags. The semen sample collected from Laura’s body matched Taylor’s DNA. After raping and asphyxiating Laura, he’d taken her keys and locked the door on the way out.
For ten weeks following the murder, Laura’s family and the EMU student body had been assured she died of natural causes. Taylor continued to circulate on campus. After the arrest, the community was stunned. “I was specifically told I was not in danger, that we weren’t in danger, and unless you guys already had a guy in custody—we were in danger,” one student said at a meeting set up for students to air their frustrations. “And the fact that he is being charged with criminal sexual assault—not only were our lives in danger, but we were in danger of many other things.”

The case gained national attention that summer, as school administrators were found to be in violation of the Clery Act, a federal statute requiring colleges to keep and disclose information about crime that occurs on or near their campuses. Eastern Michigan University received the highest-ever fine in association with the Act—$357,500—and the university’s president was fired over the case, along with several other administrators involved in the cover-up. Bob and his wife, Deb, appeared on Good Morning America, Anderson Cooper 360, Dateline, and a slew of other shows.

Meanwhile, Bob and I kept in contact via email. In late February, after Taylor’s arrest and acknowledgment of the investigation, he reached out with concern. “Em, the latest news has Deb and I quite drained of energy. Are you safe? I’m very cautious now. So many times I’ve just left doors open and unlocked.”

* 

When I realized I’d given up on saying no, I was twenty-four. It was June 2012, and I’d walked into a hotel room to discover my friend Jordan and I would be sharing a bed. We were in the city for our friends’ wedding and had arranged to split the room. When he’d made the arrangements,
I’d imagined two double beds separated by a nightstand. Instead this room had a king-sized bed crowded into a corner on its left side.

We must have both noticed when we came in, but said nothing. I arrived first from Chicago and he would fly in later from New York. I spent the day wandering the city, and when I went to meet him in the room later, we ignored the bed and talked about the wedding. As a groomsman, he was nervous about the speech he needed to make. We went out and ended up in a sports bar, draining a couple drinks before making our way back.

By then, we could no longer ignore the bed. We got in, him on the left and me on the right. We talked nervously, constantly, as if we could ease into the bed better verbally than physically, as if this patch of discomfort could be navigated best by aggressively ignoring it. Eventually we ran out of words and said good night. I turned off the light. I was on my side facing away from him, close enough to the right side of the bed to probe it with my bare foot.

In the darkness, the silence smothered us, begging to be broken. I worried and worried and then heard what I feared.

“Emilie?”
“…Yeah?”
“Do you ever… miss snuggling?”

Jordan and I were friends, but the history was more complicated. He’d asked me out once in college, and I’d demurred. Another time, he’d let me know he was open to being friends with benefits. I’d demurred then, too. But the offer seemed perpetually on the table, and somehow I felt I could only say no so many times. Now we were both single, both in a bed together.

The question was an implied two-parter and I was already trying to figure out how to follow the next move. I was quiet for a few beats too long. “I guess?”
“Do you want to snuggle? Just as friends?”

The exchange was too quick, the question posed before I’d figured it out. No, I thought. “…I guess? But only for a little while. Guys get hot at night.” I sounded miserable.

We met in the middle and I placed my head on a crook in his arm, ill fitting. I rested my left hand on the left side of his abdomen and the position could have been almost fraternal, but then he wrapped around me. He positioned his face in front of mine. I looked whichever way I needed to reorient my lips away from his.

I committed myself to some length of time in this position, like a mother whose child has fallen asleep on top of her. I resorted to counting time. I imagined the jumping sheep, but each sheep was numbered—a second passing by. One, two, three. My mind shifted kaleidoscopically: no, no, no.

No. I imagined the word tattooed all over the interior of my body, a sort of wallpaper he could see if he cut me open and looked inside. It felt like cud in my mouth and I chewed on it. No. No.

“Okay,” I said after some time, indicating I was done. I untangled myself and crawled back to my side of the bed. He rolled himself over and followed, and then spooned me from the back, his touch clammy. I tried not to identify or distinguish between the soft and hard parts of his body. I tried not to focus on where his hands were grazing me. I lay on my side with one hand and one foot dangling off the edge of the bed. He held on.

Then, an idea. I untangled myself, got out of bed, and made my way to the bathroom. I sat for a while on the edge of the bathtub. It was a fancy one, the kind with jets. After what felt like long enough, I walked over and flushed the toilet. Then I headed back to the bed. He was splayed out, but when I crawled under the blanket, he curled back around me. We played this
game a few times, my night devolving into a series of counted-out segments that felt like adequate time by some unknown standard. But every time I crawled back in, he wrapped himself around me.

_Tell him to stop_, I told myself again and again. _Just tell him to stop_.

But instead I was silent.

No longer able to stand it, I disentangled myself again and grabbed the room key from the nightstand. I slipped on my sandals and walked out of the room, into the cleansing fluorescence. Down the pink-striped hallway in pink-striped pajama pants, I took a left and then a right to get to the elevators. It must have been 2 or 3 in the morning. I was exhausted, but I called the car and got in. I rode to the top and down to the bottom and back to the top. Up, down, up, down, up, down.

I pushed the button again and again, in control.

* 

In the summer of 2017, after my first year of grad school, I began to go stir-crazy staying with my parents in Michigan. I decided to return to West Virginia, even though I didn’t have a job. My boyfriend at the time was being paid to water the plants and bring in the mail for one of his English professors, who was spending the summer in Maine. When he asked if I could stay in her house, she agreed.

Less than a week after I returned, I descended the stairs, burst into tears, and broke up with him. I had been trying to have feelings beyond friendship and failing, some hard part in my center growing queasy with the effort. He left me in the house, looking confused, both of our eyes wet. “You can stay here,” he said.
“I just broke up with Bryan but I’m still staying in the house he’s taking care of for his professor,” I messaged my friend Mae later that day. “Is that weird? I feel bad about it.”

“Wow!” she said. “That’s SO feminist.”

It didn’t feel like a feminist decision. I was out of options. I didn’t want to go home to Michigan, and I didn’t have a job in West Virginia, and I didn’t have another place to live or the money to afford it. Now I also didn’t have anyone to spend time with. I went for long walks on a trail through the woods nearby to calm myself and returned to the beautiful house—a house with too many rooms, too large for me.

To fill time, I began volunteering every day with the local prison book project. Alone in a room full of books, I opened and read letters from prisoners and fulfilled their requests. The letters were mainly from inmates at medium- and high-security prisons in Appalachia. The requests tended to be unfailingly polite, and I wondered about the people behind them—what their lives had been like before, what they had done to find themselves locked up.

While working in the space one day, I became preoccupied with a letter we’d gotten over and over. It was typed, detailed, and articulate. The inmate always thanked us and provided some thoughts on the last book we’d sent. He noted he was a fan of Victorian mysteries, history, literary fiction, and literary journals like *Granta*. He requested specifically an Oxford English dictionary, if we had one. I pictured an older, professorial type, guilty of a white-collar crime. Maybe something financial?

When I searched his inmate number and name online, I was met with a very different crime: sexual exploitation of a minor. Such a charge is levied, I read, “(a) when the person: (i) knowingly produces, possesses, or possesses with intent to distribute child pornography; or (ii) intentionally distributes or views child pornography; or (b) if the person is a minor's parent or
legal guardian and knowingly consents to or permits the minor to be sexually exploited as described (above).”

I decided not to look up anyone else.

* 

To occupy my mind as I worked that summer, I listened to podcasts. I began listening to one that focused on murder cases, detailing the backgrounds of the assailants, the strategies used, the types of victims, and more. Soon, I was fixated. I made banana pancakes in the professor’s kitchen while learning about the murder of an English teacher and her two children. I walked to the workspace in the morning listening to the case of a man who murdered and dismembered his family and returned in the afternoon to the story of a man who committed serial arson, resulting in four deaths. I cleaned the bathroom to the story of a camp of Oklahoma girl scouts who were murdered not far from their tents. The next day, I got up and listened to a new set of episodes—a new set of murders.

At night after the sun set, the house settled into eerie silence. There were too many decorative mirrors reflecting too many empty rooms. I turned on the TV for some noise, dreading when I’d need to turn it back off. I kept the lights on.

“I’m going to be murdered,” I messaged Bryan, who I’d continued to talk to despite the breakup.

“You need to stop listening to that podcast.”

“Can you please come over and check for murderers?” I asked.

“I’ll be there in ten.”

We went through the whole house, from the basement to the crawl space in the attic. I watched him humor me by poking his head under beds and in closets. I knew by then that
usually, the murderer isn’t the stranger who surpasses the security system, but the husband or boyfriend or ex-husband or ex-boyfriend. The call comes most often from inside the house. I looked at his blonde curls and glasses and wondered what he might be capable of. He had a foot of height and probably close to 100 pounds on me. During our relationship, he’d easily picked me up and carried me around. But he was so patient. Never angry, not even after I’d dumped him for the second time. I tried, but I couldn’t imagine him murdering me—not even a little.

But how could one really ever know? Ted Bundy, a mild-mannered law student, had removed women’s heads. The probable child pornographer read *Granta* and had dictionary brand preferences. I’d placated enough eager men by letting them pet me, men who’d initially seemed docile, sweet, harmless. I’d grown weary as they found loopholes through the barriers I’d erected. My relationship with *no* was fraught, a constant negotiation with myself. Say *no* and I could either get out of a situation or I could find a hand wrapped even tighter around my thigh, or worse.

I don’t know if Laura heard a knock on the door and answered, or if the entry was forced. I don’t know if she had some knowledge of her perpetrator, or whether hers was just the unlucky door he’d chosen. Both seem as likely, and as irrelevant to the outcome. I imagine the two of them standing in her doorway, the sinking feeling in her stomach as she knows something is very off. But maybe he said he was from maintenance and wanted to check the wiring or the vents, and she didn’t want to be impolite. Or maybe she stood frozen in terror, cornered in her room, knowing full well the uselessness of *no*.

Bryan seemed to care about me, didn’t make demands or push through boundaries. Still, I had to wonder if there was an expectation brewing at the back of his mind. If searching closets
would become one half of an exchange. But I was scared and out of options. I wanted shelter, I wanted protection, and I wanted to owe nothing for it.

Even though anyone could have found a way in during the day—maybe a trusted neighbor or an old friend of the professor’s, someone with an extra key—no one was in the house. I tried to prolong Bryan’s stay. Did he want a glass of wine? How about we watch something?

But I knew it wouldn’t matter. Eventually he’d leave and I would be on my own again in the too-big house.

*

I still think of Elizabeth Smart sometimes. Things got better for her in the years after her rescue. She met a nice Scottish boy on her mission trip to France and married him. She had two children, a boy and a girl. She is now a journalist and an advocate for missing and trafficked people.

In the months after she was taken, Smart’s captors demonstrated a brazen lack of caution. Though they kept her dressed in veiled robes, only her eyes visible to the outside world, they took her constantly out in public—into restaurants where they were regulars, into grocery stores, to street festivals. People found the trio odd, but left them alone. Though Smart was so often in tantalizing reach of safety, Mitchell had threatened her again and again. If she tried to talk to anyone or escape, he said, he’d return to her home and kill her, along with her entire family. And besides, he added, no one cared about her anymore.

Smart’s rescue wasn’t even her first interaction with the police. In August 2002, two months after her abduction and seven months before she was recognized, her abductors took her to the Old Salt Lake City Library to research new places to live. A library patron, suspicious of the trio, called the police. When the detective arrived, he approached Smart, asking her to
remove her veil. “I’m looking for Elizabeth Smart,” he said. Barzee, the female companion of her abductor, signaled for Smart not to move or speak. Mitchell told the officer the garb was religious and could not be removed. After discussing the matter for several minutes, the detective was convinced and left the library, leaving Smart behind.

“I was so mad at myself for not saying anything,” Smart said. “Mad at myself for not taking the chance.” But I get it. She was just weighing the consequences. It’s important that I stay here, she must have been thinking, absorbing the warning in her captors’ eyes. Even if I don’t feel safe.
**Bad Faith**

In Michigan, everything is trees and rocks and dirt and water and the fermenting biology that emerges thereof.

During high school, a friend and I found sharp-clawed crayfish, stone-colored, camouflaging themselves in the creek that ran through town. Further up that creek, where it ran behind her house, we tubed a narrow stretch of rushing water through a thick patch of trees into a tranquil clearing. The route was littered with still, green frogs who squatted on rocks and then emerged into focus suddenly, staring at you, their stillness a kind of horrible thing.

I’d flinch at the snakes in my peripherals at Sweezy’s Pond, a large, swampy reservoir located on a trail a quarter mile behind the high school. The mosquitos were unbearable in the summer. During the school year, biology classes sometimes took the walk to collect samples of water, algae, dirt. The cross country team would run the wooded loop around the pond. I was drawn not by academic or athletic obligation, but a lingering, youthful desire to touch and be touched by this place—a perverse urge to encounter what I feared.

* *

I spent Easter and Christmas mornings as a child at St. Rose of Lima, a stone church a few blocks from our home. We’d listen to the letters and readings—from St. Paul to the Apostles, from St. Paul to the Corinthians, from the Holy Gospel according to St. John, from the First Book of Genesis. We sat in the temperate Michigan church and listened patiently to these men of the desert-dry Middle East, holding forth in a historical milieu I didn’t quite grasp, writing back and forth about tribal qualms and supernatural grievances. It seemed normal.
I didn’t often focus in church, and when I did, few of the stories stuck with me. Yet I return to the Binding of Isaac, found in Genesis 22 of the Old Testament, again and again. It nudes at me, a mystery in need of solving.

Abraham gathers wood for a fire, a knife for slaying, and saddles his donkey. He takes his son and two men on the three-day voyage. When he approaches the mountain, Isaac asks, “Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” The lord will provide a lamb, Abraham responds.

When they reach their destination, Abraham silently builds an altar, lays the wood out, binds his son. He removes a knife.

It is at this moment—the height of the dramatic tension, the very second before bloodshed—that God intervenes, calling off the execution. “For now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, from me.”

_Fear._ I have combed different versions of the Bible looking for different translations: the King James, the New International, the Catholic Public Domain, the Complete Jewish—even the Concordant Literal, a rigorously faithful translation from Greek. The word is always _fear._

*  

My sister declared herself an atheist when I was eight and she was sixteen. Gina was long-haired and brazen, traversing both the edges of her high school class and our home. She took apart computers and read constantly and earned mediocre-to-failing grades. She applied precision where and when it interested her: creating accurate anatomical drawings based on prints from our mother’s da Vinci coffee table books, carefully deconstructing a desktop motherboard. She routinely slipped a scalpel into the center of Mom’s nervous system, causing an electrical blowout. They’d scream until I’d cry.
We’d been raised half-hearted Christians, the kind who didn’t discuss it much outside a pew. But Gina’s declaration of unbelief was big and jarring, a little earthquake in the home. Mom was upset, horrified. She summoned arguments. *But how can you explain—? But what about—?*

It hadn’t occurred to me until then that the pink-tinged clouds waiting at the end of my corporal life might be Santa, Part Two, that the lights would simply turn off, that I’d remain trapped in my form, that I’d be swallowed and choked forever by dirt, that the Halloween song might be a realistic reckoning with the finality of death: *The worms crawl in, the worms crawl out…*

“What if there’s no God?” I asked Mom later, sobbing. I perched on edge of the bathtub while she removed her makeup. I needed confirmation that there was, that Gina was wrong, that everything went on forever.

“It’s true that we don’t know,” she said. “But we can have faith.”

It was a poor foundation. But the word was enough to seal the cracks, at least for a while. I felt myself buying time. *No one else is worried about this,* I reasoned. They’re worried about making the soccer team, passing math tests, convincing their parents to let them shave their legs. Like an older relative breathing sour words in my face, I reassured myself. *You are too young to worry about this.*

I didn’t fear God, but I feared my sister. Her ideas were dark, a threat to the boundaries I knew.

*
One night when I was ten, as I occupied myself in our living room—playing on the floor with the dog maybe, or reading a book—my dad cleared his throat awkwardly and said, to himself but more to me, “Poor Bill.”

I looked up. I waited for him to continue, but he didn’t. So I asked, “Why poor Bill?”

He gathered himself.

“Sally died this weekend,” he said.

Bill and Sally were a married couple who’d gone camping with us several times. Sally had dark hair and glasses and a tendency to be wry. In the car on the way to a restaurant the summer before, everyone still in swimsuits and towel-wrapped from a river swim, we’d been debating optimism versus pessimism, the best way to approach the world. “We’re all dying slowly, all the time,” my friend Kristín pointed out. We sat in grave silence.

“Well, I guess we all know who the pessimist is here,” Sally responded.

After enough time passed—after the initial tang of shock faded slightly—I asked how she’d died.

Sally had killed herself, he said. What I read later in the local newspaper filled in the picture. Sally had taken a canister of gasoline and driven herself out to Yankee Springs. She’d taken a walk on a trail to the Devil’s Soup Bowl, a dip in the land carved long ago by a glacier. All alone, surrounded by the naked trees and overcast sky of Michigan’s late November, she’d removed the cap from the canister. She’d lifted the container and poured its contents all over her body. Then, wet and cold, she’d taken a match, or maybe a lighter, and sparked a flame.

Later, a pair of hikers found what remained.

I didn’t know what to do with Sally. Her death was some kind of offering I couldn’t understand. I felt the caulk loosen, the cracks expand.
At eleven, I told my parents that I planned to embark on a personal Great Awakening. The luster of St. Rose was all in the aesthetics—the twenty-foot-tall stained glass windows, the gilded, bleeding Christ, the single white candles passed out at Midnight Mass and the glow they emitted when the lights were brought down. I was beginning to find other elements off-putting.

I’d been through the First Communion training a few years before, where on Mondays after school we’d open our Reconciliation textbooks and learn that we were sinful—all of us. We were encouraged to brainstorm the ways we were sinful, so that we could eventually share them with the priest, who would sit across the table from us in a soundproof room and forgive us. The only sin that ever came to mind was terrible and humiliating—a way I’d learned to touch myself after watching a movie scene and experimenting. Believing I was the single living person who’d discovered this loophole, and sooner willing to jump out the window than share it with the priest, I fabricated confessions or came up with uninspired ones. Sometimes I don’t feel like doing my homework.

My peers were having a different experience entirely. Their churches weren’t beautiful temples of guilt, but surround-sound, multimedia recreation centers. They had gyms with basketball courts. They had slushie machines and rock bands. They played tag and went bowling and had “youth group,” a therapeutic weeknight check-in.

“I have decided to try to find a different church,” I wrote in my journal. It had a shiny moon on the front, which soothed me. “Somewhere I fit in better.”

I went with my friend Danielle to the First Baptist Church. On the north end of town, the church was a utilitarian structure with drab carpeting in the upstairs and no bleeding Jesus. We
arrived before the sermon and went downstairs to the multi-purpose room for a pre-church youth group. Danielle introduced me as her Catholic friend. There was an immediate show of distaste.

“Catholics believe some crazy stuff,” one girl said. Others nodded. I shifted uncomfortably.

“We’re glad you decided to come here instead,” the youth group leader affirmed. I said nothing, immediately sensing I’d made a mistake. These were not my people.

The feeling intensified when we entered the church for the service. The sermon was long, loud, boisterous, frightening—a direct rebuttal to the calm, stodgy mass I was used to. People were taken, fevered. At one point, the congregation was invited to come forward to be saved, or to renew their devotion. I’d heard of being saved before—people spoke of it as life-changing. “When were you saved?” they’d ask each other in hushed voices, or “Have you been saved yet?” The implication of the language intimidated me. I was a Catholic, unsaved. Though I’d barely known it, I was endangered and lost.

“Do you want to go up?” Danielle whispered to me. Her family looked at me expectantly. I shook my head, feeling terrified. I didn’t want to be saved. I didn’t want the basketball courts or the smoothie machines. I wanted the wooden pews and the stained glass windows. It might not have inspired me, but I knew the contours.

I abandoned my quest for a new church.

*  

At summer camp the year after sixth grade, our cohort got to spend a night on Indian Island, an island in the middle of the lake. The island had a rope course set up in the trees, and one night each week, one of the boy cabins and one of the girl cabins completed the course and then had a bonfire and spent the night in tents on the island.
While we stood talking in groups, we learned we’d be partnered during the rope course. Matt, an older boy I’d had a crush on all week, asked me to be his partner. I accepted shyly, imagining the way we’d be palm-to-palm twenty feet up, just the two of us up there with the wind.

Later, as a group of us searched for kindling, someone turned the conversation to religion. YMCA camp wasn’t Bible Camp, but it was Christian in a default way. Mornings started with a brief stint at chapel. Someone said a prayer before dinner. There was a camp slogan (“God first; others second; yourself third”).

“I don’t believe in God,” Evelyn said casually. I was struck by this information. Evelyn was a year ahead and went to a different school. She had a way of commanding a room, and I’d admired her confidence. But now she was sorting herself into a more sinister crowd.

“Me neither,” said Matt.

“No?” I asked. “Not at all?”

I felt a pang in my chest. Matt was cute—tall, quiet, with dark hair—but I was beginning to imagine a danger to him that set me on edge. He was also a year or two older. I wondered what he got into in his free time, whether I should keep a distance, whether maybe Evelyn and Matt were better suited to each other.

When we returned to the broader group, I cornered my friend Chelsea and asked her to partner with me for the rope course. Then I told Matt I was sorry, but Chelsea needed someone.

When camp was over at the end of the week, Matt and I exchange email addresses. He emailed me (crazydaizy14) a few days later. Did I want to meet up at the park?

I contemplated the email. I imagined him pulling out a ziplock bag of white powder, or asking me to come back to his house with him, and then up to his room. It would be new territory
I didn’t know how to navigate. His atheism was a warning. I didn’t know what he was capable of.

I let the email go unanswered.

* 

I was thirteen when the airplanes hit the towers while I sat in Mr. McCann’s World History course. As we watched a video about the Holocaust, a teacher came in and spoke with him quietly. She left the room, then returned about ten minutes later, spoke with him again, and slipped back out. At first I thought nothing; then I thought: bomb threat?

Mr. McCann got up from his desk, paused the video, and said, “Two airplanes have hit the Twin Towers in New York City.” These seemed like disparate pieces to a larger puzzle. Airplanes flew into a building? Two of them? The “Twin Towers”? It was all so heightened, so dramatic.

“Because it was two airplanes, this probably wasn’t an accident. This was probably an attack,” he said. He looked excited, restrainedly giddy. “This might be the beginning of a war.”

The rest of the day, we moved from class to class, mainly watching TV: the airplanes hitting the towers in math class; the airplanes hitting the towers in science; the airplanes hitting the towers in English. None of us understood the context. Aren’t wars usually less of a surprise?

That night—the beginning of 8th grade—I began my habit of watching the news alongside my parents. I marked it in my journal, the content of which had until then been dominated by the actions of boys and the routines of daily life. “Everyone thinks an Afghanistan guy is behind it all,” I wrote. “I forgot his name but it starts with an O. Osmar or Osbar or something.”
Fox News was my parents’ preference. Slowly, like a baby picking up language, I began to understand. The world is dangerous; some people hate us for our freedom; we have to go to war to kill the bad guys. America shook out into two camps. There were conservatives, the vast majority of the population, who were rational, reasonable, and realistic, and who quietly and respectfully believed in things like God and lower taxes. They lived mainly in small towns like ours and led humble, honorable lives. There were also a hostile faction of Americans called liberals. They usually took to the cities, shedding religion and harboring resentments. Liberals seemed to have a problem with everything: people keeping guns, the celebration of Christmas, whatever our new president was doing. The recently disgraced former president, who I’d caught flashes of again and again, wheeling past the television as a ten-year-old, eyes widened—“I did not. Have. Sexual. Relations with that woman,” “Indeed I did have a relationship…”—was a liberal, naturally.

Cat, a girl in the grade ahead of me—an acquaintance from AYSO soccer—was also a liberal. I knew because she outed herself at random one day, sending an email to everyone on her contact list explaining why abortion should be legal. Opening the email, I stared, reddening, stunned at her lack of concern for the unborn.

“That was awful. Don’t ever send me anything like that again,” I typed back.

“Okay,” she responded. “Geez. I didn’t think people would be so sensitive.”

By the time I was fourteen, at my urging, my parents and I began attending church every weekend. We’d file in, manage the hour, do the sit-stand-kneel-sit-stand-kneel of Catholic custom. It was still as boring as ever, still partly incomprehensible, but I felt lighter when we left—purified.
I wrote papers for 9th grade English: Why Abortion Should be Illegal, Why Affirmative Action is Wrong. My political awakening was a life raft. If sex before marriage was wrong, I didn’t have to worry about having sex anytime soon. If drugs and underage drinking were wrong, I didn’t have to worry about trying them and losing control. If Christianity was real and right, I didn’t have to worry about mortality.

At 8pm each weeknight, I curled up on the couch with my parents and soaked in the brilliant blues and reds—the popping graphics and scrolling feeds—of cable news. Bill O’Reilly smiled, amused, as he worked through his talking points: who was being too sensitive, who was failing to recognize danger, who was being intolerant of good Christians just trying to practice their faith. He shook his head, eyes squinted knowingly, smirking. We knew better, he and I.

* I cried on my fifteenth birthday when my dad forgot to get me a gift.

“No, no,” Mom comforted me. “The gift was from both of us.”

But it was delivered by only one of them, and I knew that wasn’t true. There was an odd tectonic shift inside, something in my middle.

By late winter, huddled in my room with the ‘95 PC I’d inherited when my parents finally bought a new one, I’d ventured out onto the Internet. I spent hours looking up lyrics to the songs I liked. Eventually, I found the forum page on the website, and wandered into the community—a mass of strangers who showed up here day after day. I could look at these people from a safe distance.

Though it was a music site, we posted about everything and nothing in particular. We thoroughly exhausted age/sex/location. We discussed favorite TV shows and books and, of course, bands. We posted threads of just our photos, revealing ourselves beyond the screen name
and IP address. We were from everywhere—Oklahoma, Utah, New York, California.

Occasionally, people posted about politics. Some of them were anti-war, writing about oil and a lack of WMDs. I read with resistance and mild curiosity.

I added some of the forum participants on my instant messenger platforms. One, a guy from Maryland, became my central focus. We exchanged photos. We chatted constantly. We knew each other, it seemed. He was a parallel person across the country.

“What do you think about abortion? What do you think of the war?” I asked.

“I think we should abort the war,” he said. “But not other things, like babies.” He was meeting me halfway. I thought of the oil in the Middle East, how little I knew about geopolitics and natural resources. I thought of his blue eyes gazing out of the photo, about new bonds I might forge. I wanted to hear more.

*

That April was Confirmation, the next and last step after First Communion. The ninth graders went through a new round of classes. We’d been told that after Confirmation, we’d be fully official, as Catholic as the Pope. We were prepared for the ceremony and told to pick a saint, whose name we would add to our own. Like most, I picked the saint whose feast day was closest to my birthday—St. Lucy.

The legend is that Lucy, like many female saints, met a grisly and premature end when she refused her noble heritage, committed herself to God, and distributed her wealth to the poor. When the man she was betrothed to learned of this, he told the governor of Syracuse, their home. Lucy was ordered to burn a sacrifice to the emperor’s image. When she refused, she was ordered put to death in an attempted burning, but she would not burn. The governor’s men ended up gouging out her eyes, making Lucy patron saint of the blind. I liked Lucy’s obstinance.
By the time of Confirmation, I was beginning to fray. I’d stopped caulking up my doubts and was allowing them space, if not attention. The night before the ceremony, the town’s Catholic ninth graders gathered for a celebratory potluck dinner in the drafty church basement with their parents and witnesses—a non-nuclear relative or family friend who would attest to spiritual growth in the coming years. My witness was my aunt, my dad’s brother’s wife. Though we weren’t close, she was the only other relative I knew in the church. Mom was the Catholic one, and nearly all her family was still in Germany.

Before the dinner, some of the older, established people in the church offered a group prayer, along with a few words of encouragement and pride.

“Before we eat, do any of the witnesses want to say anything?” one of the women offered.

There was a moment of silence. Eyes wandered around the room. My aunt raised her hand.

“I’m so proud of Emilie,” she said. Hundreds of eyes trained in on us. “She has a strong faith and has grown so much spiritually. I’ve watched as this girl has brought her family back to the church.”

My parents and I sat in horrified silence. It was too late to explain how wrong it all felt, how wrong this projection of me to the whole room was. I’d been bound to my aunt as my witness, to a ceremony that now felt at least a little hollow.

* 

By mid-summer, my world had splintered. Dad’s years of faithlessness to Mom had been exposed, a bomb in the middle of the family. Pip, the boy in Maryland, was nurturing fractures in our connection. What had been a passionate alliance was cooling, first for practical reasons, and
then due to his nihilism. He was crawling out on academic limbs. Every time I felt I’d caught up with the most recent theory he’d become enamored with—Feudalism! Communism! Anarchism!—he’d maneuver to a new one.

I rarely trucked with the theories—even at fifteen, I could muster a decent argument against feudalism—but I tried to understand. He erected barriers to understanding and I worked to get through them. When I sent him a Nickel Creek song I liked, one with religious undertones, he made sure to clarify that he liked it, but only because of the instrumentation, not the message—because religion was a farce. I’d found the lyrics comforting, some last vestige of faith. Here was new music I liked, the bluegrass that fit with the corn-and-soy countryside and tall field grass I’d grown up walking through, with a nostalgic bent. I wondered if I could half-believe, if I could like it for the message without accepting the message.

Gina married in June, at a ceremony with a female non-affiliated officiant who read from a variety of multicultural texts. She and her husband bought an A-frame house half an hour away and invited me to stay whenever I wanted. We’d been instant messaging since I was a preteen and had grown close. At her house, I scanned her bookshelf. Slaughterhouse-Five. Infinite Jest. Why I Am Not a Christian.

I spent one night there with a copy of 1984. I’d had no idea what the book was about when Mom had bought it for me days before and handed it to me, instructing me to read it. The deeper in I got, the more I felt myself gripped. At the turn near the end, I could hear an internal shrieking. I finished at 2 in the morning and roused myself from the bed, walking into the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror.

There would be no more caulking of the cracks, I decided. There were worse things to fear.
Sometime during mass that summer or fall, I sat in the pew and listened more closely than usual to the homily. I wanted to know what was being said. The priest related the story in the readings to God’s requirement that we love him more than anyone, including our family. Ranking love this way is hard, he said, but necessary.

_No_, came the thought suddenly, bubbling up to the surface. I gritted my teeth. I couldn’t summon a way to square the abstraction, to love something I couldn’t fathom, at that thing’s behest. Why create beings just to taunt them? What was this needless competition for? I was tired of the pettiness.

The following Sunday, I heard my parents call me for mass from the foot of the stairs.

“I’m not going,” I said from the platform at the top.

Mom and I looked at each other for a long moment. I was a year younger than Gina had been when she’d come out as an atheist. But this was a more ambiguous protest.

“Okay,” she said quietly.

* 

Christianity was a backdrop: a benign canvas. Since before I can remember, at noon and 6pm each day, the same recording of an organ hymn plays at the Methodist church two blocks away from my parents’ home, resounding throughout the neighborhood. Over the years, it was often a reminder to dust off and leave the playground for dinner, or that I should probably start my homework, or that recess would be over in ten minutes.

Weeks before Christmas each year, the same wood-and-plastic nativity scene would be installed and lit up on the courthouse lawn, along with white Christmas lights lining the building’s window casings. Carolers often met on the lawn before making their rounds.
There was also the traditional prayer at high school graduation, led by a teacher.

My junior year, a few weeks before graduation, Cat—school newspaper editor and composer of the abortion email—published an op-ed arguing for the removal of the prayer before the ceremony, citing the separation of church and state and the fact that not everyone was a Christian. Cat’s family, I knew, also went to St. Rose, though she’d stopped attending before Confirmation. Frightened by her opinions in middle school, I found myself, by late high school, drawn to her obstinance.

Shortly after the op-ed came out, Cat and a friend quietly arranged a meeting with the principal. Grievances were aired. The ACLU was mentioned. The prayer was off.

Instead of simply canceling the tradition, the principal held an assembly for all seniors in order to gravely and personally deliver the news. He did not speak of respecting other religions, or those with no religion at all; he just said that, legally, the prayer could not happen. Instead, there would be a moment of silence.

As the seniors filed out of the lecture hall, Cat—her face shaken between curtains of pale blonde hair—caught the first of it. “Fuck you!” shouted someone in the crowd. “Thanks for ruining graduation,” spat Scott, the Homecoming King. One girl burst into tears. “I hope Jesus forgives you!” she wailed. Unfocused, beginning to go numb, Cat found her way out of the crowd and headed to sixth period.

At the time, I was peripheral. I had read the op-ed and the news about the assembly had filtered down. The school was buzzing. I felt energized; suddenly, the people sitting next to me in classes were debating. The juniors were less feverish than the seniors, but the growing consensus still seemed to be the same: what did prayer ever do to Cat?
I learned about the fallout later that week when I walked into the newspaper office and found Cat and her narrowing group of friends, beleaguered, gathering themselves. They had battle wounds. Someone’s car had been vandalized; threatening notes had been slipped into lockers. Adding to the pressure, local news media had caught wind of the story. A front-page article drew the attention of the community at large, broadening the conversation.

On graduation day, the attendance was record-breaking. We packed into the gym and filed onto the pullout bleachers. The Class of 2005, identical in royal blue caps and gowns, sat in metal folding chairs, filling out the gym floor. Administrators unfolded the remaining chairs for bleacher overflow, and several people stood, unable to find seating. I sat high in the second row of bleachers with my dad, my palms sweating from the tension. It seemed certain something would happen, but I didn’t know what.

After the opening announcements and the roar of cheering and air horns, the student council vice president approached the microphone. “Let us take a moment of silence,” she said. Around me, bodies went rigid. I braced as the room went quiet. A few seconds passed.

Then, a loud but indistinguishable murmur from the middle of the blue sea. I strained, leaning in, as the words continued and the murmur spread outward, then up into the audience.

“…Thy kingdom come, thy will be done…”

No, I thought. The room droned with voices—below, above, on both sides of me. On my right, I heard my dad’s voice melting in.

“…As we forgive those who trespass against us…”

I focused hard on the sea of robes, my eyes darting from the edges to the middle, from the front to the back. Where was she? Was she okay? I couldn’t focus. Everyone looked the same from my vantage point. I gritted my teeth. On the stage, the principal controlled a smug smile.
“…But deliver us from evil. Amen.”

A deafening cheer erupted from the crowd, with raucous applause and horns blending to a consensus. My face burned red. I wiped my hands hard on my jeans.

*

I made my first online dating profile at 22. I scrolled through the list of descriptors, self-reporting. When I got to the “Religious Views” section of my profile, I hovered briefly before selecting the “atheist” option and, from the drop-down menu denoting seriousness, the middle option—“Somewhat serious about it.”

I’d drifted into atheism, less a conscious choice than an inevitability. It was simply where I found myself, where the tide had pulled me, after shedding my fear. A year or so earlier, I’d been to India and walked through temples, the bottoms of my bare feet cooled by the smooth stone floors. I’d stood before Buddhas in darkened caverns and considered the offerings left in their folded hands. They’d inspired reverence, quiet. I was returned to my hometown church, left again with the aesthetics—the smell of the missals, the gleam of candlelight, the sound of a phrase repeated in unison, echoing in the great, hollow space. I’d been away from church-going so long that it was beginning to feel as novel and exotic to my mind as these statues of remote gods. Standing before a man’s bleeding execution. Eating of his body.

My first date from the site was with a man of Indian heritage who ran an atheist blog, drawn by my lack of religion and my vegetarianism. We met in a Chicago cafe in dark, gloomy February. His blog was, it turned out, fairly well known. He’d written a book about atheism as well, and taught high school.

“Do your students know about your double life?” I teased.
“They’re very curious about it,” he said. “Sometimes they look me up and ask me about it. It’s a little awkward. I just try to be honest.”

The date lasted about an hour. We didn’t go out again, but he was unimpeachably kind, the type of man I couldn’t imagine fearing.

*

I spent much of the past holiday home in Michigan. I avoided the television, which is still, a decade and a half later, mostly fixed on Fox News. Instead, I worked in the living room, catching up on freelance writing and clicking around to distract myself with social media.

Mom joined me at one point, sitting down with a book. It turned out to be more of a prop. She stared pensively into the Christmas tree, deep in thought.

“You know,” she said. “I really don’t feel like going to church this Christmas.”

She’d been following the molestation scandals, the way those in the church leadership simply moved around the perpetrators. One recent Sunday she’d attended church, a priest had suggested the congregation forgive those who’d committed the crimes, just as they asked for forgiveness for themselves. Mom had gotten up and walked out.

“It just makes me sick,” she said. “I hate to say it, but I feel like I’m losing my faith.”

“Don’t apologize to me,” I said. “I’m right there with you.”

That afternoon, I decided to take my parents’ dog, Max, for a walk. It was Christmas Eve, and the typical gloom of a Michigan December had descended. I’d grown used to the overcast skies, the cold rain in lieu of snow. It wasn’t comforting the way I wanted, but it was in the way I’d grown to expect.

We made a loop around a wide, flat grid through the neighborhood. I was enjoying looking in through the windows at the glowing trees and taking in the air-puffed Santas and
snowmen in people’s rain-soaked yards. Near the middle school, as Max stopped to sniff out a pile of leaves, I paused to read a large sign someone had erected in their yard. On a stiff white board, suspended between poles made of PVC piping, was a message: “...HAVE YE NOT READ THAT WHICH WAS SPOKEN UNTO YOU BY GOD... MATT 22:31.”

Posted on a smaller sign above, as if as an afterthought, were the words, “YE DO ERR, NOT KNOWING THE SCRIPTURES.”

*There are worse ways to err,* I thought, and tugged on the leash.
Sleepwalking

I shared a poem with my students last fall. I don’t read much poetry, but it came to my attention via some social media post early last year after Poetry Magazine published it, and I couldn’t forget it. I’d been returning to it throughout the year. It vibrated in my body like a drum.

I Woke Up

and it was political.  
I made coffee and the coffee was political.  
I took a shower and the water was.  
I walked down the street in short shorts and a Bob Mizer tank top  
and they were political, the walking and the shorts and the beefcake silkscreen of the man posing in a G-string. I forgot my sunglasses  
and later, on the train, that was political,  
when I studied every handsome man in the car.  
Who I thought was handsome was political.¹

Etcetera.

I projected it up on the screen and my students stared, expressionless. The room was quiet while they read to themselves. I wondered how they would interpret it—if anyone would find it relatable. These are students in West Virginia, where a great media eye has, over the past few years, gazed, stalked, infiltrated and interviewed.

“What do you think?” I asked.

One student raised his hand. “I just think it’s kind of a negative perspective,” he said. “Thinking everything is political.” Other students leaned back in their seats, equally disenchanted. The air was thick with discomfort.

“Is it not true, though?” I asked. “That everything is political?”

No one engaged. Students crossed their arms. It was a trick—they could sense it. I was leading them off the path again, past grammar and sentence structure and into the brambles and thickets of unpleasant discourse. I was going to pull back the curtain again, gesture toward cruelty and unfairness, point out disparities. I wondered if my voice had that shrill pitch it can take on when tension burrows into it.

“Well, anyway,” I retreated. “You can see how the author uses rhetoric in his repetition. Let’s move on.”

* 

Over the past few years, I’ve said fuck more times than all the other years of my life combined. Fuck this. What the fuck? Are you fucking kidding me? Fuck you, out loud to the Congressman talking through my car stereo. Go fuck yourself, I think and almost say to the president on Twitter, melting into the crowd of voices searching for a way to be heard. The word should lose its verve through overuse, but I don’t know how else to express how unacceptable and overwhelming everything feels. It’s a necessary word. It keeps me sane and aware, like bringing a sharp knife on a walk through a shadowy neighborhood at night.

Everything hits me in the center. People describe this sort of transition when they have a baby—it’s a way of seeing the world through new eyes, seeing people differently. My mother never much liked or wanted children, but after her first baby was born, she responded to everyone else’s babies differently too. They were tiny miracles. I have the same nerve-level reaction, but instead of the wonder of life, I’m feeling the agony. I’m inverted now, raw on the outside.

Videos come to me via social media. I can only watch some of them. Most I can’t handle. A cop shoots and kills an unarmed man who cowers on the floor, his hands in the air. A jury also
watched this video; they neglected to convict the cop. He was scared, they said. The officer used an AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. He’d had it inscribed with the phrase *YOU’RE FUCKED*.

A starving polar bear pulls its body slowly across the thawing tundra, looking for food. Its back knees drag on the ground—it cannot even lift them up. The bear is, text overlaid on the video states, mere hours from dying. Its misery is palpable. Its head hangs. A backbone juts out sharply.

Travelers on a Greyhound are forced to show their papers to immigration officers at a routine bus stop in Fort Lauderdale. “Is this new?” the passenger filming asks, seemingly to no one. A black woman of Caribbean descent is arrested and removed when she cannot show her papers. She had been visiting her granddaughter in Orlando.

Disabled activists on the floor of Congress protest legislation that will cut access to Medicaid for low-income citizens. It will affect them disproportionately. They chant “save our liberty!” They are under arrest. Cops in neon vests forcibly remove them from their wheelchairs, carrying their bodies away in awkward poses, sometimes allowing their legs to drag on the ground.

A landscaper in the Detroit airport hugs his children and his wife of fifteen years. His wife’s sobs are muffled by his jacket, but still loud enough to be heard. He rubs her back. He is being deported to Mexico after thirty years in the U.S. His only infraction is his lack of legal citizenship. He had lived here since he was ten years old.

A sorority girl at the University of Alabama shoots a video of herself turning off a faucet in the bathroom mirror. “I love how I act like I love black people because I fucking hate n-----s,” she says. “I fucking hate n-----s, but I just saved the fucking n-----s by shutting that water off.”
She does a little dance in front of the mirror. The word burns my ears, but she says it so naturally; she’s practiced.

I could stop paying attention. This is what my mother tells me to do. This is what a therapist might advise. Tune out. Take a hot bubble bath. Stop making everything political. *It’s kind of a negative perspective.*

I wasn’t always tuned out. As an undergraduate, I was obsessed with environmental degradation. I shunned plastic bags, bringing my own canvas ones to the grocery store. I became a vegetarian to reduce support of the cruel and environmentally toxic fossil fuel industry. I didn’t use paper towels in bathrooms, wiping my hands on my jeans instead.

The worst thing—the most frightening thing—was global warming. I took a class on it, fulfilling a science requirement. I didn’t always understand the science, but one thing was clear beneath the equations and geochemistry: past a certain point, the damage would be irreparable. There would be deadly heat waves, devastating floods, long-term droughts, cracked soil, city-destroying hurricanes, disappearing coastline. The more serious problems weren’t just damage to infrastructure and crops, but the human consequences: tens of millions of environmental refugees, resource catastrophes, economic problems that would be impossible to keep up with, and potential civilizational collapse as a result.

I planned to add a second major in environmental studies, taking classes like Human Impact on the Environment and Religion and Environment. I learned about ways we could address our neglect. We could internalize externalities, taxing corporations, rather than society broadly, with the damage done to the environment. We could invest massively in alternative energy sources like solar and wind. We could reduce our fixation on growth, and find other,
more productive ways to measure economic success. This was 2007-2008, when it still seemed possible we might take action on global warming.

On campus, I joined an environmental group, but we couldn’t do anything except hold small protests, which were borderline embarrassing in their inefficacy. Sometimes, we would head up petitions for the university—a giant, wealthy machine—to divest from oil companies, which they would ignore, no matter how many signatures we gathered. Mainly, the group served as a kind of supportive space for people with environmental anxiety. Each week, we’d order a big box of samosas and watch an episode of Planet Earth. It was delicious, ineffectual, and deeply self-inoculating.

One day, I read an article in the local weekly about how people were caring too much about the environment, and they should relax a bit, or they would burn out. The article infuriated me. I wrote a short story in response: a woman visits her therapist, and admits to having recycled one of her daughter’s treasured drawings, writing a grocery list on the back, rather than using new paper. The therapist coaches her and eventually they throw it out together, and she uses clean, new paper, which qualifies as a breakthrough.

I asked my friend Upekha to read the story, which struck me as clear social commentary.

“Can you tell it’s a satire?” I asked. “Because they’re acting like her concern is crazy?”

“Totally. It’s just… kind of hard to tell which person is being parodied,” she said carefully.

In other words: no, really. You are being a little bit crazy.

* * *

On Friday nights, people ten years younger than me scream nearby at parties, aging me prematurely. Their faint, intoxicated yells are eerie through my window, less annoying than
psychically invasive. They yell things about the football team, which, in addition to maybe the basketball team, is the only thing that inspires any kind of pervasive public emotion around here. I could scream, too, but for different reasons. Instead, I freeze. I power down.

I sit in my apartment, shelved between the football stadium, the hospital, and undergraduate housing, a compendium of institutional blandness, and think about the frameworks that keep me sitting in my apartment on Friday nights. I could get drinks, but I’m trying to get out of credit card debt; I’m in credit card debt because I was unpaid for a few months this summer, and I don’t make enough now to dig out; I don’t make enough now to dig out because graduate students are barely paid enough to live; graduate students are barely paid enough to live because teaching is severely undervalued; teaching is severely undervalued because we’re part of a corporate university ecosystem that is designed to disproportionately benefit only a few; we’re part of that system because all public institutions are being slowly privatized and eroded into systems that disproportionately benefit only a few.

Etcetera.

If I get up and make dinner, a new framework exerts itself. I should become a vegetarian again, but I’m trying to eat low-carb so I can lose ten pounds; I’m trying to lose ten pounds because I’m unhappy with my body; I’m unhappy with my body because we live in a society with razor-thin beauty standards for women, and I’m thirty now, and I can feel my body veering toward the unforgiving genetics of the women on my dad’s side of the family; I am helping destroy the earth to lose ten pounds.

Few thoughts go through my head anymore without getting routed into this loop, a Rube Goldberg-esque chain that ends with fracture, dissolution, isolation. A cigar is never just a cigar. It’s kind of a negative perspective.
My corner of West Virginia isn’t the endless Trump rally people imagine. A progressive group organizes on the quad following each national trauma: the Muslim ban, the march of white supremacists in Charlottesville, family separation at the border. A small group of women dressed as Atwood-esque handmaids to reprise the anniversary of the Women’s March. The city passed a non-discrimination ordinance. Morgantown passed a resolution to uphold the Paris Climate Accords, even as coal trucks lumber through town. A few of my students, in the privacy of their papers, express progressive opinions, if cautiously: college should be made more affordable, or the Muslim Ban is bad.

Still, these are outliers. Many more of my students’ papers leave me depressed and listless: the media is unfair to cops, or police brutality is overblown, or we need to deport all illegal immigrants, or we should bring back coal, or kneeling football players are just being disrespectful.

As a composition teacher, I’m meant to convey some basic but essential elements of writing: purpose, audience, context. I try to blend in some bigger concepts: the structures underlying the topics they want to write about; the very human motivations of, say, Central American refugees. I want them to strip off the skin and look at the mechanics of an issue.

Even so, I have to question myself—do I just want to turn them progressive? The right-wing media has warned about people like me, college instructors with this kind of agenda. I fear the anonymity of student feedback in semester-end evaluations. I think often of the student who seethed in his evaluation my first semester, who wrote a long, dense paragraph, angry I’d critiqued his sources and substituted my own liberal sources. It was the fall of the election and
I’d bent over backward to both-sides each lesson that touched on politics, to not let them know who I was voting for. It hadn’t been enough.

As a teacher, I’ve operated in the best faith and the worst: Be more thoughtful; be more thoughtful *just like me*. It’s enough—along with the skeptical looks—to make me retreat before pushing the class into a serious discussion. We reroute to passive v. active voice, to serial commas. All the while I wonder: *how do you change a mind?*

The spring after the election, I passed three Trump signs in dorm windows on the way to campus. Two were homemade. One was giant, each letter comprised of multiple sheets of paper, spread across five windows. High up in the dorm tower, it looked out over the landscape like a beacon. If it hadn’t hardened the knot in my stomach, the cold insistence of it, a word that lands like a piano on a sidewalk, would have made me laugh. *TRUMP.*

Summer 2017, I went to an anti-racism rally in the center of campus. It was maybe 24 hours after 32-year-old activist Heather Heyer was murdered roughly 230 miles away by another seething, radicalized white boy. As an African-American woman delivered a moving speech about how *we won’t accept racism here*, guys in a truck drove back and forth repeatedly, honking and yelling insults at the crowd—a crowd that was protesting, in the most basic sense, white supremacy. Heyer’s body was barely cold. I felt the hope drain out of me.

*  

Angry as I was about the prospect of “environmental burnout”—about the audacity of telling people to relax—it happened to me. After years of caring, I unclenched. The climate change obsessives were a small community; it was me and what felt like a handful of other people, and few of us had power, and none of us had lobbies, and it wasn’t enough.
Even more pertinent, it was 2010 and I was a millennial looking for a job in the depths of the recession. I stopped caring if I brought bags when I went to the store. I stopped feeling bad when I used paper towels in the bathroom. By that point, I was tired and panicked, had very little money, and little else seemed to matter anymore.

A funny thing happened, though. Even after I got a job, after a routine fell back into place, I still couldn’t access the motivation to care. Little had changed in my years of pseudo-activism and attention. We were still hurtling toward devastation. Those who took on some modicum of responsibility did so alone, with little overall effect on others or the earth. When, five years after becoming a vegetarian, I took a slice of pepperoni pizza at work to the surprised looks of my coworkers, I could only shrug. I hadn’t changed my mind about the negative environmental effects, about the horrors of factory farming. I just felt alone and tired. I don’t know, I thought. I put in five years.

One of the most potent feelings in my gut after the election was a knowing dread that, over four years, we would get used to this. We would care for a while, even obsessively, and then we’d burn out. I called my representatives a few times last year—but only a few. My phone number still has a Michigan area code, and I’d read that Senator Shelley Moore Capito’s staff was only counting calls from a West Virginia area code as “her constituency.” I emailed her and received formulaic responses. I resorted to tweeting at her, which is the least effective way of making change, but the most emotionally satisfying. After she voted to pass the tax bill in December 2017, I tweeted at her, simply, “You are a ghoul.”
Late last year, I read an article in the New Yorker about whether or not calling your Congressperson actually did anything.\(^2\) The takeaway was *sort of*, depending on who your representative is. Online petitions, form emails from advocacy groups, and social media posts are all largely dismissed. Phone calls using scripts suggested by advocacy groups are also ignored. The most relevant phone calls tend to reflect arcane issues. “If you ask your senator to co-sponsor a bill on mud-flap dimensions or to propose a change to the bottling requirements for apple cider or to vote in favor of increased funding for a rare childhood disease, you stand a decent chance of succeeding.” the article states. But if it’s a matter of intense partisan debate (healthcare, immigration, climate change), reaching out usually doesn’t do much at all.

I would like for it to matter if we call Congress, but it seems a futile exercise. Our greatest opportunity for change is voting—and gerrymandering, voter suppression, and felon disenfranchisement have taken a toll there as well. Eighty percent of the country opposed getting rid of the Obama-era net neutrality rules, yet three of the five people on the Federal Communications Commission voted to abolish them anyway. Seventy-five percent of the country opposed the tax reform bill’s massive tax cuts for corporations and wealthy, yet that bill too sailed through Congress.

It didn’t matter if I and a few other people cared about global warming, and it barely seemed to matter if we burned out. We the people scream into a wind tunnel. It sucks up our voices.

Years ago, I had a vivid dream that I was shopping in an outdoor market, when suddenly gravity began to dissipate and I lifted off the ground and floated away into the yellow sky. An

\(^2\) “What Calling Congress Achieves,” by Kathryn Shulz, March 6, 2017 (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/what-calling-congress-achieves)
eerie panic spread through my stomach as I realized I had no control, nothing to cling to. It was the awareness of incipient chaos, and the feeling that I could do nothing.

* 

We missed the window on climate change. It wasn’t just Trump. Congress barely moved for the three entire decades we knew we needed to. We had ideas, good ones, and we had the technology. Lobbying and private funding won out. In the early 2000s, Congress, all of Congress, was debating what to do; now, climate change has fallen down the list of priorities, and on cold days, Republican politicians still mock the notion of its very existence. Even as supercharged hurricanes strike the coasts, as each year is the new hottest one on record, as South Asians die *en masse* during excessive heat waves and wildfires burn up southern California. Even as we *live it*.

In July 2017, David Wallace-wells published a prediction of how climate change will affect the future, drawing on interviews with a range of climate scientists and informed by our path of inaction. The results were apocalyptically bad. He suggests that our impoverished imaginations haven’t even grappled with what’s likely to come. Whole regions of the world will be uninhabitably hot, and still others in a permanent state of drought, bringing a dramatic increase in famine. The melting ice could release a plethora of ancient diseases back into the human population, including the Spanish flu and the bubonic plague. Unbreathable smog could coat whole regions of the planet. Marine and plant life could die off in droves. There is no averting global warming anymore; now it’s simply a matter of whether we’ll take action to at least mitigate some of the horror. “The mass extinction we are now living through has only just begun,” Wallace-wells explains. “So much more dying is coming.”

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More recently, in October 2018, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a report that reinforced these predictions. We have twelve years to get it together, they said. Twelve years to upend the current system entirely, or we’re utterly doomed.

It’s kind of a negative perspective, but it’s also reality.

*

I was in Germany when I saw that Trump planned to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accords. He’d ramped up the reveal for a week, like it was a finale on one of his TV shows. I felt sick, the same sick I’d been feeling with varying degrees of intensity for months, a reliable tightness in the stomach. I knew he’d probably do it, but for a week I could imagine an alternative—that maybe he was just dangling it as a taunt.

“I was elected to represent Pittsburgh, not Paris,” he’d told the crowd gathered on the White House lawn.

Bill Peduto, the mayor of Pittsburgh, responded in a tweet: “I can assure you that we will follow the guidelines of the Paris Agreement for our people, our economy, and the future.”

It was early June, and I was hot in the bed that had been given to me, the one belonging to my nineteen-year-old cousin, who was traveling in Australia. I scrolled through Twitter. The speech was one of the videos I couldn’t bring myself to watch, so I read quotes and summaries.

Then I saw French president Emmanuel Macron’s response to Trump’s decision, an address directly to the American people. “Tonight I wish to tell the United States—France believes in you,” he began. “The world believes in you. I know that you are a great nation. To all scientists, engineers, entrepreneurs, responsible citizens who were disappointed by the decision of the United States, I want to say—they will find in France a second homeland.”
I don’t know when I started crying. Maybe when Macron made sad eye contact with me through the screen; maybe when he offered me a complicated grace; maybe when I realized so many Americans were, like me, strangely unmoored—drifting toward becoming a certain, unnamable type of refugee. I rubbed my eyes on the pillow.

I looked to the other side of the room. On the desk, in a large aquarium, my cousin kept a lizard that baked beneath a heat lamp. I’d been making tentative friends with him; the night before, my aunt had given me bits of lettuce to feed him, a stopgap between rounds of crickets. He moved very little, spending half the day in one position, as if in paralysis. It was hard to tell if he was asleep or awake. We had that in common.

*

The end of “I Woke Up” takes a turn:

*I thought I was not a political poet and still
my imagination was political.
It had been, this whole time I was asleep.

I’ve begun to wake up, too—to more seriously imagine the different realities that I’ve been building subconsciously in my head for years. It’s clear I’m not the only one. Politicians are being pushed now in ways they never were before, to upend systems that seemed wholly intractable. But the clock is ticking. Too many of us are still asleep, awash in dreams of a nostalgic reality, where cars mean freedom and police mean safety and America means democracy.

In my own dreams, I imagine the fall of the Roman Empire—how it felt to be the generation still living and breathing as something big and powerful collapsed in on you. The Visigoths who entered the city plundered for three days—three days of burning, pillaging, and looting. Rome was weak, but it was the first time the city had fallen in 800 years. It was the land
of the Romans’ parents and grandparents and great-grandparents and on, back in a line beyond memory. It must have felt permanent.

If you were a Roman citizen who lived through the plundering, what did you do over those days? How did you occupy yourself? Where did you hide? What were you thinking? What did it feel like to leave your home when it was over? Did you see pillars of smoke, a once-beautiful city ravaged? Did you have any sense of the enormity of what had happened?

Where did you go from there?
The Likeness of a Wolf

*We all subscribe to preposterous beliefs; we just don’t know yet which ones they are.*
—Stacy Schiff

October 1589
Bedburg, Germany

*Peter hears them before he sees them. The howling in the night, the scrape of paws on the dirt road. His heart stops. It’s one of them, he thinks. It’s finally going to take me. Instinctively, he raises the staff he carries in his non-stump hand and points it outward, as if to deflect the creature. But when they round the corner, he sees it’s just a pack of hunters’ dogs, no more a danger than the sheep down in the pasture. He relaxes, lowering the staff. The dogs skid to a stop, look up at him blankly. Their eyes are empty pearls in the moonlight.*

*The shouts follow, carrying across the field. Men from the village.*

*Ah, Peter thinks. So they’re still on the hunt for it.*

*The men come to a stop before him in the road, some ten yards out. There are four in total. He recognizes Hans and Jan, the butcher and the tailor, who exchange a glance. The men say nothing, staring on at him, while the dogs have begun to sniff at the edge of the road. Peter adjusts his stance in the crisp mud of the field. The night’s damp seems to be creeping into his boots.*

*It takes just one beat more before Peter knows. It’s a quiet unlocking of the past few months—the glances at the tavern, the wide berth he’d begun to accrue when wheeling his cart of wheat into the square. It had been so quiet and subtle he hadn’t noticed he’d noticed.*

*They’ve found what they’re looking for.*
I had wolves on the mind.

I was in Germany, my mother’s birthplace, for the first time in thirteen years. Mom had pitched the idea of going together as a means of cheering me up. My tone had gone flat on our phone calls in recent months, and I’d been quiet and irritable when I took a trip with my parents that spring. Mom interpreted my mood as depression over a recent breakup and my failure to make strong friendships in the small college town I’d moved to the summer before.

But these were just small things. I’d been more preoccupied with the way the outside world had moved in, populating my body like a virus. I’d watched the results of the 2016 election the previous November with horror clotting in my bloodstream, making me desperate but lethargic. I kept hearing the president’s words in my head. *They’re rapists*, of an imagined horde of invaders. *Grab ‘em by the pussy*, in the privacy of a bus.

I’d recently moved from Chicago to West Virginia for grad school. I’d known how red the state was, but I was still surprised somehow when the people elected a man who got onstage and mocked the most vulnerable in our society, like a wolf picking off the sickest sheep. Outwardly, nothing changed after the election. People were still friendly at the grocery store, smiling at me as I passed with my cart. And yet, overnight, I began to see my neighbors as cruel and alien. I imagined people donning a mask of tolerance every morning before leaving the house and removing it to reveal a hideous resentment each night. I worried what they might allow in the name of safety. On my walks home at dusk, without understanding why, I’d begun to picture strange, mythical predators in the shadows—big, toothy beasts waiting to attack.

I couldn’t communicate this to Mom. Our political conversations had become fruitless, frustrating. She feared her own set of wolves; I knew I’d only get so much understanding. So I
let her think I was upset over the garden-variety things, and agreed it might be a good idea to leave the country for a while.

The scenic northern city of Kassel was our first stop after flying into Frankfurt. Mom’s aunt, an eighty-six-year-old nun who wore a long grey habit and squeaked around in sneakers, ran a hillside retreat for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Hilly and surrounded by tall pines, Kassel felt somehow quintessentially German. I’d learned, thumbing through the guidebook I’d checked out from the library the day before, that this was the home of the Brothers Grimm.

After a nap that first morning, I went out for a walk. A mouse darted across the path and I looked out into the forest, trying to imagine what other, larger animals might be stalking through the brush. I’d been trying to absorb the foreignness—different bird songs, different soil, different air—but had been struck instead by the similarities. A white sky releasing, then withholding, drops of rain. The same pines and white-skinned birch trees from my hometown in Michigan. It was all strangely familiar.

I tried to take myself back hundreds of years, tried to imagine wilder woodlands. Here children walked, full of tales about witches and wolves. Of all the folklore published by the Brothers Grimm—Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, Rumpelstiltskin, Cinderella—I couldn’t stop thinking about Rotkäppchen: Little Red Riding Hood.

Under the Aarne-Thompson system of classification for folktales, Little Red Riding Hood is a tale of “Supernatural Adversaries.” It warns of the threat of outsiders. In the story, Little Red Riding Hood is told by her mother to be careful and stay on the path. But when Red meets the wolf, she happily enters into conversation. “She did not know the wolf was an evil animal, and therefore she was not afraid of him,” the story reads.
For German children, warming themselves beside a chimney fire, tugging their blankets a little closer, the message would have been clear. Stay on the path. Don’t trust strangers. Don’t go like a lamb to the slaughter.

* 

Wolves linger in my family like vestigial organs. Opa, my grandfather, was Adolph: noble wolf. Mom’s sister married into the Wolfframs (wolf + raven), an ancient name derived from the Germanic pagan tradition. The wolves Geri and Freki and the ravens Hugin and Munin accompany Odin, faithful companions.

Wolves linger more generally in German history. The ancient Romans recorded German warriors entering battle in wolf pelts, a reminder of the wearer’s “slipping beyond the confines of humanity and becoming a divine predator.” In mythology, Fenrir, the wolf son of Loki, is bound by the gods in their fear of a prophecy that his rapid growth and dangerous nature would lead him to kill Odin. In one version of the myth, Fenrir breaks free and devours the sun and moon.

Tales of wolf-pelt-clad warriors in battle and people shape-shifting into wolfish form turned sinister with the Christianization of Germany. Wolves took on a Satanic association, thrown into a burgeoning context of witchcraft and sorcery. In taverns and churches across the countryside, people whispered of the Devil giving man the power to morph and change, to become a beastly predator—a werewolf.

* 

Our second night in Kassel, a jumbled circadian rhythm and feather-bed heat woke me up at 3AM. Alone in my room, I kicked off the blanket, turned on the night light above my head, and heaved out the one book I brought with me: The Rise and the Fall of the Third Reich.
I’d vaguely hoped to interview my family about their experiences before and during the war—my mother acting as translator—but I knew embarrassingly little about the rise of Hitler and the Second World War. Along with the travel guide, I’d checked out the book using my mother’s library card from our hometown library a few days before. It was the size of a brick, more than 1,000 pages, and I brought no other reading material to keep from avoiding it.

I was twenty pages in. Young Adolf was aggravating his teachers with poor schoolwork and a lack of dedication. After graduating, he’d applied to art school, but failed the entrance exam. He managed to eke out a living as an artist anyway, drawing mainly bland and unremarkable landscapes, depicting scenes around Vienna. He tinted postcards and painted houses to get by.

One detail in the text stood out—I read it and reread it. I stared at the window for a moment, the room reflected back, pines in the darkness barely visible outside. I read it again.

Occasionally, Hitler would add people into his paintings, strolling the boulevard or gathered lakeside. While the buildings he painted were detailed and well drawn, the people were so poorly rendered they resembled cartoons. One modern critic, unaware of who he was critiquing, claimed the work showed a “profound uninterest in people.”

Hitler drew the people in his paintings like indistinguishable dolls: one exactly like the next and the next and the next.

* 

In the mid-1560s, in the German village of Bedburg—after the time of Fenrir, but before Little Red Riding Hood—residents grew unnerved by a spate of livestock killings. Cattle, goats, sheep. Villagers would wake in the morning to find the wet entrails of a calf or lamb glistening on the dewy pasture grass. A detached hoof or two. Most of the animal gone.
The killings continued for years. Villagers suspected an encroaching wolf. It wasn’t until children began disappearing that discomfort bloomed into terror. Tired of the assault, the townspeople assembled nightly with packs of dogs. They set out into the countryside to hunt the beast. For weeks it eluded capture, until one night the dogs caught scent of the animal and chased it into a field, surrounding it. Thus cornered, the hunters watched in awe as the wolf transformed and standing before them was the farmer Peter Stumpp, staff in hand, as if out for a walk.

Peter submitted willingly, walking back to the village with the men. Brought before the magistrate and confronted with the rack, Peter confessed everything. For twenty-five years, he’d wandered the village well dressed and respectable by day, feasting on victims by night. Inclined to the path of evil even from his youth, Peter had begun practicing black magic at age twelve, dabbling in necromancy and sorcery.

Learning of his dark ways, the Devil appeared before Peter and offered a deal: whatever he desired in exchange for his soul. Peter didn’t want riches or power; he longed only to satisfy a carnal desire, to violate and feast on the living of the village without drawing suspicion. The Devil produced a belt for Peter, which, upon donning, gave Peter the likeness of a wolf.

Beyond livestock, Peter confessed to killing a total of fourteen children in his wolfish state. He’d also ripped apart two pregnant women, tearing the fetuses from their wombs and eating their hearts “panting hot and raw.”

Peter immersed himself in all manner of sin. He lusted after his own beautiful daughter, Sybil, subjecting her to his advances and using her as a concubine. He also committed incest with his own sister, and slept with a bewitchingly beautiful woman sent to him by the Devil—a succubus.
Peter had a son by one of these women. He loved the child, but his taste for flesh was stronger. Luring the boy out into the fields, Peter sent him on ahead before slipping on the belt, undergoing his wolfish transformation and slaying the child. Peter then “ate the brains out of his head” as “a most savory and delicious means to staunch his greedy appetite.”

It was his magnum opus.

This, at least, is the story as testified by the sole surviving account, “A most true Discourse: declaring the damnable life and death of one Stubbe Peeter, being a most wicked Sorcerer.”

Translated from High Dutch to a late Middle English by Englishman George Bores in 1590, the pamphlet reads as part report, part warning, part lurid entertainment. While two English translations of the document exist, the original German versions were lost to history.

The pamphlet ends with an author’s note that the discourse should be

a warning to all Sorcerers and Witches, which unlawfully followe their owne diuelsih imagination to the utter ruine and destruction of their soules eternally, from which wicked and damnable practice, I beseech God keepe all good men, and from the crueltie of their wicked hartes.

Almost everything known of Peter Stumpp comes from this translated pamphlet. His birth record from the neighboring village of Epprath was destroyed, along with the rest of the local registers, decades later in the Thirty Years’ War. But given Peter’s twenty-five-year reign of terror—and its initiation at the age of twelve—the pamphlet implies Peter was about thirty-seven at the time of his confession.

We know Peter was missing one hand. This was used as evidence of his crimes, as a wolf’s paw had been left in a trap found by a villager. Given that he had an adolescent daughter
and also an openly acknowledged lover, the few available sources suggest he was a widower. Peter is also recorded to have had one (surviving) son.

We know that the electorate of Cologne, within which Bedburg fell, had been wracked by the Cologne War of the 1580s, a consequence of the Reformation. That the region was devastated by the conflict, which brought in mercenaries from all over Europe to fight on behalf of each opposing side. That on the year of Peter’s capture, 1589, Protestant forces finally succumbed to the hands of the Italian Duke of Parma, who had been brought in to crush reforming impulses and deliver the territory back to Catholic order.

And we know that in this context of chaos and tension, in an era of religious crackdowns, Peter was almost definitely a Protestant.

* 

On our last night in Kassel, the nuns invited Mom and me into one of their bedrooms to eat. We sat around a small, circular table and ate the standard dinner: cold cuts and cheeses and lox and spreads on brotchen—white bread rolls. Every night the nuns drank a large bottle of beer each, and provided me one as well. Mom opted for tea, served in a fragile cup on a dainty plate.

While downing bread and fleishsalat and beer, we watched the woman on the screen present the news. People were not using trains at the expected rate and they were underfunded. The state was considering imposing a tax to keep them running. A pet rabbit one town over had dug up a Roman coin. The affable-looking gentleman held up the rabbit, his son grinning at his side.

And then a photograph of a man appeared on the screen—a member of the military, something to do with faking a Syrian identity. He was on the run.
I felt my body go rigid. Over the past few years, Mom had brought up the migrant crisis often, relaying what she’d heard and what she feared: people are pouring in. They aren’t even refugees, most of them—just opportunists wanting to take advantage of Germany’s generous social services. They don’t want to assimilate. They’re isolating themselves, demanding Sharia and committing honor killings. There are some nice people, sure, but criminals and rapists too. And German media is too politically correct to tell people what’s going on.

With every headline of an attack in Europe, my mind went immediately to Mom and her worry, her inflamed concern about Muslims. Don’t trust strangers. Don’t go like a lamb to the slaughter. At some point I’d gotten so exhausted by arguing that I couldn’t figure out how to respond anymore, how to explain why these conversations made me so upset. I’d turned into a wall—stoic, quiet, unmoved. People don’t argue with walls; at best, they just talk at them, and she’d grown accustomed to talking at me.

The newscaster spoke in incomprehensible German, calmer than her American cable-news counterparts but still clearly anxious about this non-Syrian on the run. I cradled my beer in one hand, studying its amber bubbles, and felt grateful for a moment I couldn’t speak my mother’s mother tongue.

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Late on October 2, 2015, in the town of Altena, some sixty miles northeast of Cologne, a 25-year-old firefighter trainee named Dirk Denkhaus and his 23-year-old friend Marcus Nitschmann quietly broke into a refugee center. They carried a gas canister, purchased earlier in the evening, and made their way to the attic. There, they poured out the gas and started a slow, smoldering fire. Then they crept back out, cutting the center’s phone lines and disappearing into the night.
The fire smoldered in the attic through the night, never breaking into a full roar. When the inhabitants smelled the burning from downstairs the next morning and used a cell phone to call the fire department, Denkhaus dutifully showed up with the rest of the crew to put out the coals.

Denkhaus claimed he never meant for the people in the house to die; he simply wanted to make the house uninhabitable. He pointed darkly to media reports of “what could happen.” He wanted to prevent more migrants from coming.

Denkhaus’ attack was one of 3,335 anti-refugee attacks that took place in Germany over a two-year period following Chancellor Merkel’s decision to absorb a record one million asylum-seekers from Syria and other war-torn countries. Most Germans had at first met the policy with enthusiasm and warmth, especially those with a long memory, eager to atone for old sins.

But things took a turn after New Years’ Eve, 2015, when celebration attendees fell victim to mass sexual assaults and theft in a few crowded city centers across Germany—but mainly Cologne. The city’s police chief, Wolfgang Albers, suspected at least 2,000 young men in what appeared to be a coordinated group effort. He described them as having an “Arab or North African appearance.”

The attacks left a country that had opened itself to migrants shaken. The police were overwhelmed. The media, unsure how to cover the incidents without inflaming anti-refugee sentiment, dragged their feet—provoking suspicion of a government-sponsored cover-up. People began to panic online, especially on anti-refugee websites and social media pages. Following the attacks, stories of murder, theft, assault, and especially rape, multiplied.
German magazine Spiegel conducted a thorough investigation into one right-wing site’s anti-refugee claims in January 2018. Reporters examined Rapefugee.net, a site that purports to expose the truth about migrant crime and is often distributed through Facebook pages like Heimatliebe.Deutschland (Love for the German Fatherland), Truth24.net, and local branch pages of Germany’s most prominent right-wing populist party, Alternative for Germany.

The reporters found a multitude of spurious claims. Roughly a third of crimes marked on a Rapefugee.net map had links to broken pages or did not contain any information about the incidents. When called for more information, police and prosecutors had never heard of the supposed crime. Many other cases were exaggerated. While 205 of the 291 incidents on the map were identified as rape, many were in fact harassment, exhibitionism, or assault—only 59 of those 205 were correctly labeled.

Of the suspects or perpetrators of the acts, roughly a third were indeed provably refugees, with many of those attacks occurring in refugee camps, perpetrated against other migrants. The remaining two-thirds were other foreigners, including EU citizens; native Germans; or unknown assailants.

A study published in August 2018 by two University of Warwick professors found that anti-migrant crime is higher in German municipalities with higher Facebook usage. The crimes are not linked to simply higher Internet usage as a whole, the study found—they were particular to Facebook. When Facebook experienced an outage in a region, anti-migrant crime measurably dropped. At his trial, Denkhaus was revealed to have been a constant consumer of anti-migrant sentiment on Facebook. A separate incident in Altena in 2017, in which a man stabbed the mayor, also had a Facebook link; infuriated by the politician’s pro-refugee policies, the man had read a slew of enraged comments about the mayor on local pages just before his attack.
In its analysis, the New York Times story on the article noted the way Facebook’s algorithm is wired for user engagement: “Posts that tap into negative, primal emotions like anger or fear, studies have found, perform best and so proliferate.”

At the time of Peter Stumpp’s trial and confession in 1598, and even a few hundred years later with the widespread publication of Little Red Riding Hood, Eurasian wolves still roamed the forests and mountains of Germany. They kept mainly to the hinterlands, though they did occasionally overlap with human populations. While they mainly fed on deer, boar, and other forest dwellers, they would sometimes prey on livestock when living in human-populated areas.

Sometimes, though rarely, they attacked humans. According to Jean-Marc Moriceau, a specialist in rural French history, there were occasional instances of “predatory wolves”—those that would move beyond a taste for livestock and begin to stalk people. These attacks could last for years, with deaths measuring in the dozens. The French would often refer to the killers as “beasts,” as if they were otherworldly, though when the culprit was caught, it was almost always just revealed to be an unusually large wolf. Such attacks could be particularly bad in times of conflict, when too many corpses meant people went unburied. Predatory wolves moved from scavenging on the dead to preying on the living.

A more recent study of a resurgent wolf population in Norway found that ninety percent of attacks were on children under the age of eighteen, with most attacks on those under ten. Children have historically been especially susceptible to wolf attacks; in addition to their weakness, they were often more likely to wander off in rural areas to play or pick berries, and more likely to be asked to tend to livestock. When the wolves killed adults, it was usually women. Whether they were preying on livestock or people, wolves could be brutal—they were
known to often eat almost the entire kill, leaving little behind. Perhaps just some wet entrails, or a detached hoof or two.

Wolf attacks were a nuisance, though never endemic. The average number in France, which had a higher rate of attack than Germany, was roughly thirteen citizens a year over a 500-year period. Still, the attacks were common enough to provoke hatred of wolves as a species. In Germany, organized hunts began in the Middle Ages, increasing over the centuries. By 1847, the last wolf in Bavaria had been killed; in the Rhine region—home to Cologne—the last wolves had been eradicated by 1899.

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Stumpp’s case was not an anomaly. Though rarer than witchcraft trials, werewolf trials proliferated briefly in Europe, peaking in the 16th century. They were particularly rampant in the Baltic region, where peasants kept a firm hold on their pagan traditions.

By the 18th century, werewolf trials had been phased out. Those who had been sentenced as werewolves were already dead and gone, their cases relegated to history. Given the pamphlet’s preservation, Peter Stumpp’s case persists as a late medieval oddity. Every so often, it is unearthed by a podcast or blog that dabbles in folkloric history.

With the complex bounty of charges—werewolfery, incest, copulation with a succubus, rape, cannibalism, murder—modern analysts remain at a loss for Stumpp’s true crimes (if any). Some have taken the pamphlet half-seriously, assuming he was likely a serial killer. A Stumpp-focused episode of the Amazon series Lore provides a dramatic reenactment of Stumpp attempting to kill a young woman from the village. Though he dons his belt, Stumpp doesn’t transform. “The tale of Peter Stubbe sounds terrible—but when you hold it up to modern-day serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer or Richard Trenton Chase, it’s par for the course,” Aaron
Mahnke, creator of the show, narrates in a final voiceover. “The difference between them and Stubbe is simply four hundred years of modernization.”

Even Stumpp’s Wikipedia page, which acknowledges the dearth of primary sources, Stumpp’s physical impairment, his religious vulnerability in a town seized by Reformation-era conflict, his covetably wealthy status, and his confession following a stretching on the rack, states that the charges against him were not necessarily “without basis in fact.”

Without court documents and other evidence to rely on—with only a pamphlet meant to warn, scare, and entertain—it may be impossible to ever know Stumpp’s true story. We’re left mainly to imagine.

But we do know what happened after his arraignment, after decades of fear, conflict, and suspicion gripped the public. After confessing to—or at least signing off on—his crimes, Stumpp was consigned to a widely viewed public execution three days later. On October 31st, he was laid on a wheel, and with “red hotte burning pincers,” had the flesh pulled from his bones. Then, each arm and leg was broken with a wooden hatchet, a punishment that rendered the criminal “into a sort of huge screaming puppet writhing in rivulets of blood, a puppet with four tentacles, like a sea monster, of raw, slimy, and shapeless flesh,” according to one witness to the technique in 1607. Finally, Stumpp was decapitated and burned to ash.

For good measure, and for their alleged complicity, Stumpp’s daughter and lover were also relegated to the flames.

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We took a train from Kassel to Marburg, across the patched fields of Hesse, shocked yellow with rapeseed. I stared out the window at the Lahn River moseying tidily through farmland trimmed
to its banks. We bought economy tickets for the hour-long trip and sat along one side of the car, facing a row of people on the opposite side. We watched the fields and villages glide past.

I shifted my focus back inside the train, to the row of people sitting opposite us and down the car on our own side. They were unsmiling and whispering to one another—holding babies and staring at their phones or looking around. They wore headscarves and had strollers and fast food bags. The men were wiry and seemed stiff, unrelaxed.

I was also unsmiling and tense, but I felt the beginning of a quiet panic stir in the pit of my stomach. One man moved from our row of seats to those opposite, sitting on his own, and tapped into his phone.

Mom leaned forward and whispered to me, not quietly enough, “Now he’s going to text his friend and blow up the train.” She laughed.

“Mom,” I whispered back through clenched teeth.

I focused on a platform of seats at the end of the train car to my left, elevated up several steps. A bag sat abandoned on a seat. I realized that moments before, a man had been sitting there with the bag, but now it was alone. It bulged with possibility. I thought of the American security maxim: \textit{If you see something, say something}.

I began to sweat. I looked away: outside at the fields, the barns, the idyllic, grass-fed cows. I looked at the sign above my head, illuminating the next several stops. I looked at the sticky floor and the empty beer cans shoved between seats. Mom was describing the land, the geography between Kassel and Marburg. We were nearing Niederklein, the village where she grew up. I looked up, over and around, as she continued into my ear: “Niederklein is so small, not even really its own village now, merged with Stadttallendorf. There’s only one baker left, and Tante Gerti says he’s not even any good. People keep leaving.”
A firing of synapses in my brain transmitted a message: Get away from the bag.

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “Going to find a bathroom.”

I stood up and kept my balance while moving across the car to my right, then up the set of steps to the restroom. Inside was a stainless steel toilet bowl, no seat. I looked in the mirror, lightheaded. Lately, when I look in the mirror, my focus directs itself toward two wrinkles carving themselves vertically in between my eyes, the result of a frequent expression: eyebrows furrowed dramatically inward, forcing a tiny mound of concern in between. The look means both, “I don’t understand” and “I have no control.”

If a bomb exploded at the opposite end of the train car, I wondered, would I survive it? The people in the train, mostly not ethnically German, were couples with babies and couples without, and small groups of young brown men who conferenced quietly, seriously, and looked at their phones. I was seeing them all with the same heightened suspicion—one like the next and the next and the next.

But they were people acting exactly like all other people, acting exactly like I had been acting. Only I was panicking in a train restroom. I slowed my breathing and stared at myself, ashamed. What unknown cruelties lie on the other side of saying something?

When I left the restroom and descended the stairs, I saw the man on the opposite end of the car was lounging again with his bag. A restroom sign on the wall above the doorframe, previously illuminated, had gone dark.
I am 30 years old and I have never not lived paycheck to paycheck. I got close—in fact, just to the trailhead of this kind of life, in the months before I accepted an offer to grad school. A few months had slid by with no major expense; then, I received a significant tax refund. For the first time, I had a few thousand in my checking account. The realization inspired two conflicting feelings: security and anxiety. I was anxious for the moment this security would, like always, be taken away.

It was the spring of 2016 and I had just been accepted into grad school to pursue a degree in creative writing. I had put off applying for years. I’d graduated into the heart of the Great Recession in 2010, into an economic free fall, and pursuing an MFA in creative writing at the time seemed utterly deluded, on par with graduate-level puppetry or ceramics. It was the kind of thing one might do if they’d come into the world on a soft cushion of money, if affordability had never been a concern.

An MFA seemed so out of bounds for me that it took years to learn there were ways to pursue it without going into debt—that there were fully funded programs, that I could get paid. I didn’t even look into the prospect until I began waking up in the middle of the night, panicked at my stasis. I’d been working in development for an arts education nonprofit in Chicago. The organization was covetably cool—I could wear casual clothes and my colleagues were artists who protested bad immigration policy on the weekends and read good books. We did life-changing work, providing free, high-quality studio art classes to middle and high school students. I was generally not overworked. Still, the 9-to-5 of it planted some existential seed in the back of my mind, and it was growing. I deleted emails for citywide networking events because I knew I
didn’t want to fundraise for a living. The middle-of-the-night panic that jerked me awake was pure Talking Heads: You may ask yourself, how did I get here?

When I got into grad school, my very first question was: can you actually live on this stipend? I asked the professor who reached out with the offer. I asked current students. The response was delivered with a handwave: yes, yeah, sure, it’s doable. You can’t live high on the hog. You may need to cook most of your meals. But sure, you can do it. West Virginia is cheap.

The stipend was less than half my then-salary, and I was already cooking most of my meals and not living high on the hog, but through trust and magical mental math and a deferment of student loans, I converted city-to-town life to half the cost overall. I’d still be living paycheck to paycheck, but I’d be doing what I wanted, at least for a while.

They’re paying me to go to grad school!, I told colleagues and friends. They nodded, looking encouraging, if a little incredulous. I knew I’d have a job as a teaching assistant, and I pictured my teaching assistants in college—helping out the professor, meeting with smaller sections of the class, maybe occasionally conducting a lecture. While visiting, I would learn with some trepidation that I’d actually be teaching two classes a semester—solo, no professor. I wondered why they called us assistants when we were actually full instructors, and it was finally a taste of reality, a means of drying up my too-hopeful naiveté.

A few weeks ago, my boss came into the office to find me sobbing. I’d just logged into my student account to find that I owed more than a month’s salary in various fees—those for the upcoming semester, and, inexplicably to me, fees for a class I’d dropped during the summer—because I couldn’t afford it. I owed these fees (or at least a hefty portion of them) immediately.
Having moved, I’d just paid rent twice in a month (one landlord required rent checks on the 15th, the other on the first). I’d spent $52.30 on a U-Haul to move my furniture. The week prior, I’d driven back to Michigan for my best friend’s wedding and paid $37.50 on use of the Ohio Turnpike, and $68.25 on gas (my boyfriend, thankfully, paid for gas on the way back). I’d paid $32.94 for a meal and participation in a table-wide frosé (i.e., frozen rosé) toast at the upscale seafood restaurant that had been chosen for the Bachelorette party. I’d paid $21.15 for a book for my mother’s birthday that week and a bottle of wine as a thank you for the friend who was watching my cat.

The morning of the wedding, I sat in my parents’ kitchen and scrolled through Kay’s wedding registry, the anxiety pit in my stomach beginning to feel like an ulcer. “I still need to get her a gift,” I told my mom.

“Don’t worry about the gift!” she said. “I have so many new towels you can give her. Just use those.” I looked up at her with knitted eyebrows, feeling the way I’d felt, intermittently, for a decade—like a charity case. I didn’t ask for money, and my parents weren’t awash in it, but if they read enough anxiety into my voice, they’d look for a way to send some cash or cover some expense. Into my late twenties, my mother still insisted on taking me shopping for shoes and bras and underwear, knowing I’d let my own things get riddled with holes or let the elastic wear out before I’d replace them, and that when I’d replace them, it’d likely be with the cheapest possible versions. I appreciated the gesture, but I also felt miserable trailing her through department stores. I could have firmly said no, refusing the help. But I rarely did. Still, having my mother cover the expense of the gift for my best friend’s wedding—at the age of thirty—was just too much of a personal failure to bear. So I found myself in the line at West Elm a few hours later,
among the tanned, thin suburban mothers, buying a pair of gold-plated salad spoons that cost only $33.07 and yet more than I could really afford. It had been an expensive month.

In the office, I mulled this over. The guilt of living beyond my means—the inability of cutting my spending down much further without straining friendships, missing opportunities, testing my self-respect, diminishing my own happiness. It broke something in my center.

“I’m sorry,” I said to my boss through tears, forcing a laugh. “I’m sorry. This is embarrassing. I’m just a little overwhelmed right now.” I still couldn’t gather myself enough to stop crying. The charges on my account made little sense to me. I didn’t know why I was being charged for classes I’d never taken, and no one had told me that the same fees that had been taken out of my paychecks in installments over past fall semesters would be owed upfront because I would not be a teaching assistant this coming fall, but a research assistant.

I wondered at the casual way that my professors and department heads had forgotten to relay this kind of information, as if everyone might be expected to have $1,200 tucked away. It was the same casual air with which the bank attendant had told me a few years earlier that I was being charged $12 a month because I was too poor to keep the minimum required amount in my checking account at all times. It was the same way the vet assistant had told me years earlier that my cat needed an emergency catheterization or he would die in the next few hours, that it would likely cost around $1,000, and would I like to look at this CareCredit brochure?

Even at work, under her concern, I felt a certain secondhand embarrassment emanating from my boss—a sense of distaste for this production. She set down a box of tissues on the table. “Maybe you should just go talk to Student Accounts,” she said gently.
Every so often, a money-related study or headline pops up that causes so much throat-clenching despair, I file it away somewhere in my body. Like: those who graduated in 2009, following the autumn of the financial downtown, will earn on average $60,000 less over ten years than their peers who graduated in 2007.4 (I graduated in 2010.) Or: Amazon’s CEO, Jeff Bezos, makes the median Amazon employee’s annual salary ($28,000) every 8.93 seconds.5 Or: nearly 70% of college educators are now adjunct faculty members, making between $20,000 and $25,000 a year.6 According to one Boston-based adjunct instructor interviewed for a Service Employees International Union survey, “I lived off fried potatoes and onions for the semester. I actually lived better as a grad student than I do now.”7

A graduate degree in creative writing prepares you to teach college students, but the field mainly welcomes insecure adjunct roles, meaning the knife-edge I live on now, if I go on to do what I have been trained to do, will be the knife-edge I’ll simply continue to live on, except with student loans coming out of deferment and likely no benefits and the looming threat that my classes could be cancelled within days of any given semester starting. To even realistically apply for full professorships, we’re told, we need to have a book published—which is liable to take a few years, if it’s going to happen at all.

When I came to grad school, I didn’t want to be an instructor. It’s only in the last year or two that I’ve come to consider it, dismal though the prospects for advancement are, and only

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6 “9 Reasons Why Being an Adjunct Faculty Member is Terrible,” by Tyler Kingkade, November 2013 (https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/11/adjunct-faculty_n_4255139.html)
because the things that I really want to do—write and edit in the media or publishing—feel so distant, so competitive, that I might as well want to be a movie star.

Now, in the months before I graduate, my Twitter feed is suddenly awash in the same message: “Today will be my last day at Buzzfeed/Huffington Post/etcetera,” the tweets read. All from talented journalists I follow, journalists now flooding an already tight job market with their experience and gifts. Meanwhile, with such competition, I envision my freelance work withering to ash.

As an anxious millennial, it makes a certain intuitive sense that an industry I want desperately to enter would again be crippled in the months before I’d graduate for a second time. At the center of my heart is a quiet, shivering, persistent fear: that I will never be allowed satisfaction in what I do.

My sister Gina, eight years older, took a different career path. While I wrote in journals across the hall, she ripped apart computers in her bedroom and taught herself to code. Bored in high school and afflicted with Attention Deficit Disorder, she nearly didn’t have the grades to graduate, but when she started answering phones at a tech company, it didn’t take long before the programmers noticed she could do other things—the things they were doing. She took credits at local community colleges and later universities, most recently the University of Colorado at Boulder, paid for by her employer.

Gina still doesn’t have a bachelor’s degree, but she does make six figures as a high-level engineer. She’s had her own battles—sexism in the workplace, fertility issues—but money has never been a concern for her in quite the same way. She does what she loves, but she’s also flown to Australia, Japan, Costa Rica, Italy, Mexico, Cuba, Indonesia, Colombia.
I was the academic star, but I’ve become, though no one wants to say or maybe even think it, the professional flop. If my family wants me to join them on a trip, they must pay for my plane ticket. They don’t seem to care much about gifts, but I’m sure they’ve learned to expect a spare and simple Christmas from me. My parents still ask sometimes what I want to do, but they’re used to my hesitation, my mild stuttering through a list of writing-related options and interjections of self-doubt.

“I want to be a writer,” is a thing you can say at ten, thirteen, fifteen, even twenty. You can write and publish in your spare time and even complete a three-year program that fosters and nourishes that goal. But writing what you want is rarely a vocation in itself. In practice it’s a torture, and yet still a kind of luxury. How often does a market exist for exactly what you long to sell? Even George Saunders has a day job.

I’m not always responsible with money. This has become clear to me after reading enough Internet forums on how to save. On Ask Metafilter, a smarter, Quora-like forum I’ve been browsing for a decade, one user ticked off some ways he’s saving money (“Packed lunch to work everyday,” “I never buy coffees anymore,” “I try to keep social engagements after work down to a maximum of three times a week”), noting that international travel to see family and friends has been the biggest drain on his income. “What are everyday things you do that save you money?” Ziggy500 asked.8

The responses were not altogether warm.

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8 “One Weird Trick to Save Money,” Ask Metafilter, October 2017 (https://ask.metafilter.com/314695/One-Weird-Trick-to-Save-Money)
“I'm kind of confused by you saying that you're paying off debt but still going out for meals and paying for exercise classes. You literally don't have money to do those things until your debt is paid. Don't buy things you don't have the money for,” raccoon409 huffed.

“I think it's ok to have some fun but your lifestyle does sound quite lavish,” opined hazyjane.

Going out to eat and exercising does not, to me, sound terribly lavish. While working full-time in Chicago as a grant writer, I had a $29/month subscription to LA Fitness, where I took the complimentary yoga classes once or twice a week and swam and ran on the treadmill. I also went out to eat or for drinks a few times a week with friends or coworkers or on dates, because it’s the standard means of socialization for people in a city. Most of us didn’t have cars and were spread throughout the city, so inviting friends or coworkers over for dinner meant a travel commitment of an hour or two, usually.

I wondered about the international flights Ziggy500 was taking; they definitely were a luxury I couldn’t afford, but maybe Ziggy500 had a dying grandfather, or another deeply sentimental reason he needed to put down the money. Maybe there was someone he’d regret not seeing. Or maybe he wanted to see the world while he was still young, an ambition I had once, before I realized I could never afford it. I wondered if Ziggy500 was like the guys I would scroll through on Tinder, who had pictures of themselves in Peru, in Thailand, in China, in France. “I love to travel!” their bio would say. “I’ve been to 12 countries.”

*How the fuck do you have the money for that?* I’d wonder. Is the salary really so much better outside the nonprofit world? Do they not have student loans? Did they inherit a mess of cash from a grandparent or receive a parental stipend? Are they in credit card debt? Do they have a YouTube channel with a million subscribers?
Eating was my primary vice. I mainly brought lunch to work and I did usually cook at home, but if people were going out, I’d go out. I’d get the craft beer instead of the PBR. I got the cheap sushi, but two rolls. I got uncomfortable spending amounts past $13, but quantity, FOMO, YOLO—it added up.

I cut in other places. I bought clothes rarely, and then always second-hand or from low-price department stores like TJ Maxx. I became a talented thrifter. I didn’t buy gadgets or art. My furniture was bare bones and eclectic, from IKEA or the Salvation Army. I didn’t smoke. I went to a movie twice a year or so and almost never saw shows or concerts. For a while, cheap manicures were an occasional splurge, but eventually I watched enough YouTube tutorials to learn how to passably paint my own nails. I bought $2 bottles of Sally Hanson and Sinful Colors polish from drug stores.

Still, with more than half of each monthly paycheck consumed by rent and utilities and student loan and phone and transportation payments—or, as it was before the last two years of work in Chicago, half my monthly salary alone going to rent—saving would be limited. There were little expenses here and there that couldn’t be negotiated or eliminated. My cat, given to me by a friend who collected him off the street, required an expensive prescription diet food or he couldn’t shit, and needed to take anxiety medication or he’d get too stressed out to pee. If I stayed inside always, if I didn’t go to the gym, if I didn’t go on dates, if I’d put to sleep a cat too neurotic to be adopted, I could have saved money, probably—at least a little bit.

But doing nothing is hard. It’s a kind of wasting away. A thousand conflicting signals came at me all the time. If I didn’t date in my twenties, the window would start to close, and I wouldn’t be able to reap the tax rewards later, when I got married. The dates were an investment in a future with split rent and a reduced tax bill. If I didn’t stay in shape, if I sat in my office
chair all day long, I’d end up with more health problems and medical bills down the road. The $29 gym membership was an investment in my future health. If I didn’t go out and keep up my friendships, I could miss out on a word-of-mouth opportunity to find a job that put me on the right track, that didn’t make me wake up in a panic a few nights a week.

These, at least, were the practical rationalizations. When faced with the alternative of saving, those felt like the only kind I could justify. The existential realities—that I simply didn’t want to spend my life alone, needed an outlet for my anxiety, wanted to see my friends—were there, too. But there was guilt in such investments for their own sake, when there were loans to pay.

When scrolling through the comments, I found the response of a user called Spiderwoman most resonant. “In the past, I've tried changing my lifestyle to save money,” she admitted in response to Ziggy500’s question, “and usually it's brain-degenerating and boring.”

This is not to say that I haven’t, in certain fits of motivation, decided that now would be the time I’d Really Save, Really Budget, Really Do the Whole Thing. I outfitted myself with new philosophies. I read The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up. I listened to podcasts like The Minimalists, where two men who worked corporate jobs and then gave away almost everything they had tell listeners how to need and buy very little.

I found the philosophy appealing, though an ex-boyfriend and I would argue about it. It’s privileged to be able to keep very little, he’d say. He found it to be just another classist trend, something that wealthy people could try out to feel good about themselves, but unrealistic for low-income people.
But I found it useful. I practiced getting rid of the things I didn’t use or need, forcing myself through the hesitation and clinging until it became clear I never missed anything after it was gone, that very little of the material world is actually important. The mental hack imparted by minimalism is less a cycling through material items than the lessening of a desire to buy things in the first place—single-use objects, resource-intensive objects, a dress for a party you’ll never attend.

Even with a minimized approach to life, and even with a budget, I was strapped. I couldn’t get that budget to reflect reality. I’ve felt chest-tightening resignation so many times when—having finally saved up $500—it has been, like a righting of the universe, demanded back by some equal but alternate force intruding on my life: a veterinary catastrophe, a laptop disaster, car trouble.

Spring of last year, it was an awkward cervical ultrasound in an office with clean lines, a bill of several hundred to be told I had benign fibroids—some bit of adventurous tissue wandering outside my uterus. This past spring, it was an exploratory mammogram at the recommendation of my gynecologist, and then another probing, a nicking away of cervical flesh into a test tube to screen it for cancer.9

On the phone before the appointment, my gynecologist explained the colposcopy. “It’s a very common procedure. It’s really not likely you have cancer,” she said. “And even if you do, we’ll deal with it. We just cut it out.”

With my feet in stirrups, as the doctor made cheery small talk and flicked bits of me into the tube, I imagined a few possible futures. I can’t afford to have cancer, I thought.

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9 Thirty and child-free, the theme of the past year has been bodily dysfunction
In the U.S., there is an enduring national sense that the wealthy have earned their money and the poor have earned their misery. If you have a full- or part-time job and the job doesn’t pay you well enough to survive, it’s your fault for not having a better job. Never mind that jobs are limited by experience and network, that you may be limited by disability or circumstance or location, that not everyone wants to be an engineer, that McDonald’s will always need employees even when teenagers are at school.

In 2013, McDonald’s created a sample budget in partnership with Visa to try to help its employees see how they could live on a minimum wage rate that hasn’t kept up with inflation in decades. The budget included a line item for a second job, a tacit acknowledgment that getting by on one minimum-wage job is not possible. It included a $20 monthly payment for health insurance and $0 for heating. These and other estimates from the budget were roundly pilloried as unrealistic by Think Progress, Yahoo! Finance, and a few other media outlets. On CNN Money, four actual McDonald’s employees shared their own real-life budgets. Most didn’t work second jobs, and each had unique complications: tuition bills, children who constantly outgrew their clothes, child support. One worker who submitted his budget did work two jobs (at two separate McDonald’s locations in Chicago), but still “struggle[d] to pay for a monthly bus pass and his prescription drugs.”

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While the point should have been clear—it is nearly impossible to survive on minimum wage, even with two jobs—other articles were published in defense of McDonald’s and their sample budget. In “Everyone Needs to Stop Hating on That Sample Budget from McDonald’s,” Business Insider picked at small technicalities. “$600 a month on rent is not unrealistic for low-wage workers in most of the country,” the article’s author insisted. “It is possible to live on minimum wage given good personal finance habits like budgeting.”

Given budgeting, sure. But also given not living in New York or Los Angeles or any other major metropolitan area (where there are, it should be noted, plenty of McDonald’s locations) and not having cervical cancer and not even needing a screening for cervical cancer and not having a cat with urinary tract issues and not having a MacBook power cord that gives out suddenly ($83.74 for the 2012 model, as of early August).

The Washington Post defended the budget with similar claims about the achievability of $600 for rent and the reality of low-income people working two jobs. “Gawker calls the budget ‘just-shy-of-condescending’, but budgeting is an important skill that isn’t obvious to every young adult in America,” the article argued. “Offering practical advice on how to live on a modest income is more constructive than ridiculing the choices required to do so.”

The twisting required to consider Gawker condescending for pointing out the difficulty of living on a barely livable wage—to consider yourself the empathetic one for not laughing along at what begins to feel, for any person trying to make such choices, like sad hilarity—makes my jaws hurt from clenching. Don’t balk along with the peasant who can’t afford bread, the author of the

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Washington Post article seems to be saying. Show him how to mix sawdust into his recipe instead.

Meanwhile, according to the Chicago Tribune, the CEO of McDonald’s, Steve Easterbrook, saw his salary nearly double in 2017—to $15.4 million.\(^{15}\) This includes his base salary along with “the value of his stock awards,” “the value of his stock option awards,” and a “performance-based bonus.” Easterbrook was credited with “setting the world’s largest burger chain on a path to growth”—even though the U.S. market remained in decline, as it has since 2012.

In addition to the stock benefits and bonus, Easterbrook’s executive benefits included “a car allowance, security, life insurance, and financial planning, matching charitable contributions and use of the company aircraft, including for personal trips.” Easterbrook doesn’t have to budget the cost of gasoline and maintenance, like his employees. I’d wager the financial planning he receives is also both more realistic and more thoughtful than the sample budget McDonald’s supplied to its low-income workers.

In December 2017, while at my parents’ place for the holiday, I followed along as Congress passed the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, a bill that most noticeably dropped the corporate tax rate from 35% to 21% (despite the fact that corporations currently hoard an unprecedented amount of cash)\(^ {16}\), and repealed the Affordable Care Act’s individual mandate (which will increase healthcare costs dramatically when it goes into effect in 2019). While the bill made lots of “reforms” to the


tax code, it received plenty of critical press for the analysis by economists, the Congressional
Budget Office, and nonpartisan economic think tank reports that it would disproportionately
benefit the wealthiest households and explode the federal deficit.¹⁷

Around the same time, a video clip was making the rounds on Twitter. The clip centers
on 31-year-old Mar-a-Lago member Wyatt Koch, the chubby-faced, redheaded son of Bill Koch
(a Koch brother, though not one of the famous two). The brief video, which features Wyatt
driving through West Palm Beach in a humvee, pretending to direct a meeting in a conference
room, and socializing with women far more attractive than himself on a yacht—interspliced with
bits of Wyatt’s camera-facing monologue—is obviously a promotional segment for Wyatt
Koch’s fashion company, Wyatt Ingraham. From the looks of the website and video, the
company focuses primarily on pumping out loudly patterned Hawaiian shirts, retailing for a little
under $200 each.

“My father said to me, ‘Wyatt, you can do whatever you want to in life, but just make
sure you do it well, and you do it with passion’,” Wyatt relays in the clip. As I watched on my
phone at my parents’ kitchen table, legs tucked up and under my ratty T-shirt, a twisted smile
spread across my face. My parents had told me something similar growing up, though they
weren’t worth $1.72 billion. Some part of me still believed the sentiment, though—or at least felt
desperately driven by its promise.

But I’d also just read and heavily annotated Dark Money, a book about how the
American political system is bought and sold, within which the Kochs feature prominently. I’d
been begging my mom to read the chapter on climate change. My mood was big and dark, doom-

¹⁷ “An Analysis of Donald Trump’s Revised Tax Plan” by James R. Nunns, Leonard E. Burman, Jeffrey Rohaly,
and Joseph Rosenberg, October 18, 2016 (https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/publications/analysis-donald-
trumps-revised-tax-plan)
oriented. In that moment, with the snow falling softly outside and a Dickensian bill passing through Congress mere days before Christmas, Wyatt Koch and his hideous fashion line registered as sad hilarity.

In the clip, Wyatt wears one of his own shirts (the “Wall Street”), a repeating pattern of yellow moneybags emblazoned with dollar signs, with gold coins and hundred-dollar bills spilling out and tumbling through the air.

After I met with Student Accounts about my fees, I ordered a cheeseburger I couldn’t afford and went home to lay in my bed. I was numb. I responded to an email Gina had sent a couple weeks before, beckoning me to come visit her in Colorado. I’d agreed to come before getting the bill, but I briefly explained the situation with the fees and noted it would have to wait: “I anticipate things being very tight for a few months.”

What I didn’t say was that “tight” meant “impossible.” I was trying to decide whether to forge ahead into credit card debt or try to figure out how and where to go to a bank for an emergency loan when Gina responded.

“I can help,” she said. “I get paid tomorrow.”

Gina’s help arrived the next morning, through Google Pay. The email subject was simply, “some funds.” When I opened it, I saw “You received $1,000” in big, bold typeface, the Google Pay default message.

I stared at the number. I’d never received so much at once, unearned, without expectation. The relief was immediate, like jumping off the tracks, out of the way of a train barreling toward me.
It was a happy ending, for now.

Late-stage capitalism is no time to pursue creative writing. When I was mulling over the decision to accept the offer to grad school, I kept saying the same thing: “I just don’t want to put in three years, leave, and end up back in the same place.” I was bored and stifled writing grant proposals. I wanted to move, even if incrementally, toward something more fulfilling. Increasingly, though, with the emaciation of media jobs and the unaffordability of adjunct work, I fear I will indeed end up back in the same place. In ways I liked my life, but it felt smaller than I’d hoped. Likely it will always feel that way.

In February 2019, Derek Thompson published an essay in the Atlantic called “Workism is Making Americans Miserable.” The central thesis is that Americans have increasingly drifted toward viewing work as not just a necessary evil, but “the centerpiece of one’s identity and life’s purpose.” The feeling has become so pervasive that a Pew Research study found teens prioritize “having a career they enjoy” over family and kindness as future ambitions. The problem, Thompson explains, is that “the modern labor force evolved to serve the needs of consumers and capitalists, not to satisfy tens of millions of people seeking transcendence at the office.”

Reading the article, I felt a sense of overwhelming identification. I am, it appears, one of tens of millions. Another anxious workist, ignoring that the system was not built to deliver me satisfaction. In a way, this realization is freeing.

I’ve come to accept that any job I believe may fulfill me will likely leave me as financially precarious as I am now. So lately I’ve been entertaining new ideas about a post-grad school life. I’ve talked to a writer friend who spent years doing medical writing for a pharmaceutical company, making nearly six figures in contractual and managerial work. It was for an industry I’d like to burn to the ground, but when I think of paying off those student loans, paying off my car, taking my family out to dinner and picking up the bill, instead of letting them buy it for me like they’ve done all my life—it sounds like it could be a dream job. Maybe the middle-of-the-night panic would come back, or maybe I’ve been misdiagnosing that panic all along. What different satisfactions could the freedom of money unlock for me? After all, the pharma friend managed to keep up with the writing. Now she has a book deal—and a house.

After Gina sent me money, because I didn’t know how else to repay her, I sent her an essay I’d been working on. I realized this was a kind of patronage, and wondered how often Vincent Van Gogh had sent prints and paintings back to his brother Theo in desperate gratitude.

*Look, I was gesturing. This is the thing I’m trying to do.*