

A photograph of a woman in a red t-shirt and blue jeans kneeling on a concrete floor against a grey, textured wall. She is looking down with her hands clasped. A large, dark shadow of her is cast onto the wall behind her, making it appear much larger than she is. The title 'LEAVING NORMAL' is printed in large, white, distressed letters at the top, with 'adventures in gender' in a smaller, red, serif font below it.

LEAVING
NORMAL
adventures
in gender

RAE THEODORE

2nd Edition • Goldie Finalist

Praise for *Leaving Normal: Adventures in Gender*

“A smart and eloquent memoir about becoming butch, *Leaving Normal: Adventures in Gender* will resonate if you have a proud copy of *Stone Butch Blues* on your shelf, or listen to “Ring of Keys” from the Fun Home musical on repeat.

...

The writing is spectacular, infused with a self-aware sense of humor. Theodore may struggle to find her reflection in the people around her, but you’re bound to find your own reflection in her story.”

~ Autostraddle’s “Hidden Gem’s of Queer Lit” review

“Each chapter is written with raw heart and poetic grace. I laughed and cheered throughout. There were also a few stray tears. Brave, uninhibited and emotional, this book allowed me the opportunity to step inside Theodore’s “sensible shoes” and see what it’s like to live life along the gender boundary.

It’s a book that will inspire you to remove labels, slash stereotypes, and just be yourself. It’s a reading journey that everyone should take.”

~ Kim Lehman, owner, Lucky Stars Publishing, and author of *First, Last, and Always* and *Righteous*

“An emotional, joyful and intelligently written rollercoaster. A must read. Not only for people on the more challenging side of the gender spectrum, but also for those who would like to understand.”

~ Fleur Pierets, Publisher of *Et Alors?* a flamboyant queer art magazine

“Some authors simply share their story. Others bring you into their world. Rae Theodore’s candid and humorous insights will keep you smiling and wanting for more.”

~ Rachel Stevenson, speaker, author, & LGBT leader, LGBT Equality Alliance and OUTWORD.Today

“This book is for everyone. Everyone who has felt alone or separate because of their gender. Everyone who has felt marginalized due to their sexuality. Everyone who has been ashamed because someone used the wrong pronouns, or used the one they wanted to hear by mistake. Everyone who has ever felt like they were the only person in the world who felt the way they did.”

~ The Reading Femme review

“Rae Theodore takes the reader with her on a journey of self-discovery. Eloquently written and infused with just the right amount of humor, *Leaving Normal: Adventures in Gender* is

exhilarating and enlightening. It's recommended reading for anyone trying to guide themselves through this crazy thing called life."

~ Gina Strang, Qmmunity Alliance facilitator

"Rae Theodore's honest and clever storytelling made me laugh out loud and touched my heart. Her courageous journey can inspire us all to leave normal behind and become exceptional! Rare and authentic, we need more Rae's in this world!"

~ Elizabeth Mosteller, Women's National Book Association, Greater Philadelphia Chapter President

Leaving Normal: Adventures in Gender

by

Rae Theodore

Blue Beacon Books

by Regal Crest

Tennessee

Copyright © 2015 by Rae Theodore

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher. The characters, incidents and dialogue herein are fictional and any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Print ISBN 978-1-61929-320-5
eBook ISBN 978-1-61929-321-2

Second Printing 2017
9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Cover design by Acorn Graphics

Published by:

Regal Crest Enterprises
1042 Mount Lebanon Rd
Maryville, TN 37804

Find us on the World Wide Web at <http://www.regalcrest.biz>

Published in the United States of America

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Patty Kline-Capaldo for forming and facilitating a writing group that changed my life. Your friendship and mentorship are certainly worth \$5 a week, maybe even \$7.

Julie Daly, you're an excellent editor and an even better friend. Thank you for believing in my writing from the start and convincing me I had something important to say.

Holy Craft Store! Jill Sardella, you're the best bookmark and cape maker around.

To Jan: You, sir, are my hero.

I'm indebted to every Just Write writer who has ever gathered Tuesday at Towne Books and contributed to the magic that happens there.

Kathy, I'm pretty sure it was your idea.

A single head nod to the butches of the world.

And Regal Crest, I'm proud to be a member of your family.

Dedication

To my wife, who thinks me a Sexy Beast.
I'd marry you a third time.

“You’re born named and the rest is drag.”

~ RuPaul

Preface

I’M A BUTCH. A masculine-presenting woman. A cherry red Tootsie Pop with a center comprised of flannel shirts, sturdy shoes, power tools and ESPN every day of the week.

Here are some snapshots from my butch life:

“It was like she wanted to be a man,” the clerk at the post office says when a Janice Joplin song comes on the radio. “Gross.” He is so disgusted by the singer’s masculinity that small beads of spit fly from his mouth when he speaks. I try to make myself invisible as I wait in line in my cargo shorts and Polo shirt and fresh haircut, a number four on the sides.

The old man and his wife pause as I hold the door for them. “Let’s not hold this—” She stops as she tries to decide whether I am a man or a woman. In the end, she can’t tell. “Let’s not hold this person up,” she says.

The guy at the fast-food restaurant gets it wrong every time. You can tell he wants to take it back—that sir he was so confident doling out a few seconds ago. He looks like he wants to disappear as he stands there in the drive-thru waiting for someone to hand him my paper bag of food.

The little girl in the women’s bathroom alerts everyone about the presence of an intruder. “Mama, there’s a man in here,” she says. I hide behind the metal door of my stall wishing for the superhero power of invisibility.

Every time I am at a Back to School night, I can see the painted nails and lips of the other moms reflected in my shiny black boots.

It’s certainly not for the weak or the timid. Being butch. Thumbing your nose at stereotypical notions of beauty and fashion and crafting your own out of buzz cuts and striped neckties and Oxford shirts that come from the left side of the department store.

Herman Melville writes in *Moby Dick*, “It is not down in any map; true places never are.”

That’s the essence of this book, of my life. A search for that true place, my authentic self, that started when I was a pre-teen tomboy and a little more interested in *Charlie’s Angels* and Olivia Newton-John (black leather pants and red high heels Olivia Newton-John from *Grease*) than my female friends.

I’ve learned my journey was never about becoming butch. It was more about unbecoming everything that wasn’t me. Sloughing off like dead snake skin the accoutrements of femininity—red nails, painted lips, the color pink, high heels and handbags—so I could be who I was meant to be in the first place. In the end, I was always a butch.

Charlie's Angels

IN A WAY, my love life peaks in first grade. I have a crush on David Eddy, the most popular boy in my class. David has delicate facial features like a Barbie doll and beautiful blond feathered hair that falls on his shoulders in soft, golden waves. Farrah Fawcett has nothing on David Eddy.

I sit directly behind David and daydream. Does his hair feel like actual bird feathers? If David moves his head from left to right, left to right like an oscillating fan, will his layered hair transform into angel wings and lift him off the ground at least two or three inches?

Even though I'm in my forties, I still have the valentine David dropped in my Valentine's Day mailbox that year. It shows a smiling cartoon light bulb that says, "You light up my life." David signed his full name at the bottom using his best handwriting.

The mailbox is actually an old shoebox I covered with tinfoil and decorated with doilies and red and pink construction paper hearts. The shiny silver of the foil catches the overhead fluorescent lights of the classroom, emitting a zig-zag, bright-white, flash-of-light signal that reaches all the way to outer space with its call for love and adoration. Like a child's ray gun, my mailbox seems to make a sharp sound like *zing* or *ping* whenever a beam of light bounces off it. Maybe it's the buzzing of the overhead lights I hear.

My noisy metallic mailbox with its crinkled foil façade stands in stark contrast to the other students' subdued letter receptacles. Most covered their boxes using the large roll of white butcher paper our teacher keeps in the back of the classroom.

It will be years before I find another boy as pretty as David Eddy. In the meantime, several boys show their affection, perhaps intercepting the shiny silver signal I had released to the universe a few years ago.

One February, Greg McCarthy shows up at my door. He is wearing a three-piece navy blue suit and holding his mother's hand like a tiny businessman who needs help crossing the street.

"Hi," he says.

"Uh...hi...Greg. What are you doing here?"

"Go ahead, Greg," Mrs. McCarthy says, gently pushing him forward like he's a baby bird preparing for his first flight.

"These are for you," he says. "Happy Valentine's Day."

Greg hands me a heart-shaped box of chocolates and a bright orange construction paper valentine he has carefully cut into the shape of a jack-o-lantern. Its grinning face has been pierced with an arrow.

"Yeah...thanks...for these," I say, glancing around to see if anyone is watching. "And thanks for stopping by," I add, trying to cut Greg's impromptu visit short. "I didn't know you knew where I lived."

"I followed you home from school," Greg says, smiling like the toothy valentine pumpkin he has handed me.

"Okay, Greg, say goodbye to your little friend," Mrs. McCarthy says.

She has obviously detected that Greg's behavior has in that instant progressed from cute to creepy and determined it's best to get him home as soon as possible and out of his church clothes before they got any more wrinkled.

I find Greg irritating with his polyester formal wear and cliché box of store-bought chocolates. And seriously, what little girl dreams of getting a pumpkin-shaped valentine? It is like getting a boiled egg for Christmas. Greg is too young to be quirky. When you're a child, quirky is just another word for weird. Besides, he brought his mother on our first date, which is a total deal breaker.

Timothy Parrish has a crush on me, too. I know this because he's always chasing me around the playground and on one occasion heaves a cinder block in my direction like a mustachioed, leotard-wearing sideshow strongman. I report the cinder block incident to my mother, who tells me such random acts of violence are a sign of a boy's affection. I conclude Timothy is head over his Keds in love with me because he could have crushed all 26 delicate bones in my foot with this one romantic overture.

I begin to wonder if all boy love is rough and unwanted like a hard shove.

For the most part, incidents like these are mild annoyances I brush away like the flies that gather on the warm, sunny days when we eat our brown-bagged school lunches outside on the grassy hill of the elementary school. Ignoring the buzzing flies, I lay down in the soft grass and eat my peanut butter sandwich in the tiniest of bites, trying to will our lunch break to last until the end of the day.

Most of my time at school is spent in the light and easy company of girls. My friends and I call ourselves Charlie's Angels and run around the playground trying to break up pretend drug deals and halt fake murder plots. I'm Sabrina Duncan, the smart Angel who wears sensible shoes and poses as a white-gloved mime or lab-coated scientist to smoke out the bad guys.

There are four of us but only three Angels. The other brunette assumes the role of Kelly Garrett. After a vote, we decide it will take at least two nine-year-old girls to equal one Jill Munroe. Munroe is the busty blonde played by Farrah Fawcett in the television show. Three or four would have been optimal, but our circle of friends isn't that large.

We exclude Bosley, Charlie's right-hand man, from our scripts. I chalk up his untimely death to a tragic hit and run on the episode that takes place at the race track or a vicious shark attack on the surfing episode.

We take turns posing as Charlie, cupping our hands over our mouths and lowering our voices so the instructions for our next mission sound like they are emanating from an invisible speaker.

"Angels, a terrorist group has planted a bomb under Greg McCarthy's desk that is set to detonate at precisely 12:30 when the final lunch bell rings. Pay that no mind."

"Instead, I need you to track down four red folders that contain important information about a future attack. Kelly, you're the ex-model wife of a billionaire playboy scientist who is rumored to have developed these bombs. Jill and Jill, you're twin go-go dancers from Russia who frequent the billionaire playboy scientist's mansion. And last but not least, Sabrina. You'll be posing as a near-sighted tutor who is helping Jill and Jill with their English skills. Angels, don't let me down. The safety of the world depends on you."

I'm content to spend the remainder of my elementary school days as part of an all-female crime-fighting posse. However, the other Angels eventually grow tired of our girls-only game of pretend. Their lives are incomplete and meaningless without a single Bosley in the picture.

I don't understand. Bosley isn't even in the official board game, so how important can he possibly be? No one walks around with a Bosley lunch box or a denim, drawstring book bag screen printed with Bosley's giant head.

When it comes to opening up the game to our male classmates, the Angels are stubborn and determined, especially the Jills.

The boys at school have started to look their way when they run across the playground, their blonde hair undulating in the wind like strands of soft yellow ribbon.

Statistics and the Opposite Sex

“Some people are more certain of everything than I am of anything.”

~Robert Rubin, *In an Uncertain World*

THE QUESTION COMES out of nowhere like a line drive flying fat off the sweet part of an aluminum baseball bat on the hottest day of summer.

“Who do you like?” one of the Angels asks.

I’m standing on the shiny black macadam of the recess yard, a place where I’m usually at ease and in control, playing four square with my best friends. I have always been king of this playground, captaining kickball teams and gliding from one end of the metal monkey bars to the other in four swift moves. Right arm, left arm, right arm, left arm.

Buying time, I bounce pass the all-purpose rubber ball, feeling its textured surface as it leaves my hand. The red ball seems to hang in mid air as if it’s the last day of the world and the sun is on fire and about to explode. I’m reminded of the Atomic FireBall candies my brother and I pop into our mouths at the exact same time. The red orbs of cinnamon make our eyes water and our lips burn.

I can’t seem to grab hold of the question. It floats above my head, skimming the outstretched tips of my fingers. I’m usually much surer with my hands. My first thought is to play defense and bat the question away or deflect it with my forearms or my feet, but I know this will only prolong the uncomfortable feeling growing in the bottom of my stomach like a freshly punched ball of bread dough.

It feels odd having to think here, a place where everything has always come so easily and naturally for me. Usually, I’m guided by instinct and reflex. Today is not one of those days.

It’s the word who I’m tripping over. If the question had been “What do you like?” I would have answered immediately. Baseball cards, going fishing with my dad, my lime green bike with the banana seat, the leftover Kentucky Fried Chicken my mom wraps in tin foil and packs in my school lunch and Saturday morning cartoons, especially the *Justice League of America*.

I like my girlfriends, too. I’m fiercely loyal and protective and expend a great deal of energy entertaining them with my oddball jokes and over-the-top antics.

The question stretches out in front of me like a rickety rope bridge on a windy day.

My friends automatically know which boys they like. It’s as if they were born with special wishbone-shaped divining rods in the middle of their chests that quiver and point them in the right direction.

To me, boys are merely a part of life. They are the vegetables on my dinner plate or the laps we have to run around the baseball diamond before we can take batting practice.

On the school playground, I lump each boy into one of two categories: teammate or adversary. It is an objective listing with no room for like.

Without any male classmates, there would be no competitive sporting contests. Most of the girls in my class can't boot a kickball out of the infield. If they do make contact with the ball, they run to first base waving their arms in the air as if they are middle-aged women in housecoats being chased by a horde of mice.

When it comes to dodgeball, the girls prefer to stay on the sidelines instead of getting struck with rubber projectiles that if thrown hard enough leave a crisscross pattern on bare skin. If forced to enter the painted white circle, they hide behind the boys, declaring them their protectors. At first, the boys play along, shielding the shrieking girls by puffing out their chests and stretching out their arms. They are miniature apes dressed in flared polyester pants and striped shirts, pounding on their chests and gliding around the perimeter of the circle. Eventually, it is every man for himself, and the boys duck at the last possible moment, allowing rubber to strike tender female flesh. The sound rings out across the playground.

Thwap!

If a female classmate would have sought shelter behind my outstretched arms, I never would have ducked.

On Olympic Day, Joey Arnold is the only student who can throw a baseball farther than me. I take my turn after Joey and instinctively know not to beat his throw. It would be interfering with the natural order of things—me, a giraffe, in the middle of Darwin's monkey-to-man origin of species theory. Besides, coming in second is respectable, especially for a girl.

In the classroom, I have no use for boys. I giggle and gossip with my girlfriends and partner with them on school projects.

Sometimes our class lines up boy girl, boy girl, boy girl. I think of the boys as the tabbed dividers in our binders that keep each main subject from spilling into the others.

I know not to select Joey Arnold with his curly brown hair and Peter Brady good looks or any of the other popular boys as my like. Joey is out of my league. I won't know for twenty years or so that he is in the wrong league.

I also know not to pick from the least popular kids. Michael Spivek is almost as tall as our male teacher and the only kid sporting a mustache in all of Whitfield Elementary School. Michael wears dark jeans, white T-shirts and a denim jacket, even in the dead of winter. If it were 1956, Michael would be a greaser like Danny Zuko in *Grease*. But instead it is 1976, and he is twenty years too late.

After eliminating the Joeys and the Michaels, I hone in on the middle. In reality, I'm performing a sophisticated statistical calculation and determining the median of the boys in our class.

me-di-an *n*. The middle value in a distribution, above and below which lie an equal number of values.

I do the math in my head and arrive at the correct answer.

"Lewis Vincent," I say in a clear voice. At that moment, I declare like I'm the Queen of England that Lewis Vincent is my boyfriend. And so it is. Lewis Vincent never knows and lives out the rest of his life unaware we were once young lovers.

Lewis is polite and average in academic and athletic skills. He will probably grow up to be an accountant, a manager of a local Radio Shack or maybe a male nurse. Everything about Lewis Vincent is safe. From this point on, safe will be my type when it comes to boyfriends.

I write down Lewis Vincent's vital statistics in the back of my yellow diary in a section marked "Memorandum," leaving behind a written record of my boy-girl relationship like hieroglyphics on a cave wall.

"My boyfriend Lewis Vincent: Red hair, freckles, hazel eyes, cute and short. Not real short. Plays trombone."

This is how I size up Lewis Vincent, taking inventory of his most important characteristics as if I'm John Walsh of *America's Most Wanted*, failing only to mention Lewis's tattoo status. Of course, Lewis Vincent is only in fourth grade and doesn't have a tattooed trombone on his arm or our elementary school's crest on his chest.

My diary lists one other boyfriend.

"My boyfriend Stephen Conrad: Brown hair, brown eyes, medium size, muscular and groovy. Also hates music."

Apparently, at some point I tired of the dulcet sounds of the trombone and became a young music hater just like Stephen Conrad. I have no memory of Stephen. I imagine him to be Barney Rubble like in stature and build, perhaps wearing a bright polyester shirt unbuttoned to his navel. Groovy.

My friends are satisfied with my response.

"Really, Lewis Vincent?" they ask before singing silly rhymes about me and Lewis in a tree.

I smile and chase them around the playground, knowing I'm safe until the next question.

Patricia Tarsi and the Macramé Purse

“YOU’RE NOT GOING to like it,” one of the Jills tells me at school one day.

“She’s right,” the other Jill chimes in. “You’re gonna hate it.”

The it is my birthday present. I’m turning ten and having a party at the local bowling alley. I have already handed out Ziggy invitations during recess, inviting the Angels and the new girl from our class. The distribution of the Ziggy invites means it’s a done deal. No one ever messed with Ziggy. He was the 1970s version of Buddha with his bald head, quiet wisdom and aversion toward wearing pants.

Apparently, Jill’s mom had been shopping at Boscov’s department store last week and picked up my birthday gift. Jill wasn’t there to steer her in the right direction, and now it’s all a great big disaster.

“I told her you would hate it and begged her to take it back, but she wouldn’t listen,” Jill says, burying her face in her hands.

The other Angels pat her on the back, understanding the importance of bringing a good gift to a friend’s birthday party.

“She didn’t know,” Kelly says to Jill. “I mean, how could she?” Kelly looks directly at me and waves her hand up and down the front of my body as if she’s holding a portable body scanner like the ones in the sci-fi shows my dad watches on TV on Saturday afternoons.

Familiar with such examinations, I stand perfectly still as if I’m getting an X-ray. I wait for Kelly to announce what she’s found, the thing that makes me different, but she never does. Even though we are among the smartest kids in our fourth-grade class, that word isn’t in our vocabulary yet.

Part of me is curious about what she might discover. The other part is horrified. I think of the scrapes I get on my knee when I fall off my lime green bike with the banana seat. My mom makes me sit on the edge of the bathtub and place my leg inside. She pours peroxide from a brown plastic bottle into the small white cap and then onto the scrape. I hear the fizz and watch with a mixture of fascination and disgust as the white bubbles carry out poison from inside my body on their shiny round shoulders. It makes me wonder what other poisons live quietly inside my skin.

“How bad is this gift?” I ask.

“Oh, it’s bad,” the Jills say in unison.

During the week leading up to the party, the Angels and I talk about nothing but the present.

I don’t remember if I learned the identity of the gift before the party. It was a very stressful time in my young life. I would like to think the Angels stayed true to their secret-agent status and guarded the identity of the gift as if it was something top secret like the recipe for Tang or the ingredients in “Gee, Your Hair Smells Terrific” shampoo.

THE DAY OF the party finally arrives, and everyone meets at the bowling alley.

In a year, my friends and I will bowl here every Wednesday afternoon under the team name “Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Bowlers.” For brevity’s sake, the lady with the tall hair and the pencil tucked behind her ear will write down “Sergeant Pepper’s Bowlers” at the top of our scoring sheets and on the league ranking lists. We find this insulting to ourselves as young bowlers, as well as to Peter Frampton, The Bee Gees and Leif Garrett. We had heard the Beatles’ version of the movie *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* was good, but the Beatles were no Bee Gees.

The party is a huge success. We bowl and then move to a special playroom where we eat hot dogs and miniature bags of potato chips and drink Icy Tea in bright orange pint-size cartons. My mom brings a yellow cake with white icing, which is my favorite, and everyone sings happy birthday to me before she cuts the cake into large wedges.

We even have time to play a quick game of Charlie’s Angels. We decide to make the new girl the Russian villain and alternate shooting at her with our imaginary guns and posing, guns at the ready, like the real Angels do in the TV show opening. Because we have two Jills, we can never get it quite right. With eight arms waving in the air, we end up looking like a giant octopus or a Hindu goddess having a seizure.

The only thing left to do is open the gifts.

“Come on, girls, gather ‘round,” my mom says. She motions everyone over to a small table with a tidy pile of brightly wrapped gifts in the center.

I feel my stomach drop. Normally, this would be one of the best parts of the party. Who doesn’t like presents? But here’s the problem: A gift is supposed to complement the recipient, and I’ve already been told this gift is something I will detest. It’s like Garanimals, the mix-and-match clothing with the animal hang-tags my mom buys for me and my brother. On its own, I’m sure the gift is fine, like a single giraffe tagged shirt, but when paired with me, a girl who likes to climb trees like a monkey or wrestle like a bear, the end result can only be disastrous.

Kelly hands me her present and I eagerly take it. I open it slowly and thoughtfully, trying to stretch out the gift-opening process. It’s a *Charlie’s Angels* board game. We both break out in big smiles.

Jill hands me a small package that turns out to be a yellow diary with a lock and key. The new girl brings a jigsaw puzzle, the kind you can only buy from the Hallmark store. Springbok puzzles are always a solid choice.

And then there is one. The Angels start looking at each other and then at me. They whisper into each other’s ears, covering their mouths with their hands. Jill stares at the floor.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead and open it,” my mom says.

I pick up the medium-sized box and hold it in my hands. It’s light. I thought horror and bad taste would weigh more. I will feel the same exact way when I’m standing in a department store in a few years holding the box that contains my first bra.

I peel off the wrapping paper. The rectangular box is bright white. Boscov’s is printed in the middle in royal blue ink.

I lift the lid of the box straight up. The contents are resting beneath a blanket of crisp white tissue paper.

My body tenses and I hold my breath as I gingerly unfold the tissue, ignoring the voice in my head telling me to leave the gift right where it is, which is safely tucked under the white tissue paper like a dead body.

The first thing I see is a big, brown wooden button that looks like a Cyclops's eye. I stare at it and it stares back, taking me in and sizing me up.

The button is sewn onto a macramé purse. Jill's mother bought me a macramé purse.

I'm speechless, which is a rarity for a pre-teen girl.

My mom carries a purse filled with Kleenex and lipstick, Band-Aids and a plastic container of orange Tic-Tacs. My dad leaves the house carrying all of his belongings on his body. This method seems easier and more dignified than being chained by handle or shoulder strap to a big fat bag.

I allow myself to get lost in the tan strands that run over and under each other and criss-cross like railroad tracks.

My mother breaks my concentration.

"Isn't that nice," she says. "Take it out and show everyone."

I fold my arms in front of me and shake my head. My mom reaches into the box and triumphantly raises the purse high in the air as if it's a giant buck head on the first day of deer season.

I feel like I'm going to throw up.

"Nice," she repeats.

I think to myself that she can say the word *nice* one hundred times and it still won't be true. Purses are nice gifts for regular girls but not girls like me.

I'm only ten and my mom is still optimistic that it's all a phase, a stepping stone to some other version of me. All of it. The boy's clothes and sneakers, the athleticism that seems incongruous with my sex, the massive baseball card collection, and the intense dislike of skirts and dresses, the color pink and purses.

Off the top of my head, I think of ten other horrible birthday gifts I would rather have:

1. A T-shirt with an iron on of that stupid Thank God It's Friday kitten.
2. An action figure of Aquaman, the lamest of all of the *Justice League of America* superheroes.
3. Underwear.
4. Scented magic markers that smell like underarm or sweaty socks.
5. A multi-pack of Bubble Yum laced with spider eggs. There's a rumor in my school that a bunch of kids died after chewing Bubble Yum contaminated with spider eggs.
6. Hawaiian-Punch, which makes me barf.
7. Nancy Drew books, instead of Hardy Boys books or even Encyclopedia Brown books.
8. A framed picture of my brother.
9. An Air Supply album.
10. A Carpenters album.

I'm embarrassed by the purse but also angry. I glare at everyone in the party room. I'm mad at myself because I make everything difficult, even things that should be easy like birthday presents.

There's something else though. I feel misunderstood. It's not a small misunderstanding as if I said dog and everyone laughs because they thought I said hog.

"Oh, we thought you said you were taking your hog out for a walk."

Certainly, I can see the humor in that kind of misunderstanding. We all would have laughed, and I would have rolled my eyes in that way only a young girl can.

It's more about people failing to understand who I am when it all seems so clear and simple. I'm just me, a girl who likes to play tackle football, wear boys' clothes and organize her baseball cards by team using skinny red rubber bands and neatly placing the stacks in a shoe box, National League teams on one side, American League teams on the other.

Maybe the anger is a way to cover up the hurt and shame. But there is something infuriating about being given a purse for a gift.

Before the other moms start arriving to take their kids home, I corner Jill.

"Make her take it back," I say, poking my finger in the middle of her chest to emphasize each word.

"I already told you she won't take it back. She insists it's an appropriate gift for a young girl."

Both Jill and I turn red, the words *appropriate* and *girl* hanging in the air between us.

I ALWAYS TOLD myself that if I ever did write a book, I was going to call it *Patricia Tarsi and the macramé Purse*. Patricia Tarsi was one of the Jills, the one whose mother decided it was a good idea to buy me a purse for my birthday. It isn't because of the purse itself or all of the drama surrounding it but because years later when I try to recall when I first *knew*, I always go back to the macramé purse. It was my strong reaction to a handbag comprised of knotted cords that let me know this was somehow a key event in my life.

Even today when I tell the macramé purse story to other people, they never really get it. "It was just a purse," they say. "What's the big deal?"

But to me, it has always been much more than a story about a purse. It is one of my earliest memories of being different from my friends and recoiling from a stereotypical symbol of femininity.

I think of the macramé knots that combine to form the purse.

They are similar to the knots in my own life, those incidents that seem to be a random tangle of different and disappointment. They always come with a lump in the throat or that feeling of having a round rock in the center of my stomach.

I used to think it was all so messy and annoying, the intertwined strands of my life that hung in alternating gaps and balled up knots the size of a monkey's fist. It isn't until much later I realize the universe has meticulously and methodically tied the knots herself, neatly looping the strands over and under each other until I can see the intricate pattern. If I connect these hand-tied knots with cotton twine, I certainly wouldn't get a pocketbook. I think I'd get a constellation—maybe an Amazon warrior wielding a shiny staff pointed toward the heavens—each knot representing a singular moment of discomfort.

If I was more sophisticated and intuitive, I would have put it all together a long time ago.

Big Josh and the Big Rescue

THE LADY WITH the long legs and tan skin fell down the basement stairs. She was wearing a gold sequined mini-dress, so she looked like she was emitting sparks as she rolled.

She didn't scream or yell out on the way down. The only sound we heard was a muffled *thunk, thunk* as her stiff body, legs straight, arms tight at her sides, bounced from one carpeted step to the next.

No one knows how she fell, but there are several theories:

Maybe she caught one of her white rubber heels on the carpet.

Maybe she was drunk.

Someone heard loud party music coming from her townhouse late last night. The same person reported seeing the woman's hot tub filled to capacity with revelers that included a man in a sailor outfit, another in army fatigues and a miniature pony.

There is even talk that the lady in gold had been pushed. As for the motive, she allegedly has piles of money in every color of the rainbow hidden inside her three-story townhouse with the pink elevator.

BIG JOSH IS the first to arrive on the scene with his army green safari jeep. He appears so quickly, it seems as if the entire accident has been staged.

Big Josh jumps out of the vehicle without opening the door, surveys the situation and gets to work. He takes a yellow-handled jump rope and tosses one end down the stairway.

My brother stands near the stairwell, arms crossed in front of his chest. He looks like André the Giant from where I sit on the floor, my thumb and pointer finger clamped around Big Josh's waist.

"Why can't you play with your own toys?" he asks.

"Because Mom and Dad buy you better toys," I say.

"What about your dollzzzzzz?"

He elongates the word like a foot-long pull of chewed bubblegum stretched from the clamp of his alligator teeth smile, and I turn as red as Superman's cape.

To a tomboy like me, these words have a similar effect: skirt, dress, pretty, pink, lipstick, glitter, girl.

They make me feel a certain mixture of anger and shame that I don't think anyone else in the world has ever felt. I wonder why both emotions make me red.

Anger flashes hot and fast, igniting the fuse that winds its way from my belly to my head and sets my face ablaze. After the flames have been extinguished, shame is the long, slow burn. It's a pile of embers smoldering scarlet-black, whispering swallowed secrets—hiss, crackle, hiss—in its warm smoky breath.

I think about the Atomic FireBall candies that make the inside of my mouth feel like it's on fire. Even after the sucked-on orbs have faded from crimson to pink to white to nothing, I can still feel the sting on the inside of my cheeks and taste burnt toast and tar on the tip of my tongue.

I force open my balled hands and gesture toward my brother.

"I'll let you play with me," I say in a sing-song voice.

Big Josh stays with the jeep while my brother runs down the stairs and ties the thick, braided cord to the woman's right leg.

Big Josh isn't a doll. He's an action figure. A molded man with a painted on beard and mustache, work boots and spring-loaded arm that allows him to chop pretend wood with a plastic silver axe. He wears denim shorts with a matching vest that showcases his hard plastic pecs and ripped abs. The hollowed out space that runs down his sternum and across his ribs forms a small cross, and I want to pluck it from his chest and carry it around in my pocket like a Cracker Jack prize.

Once the rope is secured around the woman's leg, my brother gives it a tug.

I had attached the other end to a small black hook that was connected to the working winch on the front of the jeep.

Big Josh vaults over the door into the vehicle and starts to drive in reverse. The lady begins her leg-first climb, making that same *thunk-thunk* sound each time her blonde head strikes the nose of a step.

This is my earliest memory of rescuing a woman.

When the lady reaches the landing at the top of the stairway, my brother unties the rope from her leg. Bored with the game, he runs off calling for our mother.

The lady seems uninjured, but Big Josh, being a gentleman, walks over to check on her.

"Are you all right, little lady?" he asks in his deep voice.

His plastic chest shines from the overhead light in the stairway.

"Why, yes, good sir. You're my hero."

The woman speaks in a high-pitched voice with a southern accent despite having lived her entire life in Michigan and Pennsylvania.

"Call me Big Josh."

"Big Josh, thank you for saving me. My name is Barbie."

"You're welcome, Barbie."

"You are so strong and brave, Big Josh."

"All in a day's work."

"You should come to my townhouse sometime. I'll cook pot roast."

"Maybe."

When the conversation stalls, Big Josh makes random axe chopping motions with his spring-loaded hand in an attempt to impress Barbie.

He doesn't hear the footsteps or see the little shadow or the big one. Caught by surprise, he's unable to stop the assailant from grabbing him and taking him to an unknown location.

There's only one clue. These words shouted by the kidnapper during the abduction:

"Play with your dollzzzzzz!"

The Great Escape

MY DAD TEACHES me all the important things in life. He teaches me how to:

Play chess.

Shoot pool.

Play pinball.

“Fumble at the flippers,” he says in response to a miscue in a way that is both joking and not.

Shoot a layup.

Wash a car.

Play ping pong.

His father was a champion table tennis player in the Army. I learn how to slice the light-as-air ball so it lands on the other side of the table with a sharp *ping* and suddenly drops off the edge with a quiet *poof* like Wile E. Coyote plummeting from a cartoon cliff.

Throw a football.

Toss horseshoes.

Cook fried potatoes all morning long in a heavy cast iron skillet bigger than my head.

Tackle, eyes always focused on the opponent’s belt buckle.

Hammer a nail.

Fish.

“Reel in the slack,” he says. “Give it a quick tug to set the hook.” We catch worms on the putting greens of a nearby golf course late at night after heavy rainstorms. My brother and I collect the bloated pink bodies in the moonlight and transfer them to a bright blue Maxwell House coffee can filled with dirt. I can still taste the metallic tang from the coffee can as it stings the night air, its sharpness muted by the earthy smells of dirt, wet grass and worms.

A few times, my dad shows me how to clean a fish by scraping off its scales and removing its guts, but I don’t like peering at the inside of things.

Climb a tree.

Ride a bike.

Play poker and other card games.

We play five-card draw, seven-card stud, high-low, black jack and Indian poker, a silly guessing game that involves holding a single playing card on one’s forehead like a glossy blue or red cardboard feather. On Saturday afternoons, my brother, my dad and me—just us guys—sit around our basement card table with our poker chips stacked to the ceiling, our invisible plastic visors reflecting the fluorescent light from overhead while my mom shops or lunches with her girlfriends.

Drive a golf ball.

Subsist on cold, uncooked Oscar Meyer hot dogs straight from the refrigerator when my mom isn’t around.

Tie a necktie with a double Windsor knot.

His thick, hairy arms reach out in front of me as if they are my own as I stand in front of the mirror mounted above my white and gold Sears dresser. To the right sits my jewelry box, a white house with red shutters and a twirling ballerina with a spring for feet who hides inside when the hinged top is closed.

Score a baseball game, a miniature red pencil tucked behind my ear in between innings.

Decipher the back of a baseball card.

Field, throw and catch a baseball.

“None of that side-arm crap,” he says during our games of catch. “Play the ball; don’t let the ball play you.”

Everyone calls my throwing technique “textbook.” I’m my father’s wind-up robot with perfect form and follow through, a black-and-white line drawing in a how-to book.

I never consider myself a daddy’s girl. I never consider myself a regular girl for that matter, even though I attend the secret girls-only meeting in sixth-grade where we all sit on the floor of a classroom and watch a movie about burgeoning breasts and how to use a sanitary belt.

Dive.

My father is teaching me how to dive from the low board into the deep pool that is small and square like a postage stamp. I take three small steps—one, two, three—and follow with a small hop and then a big jump, my arms outstretched and pointed to the sky. When I’m in the air, I reach out in front of me, searching for the water and my father’s approval. They might as well be the same thing because I can’t hold either one in my hands for more than a split second.

“Good,” he says. “But you need more height. Reach out farther. Reach, reach, reach. Tuck your head.”

I always know as soon as I hit the water if it’s a good dive or not. It’s that feeling of swiftness and sweetness and cleanness.

Today, I know I have performed an almost-perfect dive. My body sends a picture-message to my brain that I pierced the blue water like a shiny silver butter knife.

As I float to the surface, I look for my dad treading water at the opposite end of the pool. The dive means nothing to me without his critique. The sun makes it seem like the pool is filled with a million sparkling diamonds. I plant my hand over my eyes to form a makeshift visor

When I spot him, I know something is wrong. He’s gesturing with his hands, even though it’s my mother who’s Italian, and slapping the surface of the pool so drops of water rise in the air like an upside down thunderstorm. He seems angry and is mouthing words I can’t quite make out.

“What?” I keep asking, holding up my palms as if the answer might be written there in magic marker.

“Your suit.”

That’s all I can understand. Everything seems dulled as if we are both sitting on the bottom of the pool trying to hold a conversation through a wall of water.

Your suit. Your suit. Your suit.

When I finally look down, I see two pink things floating in the water in front of me. At first, I think they are a stray pair of water wings or maybe an inflatable toy that blew into the diving pool.

Then I realize the force of the dive has pushed the top of my bathing suit down so it is sitting in a roll at my waist.

My breasts are floating on top of the water.

I struggle to pull up my navy blue one-piece Speedo razor back swimsuit, working it up and over my wet skin. The tight, rubbery fabric compresses my breasts and pushes them back into my body where they belong.

I watch as my father climbs up the three-rung ladder and out of the pool, prematurely ending the diving lesson.

I continue to float in the cool water, wondering what I have done to make my dad so mad. Even though my bathing suit is now covering my breasts, pulling them snug against my torso so they have flattened into discs and almost disappeared, I still feel exposed.

It feels like a secret revealed, even though we've always known the truth. It is my body with its loud, aggressive voice—solid as bone but not always true—that blows my cover.

My father's teachings don't stop that day. There are still lessons on how to perform an oil change, jump a car battery, solve a geometry proof, hang a picture, fix a toilet, paint a room. We never mention the bathing suit incident.

When I finally climb the ladder to leave the pool that day, I feel my nipples poke against the wet nylon fabric as if my breasts are attempting another escape.

Sixth-grade Man of Mystery

“Oh Sandy, baby, someday
When high school is done
Somehow, someway
Our two worlds will be one”
~“Sandy,” *Grease*

I HAVE ALWAYS been in love with the idea of being in love. Even at a young age, I want to star in my own love story.

As a pre-teen, *Grease* is my favorite movie. I have the double-album soundtrack, and my friends and I know the words to all of the songs by heart. A giant fuzzy felt poster of John Travolta and Olivia Newton-John hangs in my bedroom. I had carefully colored each strand of Olivia Newton-John’s post-makeover permed hair using thin magic markers in different shades of brown and yellow. She looks beautiful with her sun-kissed, tousled hair and bright red lips.

During sixth grade, authentic *Grease* lingo can be heard at our suburban school. Terms like “going steady,” “making out” and “getting to first base” (not in a baseball context) are becoming commonplace. It’s a strange, non-native language to me. I don’t want to seem like a foreigner, so I tilt my head and nod knowingly whenever any of these terms pop up in conversation. I do a lot of nodding during the 1978-79 school year.

All of these concepts seem irrelevant and unattainable to me. And then Doug O’Neill walks into my sixth-grade classroom.

Doug and I sit at the same cluster of desks. He has thin brown hair like a middle-age man in the midst of a mid-life crisis and an unusually large head. Doug has perfected the art of the comb-over at the tender age of twelve. He reminds me of Charlie Brown, or perhaps Charlie Brown’s father if Charlie Brown even had a father, but without the yellow and black zig-zag jersey. Instead, Doug favors turtlenecks in fall colors, such as burgundy and hunter green, even when it’s warm outside. The high collars are stretched out and saggy, possibly because of his enormous head. The shirts make his neck look like it is frowning.

Doug loves the Beatles and occasionally speaks with a British accent. Every morning, he greets me with an “â€˜ello, guv’na.” I think he is sophisticated and witty, a young, balding James Bond attired in a bad turtleneck. In reality, he sounds more like the chimney sweep played by Dick Van Dyke in the movie *Mary Poppins*.

Doug writes me love notes on lined notebook paper and secretly slips them inside my hinged flip-top desk. I view these clandestine confessions of the heart as grand, romantic gestures. They are written proof that I’m worthy and desirable like the other girls in my class.

In his notes, Doug writes things like:

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

“Your eyes remind me of sunshine on a beautiful day.”

“I think you are the prettiest girl in school.”

“Will you go steady with me?”

“If I don’t hear back from you, I will assume you are my girlfriend.”

One time, Doug deposits a shiny silver shamrock charm he has carefully wrapped in a piece of paper inside my desk. Doug’s best friend tells everyone in my class Doug found the charm in his garage. It was dirty and covered in grease, but Doug cleaned it up with some soap and water.

Despite the snickers from my classmates, I view the silver charm as buried treasure, a physical manifestation of Doug’s love and adoration that I can hold in my hand and hide in my pocket.

Doug and I engage in this passive-aggressive dance throughout the school year. He leaves me scribbled missives expressing his undying love and affection, and I ignore him. It’s the perfect relationship.

ABOUT HALF WAY through the school year, our class takes a field trip.

The bus is much like India or perhaps Nazi Germany, employing a hierarchical caste system for seating based on good looks, straight teeth and blonde hair.

At the time of boarding, the bus transforms into Noah’s Ark as the crowd of waiting children parts and the two boy-girl couples in my class make their way to the very rear of the vehicle, their golden feathered hair blowing gently in the breeze. I imagine them to be mated pairs of sleek yellow panthers or perhaps golden eagles with gleaming feathers cascading down the backs of their heads and necks.

As if he is claiming territory out west, Doug confidently takes one of the second to last seats and waves me over. In general, Doug and I are viewed as funny and entertaining, which compensates for our below average looks and awkward social skills. In trade for our choice seats, we perform as court jesters for the popular kids, playing out our roles with gusto.

The golden-haired ones laugh heartily, and their blue eyes shine with delight. The boys clap Doug on the back, and the girls point to Doug and wink at me. I breathe in the clean smell of their “Gee, Your Hair Smells Terrific” shampoo and Johnson’s No More Tangles detangler and watch as rays of sun infiltrate the bus windows and envelop each one of them in a warm glow. For a second, I think I can reach out and touch the shiny bubble of their popularity. This is what it’s like to be almost popular.

I know deep down Doug and I will never be Danny and Sandy from *Grease*. But we are good enough and funny enough to be solid sidekicks like Kenickie and Rizzo. This is the role I was born to play, always following in the shadow of the leading ladies in my life. It’s probably a good thing, because I would have looked terrible in skintight black leather pants and red high heels. However, Doug could have pulled off a letterman sweater with his giant head. In fact, it would have been very flattering. Also, my voice and personality are more suited to Rizzo’s sarcastic rendering of “Look at Me, I’m Sandra Dee” rather than Sandy’s wrenching and heartfelt “Hopelessly Devoted to You.”

I learn many life lessons this school year (besides the fact that Olivia Newton-John looks totally hot in skintight black leather pants and red high heels). I’ll never be one of the kids who sits in the very back of the school bus. Sitting toward the back will be good enough, though. From *Grease*, I learn it’s okay to pretend to be someone you’re not, especially to nab the guy or

girl of your dreams. I also make the connection between making someone laugh and earning their admiration and approval. A good sense of humor can make up for a lot of physical flaws and social tics.

By the time I hit college, I have perfected my stand-up routine. I learn certain guys (drunk guys) will actually have sex with me because I can do a killer Mickey Mouse impersonation.

Me: Hello, it's me, Mickey Mouse (said in a high-pitched cartoon mouse voice).

Guy: Do you want to go back to my dorm room and have sex?

Unfortunately, my time in sixth grade near the top of the social pyramid is short lived. One morning, I lift the lid to my desk and spy a note from Doug.

My Dearest Rae,

By the time you read this, I will be long gone. Know I will always love you.

Douglas T. O'Neill

I'm stunned but touched. Too heartbroken to say goodbye in person, Doug has left what I assume will be a final note.

I don't miss Doug, but I miss his love notes.

A FEW WEEKS later, I receive a birthday card in the mail from Doug. The front of the red, white and blue card shows a cartoonish man in colonial garb wearing a powdered wig and riding an old-fashioned, three-wheeled bike. "For your birthday, let's conserve gas," it reads. "Let's go somewhere and park."

Inside the card, Doug writes that he bumped into one of my friends at the mall and asked for my address. I find this odd because none of my girlfriends reported seeing Doug at the mall or anywhere else for that matter. Besides, I'm pretty sure they wouldn't have known my full mailing address. Doug asks me to meet him at a local roller skating rink in a few Saturdays.

After reading the card, I realize Douglas O'Neill is very advanced for a sixth grader. Not only is he concerned about the conservation of fossil fuels, which is a timely issue as we are still feeling the effects of the oil crisis of the 70s, but he apparently knows all about "parking."

"Bring your friends, because I'll be bringing mine," he writes.

Looking back, I wonder if this was some giant swingers party Doug had planned.

I hide the card; it seems like contraband. Like cocaine or smack or the other drugs featured on the *ABC Afterschool Specials* I watch.

As the roller-skating date approaches, I think about casually mentioning to my parents that I need a ride to the rink. "Some friends from school are meeting there this Saturday," I rehearse. I never find the courage.

The truth is I'm not ready for handholding and first kisses and whatever else Doug has in mind. I'm not ready for anything more than words written on notebook paper that has been folded into a tiny square and tucked deep inside the shell of my dark desk.

I picture Doug waiting for me in the parking lot in a white Lincoln Continental wearing a silk robe with a turtleneck underneath. When I fail to show up, I imagine him going inside, donning a pair of black roller skates and circling the rink, his large, balding head pointed downward as he skates to David Soul's "Don't Give Up On Us Baby."

After the skating date passed, I feel bad and try to make things right. Like a love junkie in withdrawal, I crave more notes from Doug.

The next time I'm at the mall, I buy Doug a shark tooth necklace from Spencer's. Nothing says sorry for standing you up in front of all of your friends like a \$2.99 shark tooth necklace from a store that sells risqué buttons, edible underwear and drug paraphernalia. Using my best Ziggy stationery, I write Doug a letter apologizing for not showing up at the rink and mail it and the shark tooth necklace to him at the return address on the card he had sent.

The letter comes back return to sender. Apparently, Doug no longer lives at that address. Perhaps he never lived there at all. Doug O'Neill is a sixth-grade man of mystery.

AFTER DOUG'S DISAPPEARANCE, I used to catch myself staring at the *Grease* poster in my bedroom. John Travolta makes me think about Doug, who had been the love of my life. I wonder where he is and what he is doing and if he has a new girlfriend he takes roller skating on Saturday afternoons.

Most of the time, however, my eyes drift over to Olivia Newton-John and her beautiful yellow-gold hair she wears like a lion's mane and those red, red lips perfect for anyone's first kiss.

First Kiss

“Why do you think you are missing something you never had?”

~Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*

MY FIRST KISS is hard and fast like a car crash.

I'm 16 years old and standing in the driveway to my house.

I have wanted this forever, if 16 years can be considered forever, but as soon as it happens, I want to undo it. I don't know why, but everything about it is wrong.

I remember the night sky being as black as the driveway macadam. Not a star in sight or a blinking white light from a jet plane making its way across the sky. Not even a spark of stardust marking what is supposed to be a magical moment. For just a few seconds, it seems like the end of the world.

DWAYNE PILLMAN IS pretty with feathery brown hair and features so fine they look like they have been drawn with a freshly sharpened No. 2 pencil. His mustache looks hand drawn, too. Sketched in soft and fuzzy with the fat part of a stick of charcoal.

Dwayne Pillman can eat six Taco Bell tacos! That's how he'd tell it. Like it's a big deal, a heroic feat. Six plain tacos, hard shells, no sauce, not even the mild kind. He always lines up the paper-wrapped tacos on his tray like dominoes.

“Wow, you can really put those away,” I say.

I never tell Dwayne I can probably eat a dozen Taco Bell tacos. Maybe more. With two packs of hot sauce each.

Dwayne and I work at the local McDonalds. One time, he leaves me a note in the drive-thru written in black magic marker on a store napkin.

“Hey Bonehead! Guess who?”

I keep the napkin in a shoebox with my playbills, the lasso my dad brought back from a business trip to Texas, a bouncy ball that looks like an eyeball that I carry in my pocket when I'm wishing for something to happen, and wallet-size school pictures of my girlfriends with messages they wrote on the backs in their curly script.

Everyone at work knows I'm in love with Dwayne Pillman.

Maybe it's the way I say his name like it has extra w's, stretching it out like it's Silly Putty and turning it into something it isn't.

I love the twang of his name—Dwayne—which sounds exotic like banjo music to my teenage ears.

In my neat handwriting, I write Dwayne Pillman's name at the top of the lists I make of boys to go with to parties and other events: the Halloween hayride, the work Christmas party, senior

prom. I use clean sheets of lined notebook paper, each one a brand new plan for a date, for a boyfriend.

Sometimes Dwayne Pillman hangs out at my house after work. We sit in the bed of his truck or on the front curb. I sneak out slices of apple pie, tall glasses of milk and sometimes cold bottles of Heineken from the refrigerator.

“Your friend can come inside,” my mother says.

Dwayne Pillman is not the kind of boy who comes inside to meet a girl’s parents.

We spend a lot of time listening to music. Dwayne likes country music—not the trendy pop that permeates the 80s. We listen to John Cougar Mellencamp’s new album, *Uh Huh*, on a cassette tape we play in a boom box.

Uh huh is classic Mellencamp: “Pink Houses,” “Authority Song,” “Crumblin’ Down.” I like the less popular songs like “Jackie O” and especially “Warmer Place to Sleep.”

“Girl can you share your warm bed tonight
I need to find a safe retreat
Someplace where they can’t see my eyes
I need to find a warmer place to sleep”

The song lyrics are our secret language.

The album cover of *Uh Huh* is a soft pink-purple with four angels floating at the top and John Cougar Mellencamp in the middle wearing faded blue jeans, a dingy white T-shirt rolled up at the sleeves and brown work boots. John Cougar Mellencamp has long brown hair that falls softly over one eye. His thumb rests inside his jeans just inside the metal button like an upside down fishhook. He is tall and slender like Dwayne. There is something effeminate about his pose. His right hip sticks out as if he’s clutching an invisible pom-pom on the sideline of a football field and about to start a cheer.

ON THE NIGHT of the kiss, Dwayne and I spend most of our time sitting in the bed of his truck.

“I know who you like,” Dwayne says.

My heart stops for a moment. I can feel it, the absence of the beat. For a few seconds, I’m existing in that empty place, that holding space that contains my secrets, my fears, my dreams.

“What? How do you know who I like?” I ask.

“I just know,” he says.

“You do not,” I reply.

“I do.”

“Just say it,” he says.

While we play this game of knowing and not knowing, the sky turns from blue to purple to black.

I think about telling Dwayne I like him. That I like him a lot. But I’m too scared to let the words out of my mouth. I imagine each word:

*I
like*

you

as white balloons, easy targets as they rise in the night sky.

Eventually, we get bored and jump out of the back of his truck and onto the driveway.

“Rae, I know you like me,” Dwayne says.

He grabs me by the arm and pulls me toward him. The kiss comes without warning. It is fast and hard and forced. I wait for my lips to open and my body to fold into his. It never happens. As much as I want to, I can’t make it happen.

The kiss is like walking into a glass door. First, there is the impact and then the shock of it all. After it is over, I will inspect my body for marks and bruises.

I thought I would fall into my first kiss in the same way I instinctually leaned into my first slide and ended up with a single spiked cleat resting on the second base bag.

I stand motionless in the driveway while Dwayne Pillman walks to his truck and drives away.

I’m frozen, rooted to the macadam. My house is only a few feet away, but it seems like miles.

I know there is something wrong with me, but I don’t know what. I got what I wanted, but in the end I wanted something else.

I wonder if this is what love feels like.

Or maybe this is what it feels like to be completely lost.

Me and Gloria Steinem

“The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off.”
~Gloria Steinem

MY PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER’S name is Tom.

Really, it’s Emily.

But her father had wanted a boy, so he took to calling her Tom, perhaps willing her to be someone she wasn’t.

My grandfather calls her Tom, too.

“Tom, can you get me another glass of milk?”

“Tom, where are my slippers?”

She works as a waitress in a fancy, Victorian-styled restaurant in Port Jervis, New York, called the Flo-Jean. The restaurant is named for two sisters, Florence and Jean, their identities forever merged. The name Flo-Jean is written in an elegant cursive script that climbs the white siding of the restaurant like well-trained ivy.

I always thought Florence got shortchanged in the naming of the place.

My grandmother brings people food on big round trays: ice-cold shrimp that dangle their pink tails over the edge of tall crystal glasses, thick slices of prime rib that nap in their own juices and ice cream sundaes that wear top hats of whipped cream.

There’s another person who runs the place along with Florence and Jean. My grandmother’s supervisor is nicknamed Tay-Tay. I was always confused as to whether Tay-Tay was a man or a woman. Even now, I don’t know.

My grandmother’s work never seems to end, even when she’s at home. She’s always bringing people things and making things to bring them and cleaning up the things she brought. She raised four boys, my father being the oldest, and used the money she earned as a waitress to pay for expenses my grandfather considered unnecessary such as braces and college.

Her house is always neat as a pin, except for the tiny kitchen with the well-worn wooden cabinets. The kitchen never rests. It is a factory that endlessly churns out soups and casseroles and cakes. My grandmother is the sole assembly-line worker.

Even though it’s the 70s, the height of the women’s liberation movement, I never find the need to stage a protest march for my grandmother.

I am very artistic and could have made colorful poster board signs that say “Her Name Is Emily—Not Tom” or “Get Your Own Damn Milk.”

I am a feminist after all. I enjoy how the word makes me seem smart and sophisticated, even though there is something about the word itself I don’t like. Somehow, it feels like pulling a little red wagon that contains the word *HATE* spelled out in big, black, block letters.

Some twenty years later, I will feel the same way about the word lesbian.

I express my feminism in many ways. In fourth grade, my friend Beth and I write a paper on Susan B. Anthony and her crusade for women's right to vote that we title "Failure Impossible."

"Like slaves, idiots, and criminals they were not allowed to vote," we write, showing insight and sensitivity exclusive to nine-year-olds. "On election day Susan and her three sisters and eleven other sturdy friends voted despite the law."

In retrospect, Susan's "sturdy friends" seem suspect. I wonder if they lived in pairs as "roommates" or "cousins," favored sensible shoes and wore knickers under their petticoats.

We didn't actually write the paper. Beth's mom typed it for us. She performs secretarial work from a spare room in the house, typing memos for invisible businessmen. My friends and I hear the click clack of the typewriter from above when we gather at her house to play. Fortunately, she still has time to buy the snack foods we crave—Doritos, &M's and half-gallon cartons of Icy Tea that we drink in big, long gulps—so we are able to overlook any distraction.

I progress from Susan B. Anthony to Betty Friedan in seventh grade when I purchase my own paperback copy of *The Feminine Mystique*. Despite reading it cover to cover, most of it soars over my head. I am in love with the idea of it though and often find myself tracing my fingers over the raised red block letters on the cover, entreating the theories and concepts to embed themselves in my brain.

I practice my feminism in other ways. I list Gloria Steinem as one of my role models, even though the only thing I know about her is that she is the head feminist and had donned *Playboy* bunny ears to expose the exploitation of women. I wear a Mondale-Ferraro pin years after the election was lost and am a vocal supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment. One of my favorite T-shirts states, "Home Or Away, As Long As We Play." I think the message is subtle and smart, and I wear the white tee until it becomes stained and yellow from wear.

Looking back, I see I labeled myself a feminist in order to build a wall between myself and the opposite sex. Girls on one side, boys on the other like in gym class.

Being a feminist was never my truth. I just revered the idea of it in much the same way that I "idolized" Gloria Steinem.

In reality, I worshipped at the altar of *Laverne and Shirley*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Donny and Marie* and the movie musical *Grease*. Steinem would have covered her groovy, tinted, owl-eyed spectacles in shame.

Maybe that's why I never found anything wrong with the way my grandmother chose to live her life.

In the end, she was a waitress. A server and a servant. That was her truth.

AS I WRITE this, I get out a small box that contains a few things that belonged to my grandmother. Inside is a crocheted handkerchief trimmed in periwinkle blue. A lady wearing a matching blue dress with red roses dotted around the bottom and a red sunhat stands in the corner.

I hold the handkerchief and wonder if it is a white flag—a sign she no longer serves.

In an instant, I know that can't be right. If she were here, she would drape the cloth over her arm and return to work.

Adam's Rib

“For man did not come from woman, but woman from man...”
~Corinthians 11:8

I SHARE MY grandmother's nickname of Tom.

I'm not Tom but tomboy.

No one actually calls me a tomboy, but everyone knows that's what I am. I'm not a regular girl but a tomboy. Some special variety of boy-girl, the seeds sold in small rectangular packets like heirloom vegetables.

I like the way the word sounds in my mouth. Hard. Sure. Tomboy.

The word *tomboy* is the exact opposite of the word *girl*, which is long and soft and stretches out for days like pink ribbon unraveling from a spool.

Tomboy. It makes me think of the quick, purposeful chop of a tomahawk. Or the sureness of a black tomcat strutting through a back alley at night.

The short staccato sounds soothe me. The word is comforting because it is an explanation.

Oh, she's a tomboy, that's why she can scale trees like a wild black bear cub.

Well, her name isn't Rawlings and she wasn't actually born with that baseball glove on her left hand. She's a tomboy.

Her boyish appearance and refusal to curtsy in front of the queen? Why haven't you ever seen a tomboy?

Without this disclaimer, nothing about me makes any sense. It is hard work to always carry an asterisk with you wherever you go, holding it high above your head. You would think your arms would be the first to wear out, but really it is your head because you must be forever at the ready with an appropriate explanation or quip.

There are so many times when I must explain why I'm this way or that way. The neighbors ask if the yellow baseball cap with the foam front and mesh sides is a part of me, a strange growth like a sixth finger or webbing between my toes. My friends giggle when Patricia Tarsi gives me a macramé purse for my tenth birthday. They understand the discord between gift and recipient, but insist on asking why my face has turned bright red.

Those who love me most see my boyish clothes and boyish ways and just shake their heads, too disappointed to even ask questions.

The promise of love provides no protection. My suitors rub the ruby-tinted coating from their glasses in search of the truth, seeing through the façade of normal and girl I wear like a loose hoodie in those situations that call for purebred female.

I meet Chris at an off-campus house party at college. The main room has been turned into a dance floor, and the air is dark and thick with the smell of stale beer and Polo cologne. The bass line in the Clash song makes the entire house vibrate.

I don't remember which one of us approached the other or what was said. Sometimes I wonder if Chris existed at all or whether I made him up—a pretend boyfriend to hold my hand and walk me home—out of beer foam and closed-eye wishes for normal and happy. With Chris, there is nothing but empty memories, save for this one conversation.

We leave the party so we can go outside and talk. It is autumn, late at night, and there is a chill in the air.

Chris has brown hair and brown eyes. Maybe they are blue eyes.

I remember him in browns and tans: khaki pants, an oatmeal cable-knit sweater, a yellow polo shirt so muted in color it looks like it might disappear. He is more of a movie extra—"Man at Table #4" or "Guy in Red Car"—than a leading man.

Chris has a small, faded scar just below his bottom lip that makes him look like he was caught by a fisherman's barbed hook and then released. I never ask him how he got the scar or trace it with my fingertips the way I will the scars of future lovers.

His crooked grin seems stolen from a cymbal-clanging chimp caught in mid clang. His sly smile makes me think he is up to something, even though he is never up to much of anything at all.

He likes me, which is all I need to throw myself headfirst and headlong into relationships as I have not yet learned to like myself.

As we sit on the concrete stoop of the front porch on that starry night, Chris reaches out and puts his arm around me.

"You have *really* broad shoulders," he says, his eyes wide with surprise. "Really broad."

At first, I think he is sizing me up for wife material. "I met a strong, broad-shouldered gal at university who can pull the plow, Pa," I imagine him saying to his father during a phone call home.

He looks at me expectantly.

Wow, how do I respond to that? Think, think, think. A million possible explanations race through my mind. Well, not really a million. Just a few.

There's nature: It's a birth defect. (Communicates that I can't help the way I am. Scores sympathy points. Big time.)

Nurture: Circus performing is in my blood. (Suggests fun, adventure and risk taking while showing respect for tradition and family.)

Bizarre: Home gym accident. (Implies I'm deformed but interesting like someone in a traveling freak show but with great abs and a focus on health and fitness.)

How did I not know I have the wingspan of a pterodactyl? I wish for wings like a prehistoric reptile so I can fly far away to a place populated by other broad-shouldered people. Instead, I sit rooted to the step and look up at the stars for the right answer.

"I play softball," I say, as if those three words can explain my abnormally long clavicles.

As I speak, I breathe out all the air I can and try to collapse my shoulders like a human accordion resting between polka sets. I am the last red-nosed clown trying to fit inside a bright yellow Volkswagen bug. If I was gifted with the genes of a carnival contortionist, I could have folded myself into the shape of a normal college co-ed, but God's generosity had stopped at broad shoulders.

Chris keeps repeating the words broad and shoulders as if he is tossing pink rose petals into the night sky and doling out compliments like "you have beautiful eyes" and "I like your pretty smile."

I wish I could travel back in time and take a picture of us from behind sitting on the stoop on that star-filled night. I imagine Chris as the second-rate superhero Plasticman, his red rubbery arm stretched thin so it can wrap around my back. In the snapshot, I'm a silverback gorilla, strong and powerful, the moonlight illuminating my coarse hair.

This is what it's like to be me, a boy-girl grown from special seeds.

I'm Barbie with a brown sandpaper beard.

I'm G.I. Joe with smooth, hard plastic breasts.

I was created from Adam's rib after all.

I am Tom Boy.

Love Trap

THERE IS A buzz in the air the fall of '85 when I arrive at college as a freshman. It is like walking around with your head in a beehive or holding something live and electric that vibrates and hums.

There is a single word creating the commotion: *boys*.

The razor-edged undercurrent of *boys, boys, boys* slices our skin and seeps into our blood. It becomes part of us.

During the first week of freshman orientation, the buzz is especially strong, and my roommate and I find ourselves overcome by desire. We have been on campus for days and still haven't found boyfriends. I slap the back of my hand against my forehead and pretend to faint onto my desk, onto my bed, onto the cold, hard dorm room floor.

For me, not having a boyfriend is like having a phantom limb. A boyfriend is something that should be there but isn't, and the absence of his arm around my shoulder or his hand in mine makes me feel empty and incomplete.

Besides, college is the culmination of everything I have prepared for as a young girl:

Fitness: Running to the mailbox every day after school after writing a letter to The Fonz telling him he is cute and requesting an autographed picture.

Education: Reading *Tiger Beat* magazine and cutting out pictures of Leif Garret and John Travolta that I store in a shoebox.

Socialization: Attending my first rock concert with my friends and shouting out the lyrics to Loverboy's "Hot Girls in Love."

But there is more. My mother met my father while she was away at college. With every step I take on campus, I imagine myself retracing her footsteps.

That first week, my roommate and I decide to take matters into our own hands. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and these are desperate times.

My roommate is the one who hatches the idea, although she says she doesn't remember it that way.

She reminds me of the Grinch when he got his idea, his "awful idea," "his wonderful, awful idea," and he smiled so big the corners of his mouth pulled up until his face transformed into the shape of a heart.

Hers is a wonderful-awful idea, too. So wonderful we can't ignore it. So awful we don't think about it too much it. We dive right into action.

Like most girls, we are crafty and decide to use this skill to our advantage. We buy a piece of white poster board, grab a handful of fat magic markers and go to work. In minutes, we have fashioned a colorful poster that we will hang outside the window of our second-floor dorm room, altering the course of our love lives. This is girl power at its most powerful. The women's liberation movement has been in existence for nearly twenty years, and here we are, two young, goal-oriented feminists, building on that legacy by taking what we are owed.

After we mount the sign, we run down the back stairway, out the building and into the quad to inspect our handiwork. We crane our necks and take in our masterpiece in all of its bold, rainbow, bubble-lettered glory. We read out loud the two words that will help us secure the perfect college boyfriends.

FREE BEER

We sprint back to our dorm room to wait. It is only a matter of time. We rub our hands together like a couple of evil geniuses.

There is a wide ledge by our dorm room window, and we sit there smoking Marlboros and watching our fellow students pass. Some walk right by without glancing up at our sign. Others see the sign but keep walking, somehow un-tempted by the promise of free libations.

And then there are the guys who stop. "Hello," they shout into the blue August sky.

This is how our love trap works: We yell down instructions for the guys to enter our dorm at the ground floor, and one or both of us take the elevator to the main lobby, sign them in with the security guard on duty and then escort them to our room.

They always travel in pairs like socks with static cling. Maybe it is brotherhood. Maybe it is an unspoken safety precaution when answering an open call for free alcohol that ends in the dorm room of two strange, boy-crazy girls.

We sit on one bed and the boys sit across from us on the other bed. Our little refrigerator, square like a safe, sits in the middle against the wall. Yellow light like that emanating from an angel's halo spills out when we open the door to grab a few cold ones.

My roommate and I sip from our beers. We soon learn we have to make quick decisions, think on our feet. God, college is so hard. Will each gentleman caller get his own beer? Will every young man get beer? We only have so many Busch pounders to go around. It is simple economics, simple college-level economics. We are learning so much already. We have only been on campus for two days and are already students of life.

In the end, we give the good looking guys their own Busch pounders. We make the other guys share. They pass a single blue and silver cylinder back and forth, taking polite, uncomfortable sips.

And there we sit at the world's most awkward tea party. My roommate and me sitting legs crossed like nice young ladies. A rotating selection of young men pass through our dorm room like it's a subway turnstile.

We ask them important questions:

"Where are you from?"

"What's your major?"

"Do you like Milli Vanilli?"

We never make any love connections. Classes start and life goes on and we meet boys the same way our peers do—at parties, in class, through friends.

Every once in awhile, even years later, my roommate and I would pass by some guy on campus.

"He looks familiar," one of us would say.

"I know."

"Where do we know him from?"

We'd realize he was one of the Free Beer guys.

And we would laugh and giggle and maybe blush just the slightest bit at our audacity, certainly, but also at our freshman naiveté, thinking we could catch love like that.

Double Agent

THE WORDS ARE bullets that fly silver slick off my tongue:

“Lesbians!”

“Dykes!”

I have a drinking glass pressed between my ear and the painted cinder block wall of my dorm room, trying to eavesdrop on what's going on next door.

“I can hear them moaning!” I say.

“Ew,” my friends say.

“Now they're kissing!” I report.

“Gross,” they say and break out into loud laughter.

“Ha!”

“Ha!”

“Ha!”

Each burst is a bomb.

I pretend I'm engrossed in my spy activities, but really I'm spying on my friends. I am a double agent.

I'm not sure what it is about my next door neighbors that screams lesbian to me. Sure, they are both girls and I often see them around campus together. I live in an all-girls dormitory, and each room contains two females who tend to travel in same-sex pairs or groups. They are small gangs that wear their colors in bright ribbons on top of their heads. They shout their tribal messages from the backs of their too-short elastic-waisted cotton shorts. *Love. Peace. Sexy.* The words curve around their rear ends like letters on a Coke can and make me blush.

Emily is tall and thin with straight brown hair. She is quiet and conservative with her button-up shirts and good posture that makes her seem like she thinks she is better than us. It is as if she is always reaching for the clouds, stretching for something pure and holy that is already out of our reach. We call her Icky Emily because of her suspected lesbian proclivities. She is on our list of people who might be that way.

Dani is tall and sturdy with a head of curly brown hair. She is studying criminal justice in order to be a police officer. The *i* at the end of her name feels tacked on—an obvious attempt to soften the hard, strong line of her jaw. Or maybe it is a chisel she will use to sculpt curves into her boxy physique.

I never hear any real words or sounds coming from Emily and Dani's room. The only thing I can detect is a vacuum-like hum from pressing my ear to a drinking glass. It is like holding up a conch shell with my ear pushed against its satiny pink interior and saying I can hear the waves of the ocean.

But still, I launch the words from the surface of my tongue and listen for the explosions that follow.

“Ha!”

“Ha!”

“Ha!”

I lean against the cool wall of my room, safe on the perimeter from fire or fallout.

How To Get From Here To There

“My memory of men is never lit up and illuminated like my memory of women.”

~Marguerite Duras, *The Lover*

THE GAP CAN be measured in feet—fifteen steps to be exact. I know this because I’ve returned to where it happened at least a dozen times and counted it—fifteen steps—one sneaker after the other. It always comes out the same.

Fifteen steps or fifty-thousand, it really doesn’t matter. It’s like how the moon seems so close sometimes but really it’s a million miles away.

MY GIRLFRIENDS AND I are walking down Calder Way, a side street in the town that runs along the border of my college campus.

We’ve already passed the clothing store where I purchased my favorite pair of shorts. Long white board shorts that fall just below my knees. The fabric is dotted with tiny skateboarders and the phrase “Sk8 or die” in soft colors like Pepto-Bismol pink and mint green. Colors you can find in a bottle of antacid tablets. My clothes have been carefully selected to neutralize my hardness and masculine edge. I wear these shorts with a light green cotton shirt cut like a football jersey. Because of the pastel colors, I consider this my “good” outfit and save it for special occasions.

Up ahead are two of our favorite bars. During happy hours, the Shark Club sells dollar shooters in flavors like orange creamsicle and tootsie roll. We go to the Shandygaff Saloon on Wednesday nights and drink half-price pitchers of neon red Alabama Slammers and Miller Lite. The Gaff plays the same songs every week: “American Pie,” “The Lion Sleeps Tonight,” “Jack and Diane,” “Paradise City.” When the DJ plays Billy Joel’s “Only the Good Die Young,” my friends and I raise our plastic beer cups high in the air like gold torches and shout as loud as we can:

“I’d rather laugh with the sinners than cry with the saints.

The sinners are much more fun.”

It’s Sunday morning and my friends and I are walking through town looking for something to eat. It’s a gray, drizzly morning, but the moment still burns bright in my mind as if it were etched into my skull with the red-hot tip of a wood-burning tool.

The square blocks of gray cement that make up the sidewalk stretch out in front of us, but we have stopped moving. The conversation about food and restaurants takes place around me and evaporates into the foggy air.

My attention is focused across the street at a girl in a tight pair of blue jeans. Her back is turned toward me, and my eyes have settled on the curves right below the point of her jean pockets.

The pocket points function as makeshift arrows. Look here, they seem to shout as if mounted to a billboard and outlined in blinking red lights. But the truth is I would have found my way there without any arrows or markers or maps.

It's the fullness of the curves that has me captivated. She seems so full she is on the verge of running over like a pitcher filled with too much liquid. I wait for something to spill out—perhaps a line from a song or a whispered secret—but it never does. Somehow, I'm sure she holds the key to the meaning of life, even though she is just a girl in a pair of jeans standing outside in the rain.

I know I belong here paired with fleshy softness and ripeness and abundance that can be found on forever-rolling curves of lips and hips and breasts and cheeks. At the same time, I'm lost because I don't know how to get from here to there even though she's standing just across the street.

I feel a pang, a dull pain that comes from an absence or a lack. That's all I allow myself to feel—a void that quivers inside me like the twang of a shiny silver jaw harp.

I don't hear the voice this time. Usually it says things like *no* or *that's wrong or you can never, ever do that*. They are words used to reprimand a small child. Or maybe I do hear the voice but it has become hoarse from overuse. As the rain strikes the pavement, it sounds like a thousand tiny hand slaps. *Ting. Ting. Ting.*

Some of my friends are engineering students and walk around campus with giant T-squares sticking out from the unzipped tops of their backpacks. From a distance, they look like coal miners leaving for work with their pickaxes on their backs. How many of those T-squares laid end over end would it take to connect me to her? I sketch the line in my mind using the T-square as a straightedge. The line is dark and straight, and I think about crossing it like a tightrope walker. But I'm not much of a risk taker.

My friend interrupts my moment of quiet admiration and contemplation.

“Could you stare any harder at that girl's ass?” she asks. When she says the word *ass*, it sounds like the hiss of a snake.

I know the answer but don't dare say it. I *could* stare harder, looking for the answers to life's great mysteries. Is there a heaven? What about hell? And what about me? Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?

I can feel the heat rising in my body. I'm not sure where it started, but it has climbed to my face. I'm searching for a knob to turn down the temperature, but nature has taken over and there's nothing I can do but stand red faced in the morning rain.

“I was looking over there,” I say. “That guy's coat looks like mine.” I try to get the tone just right: a tablespoon of indignation, a teaspoon of insult, a pinch of anger, a sprinkle of apathy.

I'm such a skilled and practiced actor I fool myself. Of course, I was just looking at the coat. It makes perfect sense. To admit to staring at a girl's ass would require diagnosis, classification, categorization.

Kingdom—Animalia

Phylum—Chordata

Class—Mammalian

Order—Primates

Genus—Homo
Species—Homosexual
Subspecies—Lesbian

Luckily, there's a guy across the street wearing a coat that looks like mine.

I have on a men's hunter green trench coat with copper buttons and brown leather trim that I bought at The Gap in the mall back home. It makes me think of the long coats worn by peeping toms in the black-and-white cartoons in *Playboy*. The coat covers from neck to shin, and I'm grateful for that amount of protection.

"Yeah, right," my friend says.

I'm certain everyone is staring at me, at the steam that forms when the cold rain hits my hot face and puffs into the air like smoke signals. I worry my parents will see the smoke and my second-grade teacher Mrs. Ruth Dixon and my little brother and all of the families I babysat for even though they are all hundreds of miles away. I brace for the pointed fingers and the accusations, the snickers and the insults, but they never come.

The talk returns to eggs and diners, coffee and last night.

My friends' silence speaks the loudest.

I realize the secret I've been holding so close to my chest is not really a secret at all. It is the elephant in the room, in the bars, in the lecture halls, on Calder Way. It is a giant gray elephant wearing a men's green trench coat and men's skate shorts. And softball cleats and a curly brown mullet. Listening to a Walkman that plays Bon Jovi, Poison and Winger and all of the other bands with pretty boy front men with long, blond flowing locks, jet black eyeliner and bright red lipstick. Guinness might list it as the world's largest lesbian, if it measured lesbianism by the ton.

Close call, the voice says.

My friends start to move down the sidewalk, and I follow, leaving behind a temporary trail of footprints that the rain washes away.

After the Fall

“I know how it is to be quiet, to listen and watch,
as if your life were a dream.
You can close your eyes when you no longer want to watch.
But when you no longer want to listen, what can you do?”
~Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*

“WHAT WAS THAT?”

These three short words spoken in my presence more than two decades ago have stayed with me all of these years.

I can still picture the scene in my mind. It is in perpetual freeze frame.

I’m climbing the back stairwell of my friends’ off-campus apartment for a party. I’m twenty years old and a junior in college.

Three students, two girls and one guy, pass me on their way down the stairs.

“What was that?” one of them asks.

Each new peal of laughter echoes and rings out like a gunshot in the enclosed space.

With one three-word utterance, they have stripped me of my humanness. I feel raw and exposed.

I focus on the words *what* and *that*.

For a brief moment, I think this must be what Eve felt like in those first few seconds after the fall—red faced and uncomfortable in her own body for the first time.

I’m wearing a rugby style shirt with long sleeves and a collar and bright red and blue vertical stripes. A square patch with a random single-digit number has been sewn on the back and there is a yellow embroidered crest on the front. The shirt is a size large—Macy’s didn’t have an extra large—which means my arms, my too-long monkey arms, peek out from the sleeves. The fact that I resemble Herman Munster is a small price to pay for a shirt that looks like it might have come from the men’s department. My mom had agreed to buy the shirt on one of our back-to-college shopping trips because Macy herself had deemed it appropriate apparel for women. *Well, if Macy says so, that’s good enough for me*, I imagine her thinking to herself.

I have paired the rugby shirt with a pair of acid washed blue jeans, because it’s the 80s after all, and white leather Asics high tops with red intersecting stripes. The sneakers are about a half size too small, but again, I wanted them so badly I was willing to endure the constant pain of having my toes pressed up tight against the inside tips of the shoes.

I consider myself to be average looking, even though my grandmother tells me I have high cheekbones like Brooke Shields, and average in height. I’m slightly overweight with small breasts and acne that flares up on most days.

My hair is brown and permed. My friend and I have contests to see whose new perm stands the highest, each a solo mountain of tight brown curls. I take to shaving the sides or bleaching

the sides or slicking back the sides with mousse or gel. If I close my eyes, I can still smell the L’Oreal mousse, fragrant and flowery, that puffed up white in my palm, light as air.

The side-less hairstyle is my thing like the rugby shirt and the high-top sneakers.

WHEN I TURN forty, I throw myself an extravagant party at the most popular lesbian bar in Philadelphia. It is a birthday gift and a coming-out gift all rolled into one.

My college friend with the matching perm brings a picture she had blown up so it’s as big as a poster. In the photo, I’m drunk and “dancing” while seated in a chair that has toppled to the ground.

My friend asks the cute bartender for some tape to hang up the picture.

“Nice mullet,” the bartender says after inspecting the photo.

I turn red, realizing for the first time in my life that the hair that I rocked throughout my five years in college with the slicked back or missing sides was a mullet, a hairstyle that is as much a part of lesbian culture as flannel shirts, sensible shoes and the Indigo Girls. I want to hurt myself, punish myself. Not because my fashion and style choices were hideous, even by 80s standards, but because I didn’t know.

Twenty years later and the words pound in my ears once again, each syllable hard and firm like the beat of a drum. *What. Was. That.*

In an instant, I am transported back into the mind and body of that scared, unsure, shy twenty-year-old girl who is unaware of the most basic, fundamental truths about herself. I’m a puzzle to those who see me on the street, in the classroom, on the stairs, because I’m a puzzle to myself. They have nothing to grab hold of to define me. Neither do I.

I don’t fit into traditional boxes or categories. Male. Female. I need arrows and sidebars to justify fitting in with everyone else.

ON MY BIRTH certificate, the word *Female* is handwritten in cursive with a capital letter F like a proper noun.

Actually, the document is labeled “Certification of Birth.” It is paper proof that a birth took place. No more, no less.

I’ve always wondered whether my mother knew she was having a girl.

“You’re carrying low, so it will be a girl,” I imagine an old woman in a dirty housecoat muttering in a Slavic accent, her wrinkled hand reaching out to rub my mother’s big belly like a fortuneteller would a crystal ball.

Maybe she lay down on a couch while her best friend tied a ring to a string and held it over her bulging stomach, looking for the telltale back-and-forth swing signaling a girl.

I wonder if her girlfriends threw her a baby shower at which people brought gifts in neutral colors like yellow and green? If so, the room must have been abuzz with theories and predictions and declarations of girl and boy uttered in between bites of canapés and cake. It is the sex of the unborn child that always takes center stage at these events.

Today, in the age of ultrasounds, there isn’t as much surprise or suspense.

However, the gender of the baby—*M* or *F*—has taken on a life of its own, spawning entire parties dedicated to the reveal. The guests vote boy or girl—like they have any say in the matter

—and then the expectant parents do something dramatic like release a bouquet of pink or blue balloons into the sky or cut into a cake colored either pink or blue.

If my parents would have had one of these parties to announce my arrival, they would have sliced into a rainbow layer cake.

I can hear the excited cries.

“Oh my god, they must be expecting a drag queen!”

Because who doesn’t love a drag queen?

“No, no, everyone. Shhh, quiet down. It’s just a lesbian,” my dad would say.

When you get right down to it, gender might very well be the most basic external building block of man. The key Lego brick upon which all the other bricks are stacked. We need to be able to see that brick to say, hey, that’s a car, or wow, nice tree house.

Without it, we’re left blowing in the wind with our mouths agape. Let me guess. Is it a giant two-headed cat? Wait, I know. How about a dinosaur? The Eiffel Tower? A dead pig?

All of this guessing and uncertainty tends to make people feel uncomfortable.

What if the creation is indeed a giant two-headed cat? Imagine what it feels like to be that giant two-headed cat.

For the better part of my life, I have been the giant two-headed cat.

In that stairwell, for the first time in my life, someone had called me on it. We see you, but we don’t know what you are.

Over the years, I have heard the snickers and the behind-theback whispers. I always kept my head low to the ground and my eyes pointed downward or at some fixed object in the distance. My strategy was to fly under the radar, blend in, slide by, pass through, quietly and seemingly without effort, even though it took enormous amounts of effort and energy to pretend I didn’t exist.

That was not an option anymore. I realized other people, people who didn’t even know me, could see my secret.

Here’s the funny part: I knew I had a secret. I just didn’t know what it was at the time. It’s a lonely feeling to be standing on the outside of your own inside joke.

My truth resided somewhere in that three-worded query. What was that? Maybe it was in the words themselves or in the sentence as a whole. Or maybe in the small spaces between the words. I don’t know.

As I write this, I see that somehow three strangers were able to summarize the grand question concerning my identity and my truth and boil it down into three tiny words. Rude but efficient, I now think. I wonder how they were able to voice what I had been feeling for so many years.

At the time, the words hit a place so very deep inside they have never been able to leave. I’ve tried to shake them off like a toddler would a scraped knee or a bump on the head, but I have never been successful. Twenty-five years later and I’m still analyzing and dissecting and scraping away to craft a response. I wonder if there is one correct answer or if the answer can change from month to month, year to year.

I imagine everyone has their own truth they carry around in the middle-most part of their bodies, maybe wedged in between the second and third rib right beneath the heart. It probably looks something like a rod of plutonium, all silvery gray and shiny. Illusive at times, volatile at others. For when you are not in tune with who you really are, who you were born to be, there’s bound to be some tumult.

I have tried to alter my truth, to bend it like a red-hot piece of metal that is only pliable in such a distressed state. In my college days, I feigned an interest in boys, wondering to myself

what all the fuss was. I lied about having an abortion just to fit in. It seemed less of a sin to have prematurely ended a life than to live my own openly and honestly.

What was I? Who was I? How could strangers know from a three-second encounter that I was not like them, would never be like them? How did I defy classification in those two neat categories, the blue one labeled “boy” and the pink one labeled “girl”? Did my oddness make me any less human? Perhaps, as the stairwell strangers had suggested, not a she or a her or even a you but a what or a that? It’s all fun and games if you’re the lead character in a Dr. Seuss book, but not so much if it’s your actual life.

It would be nice to be able to say I stopped hiding in the shadows after that encounter in the stairwell. That I stood a little taller, spoke a little louder and started looking people in the eye. That on that very day, the day a three-second, three-word encounter became fixed in time, I made a decision to dig in and discover who I really was.

The truth is I became better at hiding and more aware of who was watching.

As the three strangers descend the stairs that day and open the heavy door that leads outside, bright sunlight floods in and momentarily covers the steps in a warm yellow glow.

I catch a glimpse of it as I hurry up the stairs and into the dark hallway and my friends’ apartment.

Mortified

FROM THE OUTSIDE, the small square window is a Cyclops's eye. My mother's face sits in the center where the pupil should be.

This is her castle—a gray-sided, two-story house in the suburbs with a yard that circles it like a green grass moat.

As a child, I was always aware of her presence as I played in the backyard, the back of my neck warm from her gaze as she stood like a ship's captain at the kitchen sink and stared out the little window.

It's twenty years later, and I can still feel the heat on the back of my neck when I come home to visit.

Inside the house, the window is the same, but everything around it has changed. The kitchen floor is now black and white ceramic tile, hard and cool compared to the old linoleum, dull and raised, that had spread across the floor like a giant slick of spilled oatmeal. The appliances are stainless steel, upgrades from predecessors that had been purchased in a shade of drab yellow known as “harvest wheat.” The new countertops have been sliced from slabs of imported granite, making the counters dark and slick like sections of black ice cut from a highway on the coldest night of winter.

My mother seems different, too. Smaller and softer than before as though life has washed over her, smoothing most of her edges.

I think about my old rock tumbler with its spinning cylinder that transformed ordinary rocks into shiny, colorful gemstones. I carried these polished treasures in my pocket and rubbed them for good luck and sometimes held one in my mouth like an extra tooth for really good luck. The magic wasn't inside the rocks themselves or even in the tumbler but in the grit that came black, gray, white, fine, finer, finest in little plastic pouches. The particles, irritants like sand in a swimsuit, pummeled the plain rocks with billions of tiny grainy punches, forcing them into more beautiful versions of themselves.

I wonder if I've been the grit in my mother's life. Not polishing her but wearing her down. Rubbing off layers of her every time I made a demand that conflicted with my gender. Boy's clothes! Drum lessons! We have always been at odds, the best parts of ourselves, those shiny, polished, true parts, pushing against each other, two boulders in an unending battle of wills. Her, dark blue agate so blue it resembles steel or ice. Me, fiery red carnelian.

I smell Windex with its ammonia sting and lemon Pledge and fresh dish detergent. If you could manufacture things like clean and bright and hope, it would smell like this.

In my head, I hear a stiff, white-bristle brush buffing and polishing something, shining it up like an expensive pair of men's dress shoes. The scratchy noise travels up my spine, into my lower jaw and up through the roots of my teeth. This is the sound of perfection. This is the sound of my childhood.

Today, my mother is standing at her usual spot in the kitchen, her hands deep in a sink of sudsy water cleaning something. She is peering out the little window, sailing the house over the

manicured suburban landscape of green grass and gray pavers, weaving between past and present.

“I remember watching you play football,” she says.

Her back is to me, but I assume the look on her face is soft and wistful as she tries to catch a memory and hold it in the palm of her hand before it disintegrates like a piece of floating ash.

“Tossing those boys around like sacks of flour,” she says.

I look out the window, but I don’t see the things that have captured her attention: the torn seams of my male playmates or the spilled flour that puffs up like small clouds of smoke, sending a message only she can read.

Instead, I hear the hard staccato of the hut, hut, hut.

I hear the Mississippis and recall how we broke down time like that.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi.

We didn’t live second by second but in the silent spaces in between, stretching out our afternoons like uncoiled licorice whips to make them last longer.

We measured the day in downs. First down at the big tree, first down at the flat rock, first down where the bush pokes out from the turn in the creek bed like a lady with her hand on her hip.

We took what Mother Nature had left for us and made it our own. We were young and greedy. If we didn’t have to be home for dinner, we would have run like that forever from one first down to the next along the crooked creek that bordered our backyards.

I hold the football so tight against my chest I can feel my heartbeat in my hands.

I glide down a found seam like a silver zipper.

I thrust out my arm like it’s 1977 and I’m Franco Harris.

I toss them off, these boys who treat me like one of them.

They all fall down, flopping like fish on our makeshift field.

I fall, too, after I cross the invisible marker by the shed.

First down.

I lay on my back, the blades of grass soft-sharp on my elbows and the palms of my hands. My chest rises and falls, and I can hear my breath echoing inside my head and I know I’m alive.

Everything is alive. The clouds trailing snail-like across the cobalt blue sky, the September sun blazing orange on the horizon. The particles of earth clinging to the inside of my fingernails, my faded blue jeans decorated with lime green streaks of grass like a modern art painting.

I take in deep pulls of cool air that make the hairs inside my nose stand erect and burn my throat.

My mother can’t stop focusing on the boys made from burlap.

“I was mortified,” she says.

That’s when I know the movie she is watching in the little window above the kitchen sink is different from the one playing in my head.

I slide my shiny silver memory back inside before exposure to the open air causes it to change, to take on a gray film, to tarnish. To transform like those rocks in the tumbler.

I head out the door but can’t seem to get that word out of my head.

Mortified.

I know the meaning. I had taken five years of French in school.

Even so, I looked it up later that night just to be sure.

Born of Bone and Wondering

“What we have here is failure to communicate.”

~ *Cool Hand Luke*

MY DAD LIFTS the large rectangular box from inside the trunk of my car and places it on the driveway.

Shit. He knows.

My car has a flat, and he's showing me how to put on the temporary tire that resides in the trunk. I had forgotten about the box.

Shit, shit, shit.

My dad doesn't say a word. He doesn't arch a single eyebrow or allow gravity to pull down one corner of his mouth into a tiny lopsided frown.

The box could be a dead body, and he still wouldn't blink. He would lift the corpse gingerly from under the armpits and set it down without comment on the black macadam.

In my family, we are all master avoiders, professional ignorers. You would think we are mobsters, always looking the other way.

The box holds a new Shark-brand vacuum cleaner, bright red like a race car.

My boyfriend and I are planning on moving into an apartment together. I am in my twenties and still living at home with my parents.

I don't think they will approve of the move, so I am running all over town purchasing kitchenware and small appliances and hiding them under beds and inside closets. I'm like a squirrel with a line of credit.

In reality, I don't know whether my parents will have a problem with me living with a man out of wedlock. We never talked about it.

My grandmother called it “shacking up.” She shook her head back and forth as she said the words in her sour milk voice, just in case we were having trouble picking up on her disgust.

Even though her bluntness could be embarrassing, I appreciated knowing how she felt.

At the time, I am relieved by my dad's feigned obliviousness.

But maybe a tiny part of me secretly hoped he would ask about the vacuum.

I would have been forced to tell him about my plans for moving or make up some crazy story about how I had found the vacuum on the side of the road or how it had been given to me by a small appliance hoarder I had befriended. It might have opened up a door to conversation, providing me with an opportunity to ask all of the questions sitting on the tip of my tongue.

How did you and Mom meet?

When did you move in together?

Were you in love?

How did you know?

I had long since swallowed all of the questions that arose during my childhood. They are now a part of me, each question arranged one on top of another like the colorful plastic rings on a child's stacking toy. Each one an endless loop of wondering.

Red, orange, yellow. What's wrong with me? Why can't I be like everyone else? Why do I feel so alone?

Green, blue, purple. Why are things so hard for me? What part of me makes me so different? Will I ever fit in?

When a toddler swallows a found penny or a Barbie doll's tiny tennis shoe, the body expels the foreign object. It's a natural process, a safety net woven in instinct. But I held onto these unanswered questions, and they formed a skeleton around which flesh was stretched like fabric over the steel cage of a hoop skirt.

It seems impossible: a person made of bone and wondering! Even now, I'm not sure whether the questions were there all along. Perhaps they grew as I did, the curlicues of the question marks reaching out as they hooked into my joints and held me together.

After the tire change, my dad lifts the vacuum cleaner from the driveway and places it back inside the trunk. He closes the lid and I watch him disappear inside the garage.

Love and Leather

“We are becoming the men we wanted to marry.”

~Gloria Steinem

ON THE DAY I get married, I wear a bead-encrusted gown that is long and hard like a stick of rock candy and a black leather jacket soft from wear.

Everything about the day has been planned, except for the leather jacket.

It is December thirty-first, a New Year's Eve wedding, and I don't have a delicate shawl to throw around my shoulders or anything else more appropriate to keep me warm. As I head out the door, I grab the jacket out of habit.

I am part bride but part something else, too.

My dad and I ride to the church in a black stretch limousine. We sit in fourteen feet of silence.

I wait for a question that never comes.

Are you sure?

For the duration of the eight-minute drive, I wonder how words never spoken could weigh so much.

I am certain he will ask.

Are you sure?

It is part of our family history.

I don't remember if I had heard the story once and it had grown big in my little girl head or if it was repetition that made it unforgettable.

It is a love story, a tale of happily ever after that comes with an escape hatch, an exit plan. That's what makes it so magical, the bright red button marked “ejector seat.”

The story goes like this: The morning my mother was to marry my father, her Uncle Felix came to her mother's house. Uncle Felix asked her one question.

Are you sure?

Was she sure she wanted to marry my father? If not, he would call the whole thing off, take care of everything.

In the end, my mother married my father, and they've been together for nearly fifty years. Uncle Felix didn't have to take care of a thing, although no one doubts he would have had my mother nodded her head ever so slightly or used her hand to make a slashing motion across her throat. We were Italian after all.

IN MY FAMILY, Uncle Felix is the go-to guy, the problem solver, the fixer.

I only see him when I visit my grandmother one or two times a year in the dying steel town outside of Pittsburgh where she lives. Uncle Felix is a puzzle of hard and soft. He has thin gray-white hair that reaches across his head like the tines of a fork, and he speaks in a quiet voice that hovers just above a whisper. I think this is how the Pope would speak if he were talking about Jesus.

He always hands me and my brother \$5 bills that are soft and warm from sitting in his pocket.

Uncle Felix is a big shot at the local bank down the street. As a kid, I thought he owned the place. He always wears a suit and tie and carries around a briefcase as if it is permanently attached to his right hand. He is like the businessman's version of Edward Scissorhands.

Those things make him appear hard: the briefcase with its sharp metal corners, the suit pants with pleats straight and sharp like razor blades. Even so, his trousers fall in soft waves over his big black shoes and when he walks the dark fabric laps at his sock-covered ankles like an incoming tide.

I never see Uncle Felix in anything but a suit and tie. I imagine he goes to bed in his suit, arms folded on top of the briefcase that rises and falls with each breath.

I never see him outside of the bank or my grandmother's dining room where he sits at the table hunched over endless cups of coffee, his gray fedora marking his place at the table.

It's as if he has been frozen in these moments, in these places, suspended in a block of ice like a caveman.

My mom once told me about an impromptu visit to Uncle Felix's house. It was a hot summer day, and he wasn't expecting company. He was dressed in a clean white T-shirt. It was like catching The Fonz without his leather jacket, I imagined.

WHEN WE ARRIVE at the church, I look for Uncle Felix even though I know he isn't there. I look for his doughy features in the faces of the guests. I search for an old silk tie faded pale pink, a threadbare tweed fedora floating above the pews, a dented briefcase tucked away in the corner of the church vestibule.

I listen for his voice three-hundred miles away. I imagine it sounding thick and throaty floating like fog above the closed-down smokestacks on the outskirts of town.

Are you sure?

It disappeared into the air long before it ever reached me.

I could say I let the question go. That I released it like a bunch of yellow balloons and watched as the words mixed in with the stars until the night sky looked like it was on fire.

Are you sure?

Or that I watched it drift into the atmosphere when the church organist started to play "Here Comes the Bride."

Are you sure?

I walked down the aisle with my father.

Are you sure?

I left with a husband hooked to my arm.

Are you sure?

But the truth is I never let it go until now.

I had held onto it with greedy hands, hoping if I turned it just the right way or slept with it under my pillow it would turn back time.

Are you sure?

AT THE END of the night, I pull the leather jacket on over my gown.

The jacket is an old Christmas gift from my parents. I paid to have it tailored after I lost weight for the wedding. The Asian lady at the mall took out the side panels and stitched it back together so it fit my smaller frame. It was as if the jacket had changed as I did, conforming to my contours and complexities.

Accessorizing a bridal gown with a black leather jacket should have been a clue I wasn't cut out for convention, for normal, maybe even for happily ever after. Cinderella didn't wear black leather. Joan Jett did.

Maybe if I hadn't said I do, I would have figured it all out sooner. But no one had tossed me a knotted rope or built me a fire escape out of words.

I TRADE IN the bridal gown for an apron as I try my best to cook and keep house as my mother did. I declare Wednesday date night and serve my husband bites of food on fancy frilled toothpicks. On the nights we go out, I sometimes wear black dresses and black thigh-high panty hose and paint my nails and lips red. I become a business woman and wear business suits and dresses with shiny gold buttons and high heels. I try one ensemble on after another, seeing if they fit. In the end, I slough everything off. Everything except the black leather jacket.

Red

“She knows what to say, she knows what to do
Every move she makes, she makes just for you”
~Robert Palmer, “I Didn’t Mean To Turn You On”

AT FIRST, IT is like viewing myself from afar. Not as a stranger but as if in a dream. Me, faint and shimmery like a ghost, floating above my body.

I see long, rounded red tips. Bright red petals born as they shoot from slender stems.

They are part of me. Crimson nails that decorate the end of each of my fingers. They serve as ten exclamation points. I’m woman! Don’t you see my long, red fingernails?

I stretch out one arm, splay my fingers and admire my painted nails from a distance as if they belong to some other woman. Perhaps a movie actress on the big screen or a businesswoman taking the early morning commuter train into the city.

This is my new routine, the new me. Painted nails and painted lips. War paint. My nail polish is red, the color of blood. My lipstick is red, the color of fire.

I don’t remember when I first started painting my fingernails, the scarlet paint marking my transition from tomboy to woman.

Sometime after college when I’m well into my twenties, the red nails mysteriously appear as if seeds for them had been planted the season before.

It isn’t a conscious decision. It’s my evolution. A special kind of camouflage designed to help me blend in. A mark that indicates I’m part of the tribe.

“You could be a hand model,” my friends say.

My head grows big as I imagine my hands on television commercials. These same hands that used to catch footballs and climb trees and throw a split-finger fastball that dropped like a bag of rocks when it reached home plate. In one pretend TV spot, the pointer finger of one of my hands moves in small, practiced circles as it rubs a special cream on the other. In another, my fingertips form a makeshift perch in which sits a shiny red apple.

“Do you really think so?” I ask in a quiet voice as I thrust out my hands, palms down, nails out.

My friends also point out my clavicles, which look sharp and slick as blades underneath my skin in this slimmer body of mine.

I have gone from thick to thin.

With long, bleach-blond hair and long, red fingernails.

Red lips to match.

Black dress, black heels, black thigh-high nylons.

It is my power suit. My power look.

I could be one of the girls in those Robert Palmer videos.

I'm learning how to get what I want.

With a tilt of my head. One raised eyebrow. A hand placed strategically on my hip.

I caught glimpses of this me before in between skinned knees and softball trophies and Hardy Boys books and shoeboxes filled with baseball cards. It is thrilling like catching a flash of something silver in a stream and plunging a hand in the cold water in pursuit.

WHEN I AM in my teens, my family takes a summer vacation in Cape Cod, Massachusetts, with friends. My white shirt makes my tan skin look darker than it is. I paint my lips with roll-on lip gloss that smells and tastes like fake strawberries. I place one pink dot of blush on each cheek like I am a real live Barbie doll. When I look in the mirror, I see someone else.

My friend and I walk to a store where we buy little fruit candies shaped like teddy bears. This is the first time we have seen gummy bears, and we stand on a street corner holding a white paper bag and offering pieces of candy to boys who pass by.

"Do you want candy?" we ask.

"Free candy!" we yell.

We have been warned not to take candy from strangers, so surely this is allowed.

It is a game. A lesson in give and take. We are learning how to get boys to want what we have.

We are innocent with our sugary lips and candy and freshly shampooed hair gold from the sun, but we aren't. Even then, we can feel the power, this tidal wave like a big sugar rush that hits us and makes us believe we can do anything in the world.

An older boy stops and asks us where we were from.

He is the only one to take a piece of candy.

In the end, it is just me and my friend talking to strangers. Still, it is something we have been told not to do.

A FEW YEARS later, I wear the same summer brown skin as I walk with friends on the boardwalk. The basketball game barker tries to get us to toss little orange basketballs into a too-small net that sits too far away. He is a Latino boy in a wife beater and basketball shorts with a smear of fuzz over his lip. He is so skinny he looks like he is wearing his daddy's clothes.

"Da-mn," he says, giving the word an extra syllable for emphasis.

He clucks at me.

"Chica. For you? I'll let you walk all the way up to the net and drop it in."

He palms an orange ball in one hand and pretends to sink it in one of the hoops.

I put my hand up to my mouth to suppress a giggle. Five red fingernails telling him to stop and go.

THERE ARE OTHER times, too. Then the red nails and red lipstick are there all the time. No longer a surprise or shock.

Until that day when I'm sitting in his car.

Black dress inched up on one side.
Lace circling my thigh like Saturn's rings.

Hot breath.

His and mine.

We go inside.

He pushes me against a wall.

I look down at black nylon and lace.

Slip my small hand under his.

Run my hands down her long legs.

Feel the silky smoothness under my fingertips decked out in their red crowns.

In that moment, I realize I have become what I have desired.

After that night, the red nails dry up and fall off like old figs from a tree. They never come back.

I return to my tomboy life. My hair gets shorter and shorter, and I put on the weight I have lost. I gather up everything I have shed, collecting it in my arms, holding it close to my chest. It is like living my life in reverse. When I get to the end, I am who I was meant to be in the first place.

That fall, I start dating women with long, red fingernails and painted red lips.

A Message From God

“Some people don’t understand that it is the nature of the eye to have seen forever, and the nature of the mind to recall anything that was ever known.”

~Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*

IT’S GOD WHO tells me.

I don’t actually hear his voice. Not even a wind-like whisper that wraps itself around the curves of a cumulus cloud.

It’s more like a telegraph that tap, tap, tap, taps over an invisible wire straight to my brain.

**YOU ARE A LESBIAN. STOP.
GOD. STOP.**

I receive God’s message as I’m sitting on the floor, legs crossed, back straight, in the bedroom I share with my husband. This is not a common position for me. I feel most comfortable standing—legs spread to shoulders width, knees slightly bent—as if I’m preparing to field a ground ball.

I have sought out solid ground these past few weeks, flopping to the floor as if it were a giant fainting couch and I’m a Victorian woman riding the waves of a particularly painful bout of fever or plague.

It’s a running joke between me and my friend Kathy. Consumption and fainting chairs and female hysteria, the back of our hands plastered to our foreheads to illustrate the depth of our despair. We develop southern accents on the spot and call for iced tea in tall glasses with lemon wedges and mint leaves that we swear to *G-O-D* spell out SOS in a green swirl when stirred in a counter-clockwise direction with a long silver spoon.

Antiquated diseases seem so dramatic and romantic, perhaps because we can’t actually catch them.

For most of my life, I have struggled with depression, which seems far less serious and sexy. I am diagnosed with major depression at age twenty-five, a few weeks after walking down a church aisle with my father but exiting with a husband hooked to my arm. My psychiatrist looks and acts like Lilith from the TV show *Frasier*, and she writes me prescriptions for Prozac as long as I answer her questions correctly. I rely on the once-a-day pills to keep me afloat for the better part of a decade, taking breaks from time to time and trying other antidepressants but always returning to the magic, mood-lifting potion hidden inside the green-and-white capsules.

When my depression is dulled by pills, I forget how debilitating the disease can be. That’s the thing about depression. It’s wispy, fine, feathery, flyaway, the fizz from a soda pop can. It’s

smoke and mist and spider webs that can't be contained in a single cupped hand or pulled from the sky like a star on a string. It's a thousand layers of nothing that weigh more than a pile of bricks. It's a quilt stitched from squares of fog and fuzz and shadow and jet black crow feathers that presses down on me like a lead apron.

It's the white spray that kicks up far from the roar of Niagara Falls. At first, the delicate mist dampens my hair and the shiny drops of water dance on my eyelashes, making the world look like a green-blue magic marker sentence blurred by a wet finger. Finite sadness can be endured like a cold shower or a blast from a garden hose. But the falling waters birth new mist over and over again, releasing billions of wet particles into the atmosphere. The droplets seep into my skin and fill me with their weight as if I'm a hollow pumpkin that has been left out in the rain.

When the mist starts up again, I rely on the floor to stop me from falling into that scooped out place in the earth. In a bright white moment of hope, I had decided I no longer needed Prozac. Now that the disease is starting to slide down my head like pierced egg yolk, I don't have the energy to take the necessary steps to obtain a new prescription. Instead, I decide to craft my own cure.

Sitting on the floor, I start with breathing exercises I memorize from a book by health and wellness guru Andrew Weil. With his bushy white beard and ruddy complexion, Weil reminds me of Santa Claus, so I find him trustworthy. At first, a minute of controlled breathing seems to take hours, as if there's a mile between a single clock tick and tock. I keep sneaking looks at my watch with one squinty eye like I'm cheating on a test. I wonder how I have managed to breathe without thinking for more than three decades. After a week or so of practice, time shrinks, and twenty minutes becomes five.

Next, I pray. My family never went to church, and we don't practice any religion. My parents' philosophy was that my brother and I didn't need church if they raised us to be good human beings. Sometimes if I slept over at a girlfriend's house on a Saturday night, I would be required to accompany her and her family to Sunday morning mass. My friends are all good Catholics, and church isn't optional. Apparently, their parents weren't as sure of their parenting skills as mine were. As a heathen visitor, I never knew when to sit, stand or kneel when I was attending mass. I would copy what my friends did, but I was always a few seconds behind. It felt like playing Simon Says without a Simon.

I only know a few prayers. A friend is in Alcoholics Anonymous, and I've been to meetings with her, so I know the Serenity Prayer. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference."

If it's good enough for the alcoholics, it's good enough for me. Normally, this is not a good life strategy, but I don't have a lot of options.

I follow up the Serenity Prayer with the Lord's Prayer. I know the words by heart—not from my church visits but because they are included in "Controversy," a song by Prince from the album of the same name. I only get confused at the very end when the prayer fades out and Prince starts shrieking, but other than that I'm good to go.

I make up the next portion of my prayer session as if I'm a witch crafting a magic spell.

"God, help me become the woman you intended me to be."

I repeat this phrase fast and slow and fast again, accenting different words for emphasis, trying to hit the right notes to unlock the door that leads to God. This must be why people chant—the repetition and increased volume of words makes it more likely that God will hear a prayer or plea.

I had tried to let God in before, dropping to the floor on my knees, lacing my fingers tightly together and allowing tears to stream down my face as proof of my desperation and earnestness. I was never successful, because I couldn't let go of this world, always keeping at least a single strand of plush carpet clutched between my toes.

I repeat my meditation and prayer practice every morning, hoping it will alleviate the depression that sits on top of me.

—Breathing work.

—Serenity Prayer.

—Lord's Prayer.

—God, help me become the woman you intended me to be.

The morning I receive God's message, it comes in bold, capital letters. There's no room for confusion, nothing left to interpret.

The knowledge fills me with a deep sense of peace, and a big, wide smile erupts on my face as if I'm finally in on a long-running inside joke.

I let the words dance on my tongue like cherry Pop Rocks, keeping my mouth closed as long as I can until I can't hold them in any longer. "I'm a lesbian. I'm a lesbian. I'm a lesbian." I say the words out loud.

God isn't telling me anything I don't already know. I have known the truth forever. But then doesn't everyone know everything? He is merely pointing out the obvious.

My friends have tried to do the same in the past. "Are you sure you're not a lesbian?" one of them asks when I show up for the homecoming game wearing men's black Levi's, men's black Nikes and a silk athletic jacket emblazoned with the name of our university.

It's embarrassing coming from them, because what the hell do they know anyway. Besides, who do they think they are? God?

Former Phillies manager Charlie Manuel nicknamed his power-hitting first baseman Ryan Howard "The Big Piece," because the team's offense did not work unless Howard was in the lineup and hitting for average.

This is my Big Piece. I know it immediately.

It sounds trite—the missing piece to the puzzle—but with this new piece of information, I can finally see the whole picture.

My life flashes in front of me in another cliché moment, and for the first time it makes sense. I have always thought a reel of past life events would move by so quickly the individual frames would be blurred and unfocused, a VCR movie viewed with a thumb pressed down on the fast forward button. Instead, I can see things in precise, stop-motion detail: my fierce female friendships, my penchant for boys' clothes, the fact I don't carry a purse and can throw a baseball farther and faster than most of the men on my co-ed softball team.

Later that night, I talk to Kathy and tell her things are good, that I've been working on myself, that I will have a big announcement in the near future. I'm weak when it comes to my girlfriends, and after some prodding, I agree to tell her what's going on.

"I'm a lesbian," I say. For the first time, I'm relaying God's words to another human being. It's whisper down the lane of the highest order.

Her reaction will match that of my other friends; "of course you are" and "that makes sense" instead of "I'm shocked" or "really, are you sure?"

We hang up, promising to keep in touch. The phone rings five minutes later, and it's Kathy again.

“Were you ever attracted to me?” she asks. Because that’s what every straight girl wants to know after her best friend comes out.

I wasn’t, and I’m not.

“Not that you’re not attractive,” I say.

Still, my announcement changes everything, even though it changes nothing at all.

Leaving Normal

“Nothing is so painful to the human mind
as a great and sudden change.”
~Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

I FEEL LIKE fucking Goldilocks, moving from one bench to the next, looking for the right one. It's not whether they're too hard or too soft, too short or too tall but whether they provide the right view of the forest green door that leads inside the small white building across the street.

I had gotten into town early to stake things out. To look like I belong, like I had been here all along.

I settle on a bench with a decent view of the green door. It's not the one with the best or most direct view, but it's a good view. For at least a few more minutes, I don't want to look like I belong anywhere but sitting here. I swing my arm out and casually extend it along the top of the bench like I'm on a date with an invisible girl.

The green door isn't a rectangle. It's shaped like an iron or the bottom of a row boat, straight at the bottom but curved to a point at the top. In any other circumstance, I would find it charming.

From my seat on the bench, I can spot them—every one of them—before they turn down the side street, open the green door and disappear inside. It's the shoes or the walk or the haircut and something else, too. Something that doesn't have a name, that can't be described. Something shiny-silver like mercury that slides and glides underneath a pointed finger.

This must be gaydar. Pretty cool. Probably makes me an advanced lesbian.

This thought is scary and exciting like an amusement park ride. I wonder when my life started needing a warning sign. Caution: Not for those with heart conditions, back or neck ailments or expectant mothers. I start to panic; it feels like pinpricks in the back of my throat. I hold onto the solid wood of the heavy bench.

I wait until ten minutes of 6:00 and make the long-short walk to the green door, counting my steps as I go—one, two, three, four, five, six...

Dead man walking.

That's what I hear in my head.

Dead. Man. Walking.

I laugh out loud. It's a short *ha* that rings out like the backfire of a car in the stillness of the evening. It gobbles up any sobs that might have thought about making a break for daylight.

The green door squeaks when I pull it open, and the women waiting inside turn their heads and look at me. They sit quietly with straight faces in straight back chairs as if they are waiting to view a dead body.

A young woman enters the room and hands us each a sheet of paper.

Later, we will all say we thought she was the therapist's assistant because she was so pretty with her blonde hair and white teeth, her black dress slacks and red acrylic sweater.

She is like Marilyn from *The Munsters*, the normal-looking person in a room filled with Frankenstein monsters and Draculas. Of course, we aren't really monsters and don't look like them at all, but that's how we feel inside. Ugly, awkward, evil. It's as if we have a sickness growing and spreading underneath our pink skin, deep in our throats behind the white flash of our smiles.

When we go out for coffee or drinks after each session, we always tell the same story—Remember when we thought Corrine was the therapist's assistant?—so the experience seems more like a favorite movie committed to memory than real life.

The therapist comes out and welcomes us. As we had expected, she has short, spiky hair and wears expensive-looking sturdy shoes. She escorts us into her tiny office, which is bright and hopeful like a vase of daisies in mid-February.

There is no dead body inside, but we are all mourning something.

We huddle close together on chairs and couches arranged in a circle. If we had all leaned forward at the same time, our heads would have clunked together and made a sound like falling coconuts. We would have laughed an uncomfortable laugh but would have been glad for the diversion.

We go around the room and introduce ourselves and tell why we are here. When I speak, my face turns bright red as if I have been standing outside in the cold for too long.

We all struggle to say the word *Lesbian*. It's the short leg on the capital L that we keep tripping over.

The title of the eight-week workshop is "Married to a Man and in Love With a Woman." It sounds like a country song, if country singers sang about things like lesbians or homosexuality.

It's a direct title with no room for any sort of misunderstanding. We are learning that being straightforward is best.

It proves to be effective in this situation because no one gets up to leave, exclaiming, "Oh! I thought this was for married women with *platonic* girlfriends. How embarrassing!" Or, "I thought this was for married gals who adore Martha Stewart. That Martha. She can do anything!"

If I were running the group, I probably would have tried to come up with a punchier title.

Possible workshop titles:

—No One Knows I'm a Lesbian

—Married to a Man, What the Fuck Was I Thinking?

—This Explains the Overabundance of Flannel Shirts and Comfortable Shoes in My Closet

—Men, Ick; Women, Super Fine

—Womyn Rule, Myn Drool (for old-school lesbians)

About half of us are actually married to a man and in love with a woman. The other half—I am in this subgroup—are married to a man but looking to fall in love with a woman.

I am married to a man, but the marriage never really took off. It is the New Coke of relationships. Flat and not quite sweet enough for my taste.

I am the only one in the group who hasn't had a relationship with a woman. Hasn't fallen in love with my co-worker or my best friend, the girl at the gym or the woman who lives three doors down the street. Hasn't kissed a woman or caressed one. There are women who come to me in my dreams. They speak in soft whispers and beckon me with waving fingers, but when I go to reach for them, they disappear like smoke tendrils in the open air.

We go to these group sessions every Wednesday night for eight weeks. At first, we think we are going to learn how to be lesbians, but we soon find out we already know everything there is to know. It is more about learning how to forgive ourselves for something we can't change, even though we have all tried to be someone else for long stretches of time.

By the end of the eight weeks, none of us opt to stay with our husbands. We arm ourselves with quotes:

“To thine own self be true.”

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.”

“It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for something you are not.”

Switching teams. That's what people call it.

In reality, it's nothing like trading in a green jersey for a yellow one or getting used to a new first baseman's reach or adapting to the way a shortstop pivots and turns and tosses a ball to second for a double play.

We are leaving normal.

We are trading in our heterosexual privilege.

We aren't only giving up what we know but choosing what we don't. We feel like pioneers, even though millions of others have come before us. The truth is we aren't special or unique. We just think we are the only people in the world who feel the way we do.

Dagger

“If you want to really hurt your parents, and you don’t have the nerve to be gay, the least you can do is go into the arts.”

~Kurt Vonnegut, *A Man Without a Country*

BEFORE I COME out to my parents, I carefully select the words I will use.

I know I will hurt them with whichever ones I choose.

I practice different versions of the statement I will make. I say the words out loud, changing the emphasis from one syllable to another.

“I am gay.”

“I’m a *lesbian*.”

“Funny story. Turns out I’m *gay*.”

It’s like selecting a sword, so I pick the shortest one I can find.

I discard the word *lesbian* because I don’t like the way it feels in my mouth, and I know it will cut them with its razor-like edges.

I wrap my hand around a dagger and stab them with the short, sharp blade.

“I’m gay,” I say as if it is one word. I say it as if there is no space between me and the thing I have become. As if the new part of me leans so close I can feel the heat of its breath on my neck, the coolness of its shadow on my face.

I say everything there is to say in two syllables.

I don’t have the stomach for a long silver sword of words.

A FEW MONTHS later, New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevy will come out in a televised press conference.

“I’m a gay American,” he will say.

I will think he is brave standing there in his red and blue striped power tie. Not because he is coming out in front of millions on TV, but because he did it in eight syllables.

Butch

THE FIRST TIME I'm called a butch, I'm slumped on a folding chair at a group therapy session, hand in pocket, legs spread, knees out as if they are traveling in opposite directions.

For the most part, I'm relaxed, but a small part of me is on guard waiting for my mother to tell me to sit like a lady.

I'm wearing jeans, a Western-style flannel shirt with pointy pockets and silver snaps down the front and a pair of brown Dr. Martens boots.

One woman is attending her last therapy session, and she is thanking the therapist and commenting on the diversity in the room:

“...young women and older women...
some single, some partnered...
late bloomers...
women who are still in the closet...
out...
bisexual...
wives...
mothers...
and even a butch,” she says.

I find this exciting. A real live butch lesbian in this room! I follow the woman's eyes and look over my shoulder to see who she's talking about. I realize she's talking about me. It's a gag right out of a bad sit-com, and I chuckle to myself. I sit up and puff out my chest, a peacock in a room full of peahens.

WHEN I VISIT my girlfriend later that night and we are alone in her bedroom, I tell her about being called a butch. I can't explain how I feel inside or why this is a milestone in my life.

Instead, I unbutton my flannel shirt with one swift tug of fabric. When the metal snaps pop open they sound like the *plink* from a tab on a soda pop can. As my breasts fall to the side, I place her hand in the center of my chest. This spot is the middle of everything and the middle of nothing. It is Main Street in small town U.S.A.

The palm of her hand feels like a paperweight sitting on my breastbone. I'm grateful for the weight. As her hand presses on that secret site, there is no give, no surrender, no forgiving curves or tender flesh. I'm reminded that this is how we all start out—a pile of bones on an assembly line. Everything else, true and untrue, comes after.

With her hand there in that solid spot, I know I exist. I'm not defined by the falseness of my curves, the fickleness of my sex. It is the only part of me that feels real, permanent.

I wonder if my lover can feel with her fingertips the very edge of my heartbeat, that last concentric circle, the faintest of them all, rippling out from its source. I wonder if she can hear the whispered secrets that ride on those wavy ripples like tiny surfers or if she is too far out to hear anything at all.

I wonder if she is content with her hand resting there on the sharp sliver of safe space that runs up and down my breastbone. And if so, for how long?

First Time

“Girls will be boys and boys will be girls
It’s a mixed up muddled up shook up world...”
~The Kinks, “Lola”

THE FIRST TIME I’m mistaken for a man, I’m forty years old.

I’m wearing a pair of tan cargo shorts, a random T-shirt and a black nylon harness as I ride a zip line down the side of a ski run.

To put on the harness, I had to step into two circles on the ground and pull them up to my thighs. It’s like putting on a mostly invisible costume.

“Ready to zip!” we yell out into the trees like Tarzan before leaving the tall wooden platforms that line our route.

“Zip away!” the course guide shouts.

We hop from platform to platform playing a pretend game of leapfrog in the sky.

There are eight women on this excursion. We are all part of a therapy group in which we are supposed to be learning how to navigate the world as just-out lesbians. Apparently, there is something about climbing rope ladders and gliding high in the air held only by a thick piece of string that will prepare us for living as gay women in the real world.

Maybe we will have to scale tall fences to dodge an angry mob of stone-throwing Christians. Maybe we will have to force our way through a frenzied mob of panty-tossing lesbians at a Melissa Etheridge concert.

I don’t remember the specifics of that autumn day. I want to say the fall leaves blazed red, orange and yellow like flames on the side of a Hot Wheels car and the soft blue-white sky reminded me of the crayon color Cornflower. Or that flying in the sky like that felt like sprinting on a carpet of air.

What I remember is this:

As I land on a platform, one of the women in my group starts talking to me.

“When I looked back, I wondered who the guy was,” she says.

She throws her thumb in the air like a hitchhiker.

I look behind her to see what she’s talking about.

“At first, I thought it was someone from another group. Then I realized it was you.”

“Don’t say that,” another group member says.

She shakes her head back and forth as if she’s reprimanding a small child.

“You’ll embarrass her.”

“I’m not embarrassing her. She wouldn’t dress like *that* if she didn’t want to be seen as a man.”

That.

The hard *t* at the end sounds like the snap of a crocodile’s jaw.

The soundtrack to my life plays:

You're not going to wear *that*?
Why do you have to be like *that*?
What was *that*?

That. That. That.

Idiot. Deviant. Faggot.

Whoever said words can't hurt lied.

It's that final *t*—a tiny dagger disguised as a letter—that pierces my skin and draws blood.

I feel like a rape victim being blamed for the previous night's events. Like I had been asking for it all along with my cargo shorts and short haircut.

The hurt turns to embarrassment at being different, at not really being one of the girls, at being an imposter in this group, in my own body.

I just nod and smile, hoping the flush on my face will be mistaken for a rush of adrenaline from ziplining.

YEARS AFTER THE ziplining excursion, I think of the scene from the movie *Vacation* where Clark Griswald played by Chevy Chase is having a conversation with his son Rusty after driving the family station wagon off a closed road.

Rusty: "Gee, Dad, you must have dropped this thing off fifty yards."

Clark: "That's nothing to be proud about, Rusty."

(Climbs on top of the car to assess the situation.)

Clark: "Fifty yards." (said proudly to himself)

I had launched myself into the air, too. All of me suspended by a rope and available for inspection.

Mistaken for a guy from fifty yards, I say proudly to myself.

Fifty yards.

Scrimshaw

“It is not down in any map; true places never are.”

~Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

I SEE YOU looking at me with your mouth wide open and your eyes scrunched up like you’ve just swallowed a pint of sour milk.

A few years ago, I would have turned around to see what it was you were looking at with such disdain. I would have expected to see an old woman with the face of a crow or maybe a middle-aged man wearing stripes and plaid, the contrary patterns battling each other for supremacy.

Today, when I’m getting ready to leave the big box store with my cart overflowing with Kotex and Kleenex and Kraft macaroni and cheese, I know I’m the object of your stare, your glare, your visual inspection and split-second condemnation. I see you taking me in: the short hair, the oversized glasses, the lumps built into my chest and the squared-off sideburns that I wish were longer, darker and thicker like those of a Civil War general.

I don’t even turn my head a fraction of an inch to glance over my shoulder. I’ve already wasted decades looking back and around, past and through. These days, I’m focused on looking straight ahead.

My eyes meet yours for a second, maybe two. You turn your head but look back again. And again. And again. Apparently, you don’t have the stomach for things that make you question everything you know (or thought you did) from nursery rhymes about snails and puppy dog tails to your high school textbook with the shiny red cover that confidently states “Human Sexuality” in big block letters.

You’re just a child, even though you look grown up with your long blonde hair, pink painted nails and upturned nose that seems to be floating in the air. Someday soon, you will start looking down at the ground or far away into the distance so no one knows exactly what it is you’re looking at. You will learn not only to disguise your gaze but your thoughts and feelings, too.

Your mother would tell you it’s rude to stare, that she didn’t raise you that way, but I don’t mind. I know you are trying to figure it out, figure me out. I’m a contradiction—soft and hard, rough and smooth—and you are working to solve the riddle printed on my spine as if it were a giant wooden Popsicle stick.

I used to stand in your shoes when I looked into the mirror, so I know what the view is like from over there. But here’s the thing, we don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are. In my mind’s eye, my frame is more sinewy and my chest is flat. I stand straight and tall and walk with the swagger of a rock star. These are not lies I tell myself, but how I give life to those parts of me that pulse electric blue beneath the surface of my skin.

I know I stand out like a red kite in an azure sky. Whether I’m seen as male or female, boy or girl, there is always something people can’t quite put their finger on. If I listen real hard, I can hear the wheels in their heads whirring like tiny fans mounted behind the whites of their eyes. If I think too hard, I get lost in that middle place, that center space between male/female, boy/ girl.

If I'm not careful, I slide too far down the slash separating those absolutes and get wedged into that tight space where everything begins and ends.

I wonder what it is you see in me. Maybe you see a part of yourself and that's why you wrinkle up your face like a used paper bag. Perhaps you are sending a message to that spot deep inside you, the place in your chest that holds the rolled-up plans and diagrams that show who you will grow up to be.

Here's what I know: You can't rewrite what has been written. It has been carved into your bone like scrimshaw. But you can admire the delicate lines and the intricate design and pay homage to an ancient mariner with a steady hand who etched mermaids— backs arched, tails curved, hair flowing behind like gold ribbon— on a single side of a whale's tooth.

I would point out the obvious, the couplets of fine and beautiful mixed with coarse and brutish (a whale's tooth for crying out loud), but your eye is already drawn to such juxtapositions like a bright red stop sign.

All and None

“What they call you is one thing.
What you answer to is something else.”
~Lucille Clifton

“HOW ARE YOU doing today, sir?”

It is too neat and easy to say it hung between us suspended by strings.

Sir.

Or that we took turns striking it with long wooden sticks as if it were a piñata.

Instead, it's as if the white-haired man had inflated a giant red rubber raft inside the drive-thru of the fast-food place. The tiny word grows so large it pokes through the open drive-thru window and seeps into the main restaurant, threatening to swallow everyone whole.

As soon as he says it, he wants to take it back. I can tell by the way his face falls just a little bit. His features drop down—eyebrows, eyes, nose, mouth—as if they have been drawn in pencil, erased and sketched in again.

Maybe he sees the softness in my blue-green eyes or the lumps in my chest.

I lower my voice and try to change into the person he thought I was.

“Good,” I say.

We stare into the gap between my car door and the takeout window that juts out from the restaurant like a window high up on a castle tower.

I'm not a sir.

I'm not a ma'am.

I'm not a miss.

I'm all and none.

The way white is comprised of every color, even though it's not any color at all.

The man hands me my food from his perch.

The paper bag crinkles, and I'm grateful for the noise.

I drive away and watch in my rear view mirror as he pulls his empty hand back inside the building.

Superheroes

“I am, I am, I am Superman
And I know what’s happening.
I am, I am, I am Superman
And I can do anything.”
~ R.E.M., “Superman”

THE BOY GLOWS as if he has swallowed a jar of lightning bugs or a fistful of sparklers.
At first, I think it’s the light bouncing off the stainless steel counters of the ice cream parlor.
Upon closer inspection, I see it’s him.

He looks to be about eight or nine, stocky like a short stack of 2x2 Lego bricks, with freshly scrubbed pink cheeks and white-blond hair.

The word *ethereal* gets stuck in my head, and I can feel it melt on my tongue slow and sweet like strands of strawberry cotton candy.

The boy is with an old woman, who I assume is his grandmother. There appears to be an invisible string linking them together that rests slack at most times but tightens when she asks him what flavor of ice cream he wants or taps him on the shoulder when it’s time to go.

After I purchase a half gallon of cherry vanilla, I follow them out of the store and wait as they make their way through the front doors.

She looks over her shoulder and sees she’s holding me up.

“Sorry,” she says.

“Not a problem,” I say.

“I didn’t see him,” she says to the boy.

“Her,” he says.

He’s like a mini superhero with the ability to see things as they are.

“Oh, whatever,” she says. She doesn’t give me a second glance.

Whatever, I repeat in my head.

Whatever.

Whatever.

Whatever.

Out in the parking lot, her gray hair sparkles in the sunlight like slivers of tinsel.

I think she’s a superhero, too.

The Invisible Woman

“MAMA, THERE’S A man in here.”

The high-pitched voice pierces the metal door of the bathroom stall in the women’s restroom where I’m holed up like Superman in his Fortress of Solitude.

If I turn my head the right way, I can see through the long vertical slit in the door. It’s my own version of X-ray vision.

“Mama, there’s a man in here.”

She is three years old, maybe four, with a head of blonde curls and perfect enunciation.

Just my luck. Eliza Fucking Doolittle.

“Mama, there’s a man in here.”

Her voice is tiny as if it has been squashed by a stack of reference books, but it grows in size like a sponge in water as it echoes off the hard tiled walls and floor in the enclosed space.

I feel like a Peeping Tom as I watch the other women washing their hands at the long shiny sink and staring at the mirror as they style their hair with their fingers and reapply their red lipstick.

It’s like I’m watching a movie. A movie that I snuck in past the ticket taker to see.

In a way I belong here, but in a way not.

pah-pah. pah-pah.

That’s the sound their freshly painted lips make when they blot them together.

pah-pah. pah-pah.

It makes me think of muffled gunfire.

pah-pah. pah-pah.

The women don’t seem to hear the little girl’s voice over the running water and the random blast from the electric hand dryer.

“Mama, there’s a man in here.”

She’s laying on a changing table that flips down from the wall of the women’s restroom. She’s wiggling around on the padded changing table and kicking like a cricket as her mother tries to change her diaper.

I have declared her my arch enemy.

Of course, it was never a fair fight.

She had the advantage all along.

Dressed in pink from head to toe and fed on rhymes about snips and snails and puppy dog tails and Little Boy Blue who lost his shoe.

“Mama, there’s a man in here.”

“Of course there’s not,” the mother finally replies.

In a sing-song voice, she denies the little girl’s reports of a man sighting in the women’s room.

To pass the time, I sit in the stall and think of appropriate retorts.

Aren’t you too old for diapers?

Shouldn't you be wearing big girl underwear?

She must have telepathically intercepted my thoughts because she amps up her attack.

"Mama, Daddy's in here."

The mother seems to be as shocked as I am.

"No, he's not."

Really?

I'm not your daddy, little girl.

"Mama, Daddy's in here."

I sit in the stall waiting for the mother to finish diapering her daughter. The outraged comments I had outrun as I entered the restroom and fast walked into the first stall that I saw play in my head.

Hey! This is the ladies room!

Pervert!

Can't you read!

You don't belong here!

Get out!

I use all of my superpowers to quiet the voices. I use all of my superpowers to pretend I'm invisible.

I wait until the little girl is diapered and leaves the ladies' room with her mother. I wait a little longer. And then a little longer after that.

When I finally open the door to the stall, I try to act casual. I walk to the sink and wash my hands. I shake them off and then dry them under the electric hand dryer.

The noise from the machine is loud. It sounds like a radio tuned between stations. It sounds like a revved Ferrari engine.

I can't hear anything over the noise.

I want to stay here in this quiet place, but it is too dangerous.

When the dryer stops, I quickly walk to the door of the restroom and disappear into the lobby like the Invisible Woman.

Shave and a Haircut

SHE IS WEARING a long, black stylist jacket with the name “Kelli” stitched on the pocket. It makes her look official like a judge.

She yells at me as soon as the rubber soles on my Dr. Martens boots land on the worn wooden floorboards and they creak under my weight.

“I don’t cut women’s hair!”

I place one foot in front of the other and slowly walk toward her chair.

Her own hair is a mix of blonde and gray and tan, sculpted and shellacked into points like shark fins that run along the top of her head.

She is cleaning up her station and waving around a pair of small scissors. Think Edward Scissorhands in a bad mood.

“I don’t cut women’s hair!”

“I want my hair cut like a man’s,” I say, thinking this will bridge the gap between male and female and convince her to give me a haircut. I point to my already short hair. “Short, straight in the back, no fringe, leave the sideburns but clean them up?” I ask.

“I don’t cut women’s hair!”

The last stylist I had tried lectured me about the difference between male and female cuts.

“Square sideburns are for men,” she said. “Angled sideburns are for women.” She stabbed the air with her scissors for emphasis.

She was fresh out of beauty school and unwilling to deviate from convention

Too embarrassed to speak up, I left with angled sideburns and a red face.

For years, I have wanted to get my hair cut by a barber. Feel the sting of the neon blue disinfectant in my nostrils as a man in a white shirt, sleeves rolled up mid-bicep, pulls out a black plastic comb from the tall glass cylinder. Feel the vibration of the electric clippers on the side of my head and hear the soft buzz in my ear like a lover’s whisper. Feel the rough-hot sensation of the terrycloth towel on the back of my neck.

Until now, I haven’t had the courage to walk up concrete steps into a waiting room full of men with stubbled faces hidden behind newspaper shields.

The idea of a female barber—a mix of feminine and masculine—appealed to me.

The sign out front reads “Kelli’s Barber Shop,” a red, white and blue striped barber’s pole mounted to the right, lit and spinning like a carousel. The i at the end reminds me of the giggly girls at school who wrote in curvy script with pink and purple pens and drew tiny hearts over their i’s and j’s instead of dots.

The shop had seemed friendly and accessible. Kelli with an i cutting my hair.

Sure, hon, come right in, I imagined her saying like a diner waitress with cat eyeglasses and a smack of pink bubblegum.

Twins

“Let him think that I’m more man than I am and I will be so.”

~Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

ON THE DAY we are to bury my wife’s grandmother, the sun hides behind black clouds. I’m wearing a pair of pinstriped black trousers, a white button-down dress shirt, a black sweater vest and a necktie. The shiny silk tie has pale green and gray squares that remind me of fish scales.

Inside the brightly lit convenience store where we stop for cups of coffee, an old woman steps in front of me as if hired to deliver a message.

“Do you know you have a twin?” she asks.

“No, I didn’t,” I say.

“My grandson looks just like you!”

She is beaming in a way that makes me understand that word for the first time.

I want to pluck it from the air and hold it in my hand. All of it. The word, the way her face shines, how she says “grandson” as if she is saying “famous movie star” or “President of the United States.” I imagine everything would feel light but solid like a lucky coin people carry around in their pockets to remind themselves everything is going to be okay.

I smile back at her.

I’m beaming, too.

Brothers

WE HAVE NEVER met, but I know her.

It isn't her clothes: loose jeans that seem to make her body shrug, like she doesn't care about anything in the world; a backward baseball cap that looks tossed on, even though I'm sure she has stared in the mirror and taken the time to angle it just right.

It isn't her walk: head up, thumbs hooked inside her pockets, hips back, black boots forward, high stepping as if she owns every sidewalk square.

It's the nod. A fifteen-degree downward head tilt that says we are part of the same tribe.

She makes me miss home, even though I'm already there.

I want to call her brother and tell her it's good to see her, too.

I nod back.

She knows.

It's Not You, It's Me

I'M TRYING TO leave the sandwich shop with my paper bag lunch, but an elderly couple is blocking the door. It's raining like crazy, and they are plotting the quickest route to their car.

When the old woman notices me, she nudges her husband with a seersucker-covered elbow.

"Come on, honey, we're holding this—"

I follow her eyes as they move from my jeans to my bulky gray hoodie to my face.

The pause hangs over us like barbells suspended by strands of dental floss.

"—person up."

I can almost hear the ping-pong match between *lady* and *gentleman* playing out in her head.

While she decides what to call me, her mouth forms a perfect o as if she is singing in a choir or just found out her best friend has died.

I imagine these things spilling out from that perfectly round hole:

- A pink rattle.
- A baby doll with a porcelain face.
- Bobby pins.
- A string of pearls gifted at graduation.
- Something old, something new.
- A blue pillbox hat just like one worn by Jackie O.
- A boutonniere comprised of a single white rose and baby's breath.
- Her grandfather's pocket watch swinging from a long gold chain.
- Her grandmother's lace apron.
- Shiny white go-go boots.
- The leather gloves her husband tucked in his back pocket when he left for work.
- A red metal toolbox.
- Cufflinks.
- The Italian loafers, sleek like a greyhound, she buried her father in.
- A yellow blanket crocheted for the first grandchild.
- The small green bottles of aftershave she buys her husband for their anniversary.

I flash my best smile. The one that makes me look like I'm trying too hard. "Don't rush," I tell her. I try to make my voice sound light and airy like whipped cream.

I want to say:

Don't worry.

It happens all the time.

No big deal.

It's not you, it's me.

But they've already opened the door and are trying to dodge the heavy raindrops falling from the sky.

Does Not Compute

AT MY WIFE'S family reunion, we sit inside an old firehouse at long tables covered with vinyl tablecloths that stick to our arms and elbows.

At the end of one of the tables, a woman with a laptop is trying to piece together the family tree using a genealogy program. She seems official like a court stenographer.

This year, we are legally married. This year, my name can go on the tree.

My wife leaves me to sit with the lady with the laptop and give her my information.

She is gone a long time.

"Her software won't let you be a girl," she tells me when she returns.

"Story of my life," I say.

Faggot

TO THE YOUNG man who yelled “faggot” loud and long from his car window as I pumped gas at the local convenience store:

Sir, I’m a bulldyke.

The Middle

“The sharp edge of a razor is difficult to pass over;
thus the wise say the path to Salvation is hard.”

~Katha-Upanishad

IT'S THE SNEAKERS that catch my eye in the almost empty parking lot on that hot summer day. Forty-six years old and I still have an affection for athletic shoes like a sixteen-year-old boy.

Eyes cast down at the black macadam, I'm staring at the familiar steel gray suede and the three bright white parallel stripes.

The fact that they are about three feet away, toes pointed in my direction, confuses me.

How can I be there when I'm here?

I feel like I'm falling, even though the rubber soles of my own gray suede sneakers with the three white stripes are anchoring me to the black asphalt. It's a split-second out-of-body experience.

THIS IS WHAT it's like to live in the middle—the middle of blue and pink, boy and girl, hard and soft, masculine and feminine. It is the middle of nowhere, and there is no one around for miles.

When I was young, I used to scan the horizon—hand cemented in a permanent salute over my eyes—and look for pieces of me in those who appeared in my line of sight. It was a fruitless mission, and in the end, I looked and felt like a lost Cub Scout who had become separated from his pack.

Sometimes, when the wind was blowing just right and I was feeling unusually adventurous, I left the safety of the middle place and traveled either due east or due west, as far as my legs would take me, in search of others like me. In the east, the women all wore silver rings on their fingers and toes and gauzy white skirts that swayed like palm trees every time they moved their hips. To the west, the men dressed in business suits every day of the week with shiny black leather shoes made of alligator that matched the mustaches hunkered down on top of their thin, pale lips. East or west, I never could master the language or understand the customs. I brought back souvenirs but never settled in either of those places.

I ended up claiming land in the tiny patch of earth called the middle and building a house no bigger than a breadbox but so tall it scrapes the bottom of the clouds. It leans to the right when a storm comes through, or sometimes to the left, depending on the time of day and the alignment of the planets. I've gotten used to hunching over and folding myself up like an origami crane when I climb the stairs.

At night, I sit on my front porch and look up at the stars. I remind myself these are the same stars that can be seen in the east and the west. The only difference is they seem to shine brighter

in this middle place I call home. Maybe it's because it's just me and the stars here, and I don't have to point out the constellations to anyone else. Maybe that's the story I tell myself when I'm craning my neck up at the night sky, looking for a sparkle of silver stardust from my hole in the center of the world.

Every now and again from my middle place, I catch a glimpse of something that appears to connect me to the rest of the world. It is a common thread that weaves a make-believe story of brotherhood. I think of this invisible string as a lifeline—not because it promises to pull me to safety but because at the other end beats the pulse of the motherland.

In my head, I know the connective link is made of quicksilver. The middle, after all, is made up of illusions and deceits, magic tricks and sleights of hand. But that doesn't mean I don't hold out my silver ladle, ready to dip into the cool, blue Kool-Aid every single time.

TODAY IN THE parking lot, it's the gray suede sneakers that are teasing and tempting me and calling out my name.

I feel like I'm looking into a mirror, my own gray sneakers being projected back at me from another pair of feet.

To see something of mine cast back from someone else is comforting and exhilarating all at the same time, even if the reflection is soft and fuzzy because it comes from gray suede.

I slowly move my eyes upward. I spy short white athletic socks just like the ones I'm wearing inside my gray suede shoes. I get greedy and raise my gaze.

In an instant, the imaginary mirror breaks into a million pieces. I hold my breath and stand still in the midst of the invisible chaos. In my mind, I see random parts of myself reflected back in the nonexistent pieces of broken mirror I imagine at my feet. An eye, a thigh, an elbow, an ear. It's a Picasso painting and I'm the model, my naked body raised five feet in the air, presenting itself for inspection.

It's the coarse, dark hair that shatters the illusion of sameness.

At first, I don't know what it is. It is so dark and thick. The hair falls straight down in long black strands on his legs like streaking rain drops in a thunderstorm in the middle of the night.

No matter how hard I try, eyes closed tight and fists clenched, I will never be able to will my hair to grow like that. My hair is soft and fine, a light brown that almost disappears in the summer months.

There is no one around but him and me, but I'm still embarrassed for thinking, maybe even believing, I'm someone that I'm not.

With the illusion revealed, I get reckless and raise my head into the afternoon sunlight and take in the figure that stands in front of me. Besides the sneakers and socks, we have a few other things in common: cargo shorts that fall to our knees and plain-colored T-shirts. It is a fake bond forged in cotton, suede and rubber and nothing else.

The body I'm staring at is comprised of tall, straight lines capped off by dark, bristly hair that grows like wildfire on cheeks and chin and nape of neck.

I'm suddenly, shamefully, shockingly aware of my breasts, my hips, my curves. My soft, smooth skin.

I think about eradicating my curves with a small handsaw, cutting off the roundness from both sides until I'm straight and even like a perfect haircut. I imagine the long silver beams from

my brother's Erector Set screwed tight to my sides so I'm long and tall and erect, a solid, straight-line robot-soldier.

I don't know what to do about my hair.

In the end, I will do what I always do. I will slouch and hunch and pull my shoulders in toward each other, crossing my arms to form a shield of bone and skin to hide my breasts.

I will buy cargo shorts and V-neck tees in colors like navy blue and jet black that cover up my false parts. I will wear my cotton armor to mask the softness that seems a betrayal of who I am, a contradiction of that which lives inside me. I hide the parts and pieces that say woman and nothing else like I would a *Playboy* magazine, the shiny pages of forbidden fruit shoved under my mattress.

Every day, I will put on this shroud to conceal my insecurities, my hurts, my wounds, the pulsing part at my core that sounds out *I'm different* with each beat.

I will feel strong and powerful, hidden in plain view, my soft parts protected like a tortoise's pink belly. I will feel vulnerable, my secrets shielded only by a single layer of cotton. I will weave in between both of these day-night worlds like a carhop on roller skates in a busy parking lot.

On most days, I will wear steel gray suede sneakers and pretend to be someone I'm not, even in the bright afternoon sunlight.

But on good days, perfect days, I will ride the razor-sharp edge of boy-girl and take it all the way to shore.

About the Author

Rae Theodore lives in Royersford, Pennsylvania, with her wife, three children and three cats. By day, she works as a staff writer for one of the world's largest communications firms. At night, she writes about gender and living in that middle place where boy and girl collide.

Rae believes in the power of story—the stories we tell ourselves and those we share with others. Through workshops and speaking engagements, she teaches participants how to use story as a tool to create positive change, (change your story, change your life), and to realize that people are more alike than different despite actual and perceived differences. She is a member of the Greater Philadelphia Chapter of the Women's National Book Association and hosts WNBA-sponsored Story Jams several times a year. An earlier version of *Leaving Normal: Adventures in Gender* debuted in June 2015 and was shortlisted by the Golden Crown Literary Society for its annual award for creative nonfiction.

You can read about Rae's adventures in gender nonconformity on The Flannel Files at middleagebutch.wordpress.com. She has been recognized by the blogging site for a story she wrote about a soggy fish sandwich and another about a mystical message from a plumber. Currently, she is working on a book of essays tentatively titled *Love Is Like Tiny Hamburgers* about that thing that makes our palms sweat and our hearts race like a Ferrari engine. Plus three or four other projects, but who's counting.

**Be sure to check out our other imprints,
Mystic Books, Quest Books, Silver Dragon Books,
Troubadour Books, Young Adult Books, and Blue Beacon Books.**

Available From these e-tailers:

[Amazon](#)

[Bella Books](#)

[Kobo](#)

[Barnes and Noble](#)

VISIT US ONLINE AT

www.regalcrest.biz

At the Regal Crest Website You'll Find

- The latest news about forthcoming titles and new releases
- Our complete backlist of romance, mystery, thriller and adventure titles
- Information about your favorite authors
- Current bestsellers
- Media tearsheets to print and take with you when you shop
- Which books are also available as eBooks.

Regal Crest titles are available directly from Bella Distribution and Ingram.