Like Everything Does a memoir

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Like Everything Does

*a memoir*

*Claire Munson*
In loving memory of my mother, Carol
~and for you dear Caleb~
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Some Thoughts:
I was asked once, in a class, why I write. As each person took turns, I frantically tried to think of some reason, something poetic, something that sounds good, but all that came out when eyes were on me was, "I have no choice. I have to write."

Necessity.

This writing has become necessity. I am not only writing a memoir, but a story of a crisis survived. I cannot think of any other story, I believe, until this one is framed and taken out of motion. Annie Dillard quotes that "If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid—eschew—writing a memoir." In writing this memoir, the memory will change shape, it will become still on paper to be visited and remembered. Not the haunt it has been for so long.

Why do we read memoir, or even write it? It is a selfish act we think. These poor fools slobber over the keyboard bleeding out their guts for all of us to read and become so depressed we can’t move off the couch. Come on, you say, we all have problems, let’s not dwell, let’s get on with it. With the uprise of "new age," the overflow of therapy and "learning to love yourself" philosophy in our culture, memoir can easily be attacked as talk show drama, coming out of the closet with our deep, dark secrets.

Memoir is ancient though. We do not whine, or point fingers, it’s not about "bits of exotica held up for viewer consumption," as Kathryn Rhett writes. It is an ancient, historical form of sharing history and humanity: slave narratives, pioneers’ writings, European explorers, Lewis and Clark. It is discovery, Rhett claims, discovery for the author and audience.

Whether your mother died when you were thirteen, whether you suffered the poverty-stricken Irish childhood, whether the concentration camp took your family—it doesn’t matter. Survivors have two lives, the past life and the present, both so different, yet of course, the same life. The particular story is simply about the survival, about the two lives and the two selves that hopefully can connect with a bridge to become a whole self, a different self. I feel I cannot define myself until the past is reconciled with the present. In reading memoir, we all have a chance to build that bridge. It is for you as
much for me, it is so you can feel deeply into that place that is so often untouched and wounded and say, I am not so alone in this world. The memoir doesn’t judge, it is not a confession where we hang our heads, it is a place where experience and language join to create grace in what is awful and damaging to the spirit.

So, my purpose has many different facets. Myself, of course, rests on top of the pile because I am the one who wakes and sleeps with these memories and have been hanging on to them for years, promising I will set them loose. But without an audience, language has no grace or dance, or resonance, it has no one to feel and see its beauty. The story would have no life without the readers to give it different lives. There have been a number of different memoirs, each so different in style and content, that have touched my life and given me the courage to do the same. Frank McCourt’s Angela’s Ashes broke my heart, yet helped me laugh at my own life as he did. His example is to bring lightness to the page of what is so heavy. Anne Lamott’s Traveling Mercies, a memoir about her struggle to faith and spirituality, has helped me in that long road of defining my own, and Annie Dillard’s An American Childhood taught me that even ordinary can be beautiful, and that childhood is a story that should never be forgotten. By writing this, I am giving it to you, to make your own story, to know that survival is simply that, and nothing more.

In this memoir, I address many issues of concern in our current culture. I am the female using sex to gratify emptiness, I am the teen-age drug addict, I am the high school drop-out. I am the young girl we see on the streets trying to make a statement, trying to show you how hurt I really am. We see these symptoms too much now. I see young girls with their adolescent breasts bursting from too-tight tops, smoking, drug abuse—I recognize this. Hopefully, if this was you, or someone you fear for, then my story is also your story.

My story recounts the modern American Childhood. Too many of us didn’t have the Cleaver family, and don’t care to pretend we did. Frank McCourt says, “It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while.” I am the child thrown into therapy at the age of ten, the child who was materially gluttonous, yet so empty in the middle.
I also write about the world of educational consultants and the uprise of therapeutic boarding schools and wilderness survival programs. Alcohol and marijuana use has become tame now compared to the kinds and amounts of street drugs so available to children, most containing chemicals we find under our kitchen sink, and we are watching kids die from ingesting these. Afraid, hopeless parents are told that if they pay thousands of dollars, their children are safe and will heal and become once again, the good kid they knew. Each school will tell you of their “recovery rate,” bragging that so many leave and do so well, but truth, most leave and return to the lifestyle. So what changes a person? Each school thinks they know, or are getting close. I changed, I believe, in spite of the program. Spirit saved me.

My story is about spirit; that intangible, mysterious essence that we all can see in someone’s eyes when it is gone, that without, we begin to die. My story is for my mother who died at the age of forty-five after battling cancer for seven years. It is her love and faith as a mother that has carried me and has restored my spirit. This is the finding of that fire each of us has, that can be lost, but always regained.

My story is about work. The stump pasture is the literal metaphor for the work that takes place in changing a person, in regaining and redefining spirit. In labor and solitude I found contentment, as Donald Hall writes, author of Life Work, “contentment is absorbedness.”3 I do not portray what so many partaking in the recovery movement do: that all is grand after you face it. It is tears and blood and sweat that lead to this place of contentment-- and spirit, if you will. I think we too often want the easy way out.

Swami Vivekananda says: “work like a master and not as a slave; work incessantly, but do not do slave’s work. Do you not see how everybody works? Nobody can be altogether at rest; ninety-nine percent of mankind work like slaves, and the result is misery; it is all selfish work. Work through freedom! Work through love!”3 I write this unselfishly, hoping I have a voice that is heard, hoping I can learn and keep learning how to work through love and freedom.
Endnotes


Mid November, 1995

Light moves across the pasture, spilling over the hill like honey. The horses stir, anticipating the warmth upon their backs. Field aglow, they snort and billow steam, spraying moisture onto the hay and frozen grass. Soon those tiny crystals thaw a small circle of ground but only until the light moves on and leaves the dark.

The light rarely hits my pasture—it always illuminates the one next to me, where the horses feed and play. It is so wide, I can't even see the end; short stubble blankets the rolling hills. Old pines shade my pasture. In their shadows rest the corpses of their offspring, frozen into the rocky, mountain soil. Years ago, farmers clear-cut this land and left over fifty stumps rotting. I must remove each one.

An aging chicken coup perches in the northeast corner, the only evidence that real farmers ever lived and worked here. It is built of logs, bark peeling. Inside, its floorboards twist and knot from age and moisture, while moss blooms in every corner. A dead mouse curls near the chicken door, partly boarded, condemned. The wind passes through a gaping hole.

Here I creep during the fifteen minutes of rest between breakfast and lunch and between lunch and dinner. I chew at a peanut butter sandwich with strawberry jelly and perch in the farmer's door of the coup, in my cold shade under my grandmother pines. I stare at the light-lit field and the horses that sometimes run for me, happily breaking from piles of hay, loose legs pounding that bald pasture, their muscles so tight and perfect in motion.

Back to my watch, my fifteen minutes are gone. Dragging back to work, my back hunched, I chop at a hole in the ground, trying to persuade those old dead stumps to come out, trying to ignore my body for the sake of the task. It is just me, my work, and this bitter cold Montana. I work hard, trying to forget and waiting for that light to warm my back.
Arrivals—September 12, 1994

I arrived on a weekend day. It was hot, still hot in September, dusty, the kind that sticks to your teeth and makes that brown line when you smile. Carol, the director of Explorations, drove me to Mission Mountain School. I had just completed three weeks backpacking and the big conclusion was that I was just a bit too crazy for their program. So I was being hauled off to an all girl’s boarding school tucked away in the Swan Valley of Montana, and the more we drove, the further and further we got from any kind of city. Just stretches and stretches of tree-lined highway.

At the other program, Explorations, I pulled smaller, weaker girls into the bushes and shoved my fist in their face and told them they’d better carry some of the weight off my backpack. I also supposedly tried to sexually manipulate one of the counselors because I wasn’t wearing a bra one night in camp. Overall, the special therapeutic catch phrases that followed me from Explorations were manipulative, controlling and not able to change. I didn’t quite know what they meant, but I knew they were big.

Carol asked me what I was going to do differently at this program. I told her I was going to be nice to people and just work when I was asked. She said that was a good start.

So I arrived. The truck pulled up to a little dude ranch at the end of a long, dirt road. Above us hung the sign, “Mission Mountain School.” I heard banging, and singing from behind various barns and log buildings. Oily, tanned girls peaked out and stared, smiling.

We entered one of the brown log cabins marked “office,” and Kate, the receptionist, greeted us, “Oh, so you’re the new girl.” She and this guy stirring his coffee with a brown tooth brush cackled like witches. He told me his name and that it was his last day, which I was relieved to hear, and told me to change for workcrew. Workcrew? What is that?

Kate took me up to a shed on the top of campus, across the big green lawn. There, girls were chopping wood, and some were stacking it. Those that were chopping didn’t stop working to look because they were too busy screaming as the wood broke into
pieces. Kate took me to the pilers, thank God, because I didn’t want them to know that I had never actually chopped wood before.

Peggy and Betsy. Betsy was a short Hispanic girl and the other, Peggy, was a tall, burly woman with a raspy voice and bowl cut hair. Peggy smiled wildly at me and Betsy just scowled, looking me up and down with crossed arms, and asked “So, do you know anything about this place?”

“Ah, yeah. It’s all girls and we can’t talk to our old friends and I have to stay here for a year.”

“Did you have a boyfriend?” Betsy snorted.

“Yeah, I did, his name was Carlos. Why, do I get to talk to him?”

“You can just say goodbye to him. You’ll never talk to him again.”

“What about when I get out?”

“You’ll be different and won’t want to anymore.”

Right there, standing amidst a pile of wood chips and two girls named Peggy and Betsy, I wanted to cry, bust up, fall down and beg for my life back and drill that girl Betsy. But instead, I vacuumed the tears back in and replied, “Yeah, I know.”

We spent all afternoon stacking, getting splinters, talking about this new place and how “great” it was. I began to feel a little more relaxed. After workcrew, staff took me to shower with lice shampoo, sorted through my clothes and threw away everything but a pair of jeans. Then I retreated to another one of the little log cabins that looked exactly alike, but this one said, “Kitchen.”

The whole crew of girls, about thirty, anxiously waited in line for food. The room was decorated with red and white checkered curtains and little picnic bench tables to eat at. So, trying to be friendly to some girl in front of me, I said, “This place is a lot like summer camp.”

“Oh, no, not quite. And I wouldn’t say that again.”

Okay. I soon learned why she so adamantly denied that this place was anything, anywhere near a summer camp. At summer camp, you play games, and tell stories and eat junk food. You make friends, and swim all day and then at the end your parents come and
you hand them little Native American looking crafts that you made all by yourself. This place was not the same. The girls were beautiful, tanned and strong, luminescent. More than likely this was from hard work and the stuff that surfaces when you are pushed too hard. They all terrified me.

We all took our places after being slopped typical camp food, so I thought, and said the serenity prayer. Peggy took to the front after the prayer, grinning, and prepared us for a song she had been working on to perform. How exciting, I thought. I love to hear people sing. As she positioned her large limbs, closed her eyes and brushed the bowly wisps from her face, the most awful, scratching tone-deaf notes assaulted us all. She screeched out through her nose, her throat, the sappy words to “The Rose.” I watched everyone politely trying to put up with the torture of watching her make an ass of herself, and proudly. When she finished, we all clapped. We clapped like we meant it and poor Peggy beamed.

Once we finished dinner and were excused by staff, girls scattered off to various directions to clear food or wash dishes. I stood up, trying to maybe help, but no one gave me eye contact, or took my hand and said, here, do this. More alone and afraid than I had ever been, I slipped out the back door as the sun was setting into night. Over the hill and the trimmed grass was a valley of green that peaked into the Swan Mountains. The setting sun cast orange light and black shadows on the curves and drops of rock. The sky spilled over with the twilight and the blue. I could smell the vanilla scent of pine, I could feel my cheeks turning pink as the wind came for the night and I could feel the gravel beneath my feet and the dirt on my legs. It would have been so perfect a place if only I hadn’t been dying. I had never before felt so much weight. Even the sky was too heavy.

After dinner and clean-up, I was dragged around by a girl named Kaiwin. Kaiwin was impatient because I wasn’t moving at the speed Mission Mountain School girls did. We got to group, a bit late, which was only tolerated because I was new. We removed our shoes and sat circled in the group room, waiting in silence for a counselor to lead us. I kept smiling at everyone, and everyone sort of smiled back. I could tell they had some kind of knowledge about me. I also wasn’t the only new girl. A small, anorexic girl
dressed in baggy clothing hid in the corner of the room with her head in her legs. I feared her. What if they like her more?

Beating steps bounded across the wood porch and a man with a grizzly beard, a cowboy hat and a scowl checked me out, his eyes burning into me, and I grinned, like a nervous Cheshire cat. Then he grinned and chuckled as he removed his boots. I knew it wasn’t a chuckle like, “Hi there, nice to see you, you must be new.” It was more like, “You poor fool.” Girls sat, some cross-legged with their heads down and some grinning for approval from John, the man with the hat. I didn’t even know him yet and feared him. So we began our “Intro Group,” which was focused on me and the silent skinny girl in the corner who looked like hell. I thought I would definitely get more attention..

Jen spoke first, a girl I had met at Changing Directions, the first wilderness program, before Explorations. I felt she was my only hope for someone to talk to me in real words about real things, to tell me the truth about where I had landed. But here she was, just like the rest, talking about her “inner child.” I guess Jen had actually escaped in the night when she first arrived, hitchhiked with two drunk men to Whitefish and then called her mom, shivering and terrified. Her mom, two states away, inevitably tricked her and called the school to capture Jen. She had pig tails in her hair and she was beaming. It wasn’t the Jen I knew with dark eyeliner and loud, violent music. She promised me through her large smile how wonderful my life was to become. John gently asked her about her feelings and she cried. She thanked this man for dragging her back.

Each girl went around and told me why they had come here; all confessed that it was their fault. All beamed about the great changes in their lives. I caught on, so when it came to me, I changed into my chameleon clothes. I lied. I told them it was my fault also, even though I believed it truly wasn’t. They laughed because I said my favorite color was blue, like the sky and my eyes. They laughed when I gave Sarah some feedback about being controlling with her mother, and John handed me his hat and called me his “junior counselor.” They laughed because they all knew how afraid I was, and how much I was trying to cover. I wanted to run more than before. I had really screwed up now. Not only had I made a grave mistake by speaking at all, but I missed one of my “issues.”
“What are your issues Claire?”

“Uh, I smoke and drink and take drugs and my mom died.”

“Hmm. Forgetting one aren’t you?”

“Uh, I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

“How about sex?”

Humiliated, I nodded in shame. I could tell I had glided right into the cyclops’s cave, but unlike Odysseus, no amount of wit was going to get me out. I sat silent the rest of the night. When anyone looked at me, I smiled that Cheshire grin and returned my head to bowing. And that night, in my bunk bed, underneath a girl named Heather, in a bed so foreign in a cabin so unlike home, I cried into my pillow. I thought of mom and the years before everything had gone so very wrong. And then I slept long and hard till morning.
Last Time—February 23, 1991

Her breathing was shallow, her eyes distant. The room smelled of vomit and disinfectant, medicine, cancer. Dad said not to worry, that they were going to emergency and they would be home soon, Mom just needed an IV drop of morphine to fix, ease.

But I sat next to her and said goodbye. Not a long, heart-felt-forever-kind of goodbye--just goodbye. And I love you. She didn’t respond. Her eyes stared at the beige bedroom wall in the dimly lit midnight room. I wrapped my arms around her limp body and helped her gain some strength to walk to the car.

On the way out, she asked Seth to help Dad, and he said to fuck off. Seth was so angry, like teenagers are, like teenagers watching their mothers die. She walked out the door and was gone. I looked from the hallway as the lights of the minivan backed out and down the street and then retreated to my bedroom, to my walls of rock star cut outs, a place that wasn’t quite so empty.

Seth actually came to my room and we cried. Dad said not to worry because we had all been through this a million times: The thump of Mom’s body hitting the floor, passing out from too much pain; the days in the hospital watching her cry for her mom, just like I wanted to cry for mine. Coming home from school everyday and hoping to hear the little sounds of a body moving in the house. Praying, please God, let her wake up when I lay my hand on her shoulder. The anger at watching her bald, her skin peel in flakes from radiation, her body bloat from steroids. And the fear that comes from watching your mother die, needing to be her mother when you still need one.

That night all the tears came gushing and my sixteen year old brother let me cry on his shoulder and he cried on my mine. Through our tears we cried that this was it. “But we’ll see her tomorrow, right?”

“Oh, yeah, tomorrow.”

I don’t remember waking, but I remember Dad’s worn face that Saturday morning. He said there was bad news, that mom had lapsed into a coma. With forced hope, Dad said he was going to visit and if she were “awake” he would come get me.

Ahh. See, once again, a false alarm. I should call Genevieve and tell her I thought
my mom was going to die.

As Dad was leaving, the phone rang. I sounded cheery, polite, like always.

"Is your father home?"

"Oh, he’s on his way out the door. Can I take a message?"

"Honey, you’d better get your dad."

"Okay. DAD! The phone’s for you!"

A hushed voice said into the receiver as I left the room, "She’s dead?"

This moment lives. The trees rustling in the sun, the late February wind, heartbeat pounding, and listening only to my breath, heavy yet silent. My dad was at the door, trying to console me, but I pushed him aside and looked through slotted blinds at a forever moving world. The family with the brick house across the valley didn’t feel a tremor this morning at 10:30; they were probably eating donuts, drinking coffee. All I could do was breathe.

In one sudden moment, like the first gasp coming out of deep water, the wailing began—the shaking and pacing, tearing at hair, anything. The frantic shock of knowing I was here, alive, and thirteen and she would never be again.
Where it Began—Summer 1991

It was a late summer night, about eleven, and cars raced down the winding St. James road. The wind was slight and the house quiet. Dad had just clicked off the television and gone to bed. I was alone, in my room, listening to music on a Saturday night. The phone rang and I quickly answered so as not to wake Dad.

“Hey Claire, you know who this is?”

(Heart pounding) “Uh no, who’s this?”

“It’s Jeff Rood. What are ya doin’ tonight?”

He was known as one of the hottest boys in the middle school. He had blond hair, a band, and of course was popular—he always went for the ones I called the Laura Ashley girls. The ring leaders were Laura and Ashley, the band of beautiful cheerleading snobs. They also somehow reminded me of Laura Ashley clothes—florid, pukish.

But he had called me—adding of course, that he had called Ashley first but, she wasn’t around.

“So, uh, you wanna sneak out and meet us?”

“What? Yeah, but wait, oh okay. When?”

I had never done it. Never thought about it. I was still young, still had good grades, never yet went on a date. But tonight, dear God, was my initiation. Tonight would be the night I could talk about forever, the night that would get me into the “six pack,” the group that only was meant for the outlaws, and I was gonna be one.

My escape would have to be quick and clean. I quickly got dressed: purple bra that I stole from Victoria’s Secret, tight white jeans, a chiffon see-through blouse and brown cowboy boots. Quietly I left my room, properly stuffed the bed like we all learned on shows like the Brady Bunch and held my breath down the stairs. Quickly, I slipped into the basement, ball heel all the way on the old wooden steps, under the overhang painted in red “Duck.” Checking the locks, I exited into the backyard, over the chain linked fence, knowing the gate was too squeaky, and down the hillside of ivy and poison oak. And when my feet landed on St. James, below our home, I knew I was free.

As I walked, I heard the snapping of fireworks in the distance and knew they must
be near. And right on time, right at the corner of St James and Cambrian, right at the tree in the middle of the street were Jeff, Nick and Jessie armed with vandalism.

My heart felt like a fluttering bird, trapped against a window. I didn’t want to get caught, of course, but most of all, I was with boys for the first time, and I was ready— for a kiss. But on the way to Nick’s house, we managed to blow up mail boxes, tip over a LeCar, and set off about fifteen bottle rockets. And yes, we did have one good run and hide from a cop. But who knows. Was it really a cop?

We made it safe that warm summer night under a bright moon on empty streets. We made it to Nick’s basement, in his parent’s mansion. And there was a fire lit and warm forest green carpets.

We all sat on the floor talking, flirting, and then it began. A dare.
Claire, if you take your clothes off, we’ll take our clothes off.
Okay.
There wasn’t much convincing needed. Mostly, I didn’t want to look dumb. But I saw the fear in their eyes just like in my own.
Can we have towels or something?
Yeah, that’s a good idea.
Nick, the only one not involved, quietly snuck upstairs to the linen closet and retrieved towels for us all.

In the basement of a boy’s home who I didn’t know, on a Sunday morning, about one, I was alone in a bathroom undressing for some unknown reason. The bathroom was cramped, just a little toilet by a muted window and a strange light that made me look like I was on drugs. I stared at my reflection and said aloud,

“What are you doing Claire?”
And then I smiled.
We all returned to the green room with the warm fire and couches and Jessie, being the one again, said they would all take turns with me and I would give them what they give me. Blow jobs?

Jessie watched while Jeff and I went on with our turn. This was my first kiss. This
is not how I imagined it and Mom’s voice rang clear and true in my mind: “If you have sex before you’re eighteen I’ll pluck your pubic hairs out one by one.”

Yes, this was her humor. Mostly, mom wanted me to know I was worth more. I was more beautiful than sex. I deserved the world and the world was mine and she so badly wanted to implant her years of knowledge, as a mother, as a woman. But I didn’t understand. I wanted to be touched by these boys. They made me feel warm and strange.

“Okay Jessie, your turn.”

He denied me. I don’t think Jeff liked it very much. I think he was as scared as me but I was suddenly a natural performer. I worried that I didn’t kiss right, that it was all done wrong, but who was to know, we were only thirteen.

Around four Jeff walked me home, without the others. I had to get home soon because Dad got up early to jog and he jogged that same street. We hugged and said see ya later. I crawled back up the hill of ivy and poison oak with the first signs of daylight peering out and a few waking chirps of the birds.

I got inside the cement basement, my brother’s little craft room, and began the ascent to the door into the house. And it was locked. Once again, the fluttering of birds. How could this have happened? Am I caught? Oh God. Seth must have come down late at night to tinker with his planes and locked the door. Plan. I need a plan. Shit.

If I take my clothes off and leave them in this box, except my underwear and my shirt, then dad will never know I went anywhere. How could I without my clothes. I’ll go around to the front and enter through the front door with the hidden key and if he wakes up, I’ll say I couldn’t sleep and went outside and then got locked out. Yeah, it has to work.

Half naked in the bare morning light, I crawled barefoot and pantied through the yard, and made it safely inside. I felt that icky sick feeling of being up all night, of the taste of Jeff in my mouth, and the leaded feeling of degrading myself for the first time. And when I got into bed, I squeezed my eyes to erase the night and slept till noon.
Hating Juniper- September 13, 1994

One of the most abundant shrubs in Montana is the juniper, the low-growing, dense-needled evergreen that has that strong, sappy, peppermint smell, but sour-- the one that leaves razor sharp scratches and burns on bare skin when the sap seeps in.

I woke the next morning, day two at Mission Mountain, to new chores, a quick breakfast, and the day's assignments. Colleen, John's wife, gave us our instructions and set us off to work. Colleen was to become a woman I greatly feared, yet admired. But today she was just mean, cracking orders and sending me and a group of girls off into the woods to pull juniper.

We began along the fence line, led by Wanda, the math teacher who lived down the hill. She pointed and directed, and hunched over the rotten stench of juniper we hacked and pulled and sawed the wretched bushes down. I was strong and angry, moving from bush to bush, cutting and piling, clearing to empty ground. I didn't say a word all day. I worked, knowing I would have to be noticed and rewarded for my hard work. My group hurricaned through that day and finished our fence line in the woods of juniper before anyone else's group had finished. We were all the "new girls." We didn't value our work; we worked silent, amidst all the noise inside. We were just angry and ignorant about what lay ahead.

In the shower that night, the cuts on my arms and legs burned under the hot water. The tangy smell of juniper gummed up my hair and coated my skin and I scrubbed with the soap, cuts and all. I scrubbed away the smell of juniper and the day and the work gone unnoticed. I washed to relieve that ache in my back from bending over, that ache everywhere. One shower, only minutes long each day, was the only space that was all mine, where my body, aching and angry, could be too.
Mid October-1995

Fall comes readily, and the ground breathes when stepped on and cracks, rain seeping. The rain has come everyday for a couple of weeks now, and each day I put on my rubber suit, waiting for my shower, my only joy. But that has changed too. The whole group now is on workcrew. I don’t even know why. Something about us all being full of shit and not getting honest, and it’s partly my fault. I wish I knew what I could do to pull out of this. When I finish work tonight, there will be no shower or warmth. I will return to a wet tent and try in my sleeping bag to forget for just one more night’s sleep.

John gave me the stump pasture. There’s over fifty and he said, “All of em.” I have been on workcrew for over a month. I cannot speak anymore because I get in trouble. I cannot talk to men because they say I manipulate them. I cannot touch anyone nor be touched because they say I’m too sexual. I don’t understand.

The rain pours all day, my hole fills with mud, so it’s harder to sit in. It’s possibly four feet deep with a six foot diameter, and the stump looks like it’s raised its skirt, exposing its hairy, bony legs. All I have to do is cut those legs and this stump will be done. It’s been close to two weeks now on this same one.

The autumn clouds dropped heavy drops of the coldest rain, almost snow. I wept in my hole today. The tree is so moist in its death, the roots just swallow my saw and I cannot get anywhere. I wept knowing there is nowhere to run, if I do, my family has promised to abandon me. If I stay here, there is some hope that this will end. Donna came by when I was crying. She acted cold, but I think I saw her wanting to be nice. No one is allowed to be nice to a person who stinks like I do. “Deal with it now,” she said, “I promise you, it only gets worse if you don’t deal with it now.”

Stuck in this hole, so full of self-pity, I could hardly breathe. At 5:30 I cleaned up my tools, my stump still standing, and noticed John in the pasture with Stroker, his horse. My desperation made me walk over to the gate, stare him in the face, wet from rain, from tears, sap in my hair and mud everywhere and say, “What can I do? What?”

“Just be,” he said, and walked away with Stroker obediently at his side.

I wanted to scream, throw the manure shovel at him, get naked and run around
like the crazy person I was becoming. What the hell does that mean, I mean, to me, me who does nothing but be every breathing beat. What do you mean? What more can I do when I can hardly stand my own flesh hanging on these bones. The tears wanted to come just then. They did.
Sarah, from Venezuela, wouldn’t eat her tuna. We had to eat everything. Period. If a girl vomited on her plate, then she would get another and we would all sit, smelling the vomit and waiting for her to finish.

Sarah had a phobia of white food. After leaving the breast, she hadn’t touched even ice cream in her seventeen years. Our tuna was swimming through pools of mayonnaise. We didn’t hear a fuss or know there was a problem until one of the stupid older girls had to priss up to the staff and raise her hand when we were all heading out the door.

“Uh, wait, we can’t leave. Sarah needs to eat her tuna.”

What should have been so simple turned into a two hour meeting in the kitchen, with the benches circled for group in the middle of the day over mayonnaise on tuna. She pursed her lips, refusing, cursing, then sobbing. John and Sarah stared each other down, both stubborn bulls waiting for a good match. Sarah flung the first “fuck you,” and it was returned with a quick “fuck you” back. Like boxers in the ring, hooking, diving and standing their ground, Sarah and John passed the insult back and forth. Then John told us all we had fifteen minutes to pack for the woods, that we could not forget one piece of gear for skiing and that Sarah was going to eat her tuna, mayonnaise and all. In fact, we were going to eat nothing but tuna fish for every meal until Sarah gave in.

She was defeated. She had to be. This was only going to be a little stint, a small stroll and Sarah will eat her tuna. But of course Sarah wasn’t going to eat her tuna. She didn’t.

Not only did I not have the right backpack—mine was externally framed— but I had never skied a day in my life. The snow on the ground was young, mostly ice, and as we traversed the trail over and over again, it packed into nothing more than ice.

I made the fatal mistake this time. We came to a hill, large, icy, long. We stayed in formation always, following one after the other and were yelled at by staff, by some of the girls when we didn’t keep up. I didn’t know the technique for skiing with weight on my back on ice uphill, and I began to fall behind, my breathing deepening into wheezing as
my fear mounted. Soon it began, the girl behind yelling at the top of her lungs to move my ass, screaming threats. So I fell, naturally. I had never worked under coach like pressure. I fell so perfectly, right on a spot I would never get out of, my nose bloody from hitting the ice and my skis caught in my backpack. No one stopped to give me a hand and get me going again. Instead, they did what I would learn to do-- they stood over me on a hill of ice, screaming at me to get up. I tried to stop it but the tears came and I was stuck, with blood and tears. John finally came to relieve the dysfunction of our formation, and began with, "What the hell are you doing? Get up!"

"I can’t."

"Fuck you. Yes you can."

"I can’t."

"Roll over and get up!"

"I ca-a-a-n-n’t," I said sobbing, slipping and tangled.

John reached down and put his huge hands around my bag, lifted me skis and all into the sky and plopped me back on the hill, standing. Wordless, he scuttered away scowling.

Though my fall was infamous, I was not the only one who fell that day on that hill of ice. We did eat tuna for a week, Sarah crossed arms every day. We did sleep in the snow in tents so cold and skied long miles, and Sarah didn’t touch her tuna. We also went up and down that hill, that blasted hill of ice that put us to the ground, that made my body ache and the tears fall. Because of Sarah and because of me, that hill is marked with a wooden sign “Tuna Helper Hill.”
In the Garden—Childhood

We had the biggest back yard on the block. There was a circular courtyard, enclosed by a glass wall, and steps bordered by wood cut-outs resembling keyholes. The rose garden held old roses, mom said, from when the house was built. That meant they were tough, their roots deep. They would bloom for us every year.

Mom and I played unicorn by taking the thorns off the stems, licking them and sticking them to our foreheads, and we would whinny and buck around like it was real. She showed me how to water them by making a bowl out of dirt so they could hold their food, so that it wouldn’t spill onto the brick walkway. She would even sometimes cut them so we could put some in a vase on the table at dinner time. I remember many yellow ones.

When she became sick, I would come home from school and search through the house for her, hoping not to find a slumped body in the closet that was too heavy for me to hold. One day I found her through the window, under the roses, sitting in dirt, with her nightgown pulled up in the afternoon sun. Her bald head glowed in the sun and made her look like an angel.

“Mom, what are you doing?” I asked.

“I’m soaking up the energy from the earth,” she answered, toes buried in dirt.

She then closed her eyes—close to death.
Mary— Spring 1992

Mary saw something in me— not the drugs I was capable of doing, or the boys that were to come that I would drop my pants for. She simply loved me and held me and gave me her sister and mother.

Poor, poor Mary. She came from a family that we might want to call dysfunctional. Her father, a heroine and cocaine addict, divorced her mother before Mary’s birth. Her mother, addict of the same, ran from the 70’s in L.A. to the love of San Francisco to try to save her girls. But Mary, a beautiful, tall buxom blond, with poetry in her heart, was doomed. She tried heroine with her father at the age of twelve, began smoking then, and drinking and had sex with boys and men. Damaged. But she never complained, or cried in despair, or tormented with “why?”. We would sit in her room, in the eighth grade, smoking on her bed, talking and laughing. And if we felt like it, we took all of our clothes off and took a bath together.

On mother’s day, only a few months into friendship, we gave her mom some pot to smoke. She was touched, and that day we all sat in the sun, naked in the yard, with Bob Marley and drugs filling our brains, feeling blissful, and at home.

Dad didn’t know Mary yet, or who her family was, or what we did. He didn’t know about the weekend that her father came to babysit while her mother was away. He threw a rager and bought us Bacardi, then ran away with a sixteen year old girl—my neighbor Ingrid. But Dad found out because the papers were strewn with the evidence and his picture. And we lived with the cops in our neighborhood for months trying to find that pretty blond haired girl who went estranged.

Ingrid was found in a closet in L.A. a few months later, drugged, with black hair. Mary’s dad said he got nervous and did that only because “he loved her” and wanted to keep her hidden. Ingrid went away to some school in Europe and Mary’s dad, thirty years her senior, traveled to find her.

Dad forbade me to see Mary. Dad couldn’t understand that I had finally found a family who didn’t make me feel afraid. We bathed naked, painted at night, and drank and smoked into blissful oblivion. I loved Mary, wanted to be Mary, wanted her full, tan
breasts to be my own. At least I got to nuzzle them while I slept, feel infantile when I was hurting for my mom.
End of October-1995

Other girls on workcrew aren’t in as much trouble as I am. I don’t understand, but I guess that doesn’t really matter. I have now become John’s project for the year. He is determined to change me—I am afraid, into what. I could be in trouble tonight. I asked the counselor, Mike, to help me pull a three hundred pound boulder from my hole. I know I wasn’t supposed to get any help, but how was I to remove it alone? It doesn’t matter, though. I will be in trouble.

It gets dark early. The sky no longer has that exploding blue at dusk—too many clouds. There are sunsets, so orange, the ground, the fallen leaves, everything takes on color—joyful, quiet somehow, after I’ve worked all day.

“Claire, come over here,” Carolina calls. All the girls are circled near the tack shed, John scowls.

“Girls, I don’t think Claire is getting it.” Everyone nods. “How do you feel around her?”

Sarah chimes in, “I don’t know, you’re kind of slimey Claire. I don’t think you’re getting any better.” Everyone nods. Chin begins that quivering, knees feel weak, standing against gravity. No words, but an explosion, finally, something has to come, must defend.

“What the fuck do you want from me! What am I doing so wrong? I want to ‘get it’ but I don’t even know what you mean. Just leave me be!”

All stand back, ready for an infamous John versus student “Fuck You” war, but he takes a deep breath, reddening through this beard, he hollers back in my face, “Don’t you get it? You are one of the strongest girls here and I will not see you fail. I will not see you fail.”
The Founders—1990–present

It all began with the five founders: John and Colleen, Mike and Deb, and Gary met at a similar institution years before called Spring Creek, where their own struggles with drugs and alcohol brought them. Some believed they had a vision.

For various reasons we all never knew, Spring Creek shut down a few years prior to Mission Mountain, probably because of dysfunction. They simply weren’t helping kids. Maybe one even died. We were told only that it shut down. But whatever happened there was enough to motivate these five people, to make them believe they had the stuff to make it better, and thus the birth of Mission Mountain School.

The name was conceived because of the surrounding mountains. The Swan Valley, Condon, is one of the richest valleys in moisture, beauty and wildlife in all of Montana. On one side of the valley tower the Swan Mountains, on the other, the Missions. Maybe the word “mission” fit their purpose better than “swan.”

Being poor, they found an old dude ranch called the Double Diamond Ranch that had folded years before. The acreage was somewhere in the two hundreds and there were cabins and facilities already there. They also got an old horse named Jack.

They came from all different backgrounds: English, Wildlife Biology, Nursing, Psychology, and they all claimed to be recovering alcoholics. The school began as a safe place for these kind of kids—you know, troubled ones. Teenage girls and boys hung out during the day and played on the ranch. They ate what they wanted, when they wanted. There was no fear or workcrew yet. But soon the girls and boys were having sex, soon Mike got chased around by an angry girl with an ax, soon others began overeating, or some undereating. And the five founders discovered that these kids really weren’t normal.

Two or three years into the new school, they were still poor, all living on the campus in log cabins, trying to stay afloat. They met and decided some things. It was going to be all girls, because they knew they could change girls, and their philosophy was going to change. The more girls pushed them and found cracks in their system, the tighter it became, almost flawless. But the system sprang a leak, which gushed and then flooded: fear.
Therapy became the underlying theme in everything. If a girl were angry, then she carried around something night and day to represent her anger, something that would get in her way and be a burden like anger is. Every rule was based around the group, so if one member refused anything, then everyone else would suffer as well. And there was no leniency. There were no exceptions. If you were new, you had two weeks to stumble around and not get it, and then you were expected to be just like the rest. I never once missed nightly group therapy in my two years there, and it was almost always long.

The founders succeeded. Consultants around the country agreed there was no other school like Mission Mountain. The prices for admission rocketed to fifty thousand a year and desperate, frightened parents waited months, hoping their kids would make it in. There were only thirty or so allowed at a time, so John had to carefully assess which ones he took, and that could involve a months-long application process.

Everyone believed the school was a Godsend. Many still do. I know the staff does. As an ex student, however, I see it differently. They weren't evil. I believe they mean only the best for the girls, but I was afraid and thought so little of myself coming in, that what they added created an abyss, one that I would spend years crawling out of. I don't give them much credit for who I am now. But that comes later.
Christmas–1990

Mom had an episode right before Christmas. She fell very ill, the medicine wasn’t working, death looked likely. They admitted her into the hospital, the hospice floor. Mom used to be a hospice volunteer; she said she wanted to face death. Now she really was. In the hospital, they gave her medicine that gave her hives. Grandma said they shouldn’t let me see her, that it would be too painful. But I said she was my mom, that I was strong and I could handle it.

I arrived in the evening. There were no lights behind her curtain, just the lights seeping in from the hallway, the nurses’ station. She was hooked up to monitors, to tubes, she was bald, her skin splotched from the hives, alien looking, and she was clutching a small brown teddy bear that had a red felt heart. So small.

That night, she cried for her mom and asked if I would rub her head like her mom used to do. Mom cried, just like a little girl, but I had to be strong, no crying. No crying, Claire. I tried to sleep in the cot the nurses gave me, but mom woke me up a lot, to sit with her, talk to her, give her medicine. Dad was coming at six so I could get ready for school. Try to sleep, I told myself.

Oh please mom, just stay for Christmas, that’s all, just Christmas, and then you can die.

Mom did make it home for Christmas. She even shopped a little on her own. The state took away her driver’s licence because of the drugs she was on, but she cheated and drove just a few miles. I opened my presents and didn’t like them. She could tell. I think she was hurt that she couldn’t give me what I wanted. Really mom, I just wanted Christmas to be like it used to be. I can hardly bear that bald head anymore.
The summer was eventful. Dad was marrying in the fall, just over a year after Mom’s death. I was miserable and didn’t know it. The drama with Ingrid and Mary’s dad was subsiding. My affidavit caused some hard feelings because I actually told the truth, and soon, my testimony led to the arrest of Mary’s mom. We didn’t understand any of that, though. Our lives were simple—drinking, smoking and boys.

My current boyfriend was a nineteen year-old black man named Gibran. My father didn’t yet know him, nor my brother. I kept it that way. I knew he wasn’t the type to bring home to Dad. His dread locks, baggy clothing and sunken eyes didn’t tell a good story, but that didn’t matter yet, either.

The summer was coming to a close. My soon-to-be step mom, Penelope, had been living in my house for a few months and I already found out how to trick her with my lies. I had already slept with three different boys. I was already into something. Too deep.

The day began at my house, with the girls. We were playing drinking games with wine from my Dad’s cabinet. I drank almost a whole bottle alone. It was only the afternoon. We decided as the sun was setting that we needed more. We needed a car. Amber called some boys most of us didn’t know and none of us cared, because we used every person we could.

Under the freeway, near MacArthur Boulevard in Oakland, was a place we called Quick Stop. Owned by an Asian family, it thrived on the illegal sale of alcohol to minors. We sauntered into the store casually. If someone was in there, we looked at the candy and soda. When they left, the owners would yell in broken English, “huly, huly. Quick. Moof quick.” One person would run for the beer, the other, the liquor. Their arms would be out-stretched, grabbing bottles, stuffing them into paper bags. If another customer entered, we all froze, holding our breath, then pretended we were normal kids. Once they left, we paid, grabbed the bags and left with the owners yelling, “Ca on, get moof-ing!”

That night, with Gibran, Amber, Mary, and these two unknown boys, we passed around a jug of Vodka and Sunny Delight to chase. We would chug and pass. After a few passes, when it was my turn again, I didn’t release the bottle until it was near gone.
Street lights just missed our figures on the wooden play structure at Montclair School. We were safe all night. Too far for cops to see, or bother with. I had curfew, but never bothered to follow it. My parents didn’t wait up, didn’t wake up when I arrived, and tonight, I was going to get drunk.

I don’t remember much after I put the bottle down. It hit me hard and I became belligerent within minutes. I remember flashes: Mary dragging me on my face through sand, laughing, but seriously asking someone to help her. I remember dry heaving over the side of the truck owned by one of those unknown guys.

But the story goes on. I passed out at Amber’s. Gibran and his friend decided they needed to walk me. With my arms over their shoulders, out cold, they dragged me up a well-lit street. Of course the cop pulled up. He said no one would get in trouble, they just needed to get me home to my parents. I vomited on Gibran, in the cop car. The cop told Gibran to go get my family, but being scared, he dropped me on the doorstep, rang the bell and ran. My parents tried to get me in a shower, but I was vomiting, passed out on my back.

I don’t remember the ambulance, nor have I ever known what my blood alcohol level was, or how my parents felt other than ashamed. I woke early that morning to monitors, needles and a large black nurse chuckling to herself. I felt drunk still, sick. I knew this meant trouble. And it wasn’t the first and surely not the last time I prayed to God to just let me die.
There is so much talk of spirit, and though I don’t truly know what spirit is, I know I can see it in people, and I know that when I look in the mirror, I don’t see anything. I see my face, my messy hair, and dirty, muddy clothes. It’s like looking at empty.

I wake everyday to the same routine. I wake to chores, to cold mornings running with the group, and then my departure down the hill through the gates, to my pasture full of stumps.

I take my time getting to the tool shed, slinging the tools over my back, dragging the heavy ones behind me, dragging heavy wool pants and heavy boots. I love coming out to a stump that I have just finished or is soon to be finished. But there are always the days when I have to start a new one. The ground is frozen about six inches deep. When I hit it with my pick, it breaks into frozen clumps, grass and mud, layer upon layer of mud.

I wait for the ravens to fly over, churdle at me, pass. I wait for the sun, those short bursts to warm my back and reassure me that the sun is always there. I talk to mom, let her know that this is not what I had planned, how sorry I am, how very sorry. But she always nods, smiles at me and walks away. Why does she always walk away? Maybe I’m supposed to follow. I work, that is all.

One night, when Carolina was finishing a fence line near me, near enough to talk, she saw me crying, pitifully in my stump hole. “What’s wrong?” she asked me.

“I think my spirit is dead, I mean really gone. I think I killed it.”

“Hmm. No. It’s not gone because I can see it. It’s like a fire.”
Mornings- January 1995

It was that time of year, so cold, the hairs in your nose freeze with the first breath. In this cold, morning exercise seemed much longer, more difficult. A seasonal clothing chart was posted on the door of the office, matching appropriate clothing with the temperature. So every morning, after breakfast, before exercise, we all lined at the door. On the coldest mornings we had to wear everything—long johns, fleece pants, liner socks, wool socks, Sorel boots, fleece top, neck gator, hat and mittens. Anything missing resulted in a penalty and a much longer, harder morning exercise.

In lines of three, we waited quietly for Ellen’s instruction. I always felt sick to my stomach. Not only was breakfast still settling, but on those quiet mornings, the air was heavy with creosote billowing from chimneys, pushed back to earth from cold. I always hated that moment, that silent moment right before she would explain then say, “GO!”

One particular day, Ellen set the lines off in intervals, and our goal was to catch and pass the line in front of us. If we passed and didn’t get passed, we wouldn’t have to do twenty push-ups. Bigger than that, if anyone ran, meaning speed walking was fine, running was not, then the whole group had to do five push-ups for each person there. That was roughly 150 pushups. No fun.

“Go,” Ellen screamed at my line, and as we started to catch speed I felt my lungs tighten. The condensed air from my mouth soaked the neck gator and began to turn to ice, crystals formed on my eyelashes the harder I breathed. My line pushed harder, we were getting gained on and we were close to passing the line in front. I gasped a little, “wait,” to my two other partners, who only responded with “come on, get movin’!” And it had to happen, I began to wheeze. At Mission Mountain I discovered when I’m afraid, my lungs tighten, and I can’t breathe. I actually had asthma as a child, but more than anything, it was created by something in my head I couldn’t turn off. It said, “I can’t.”

It was almost like hyperventilating. I had to stop, walk a little and I began to cry. I had been reamed for this problem because, as they put it, it was bullshit, I was manipulating. I couldn’t even explain. Hillary walked with me, but only until Ellen came racing around the corner to bark at my heels. I did eventually catch my breath, but I only
returned to the lines, to the empty faces staring at me disapprovingly. I just wanted to speak. I had no voice. Standing up for myself wasn’t even anything I could fathom.

It’s hard now to even differentiate which cold morning was when, when the cries and curses of pissed off girls echoed on the cement basketball court. It could have been lunges, or pushups, but as I held in position and looked through the space between the ground and my body, upside down, at other faces straining, it didn’t matter. It didn’t matter that we were in this together because I could only feel the sting of cold ground in my hands, or the burning muscles and the lack of breath. Sometimes, I could look up at the sky and see what cold actually looks like—you know, blue and pink and just a little hazy.
Before we moved to Piedmont, we lived in a little house in a district of Oakland called Rockridge, a small neighborhood with children in almost every household and the little old lady that gave us bags of candy when we visited. Her house was smelly, though, dark and moldy. On top of the hill lived Laura and down the street was my best friend, Sarah Wood.

Mom and I spent a lot of time together, especially in the summer, because she taught school and had summers off. In the hot sun in July, Mom would prune her jungle of tomatoes as I sat naked in the grass inside the coil of hose. We took naps and woke to popsicles and I always wondered how to get that last bite before it fell, swearing each time this had to work. We sometimes even painted our toenails bright red and sat on the redwood deck waiting for them to dry, talking as moms and their three-year-olds do. Or in the kitchen, I stood on the yellow chair, in my pink striped shorts and helped her make peanut butter sandwiches for Dad wherever he was and Seth pounding in the green shed.

Maybe it all wasn’t perfect then—but it was close. I always woke to eggs in the morning, and every night she tucked me in.
Dad’s First Visit- January 1995

“Claire. You’re not feeling. I want to see the emotion. Claire, you’re not being honest. What really happened?” John kept repeating the words as my father and I sat in the center of the room, closed in by watching eyes. We sat, knee to knee, touching, disgusting. I was telling my “story” through gritted teeth, wanting to vomit, telling Dad all the stuff you would never dream of telling your father.

Dad, I had sex in your bed, in every room of the house, many people had sex in every room of the house, the sex was violent sometimes, biting and scratching, we did it when you were home, when you were sleeping. There were at least ten different ones, Dad. Every time I paused to breathe, John’s voice prodded, “Claire?” The room was so still, not even the crossing and uncrossing of legs, not even yawns. It was midday, on a weekend in January and so cold outside that everything looked like shards. My poor father, in his newly-bought fleece clothing, sat without shoes, crossed-legged and awkward on this carpet, listening to this man prod out every disgusting, shameful detail. When I tried to just say “and I had sex with him,” I was stopped and forced to say, “we did it doggie-style.”

The tears streamed down my cheeks, not so much because of the pain from past deeds, but more from what was being done. My dad couldn’t look me in the eye, even when John told him to. And when John began to pick on my dad, I hated him. “Leave him alone,” I wanted to shout. “Can’t you see? I know that my dad could never have done any better. He’s harmless. Leave him alone.” But I couldn’t speak, not like that anyway. Even with Dad visiting, the threat of having to chop wood in this cold was there. “You’re not honest, you go out and Dad can watch.”

Then I got to Carlos, the man I had been with through ninth and tenth grades. The man I hid away with while trying pretend what love was. There was nothing else. My dad and Penelope despised this relationship, and through my convulsing stomach and falling tears, my dad would know the details.

I met Carlos when I was an eighth grader; he was a junior in high school. He stopped his car in the middle of the road to ask me my name. I called him, we went on a
date, had oral sex. Then he never called me.

One lonely day in the summer after eighth grade, my brother was having sex with my current best friend. I could hear them in the bathroom downstairs. I was stoned, feeling dirty and alone. It was a hot day, and I decided, I’m calling Carlos. He asked if I was alone, said he would come up to my house. He came in, dragged me upstairs, and changed the tunes to the oldies station on my radio. I lay there speechless. He undressed me, fast and hard, his body sweating in minutes, above me. No condom again. I promised, dammit. He made so much noise, left aching purple hiccups on my neck, so visible. He pumped and finished and left. As he walked away and I slipped clothes on, like a paid whore, he bit his lip, shook his head, and said, “I love that ass.” I didn’t hear from Carlos until the next winter.

I paused and I noticed small tears tumbling onto Dad’s sweater. I had never seen my Dad cry. When mom died that Saturday, I wept in my room with my best friend, Genevieve. I even took a walk in that bright winter sunlight, and wind. Everything was like a dream. So hazy. I didn’t even feel sick, or like the tears could do their job. Just hollow. We stopped at Erica’s house, and Mr. and Mrs. Gielow looked so sick and pale. And no one said a word after they said, “Honey, I’m so sorry.” I shook. Shaking was the only motion my body could do. I shook all the way home with Genevieve, walking on the sidewalks tiled with red and cement blocks, passing all the same homes and gardens, passing the trees and bear park where I used to climb on the marble bear, passing the hidden waterfall that flowed below St. James road and could only be heard.

Dad didn’t cry. Never. He took us to a movie that night. Said life had to go on. We went to see *L.A. Story* with Steve Martin. It was supposed to be funny, but I couldn’t laugh or eat the popcorn. And that night, when we got home to a house without Mom for the first time, I asked if I could stay across the street with the neighbors. I couldn’t bear the empty house. Dad didn’t cry.

Now he cried. As my story about Carlos progressed through the years when the drugs progressed and the sex more violent and my pain poignant, he cried and wiped the tears with his sleeve. Heartbroken, head hung, he cried.
My long, straight brown hair was a symbol. I had been growing it for about five years, because it was sexy, because Carlos liked it. But when I arrived at Mission Mountain, I told the hair lady to just cut it off, all of it. I looked in the mirror when I was alone and cried. I looked eight again, with straight, mousy brown hair, jagged on the edges, plain. But it didn’t matter, my freedom was gone. Nobody looked at me anymore.

I’ve always thought the hair was the reason he didn’t recognize me. I had been there for five months, but I had been gone for eight. The last conversation I had with Carlos was in the Portland Airport, crying and begging him to wait for me. One year, that’s all, one year.

I had been out shoveling shit, the normal afternoon chore, and the snow had melted off only for the freezing temperatures to create ice, almost too slick to walk on. I was wearing my rubber rain suit, a hat, and rubber boots. I never minded horse chore. The shit didn’t bug me. It was a time I could think and I loved the rolling pasture, watching the horses fly the lengths together, or the herds of deer softly grazing, making almost no tracks. I was hanging up the shovel, dripping with horse shit, hay, mud when I saw an unknown car. The only visitors were the Food Services guy, the postman, or parents, but either we knew the car, or we knew parents were coming. Somehow, the car looked familiar. I walked cautiously forward to see Colleen and Deb sternly pointing down the driveway, talking to a guy with a ponytail. Then I spotted the red Crane Cams sticker in the window. I uncontrollably started to bawl, lost my balance on the ice. As if slow motion, I watched Carlos arguing as the girls poked their heads out the kitchen window. Colleen ran over to me, ran me into the office with her arm covering my head. I paced the office, wringing my hands, sobbing, talking nonsense.

John later took me into his office, brown eyes burning, asked me what Carlos had done. I told him the truth—nothing really.

"Why did you react like that? You seem terrified."

"I don’t know, it scared me."

"Don’t be scared, you’re safe here. Are you sure he never beat you?"
“Yeah, he was rough during sex, but he never hit me.”

“The sheriff has him held at Liquid Louie’s. Here is a letter I want you to put in your own handwriting and sign.”

It read:

Carlos,

I have been gone a while now and have changed. I do not want to see you ever again. If you try to find me, I will be forced to seek legal recourse.

Claire.

Those weren’t my words, not what I would have said to Carlos. The sheriff came and took the letter to him. I knew, this time, it was really over.

I knew it only a little at the time, but now I know I cried like I did because I wanted out. I wanted to run. Carlos was freedom. We both were suffering when we found each other.

In his 1970 Camaro we would leave, drive to an ocean and drop acid. We would make love on the sand dunes and wake up somewhere. We hung out with his buddies, worked on cars, drank all the time. In our ripped Levis and dirty hair, we smoked packs of Marlboros overlooking the city from someone’s tomb.

Even after I skipped my period and the little pink line read positive, I shrugged and dropped some acid. But a few days later, a heavy, painful, clotted blood arrived. I figured the test had been wrong.

We lived to escape. When that deep sinking pain of knowing that I had failed in school crept by, we would jump in the Camaro, buy some beer and drive away from the world of pain. I saw his hair, and his desperate face and wanted so badly to jump through the window of his Camaro and drive away. I cried because I felt so sharply how imprisoned I was.

Later that night in group, John explained that it was my fault. He asked how I got Carlos there. I didn’t. Then he said I wasn’t being honest, that I had telepathically summoned him there. I didn’t understand. I listened to girls go around the room and tell me how angry they were at me for making him come there, that it scared them. I sat
crying. Then John asked me again.

"Why did you react like that Claire?"

"I was shocked, scared."

"Tell us the story of your relationship."

So I told them. I told them about our freedom together, and the stealing and the lying. I told them how it all fell apart.

Carlos lost everything. Because he was so drunk one night, the judge took his license, which made him drink more, which made him lose his job, which made Carlos’ sister, Bunny, a well-respected crack user, decided to kick Carlos out of the house he lived in with her since his grandma died, when he had no car, no job, no money. I would save him.

Carlos could live with me, I said, but my parents couldn’t know. So began my three months of hell. Every night, before seven when they returned, we were already locked in my bedroom with enough food and beer to get us through the night. I had a t.v., so we were fine. If my parents wanted to talk to me, which was rare, Carlos would simply go into the closet. If Carlos had to pee, it was out the window into the side yard. But even that was risky, because if anyone was in the kitchen, a stream of urine would pass right over the window, so we reserved beer bottles he pissed in, and kept them in the closet until it was safe to discard them: They often stayed for weeks. His car was another issue. Where I lived there were many steep stairways that connected parallel streets. We parked his car at least three stairways away, so they would never find it. And lastly, I blacked out the windows with blankets, and jammed sex wax into the lock of my door so it couldn’t be picked. I lay in my bed every night, terrified of being caught, telling him to lower his voice after the beers kicked in, trying to put up with his disgusting drunken self and dreaming of having my life back. No way. There was simply no way.

Carlos also needed money, so I began to steal. Dad left his wallet on the desk every morning and left the house to walk Penelope to the bus stop. Being in the shower when they left was my alibi. Dripping wet, I would run to his wallet when I heard them leave, steal twenty or forty, and be in the shower when he returned. It worked, with some
close calls, for a year. Carlos never took the money and tried to find a job, or a place to live, he took the money and poured it into his ever-growing drinking habit.

Unfortunately, when Carlos finally got a job and was able to rent a room with his buddies, it was too late. I was sick of watching him puke and then turn around and try to kiss me. He wasn’t my handsome hero anymore—looked more like a dead beat in my eyes and some of his friends were looking really attractive. Tyson and I came close in his room one night while smoking a joint, and Alan and I would spend days together. Carlos knew it, so he drank on.

Still, he believed we were bonded in a mystical way, that even in death, I was his. He needed me. I couldn’t leave—just couldn’t. On the darkest nights, the nights after we fought and I told him I wanted out, and meant it, he would cry and then cautiously threaten my life—sitting in his car at Wildwood School, under tall pines on a windy road, feeling so sad I had ruined so much, he whispered through clenched teeth and wet eyes, “Don’t you dare ever leave me. I’ll kill you.” I never did.

When I paused, John asked snidely and quietly, “What about the part of him beating you?”

Confused, I said, “What part, that didn’t happen.”

“You told me earlier today in my office that he beat you.”

We argued, even yelled. Of course the room was convinced that I was the liar. My face turned crimson with rage. He told me to hit the bataka block for a while. While two girls held either side of the foam block, I got the large, duct taped paddle and beat the hell out of it, picturing John, furious that I had lost even more freedom—my own story.
Wet—November 1995

This has proven to be a wet fall into winter. Though I am outside everyday, I would take snow over water any time. There is such a quiet to snow. The hollers of others seem distant, the wind seems stuck, and the trees look just about perfect—tilted with weight, warmth. The only pain there is to snow is that I have to shovel snow before I get to the dirt.

Snow has been falling heavily for a few days now. This morning I woke to the sound of water pouring off the roof drainage and a deep feeling of dread weighted me under covers. Today, I'm going to be wet.

I work hard, so the sweat keeps me from being chilled, but my open stump holes are filling with water, two or three feet deep. My boots stick to the heavy clay they rest in, toss me off balance as I try to move about. There is an ugliness to this side of nature. The trees no longer sigh with snow, but drip, and the leftover clinging snow looks like ice cream left on the counter. The ground, where snow has melted away, is thick deep mud that swallows. The sky hangs musty and far away. I hate days like these.

I have three open holes with stumps taunting me, their roots still grasping the earth. Standing in the water is tolerable, but each time I hit my ax blindly into the hole, water splashes and the impact on my arms is unbearable. I have also axed my feet a few times. I just can't see.

Logically, I should go in, but I already asked John and he said he didn't give a shit.

God, John. I wish you knew. I wish you knew how miserable it was, or how it feels when your ax hits through water into still strong roots. I wish I could say that I was cold and tired and wet, that I was enough of a human to say that and you would tell me to get inside and get warm and sit by the fire and someone would come and bring me tea. I wish I wasn't so healthy or resilient. Little Sarah would be hypothermic by now, but I'm still kickin', just miserable. And misery isn't enough.

I am starting to get cold because my work goes more slowly. I have even tried to dig some of the post holes, but those too fill with water. I'm in my chicken coop now,
which keeps me somewhat dry, but the wet is starting to cool and it's not even lunch yet. Do something, he said. At this point, I can't even cry. It just won't do.
I had never been north. Seth needed to be dropped off in Seattle for a bike camp, so we made a trip of it, just the three of us, now without Seth, the whole minivan to myself.

I got my first period that trip in the Seattle airport where we dropped Seth off. Mom was so excited, she and Dad took me out to lunch on the Pier and we ate clam chowder and drove to Vancouver, British Columbia. Mom loved fruit and always carried it in a cooler. She lied crossing the border into Canada.

I had never seen green like the trees in Canada, or how empty and vast every road, every city seemed to be. I had never seen blue like that of Lake Louise, the color of cold. I decided, very sure, that someday I would live in Canada.

We swung southward, heading into Montana, Yellowstone Park, of course. It was not long after the huge fires. So much of the land was still charcoal, yet wild flowers bloomed in the soot, contrasting against the black. We saw a grizzly mama and her cub, far away like a brown spot by the river bed, still, warning us strangers on the roadside to take a hike. Living where houses almost meld together, where nothing isn’t paved or zoned, where the “wilderness” is the corner park, I was enchanted and sure that someday I would live in the mountains.

But it wasn’t the grizzly bear, or Old Faithful or, seeing real cowboys on real horses that makes me remember. It was the headaches that began in Banff.

We were sure it was menopause, or maybe severe migraines. Of course, Mom was the age for menopause, and migraines, lots of people have migraines. The sun made it hurt worse, so mom bought herself a cowboy hat. And when they got really bad, she would sit on benches or stairs and wait for my Dad and I to sight-see.

The last stop on the trip was Salt Lake City and by then we were quiet. The Mormons were strange, the city too hot, and the lake swarmed with flies and smelled. I liked the salt water taffy, and the hotel we stayed in, but we were quiet.

The headaches only got worse once we got home. Mom was driving home one day from a hair appointment and, the second after she put the car in park, she passed out...
over the steering wheel. We all still acted as though it was no big deal—of course, it was alright.

Two weeks later, after I got home from school one day, Grandma was over and Mom was upstairs on the phone. Mom came downstairs, looking tired. "Baby, I have brain tumors. I'm sorry." I began to cry and she held me and kept saying sorry. Grandma pulled me into the laundry room and tried to give me a pep-talk about "when" mom died, it would all be okay. Mom was not going to die and I hated Grandma for saying that.

But mom was going to die. The tumors were as large as small grapefruits and they were inoperable. Doctors projected Mom could die any day. Any day turned into six months, but they were six months of nurses, vomiting, the sound of her limp body hitting the floor, excruciating pain—sick, bedridden. Dying.

Each day when I got home from school I stood in the hallway and hollered her name, waited for an answer. I scaled the stairs cautiously, hoping not to find a cold, empty body.

I wanted to go North again where there were only evergreens and cold. I wanted to go back to the time before the headaches and ignore Mom's dying, ignore the quiet in everyone—the waiting.
How it Came About—August 1995

A group of us, the two Sarahs, Carolina, and Jen and myself were believed by John to be getting too close because we loved each other, had playful nicknames, stories and inside jokes. At Mission Mountain, this was really serious. If there arose a structure within the structure, then the whole system could be overcome. I knew that was the real fear, but they just said it was because we left people out. As discussion of this grew over a month, we all were deemed the problems of the group. Soon, each of were put on workcrew and called the chain gang.

This never made sense to me. I never felt a part of the group; in fact, I felt left out and was trying to gain their approval and friendship. Even others agreed, but I ended up being the one the longest on workcrew, the one that would go down in history at Mission Mountain, the one they tell stories about still because I was pounded so hard. So hard.

John decided that I hadn’t really changed, that somehow on my own doing, I had been secretly avoiding confrontation since I had come, and that made me the slimiest, sneakiest one there. I just wanted to please. He decided I was driven by the devil, malicious and calculating, that the harm I had caused to my family was worse than anyone else because I wanted and loved to hurt. He was convinced that I slept with so many people because I sadistically loved sex, that I had no care for human life. How wrongly he judged me, but I wasn’t allowed to say that, and the months went on with John and his nightly verbal beatings during group. He was so powerful, he made everyone else see me the same way, and girls started saying they were uncomfortable around me, didn’t trust me, thought that when I touched them endearingly, I was trying to get down their pants. Worse than what he said, was the fact that I could never defend myself, and that slime John created in his words, slowly seeped through my pores, into my being, so that I too came to believe this about myself.

Like I said, I don’t know why. I will never know, because even John probably doesn’t know. And what he doesn’t know most is that I am not the malignant blob metamorphosed into a woman, whom he re-created. I am a woman with one hell of a will. I got it.
Workcrew lasted almost a year, and everything I did led to worse. By November of '95', I couldn't speak or touch, and after the initial pain wore off, I began to love my little silent world in the pasture and in my imagination.
Three Hours—Spring 1995

We were in trouble. Nobody’s chores were perfect, girls were late to group meetings, and we were once again deemed “full of shit.” At Mission Mountain, these things were not seen as results of normal life, but were capital offences. We weren’t allowed to call it “punishment,” because that meant it was happening to us. At Mission Mountain, they were consequences, results of our own actions.

Ellen was the most fed up of the bunch. We weren’t “working hard enough” during morning exercise, so John passed the stick to Ellen. Our consequence was to exercise until Ellen decided it was good enough.

I don’t remember everything about that day except the snow melting into deep slush and mud that we trudged through wearing heavy boots, layered fleece clothing. It must have been sixty degrees outside. We ran up hills so steep that we had to climp with our hands. We were timed. The more tired we became, the faster we had to run. We wheel-barrowed with partners through a rocky pasture for a couple miles. We hopped like frogs for a mile, screeching and yelping as our muscles turned to clay. I cried. I lost my breath like I always do. Ellen screamed, “Claire, I’m sick of your bullshit, you’re one of the reasons we’re out here, you slack off whenever you can, you’re full of shit and wallowing in it, stop crying and get moving, stop faking, we know you can really breathe.”

I couldn’t. I really couldn’t breathe. Sure, maybe it wasn’t asthma or bronchitis—maybe it was fear. My lungs tightened on the fifth lap and no one stopped because they were afraid too. And when my lungs just wouldn’t suck, I couldn’t stop those damn tears from falling.

By the time we were at wheelbarrows I had caught my breath and was angry enough to not care about my body. Some that had been strong wilted into the swollen wet grass, just wanting to quit. I didn’t want to quit anymore, and yelled at my partner, Alison, to hold my legs higher as I ran on the palms of hands. We finished strong and laughing. We didn’t care that afterward our legs and arms couldn’t reach higher than our shoulders or that we couldn’t walk down stairs. Three hours and it was over for the day, and we were laughing, Alison and I.
My method works. The first stump I dug with pure brawn, no technique, and it didn't work. Now I dig deep holes, perfectly circular around the stump. Everyone says it is wasted time, but I can take the stump to its death in a couple hours. I'm on stump twenty three in this pasture. My mom died on the twenty-third of February, almost four years ago.

The weather is bitter cold, yet the sun breaks through the hovering trees. If I work hard enough, it actually feels warm. The horses love days like these. I watch them bound over the hillside, turning abruptly at the gate and swooping back over the bald, shining hill. Their colors meld under the glare, almost indistinguishable. Sometimes, they graze right next to me and stare out the corners of their eyes. Now, they trust me.

I am beginning to love the quiet of my pasture. I hate the work, I'll never like it, but I don't mind the quiet. I wait for bursts of sun and for my ravens to call, the only ones to break the silence. Stump twenty three is under my favorite pine, the one by the fence line where the horses stay with me, where the sun reaches. There is even some sign of spring in the wilted, wet grass.

I haven't talked with anyone in a very long time. John leaves me alone now, but I still keep my head down in group so as not to arouse any attention. At meals, I eat quickly and leave, hoping not to have to say a word. I think my mom is out here, right now. I just don't feel afraid. When the sun is out, I see images of her walking away into light with Jesus. It's almost like they're just walking ahead to lead the way. I love seeing her with him, because I know that is what she left for.

Number twenty three is large, and the roots bleed when I hit them, which means this one will take a while, but I don't mind. It's almost like I get to visit with Mom here, under my favorite pine, while the sun still shines, hopefully, before more snow.
The Day Before--February 22, 1991

The day before Mom died I was in my room, listening to loud music, drawing, acting as normal as I could. Mom used to call for me a lot because she was scared and lonely and wanted me to hang out with her. Sometimes I really hated doing that. I just wanted to listen to my music and pretend.

But I heard her voice from the kitchen calling me and I ignored her. She persisted so I screamed back, "What the fuck do you want?" And a small, weak voice answered, "Help me."

I found mom on the floor, her back against the cabinets, in her pink sweats and fuzzy bald head. "I fell down Claire, and I can't get up." Above her was her food, like a baby's, cottage cheese and canned apricots. We sat on the floor together, as the sun set on that Friday afternoon into night. We sat quiet while I fed her the cottage cheese and apricots until I could gather her up, crutch the weak body to bed. Later that night Dad took Mom away in the mini van. I stared out the window as the mini van backed out and down the hill—my last glimpse of her body.
Thanksgiving and the Forty Dollars-November 1995

Often at Thanksgiving, alumni students, ones who were "doing well," would return to Mission Mountian to hang out with us. I always hated it because it was cliquish. Only the older girls knew the alumni and shared old stories, while the rest of us all felt weird and left out.

The staff star, Stephanie, came that year. She was a cute, but mousy looking girl, short, skinny, with long blond hair. Everything was going well—we had not been on intervention in a long time—so that Thanksgiving we celebrated with music and families, not mine, but I lived vicariously and enjoyed the tinge of normalcy.

It all came crashing down around midnight. Staff came banging through our rooms, all of us sound asleep. They turned the lights on, ripped off our covers and yelled to not even bother getting dressed, just meet in the lounge. We all figured another one ran away and the poor staff would be up all night searching the snowy woods for a popciced body. But we weren't that lucky.

Stephanie sat waiting, looking pale and afraid. She began, stern, but nice.

"I had forty dollars earlier this evening, and now it is gone. I have searched all of my bags, and I can’t find it. There is no way I could have lost it and I know one of you has it. This is really serious because one of you is planning to run with that money, so just confess."

The room held their breath, everyone scanning one another for clues, but no one confessed. For the first thirty minutes, I believed the guilty one must be in the room. They drilled all the likely suspects, which left the few we would never suspect, and then drilled them. We were baffled.

This scene was so significant because, for the first time, I knew the answer. Don’t you fools see? No one stole the money. I knew none of us girls would steal because we were so completely controlled, even in our dreams, by fear. Stephanie, I wanted to say, you lost the stinkin' money. I saw it in your makeup bag when we were getting ready to go out to dinner, and there were many times in the evening you pulled lipstick from that bag, that overstuffed, tight little bag. It fell out and some lucky fool is having a free dinner
while we sit in here, tired and afraid enough to piss our pants, and all of you people actually believe one of us took it.

We sat for a couple hours in complete silence. Sleep threatened my eyelids, I swayed in my jammies in that brightly lit room. Mike got fed up. He said he was sick of it. "Deb and I are going to turn your rooms upside down, and we’ll find it in someone’s stuff, and you’ll all be in major shit."

We all sat in silence, not looking at one another anymore, just trying not sleep, some with little smirks on their faces—perhaps they too knew how stupid this was. But when Mike pounded into the group room and threw forty dollars on the ground, we all held our breath. "Okay, I found it, I know who did it, now you have to confess." But no one did. We sat there until four in the morning, waiting. Mike finally confessed that he had taken the money from his pocket as a trick, and sent us to bed, still believing someone did it, warning us all, and apologizing to Stephanie.

It was the first time from my deep hole of shame that I realized our leaders were far from God. I could see the truth and they couldn’t; they were capable of being wrong, yes, I knew it. I would hold that little secret within me.
December 1995
December. Weather has been the same. It snows, then melts, then rains, then freezes, then snows again. I have almost forty stumps removed; I'm getting close to fifty. There are four big ones left. They're fresh, so I know they'll be hard.

My pasture sits on the southeast corner of the main grounds. I am over just enough hill that no one can really see me, but I've been told they can hear the echoes of my tools hitting wood all day. They sometimes make fun, saying that if they look hard enough, they can see my body fling back and down, like I'm crazy, possessed. I am. I can work all day like that and not get tired anymore. In the mirror, I see what was once a soft feminine body turning rough, breasts shrinking. My hands are calloused, scratchy on my bed sheets. I like this strong, hard woman. I turn eighteen next month. That's strange because it means I can walk away from here any time. But something has changed in me. It's not for John anymore, or for them. I have to finish because, I know now, I can.

I still get peanut butter and jelly breaks-- in fact, I need them because I've lost so much body fat, it is hard to stay warm out here. There is a trail next to me that leads down the hill, where it is wooded like it once was in my pasture. Even though my trees are dead, I like the sunlight I get. That path is dark and leads to the figure eight meadow. In the spring, the field is a marsh, bordered by towering old cottonwoods, their leaves back again swaying. Shayna was removing a stump down there the other day and came running up, terrified. She saw a grizzly in the figure eight meadow. I wished I was her.

The horses and I are definitely friends now. Maybe they just like the shade by the fence line, but I think they stop by to say hi, take a nap. And Rascal, the Golden Retriever, comes and visits now and again to drop a slobbery ball into my hole, looking down and smiling, saying “throw the ball, throw the ball.” I try to just hand it back to him because we all know one throw means Rascal and his slobbery ball will be at your heels for the rest of the day.

Today is warm, and sunny--almost feels like summer once I get working. The ravens, knowing now how much I need them to break the silence, sing over my head. I wait for them. Everyday.
Close to Christmas—1995

“Claire! Get over here!”

Dropping my tools, worried because John hadn’t disturbed me in at least two months, I ran to him, not saying a word. “Come to my office. Your parents are going to call.” I hadn’t spoken with my parents since the summer. I wasn’t allowed to. I guess John felt the more loneliness the better. I was muddy, so I asked permission to change first. I was sure they’d had it with me, they’re sending me off somewhere horrible. Shit, I’m almost eighteen. Please, I’ll do better. My speech was planned.

We all said hello, all nervous. Then John began, like I’d never expected, he began to tell them how hard I worked, that he was pleased with me. He asked me how I had changed. I simply said, I don’t think I know, but I don’t mind working anymore. That’s all John wanted, to push me to that place where, in the cold, or in the mud or completely alone, I could be okay. He then told my parents that he was taking me off work crew—it was getting too cold.

I cried and rejoiced, but only half way. I walked back to my cabin as the dark spilled into the valley bringing night, I watched that twilight blue crawl across that big sky and looked back at the dark on the southeast corner. What a horrible time to stop me, when my stamina was strong, when I wanted to finish. I knew also, that it wasn’t over, the first signs of spring, I would be out again.
After my freshman year, I was kicked out of Piedmont High School because of extreme truancy—142 period cuts in one quarter. High school was dangerous, miserable. People hated me, so I didn’t go. Instead, Carlos and I pretended we were free, just driving.

Beacon High School was my last chance, a private school, by the wharf in Oakland. It was designed for kids like me—the ones that have potential, but just can’t do it in a traditional school. At Beacon, I had sobbing fits with teachers because I was always on the edge; I heard the same speeches again and again, “Claire, you’re so smart, you could be so much, don’t do this.” And for some reason, that made me run.

My lesbian artist friend Keri was being accepted to Art School early, so she was taking her High School Proficiency Exam—much like a GED, but for sixteen year olds. With no goals in mind, other than living with Carlos, I decided that I too was going to take the exam, be done with rotten high school. It was the root of my troubles, you know.

Just off of Jack London Square in Oakland, in a old restaurant on the docks, my parents and I trudged through our Tuesday night dinner once again. It was a nice, quiet restaurant with a view of the bay and the lighthouse reflecting just enough water to see the movement of the waves. I was high, probably drunk. I was so tired, and that is what I finally said. I told them that I was tired of school, I was tired of being tired. I just couldn’t “float” anymore. I imagined, after my honesty, they would leap from their chairs, throw their arms around me and promise me anything I wanted. But there was silence, two looks of concern. They agreed, being tired of life at sixteen wasn’t any good.

The next day, Penelope came to me. She asked me if I would be willing to visit with an educational consultant. Sure. What harm could that do? She’ll tell me what I already know, set up an appointment for the test, my parents will be happy. We got in with her quickly, strange enough. Her office was the bottom portion of her mansion. The garden was landscaped with bushes, perfectly groomed flowers and brick walkway. And she was pretty and nice and took me into her office and closed the door. Not really knowing why I was there, I told her about my plan to drop out of high school, and then
she started. I should have learned, from years before when Ingrid ran away, don't tell them everything. But again, I did.

“Do you smoke? Do you drink? Do you use drugs? Are you sexually active? Are you depressed? How’s your relationship with your parents?”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, bad.” So proceeded the fire and the return for at least an hour.

She said she would “look at my options” and we were to meet again in the next couple of days. I left satisfied—thinking my honesty would show my maturity. I felt for the first time in years a sense that everything was going to be alright. I left for home, so unaware.

“Come in Claire,” she said sweetly, pointing to the warm, soft chair. It was late afternoon, two weeks after our first meeting, and just beyond her window was the garden, and the sunlight from the west, broke through the trees, enough to slant the blinds, just a little. She took a deep breath before speaking, pulled out a folder, and began.

“Claire. I’ve been doing some research and I think I’ve found something. It would only be six weeks. It’s in Oregon and it’s called Changing Directions.”

“What?”

“I think you could get some experiential credit in school for it, and once you get back, you take the test. Claire, it sounds wonderful. It’s all girls living in some abandoned school house. You hike, do some volunteer work, and learn a lot about yourself as a young woman. I think this might be just what you need.”

“Okay.” No fighting, no thinking. I agreed. Only six weeks, I thought. What could be so bad about six weeks? It might be fun, and my parents will be happy and give me what I want when I return. Carlos will be upset, but why not?

So the date was set for June. Carlos was upset. He cried and screamed in his car, telling me I promised I would never leave him. I promised I wasn’t, just six weeks, that’s all, and I would be home forever and we would live together. I secretly hoped, in my fear, that this would lead somehow to the end of us. As we sat in his rusting Camaro, on that hot afternoon, Carlos begged me to come back, not to go at all. I felt ill. I wanted to run
from his car, from the foothills, run from all these messed up years with everything so ruined. I left him at the bus stop, just beyond the gates of Piedmont. He was crying, and this time, I was too. We hugged and kissed and said, “See ya soon.” But we cried like it was forever. I turned quickly, not looking back at that poor, sad man standing on the corner crying for the only stability he had ever had. I passed through the stone pillars that led to the winding St. James road where I had grown up, played, known people here and there, picked out my favorite Japanese garden, saved dying fledglings. A hot summer in California was approaching, and I was leaving it all behind for hope.

A grain at least is all I had. I woke early that Saturday morning. It was the fifth of July, the same day years before I got my period for the first time in Seattle and mom took me out to lunch and we had clam chowder on the Pier. My room was clean for the first time in months. I made my bed, hung my towel, rituals I never performed. I felt some feeling of finality even though it would only be six weeks before I would be back at 3 Croydon Circle.

We were all silent on our drive to San Francisco Airport. The fog seemed to swallow the Bay Bridge, revealing only feet in front of us. The highway was eerily quiet, too early on weekend for travelers, workers all sleeping, enjoying another weekend. When they my parents left me at my gate, there were tears in their eyes. Why were they crying? I knew they must be happy to see me go. I walked onto the airplane and left behind my parents, Piedmont, and a dying life.
Melted-Spring 1996

I was right. The grass began to shoot, the snow is gone, I am back again in the pasture. John said it gently this time though. He said I have just a few more stumps, and a fence to build.

But I’m crying. This piece of land harbors so much sadness. My stump is so stubborn; maybe I’ve lost my touch. I just wish I could have finished then, when I felt so strong. Get up, Claire, keep pushing. At least, the summer is coming, and the light is always here. But I feel far from finished and that scares me. Where’s that image of Mom, where are my ravens, my horse friends? It all seems so familiar, but different. God, I just want to be done. Just done.
Changing Directions did what the consultant said. I had not been that happy in years, I had not been so close to girls either. We spent two weeks in the Sisters backpacking, we volunteered at a children’s fair in downtown Bend, smoked cigarettes at night when the sun went down, singing and talking. Mostly, began to dig at some of those wounds, the ones that were festering and getting worse.

But a darkness drowned us all the last week. Diedre found out from her parents that they were sending her away to a “lock-down.” We all consoled her while she cried and panicked, helped her plan to run away, secretly thinking, thank God it’s her.

But as the days came to a close in Bend, Oregon, at our abandoned retreat under the mountains, more girls’ cries were heard from the telephone room, more consoling, and the fear in us grew. Then the last weekend came, the weekend with our parents, where we shared one on one with them how we had changed and grew— right, that’s what you told us it was about!

Really, it was the weekend of our relocation, the one where it was revealed that Changing Directions was a holding tank that bought our parents time to decide which hell they were going to send us to. And all over the grounds, the screaming and swearing could be heard, my own as well.

I should have shut up. In the first hour, it was just going to be a “normal” boarding school, but my swearing and throwing and kicking, turned it into another “program.” In that little classroom, a demon rose out of me. My voice was loud and evil. I said awful things to my father. I blamed him violently through messed up hair and a reddened face. This devil told them to rot in hell, burn, die—the devil ranted, paced the room, climbed the walls, and then begged.

Please, I’ll be good, please, send me to Aunt Linda’s, please, please. When the pleading ended, I reassured them, they couldn’t stop me, I would run and never come back. It ended there. The counselors took me out back with the rest of the quiet red devils to smoke a cigarette.

So it was final. In a few days, I would be put on a plane, flown to Spokane, and
taken to Montana to a ranch called Explorations. Farther and farther from home I was going.

The month at Explorations, my “evaluation” month, went bad, very bad. I have never been crazier in my life. Maybe close. I felt crazy at Explorations. When they picked me up, they informed me, in a callous, non-loving way, that I was being dragged once again out into the damn woods for another trip, this time for three whole weeks. I told them no way. They told me too bad.

We went to a beautiful spot, one I would return to now with pleasure. On day two, with our hiking boots on and our gear ready, we entered the Gros Ventre of Wyoming, the sister wilderness to the Tetons. So different from the wilderness of the Cascades, the Rockies were filled with pines, more cloudy, their mountain faces dauntingly powerful. I should have just hiked, shut up, and done my duties. My devil and I made a lot of trouble. We threatened smaller girls in the group with a fist to carry some of our gear, we lied indecently, we flirted with the wrong ones—counselors—and, as a result, got pounded hard. Half way through the trip, two frightening women, the ones that decided if we could stay in the extended program or not, spent the whole evening on me. Now, I can’t remember exactly what they said, but it wouldn’t be the last time, in the flicker of a campfire, I would feel like I wanted to curl up and die.

Their final decision was that I was too nuts for their program. I needed something with more discipline, no boys, and more time.

My devil retreated like a whimpering dog, tail tucked. I was never more afraid, after never being more crazy and I entered Mission Mountain School, only hoping to keep that cursed devil down.
Before—1990

In a dim light, one night before Mom died, when I really knew it was coming soon, we talked about the place she was going. I made sure that if God allowed, Mom would contact me any way she could, and in ways I would know it was her. She agreed, “Of course.” In those nights, after that February morning, when I was calling for her, the wind carried her answer.

I have to believe.

Or it was the scratching of a branch upon my rain-sodden window, scratching to get my attention, to say in its own way, don’t cry, it’s always all right. Maybe it was my cat who crawled into my lap and purred, who had never done that before. She only loved Mom. When memories began to haze, I looked to pictures as my grasps—some faded and yellow, some I can almost smell.

I always search for the hidden meaning, in the fortune cookie after Chinese, or in my dogs, or in the face and actions of a person whose love I believe could only be inspired by you. Your presence, I recreate in my life. I tell stories always, and repeat your jokes and quirks, and when someone admires how much I look like you and when I notice that my voice sounds just like yours, I am filled.

I know that you are gone, but somehow, in some unknown way, you live on in me. And I know, dear Mother, that when I marry this summer or when I give birth to my first child, I will miss you terribly. Before the priest who is calling on God for the two of us, under the lamps in a hospital room, I will be searching for you in the faces in the crowd and in the wind at the back door, or maybe in just that feeling of you near.

When my breath begins to shorten and fade, I will know you strongest and fear nothing because you have guided me to my destination, whatever that may be.
It was the next spring, over a year since her death that I found them. I was rooting through Dad’s drawers, like I often did, just looking at pictures, remembering. I did this most when I felt lonely. I still do. Somehow, the images keep me company.

The bottom drawer was heavy, hard to open, so I dug around trying to find what was heavy when I uncovered a small green box, completely sealed, labeled Carol Mallory Munson. I slowly pulled the box from the drawer, realizing how heavy it was, so dense, and read the print from the crematorium. It was Mom.

I never grew up religious, never went to wakes where an aunt was overdone with makeup and we all kissed her goodbye. I had never seen death except for my hermit crab. I didn’t know about an after life. All I knew of was body, and within a small box were the remains of my mother, unburied, in a box in a drawer. I couldn’t escape the image of my dear, soft mother burning to ashes.

Horrified, I hid the box away, angry at my dad for letting her stay there, and not be buried with her grandma, like she asked. Maybe he needed her there, next to his bed. After that day, the room grew eerie. There was ash and bone fragment, my mother, and I felt haunted and sad. Still, I returned to the box to talk; I felt more presence within her ashes, than in my pictures. And Dad didn’t know I took her out often until he finally gave her away to be put in the ground. Now, I visit the ground.

She rests in Tulocay Cemetery, in the Napa Valley. The cast iron gates are tied open with the old twisted sign, Tulocay. There is a family plot there, names I have heard of, history that goes as far back as a century ago. Her plot is on the hill, always warm and in the sun, not shaded by trees. She must love that, being always so cold, like myself. Even in L.A. in the summer, we put on our sweaters. Her headstone is so simple and laid in the grass, crudely printed: Carol Mallory Munson, 1945-1991. There is no declaration of love, just her name and the record of her years on this earth. Every time I visit, there are tears and few words. Just hello Mom, I miss you Mom. Last time, I got to tell her I was getting married, but I know she knows that. It’s like I have to tell her spirit and her body, those remains in the soil, feeding the grass, that were once her. I feel that she hears...
The names of others I only know as names. I know nothing of who they were, how much they were loved. I have pictures, I have my memory. But someday, I too will melt into the earth and feed the grass and my name will be an engraving on a headstone. Remembering is all I have, to make you live, Mom, beyond me.
Leaving—August 1996

So many stories about this odd place. Unless one had lived here, one could never understand the oddities, the fear. I am not egoistical enough to compare Mission Mountain to Manzanar, but it was close.

I’ll not forget girls peeing their pants, too afraid to ask to pee, sprinting mountains with screaming staff poking our rears, the overall fear that infested that beautiful ranch in the mountains. We were girls that needed truth and light and beauty—did we need it and all the rest slapped onto our faces? I curse them and thank them all at once. I curse them for making me so afraid, for making me believe that I was born of filth, for making me hate my being so entirely. I thank them for giving me the opportunity to want to die and then find that ever-present unceasing light, on my own.

It came to an end, like everything does.

We went, for our second summer, to the Rocky Mountain Front and camped at Benchmark. I remember such a peace, because it was only days before I would leave and begin my life. The last day, before Dad and Penelope came, John took me out alone onto the lake at dusk to go fishing. He taught me how to row the boat, didn’t say much. Then, in the car, back to the campground, he told me how much he cared for me, that few people could ever make it through his tests and come out with his respect, and I did. What I hear today in those words is I can come out respect from the darkness. But what about the light?

There are still stumps, just a few. John doesn’t seem concerned; I hope they stay. They are a few of the largest, the strongest, and now with spring, daisies and shoots of tall grass grow around their bases. Shrines. The fence posts are raised and tightened securely, the rails hung, even the gates work. I just finished the south gate, used old rails that weren’t ever peeled—skinny and weathered. I will always use the south gate because it is hidden, back against the trees and the barbed wire where the horses sleep in the shade.

When I finished the south gate, I swept the area for loose nails, old roots of stumps, roots still gripping the ground, easy for Artemis, our new foal, to trip on. Dutchess gave birth to her in the next pasture over a few weeks ago. We all woke as the
sun was dawning over the eastern hills of the ranch. The birth was voluminous, sloshing fluids, the smells, the wet. Lynn pulled out Artemis, and within what seemed to be minutes, she wobbled to her feet, standing and new as her mother greeted, groomed. The other horses, nearby at the fence line, stood still, silent, protective. My pasture was dark that morning.

Grass grows wildly, up to my knees, where there used to be a ground full of barren stumps. The soil is soft, nice to lie in. I imagine, Artemis will be happy here as she grows—there is plenty of shade and plenty of light. I can rest now, and not worry, not be afraid of John. My work is done and the sun is so warm today, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if I rest.

It seems this is all about returning, returning the land to its state before the trees, returning with spring, the grass and the daisies and the bugs, returning to quiet—a warm afternoon quiet with only the breath of wind, the quiet that was once so unbearable because everything else sounded like thunder.

Living in the Rockies now, is like I returned to the time before everything fell apart. Back to the contrast of wild flowers growing in black soot, back to water the color of cold, back to where the mama grizzly defended her cub and everything was going along—just like life does, like the windless heat before an earthquake. Remembered.