

**It Must Have Been the Roses**

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For Summer Rain—my link to the past, my tie to the future, my anchor to the present. Thank God for you, Summer Rain. You made those endless nights a little less lonely. *Together, my child, forever we'll be together.*

*for my Goose*

## Introduction

I was first introduced to memoir at Carroll College. I enrolled in a creative writing course that focused on the genre of memoir while I was still undergoing the effects of trauma in my own life. Memoir, I learned, is a whole genre of individual survival stories. These stories fill the gaps between who we think we are and who we thought we would be. Often, these enormous gaps go unnoticed. Robert Fulghum (1995) recognized these moments of transition and identified them as moments of “liminality:”

The moment when something of importance happens to you, for the first or only time, may not be recognized at the time as a rite of passage or a ritual event. Only much later will you see its crucial moment in the scheme of things. There is an exact word for this phenomenon: ‘liminality.’ ‘Liminality’ is the word for the threshold moment, from the Latin root *limin*, meaning the centerline of the doorway. Liminality is the moment of crossing over. It describes the transitional phase of personal change, wherein one is neither in an old state of being nor a new, and not quite aware of the implications of the event. (p. 50)

At the start of this project, I found myself lost in my own state of liminality. My life experiences created in me a stranger, unrecognizable to myself. I used this opportunity to reconstruct, in the form of memoir, a life misshapened

by an unexpected tragedy. I gathered the pieces of my two very different lives and wrote about the “threshold moment” separating them. I linked these two conflicting worlds together and in doing so, I experienced an incredible journey to self-realization. Richard Hoffman (1999), in an essay on memoir, wrote:

The memoirist discovers his destiny, not his destiny hereafter, not some soothsayer’s fortune, but what causes and effects, influences and resistances, circumstances and compulsions have been, often unnoticed, at work. He discovers what subjects, predicates, objects, and modifiers have sentenced him. He comes to understand what the future was.

This is my survival story. It is a story of loss in all its forms: loss of innocence, loss of youth, loss of identity, and loss of life. It is an attempt to give structure to the grief I struggle with; the grief that allowed me to take on this project and followed me through the endless nights of giving it form. “The motive of the memoirist is grief, with its accompanying outrage and incomprehension” (Hoffman, 1999).

I struggled with the events of my story. For many months, I worked towards a happy ending full of answers and the certainty of a better tomorrow. This did not do justice to my story, nor did it honestly reflect the person I am today. The process of writing memoir, I learned, is much like the grieving process. Julie Reece Deaver (1988), in her young adult novel Say Goodnight, Gracie, wrote that “Grief travels a certain route—if you could plot it out on a

map you'd have a line that twists and weaves and eventually ends up near the point of departure" (p. 3).

The following story is true. The lines illustrate genuine emotions and events. Although I am a hostage to my own perceptions and desires, I worked towards creating an honest portrayal of the tragedy that changed my life. "In memoir, the imagination serves memory; in fiction, it is most often the other way around, with memory indentured to imagination" (Hoffman, 1999). I am grateful for the experience I gained in writing a memoir and the ability to give these circumstances their own life, so that I might continue my own.

It Must Have Been the Roses

**Jessica Yarusinski**

## Part I

*Trees whisper to me, dancing gently in the breeze with outstretched arms. Their motions are delicate and I imagine myself being carried away by the strength of their branches, uplifted into the sky where the breeze tickles my shoulders. They beckon, but I look away. It isn't the same, but nothing has changed . . .*

*. . .Bark scratches her legs, but she hangs there looking at the ground above her and the sky beneath her. For the very first time, she realizes the limitations on her perceptions. She always stood straight up and now she hangs straight down. Can we really be on the earth but have no direction at all in outer space? Blood rushes out from her head and down to her feet when she pulls herself upright on the branch. The tree embraces her, swallowing her frail limbs into its own. The mighty tree. Stable. Strong. She peers out on a world in where self-preoccupation reigns. Dad mows the lawn. Mom fertilizes the garden. J.P washes his car; Ben lights a cigarette, killing the moments before she joined him. All blind to her eyes. All blind to the world beneath them. . .*

*. . .Lonely trees beckon, falling forward from the strength of the storm against their backs. Grass below me dances, waltzing in the wind. A flag on the neighbor's garage flips wildly. I watch the rain run towards me from miles away, beating the ground in hard pellets like a stampede. It approaches, speeding, laughing tears which cool the asphalt. Lightening streaks the horizon; an agonizing groan vibrates the sky. Rain mingles with dewy drops of sweat, but the fire inside me still burns.*

## Chapter 1

*O God, what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown, shall I leave behind me!  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,  
Absent thee from felicity a while,  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain  
To tell my story.*

*-Shakespeare's "Hamlet"*

Gene did not walk into my life. I dove into his. I began working as a waitress at Red Hot and Blue, a barbecue pit in Altamonte Springs, just outside Orlando, Florida. Gene also worked at "the pit". I was quickly drawn to him: the grace in his walk, the ease with which he spoke to people, but more importantly, the disinterest he seemed to have for anything outside his immediate realm of being. He led a simple life with simple goals, his immediate goal being the Grateful Dead show that June in Washington D.C. *The Dead in the nation's capital! Can you imagine anything better than a bunch of hippies hanging around the White House, all on the same weekend?* He didn't say much more before we were both working like mad to save money for a flight to Washington.

This was the foundation of our relationship. We waited tables and between shifts we would get stoned and either hit the pool or catch a Star Trek rerun. Neither of us went out much at night, except to put back a few beers at the bar across the street with the other waitstaff who worked our shift. But most nights we popped in a Grateful Dead bootleg and jammed the night away beside each other on his waterbed. Gene told me to pay attention to the different strings of Jerry, Bob, and Phil as they battled each other on guitar.

He taught me to recognize when a transition took place between *Dark Star* and *St. Stephen*—and thirty minutes into the set he reminded me that the band hadn't stopped playing once, yet they played five different songs.

Sometimes Gene's friend stopped by. Winston already bought his tickets for the show. Whenever he came around he brought beer, Gene rolled a joint, and both started "coaching" me for my first Grateful Dead show. *Don't be afraid to hold our hands, it's easy to get lost. Remember the name of the hotel, because if we do get separated, someone will get you back safely. It's tradition between sets to sit on the ground and break out all your goodies; people share pot brownies and acid, but you gotta have something to offer in return.* I humored the two of them by learning the hand signal if we were to separate in a crowd—the person separated from the group stood on the highest thing around them: a car, a fence, whatever, and threw their hand straight into the air—the universal sign of a Trekkie.

We made it to Washington for the show, flying in on Friday afternoon. Gene and I sat on one side of the plane; Winston sat opposite. As soon as the seatbelt sign went off, Gene uncloaked a flask of bourbon stashed in his backpack. We toasted Central Florida below, Washington D.C. ahead, Jerry Garcia all night. And we drank, coke after coke with bourbon as a chaser; sending cheers to Winston, who slammed beer throughout the flight. By the time we landed in D.C., we were loopy.

Winston's friend was driving down from Philadelphia and wasn't at the gate to meet us. We stole the opportunity to sneak outside, dodge the taxis and vans, and dive into a shelter of bushes where we passed a joint. Getting high, Gene and Winston sang verses from a Dead song:

*Sometimes the light's all shining on me*

*Other times I can barely see*

*Lately it occurs to me*

*What a long, strange trip it's been!*

We slid back through security, all of us guilty with a bag of pot shoved deep within our pants. Then we spotted a bar across from our gate, where we waited for Jon from Philadelphia to arrive, drank pints, and pointed out people wearing tye-dyes—other heads who flew in for the show. Out of nowhere appeared a mob of men wearing sports coats and shielding a dark-skinned man in the center. Winston jumped out of his barstool—*Look guys! It's Muhammad Ali!* Gene raced behind him. They shook his hand, *Good to meet you, Champ!* And Ali signed the cover of their ticket jackets. They returned to the bar, giggling like little boys, and Jon arrived. *You'll never guess who just walked by! Muhammad Ali! You just missed him! I'm surprised you didn't see the mass of bodyguards he had!*

We honked at all the people in tye-dyes as we passed bus stops and train stations. The city was alive with color! Hippies loitered street corners, kicking a hacky-sac between them and holding signs that announced their need for a ticket to the show. Young girls danced while their dread-locked boyfriends kept rhythm on drums and guitars. Volkswagen vans painted with flowers and peace signs bussed groups of fans up and down Center Street. When we arrived in our hotel, Gene walked to the convenience store across the street to stock up on beer. While he was gone, Winston “christened” me for my first Dead show by giving me the most beautiful tye-dyed t-shirt painted in bright yellows, oranges, and pinks. Gene nearly dropped the beer when he saw me in it.

Winston wanted to get to the scene early, so we all stuffed our backpacks with beer and squished into Jon's car, which overflowed with people we had met at the hotel. The stadium parking lot looked like a carnival, lined with old Volkswagen vans and hippies selling smoked sausages and hotdogs out the back. We walked by blankets covered with fancy, hand-blown pipes, beaded necklaces, more tie-dyes. And balloons.

We wanted balloons. Hippies substituted nitrous-oxide in place of helium in their balloons. They filled these balloons from a large tank in the back of their vans and displayed them for two purposes—to sell or to trade. We met a young hippie selling balloons for five dollars. We bought balloon after balloon, inhaled one after another and lost ourselves in a nitrous-induced trance. Everything outside of me moved in a steady vibration and I sat in the middle, completely still, and laughed at the way my world transformed into Cartoonland. We went back for more, and more, until we spent all the money we had. Then, I traded dances for balloons. I turned my tie-dye into itself, exposing my pierced and beaded bellybutton, and danced. The hippie filled balloons for us until his nitrous ran out. In exchange for collecting the empty balloons so he could reuse them at the following night's show, the hippie dosed us both with hits of acid. *People share pot brownies and acid, I reminded myself, but you gotta have something to offer in return.*

We caught up with Winston and Jon inside the stadium, where we set up camp on the floor. We spread out blankets and rolled joints and loaded our cameras. Giant balloons floated among the audience, bouncing off our heads and onto others. Bob Dylan took stage and jammed for the first hour. By the time he finished, the LSD kicked in and we were all tripping, jumping up and down for Jerry to come out. When the band did take stage, they were backdropped by a light show that resembled drops of food coloring in water.

Everyone in the audience bounced and sang along. Even during long intervals of pure instrumentation, we danced. We danced with everyone around us and it became clear to me that this, in some way, was life. Good people, good music, and the psychedelic tapestry of our dancing. Gene confided in me. *Someday, when things get bad enough, I'll run off on tour with the Dead.* Gene dreamed he could run away with the gypsies.

## Chapter 2

*Can you take me higher?  
To a place where blind men see.  
Can you take me higher?  
To a place with golden streets.  
-Creed's "Higher"*

Summertime comes to a close in Florida when tropical storms and hurricanes threaten the coastlines in late August and September. Grocery stores overflow with bottled water, canned goods, flashlights and batteries—people. Everyone prepares a shelter plan, like the bathroom in the house, protected by bedrooms on either side, but without windows that could shatter under strong winds. Local news advises communities to stay indoors and await an evacuation order should the emergency occur. Small houses and hotels along the water overlook a growing sea bringing with it destructive waves that swallow sand dunes.

But in central Florida we played. Hurricanes created amusement parks in Altamonte Springs. Days of rain flooded drainage ditches and overflowed lakes. Heavy winds tore branches from trees and dropped them on power lines, cutting electricity streets at a time. We watched the storm

from our living room; deep skies teased our captivity. We opened the sliding glass door inviting wind and rain into our home. Tigger and Dusty leapt the fence and scurried under the stream of rain that fell from our roof to the ground. They ran through the open door and back into the bedroom, where they hid in the shelves of shirts in our closet. Our cats panicked during storms and Gene always let them inside when it rained. The rest of the season they stayed outdoors, minimizing the fleas that attacked Gene's legs and left scabs for weeks.

These storms triggered the children in us. When the environment became the stormiest, we itched to go outside and run in the rain and jump in the puddles. When the rain slowed Gene looked up to me from where he lay on the floor and said *I want to walk on water*. I did not know what he meant. I only knew that I had never thought about walking on water before, and now that I had, it intrigued me.

We drove to Crane's Roost, where the lake reached far beyond its rim. We removed our shoes and splashed barefoot in the lake's soggy edge. Wind tore at our clothes but the air and ground felt warm. Gene led me to the lake's edge, where a boardwalk crossed to the other side. Only now the lake had risen, after days of rain, above the boardwalk. He took my hand and stepped out onto the flooded deck. Water only wet us to our shins. We continued walking, hand in hand, across the lake. The further out we walked, the more we appeared to be walking on water. When we finally reached the center of the lake, we stopped and imagined ourselves on top of water, gliding over the lake—the magic and power we held in such thought. Other families walked with one another around the lake, but Gene and I stood in the center of it. With Gene, I believed, I would experience everything.

Local weather bureaus name all hurricanes and tropical storms in alphabetical order, starting over at the beginning of each new hurricane season. By September, they had already named storms up to the letter J. From this came the name Tropical Storm Jerry—and Gene’s calling.

Only one month earlier, in August, Jerry Garcia died. For Gene, Jerry Garcia and The Grateful Dead represented a final refuge from the world of life, a following of people who gathered to get high, burn incense, and listen to the hymns that Jerry created on his guitar. They followed the band from show to show, living hand to mouth, but living tranquil, almost magical lives. But this one solace died with Jerry Garcia.

Gene grieved the loss by challenging the surf of Tropical Storm Jerry. From the boardwalk we watched the sea rise and fall, felt the wind whip through the sand dunes, and stood under giant raindrops falling to the earth. We stood alone, the beach void of any life besides that of the storm and any sound besides the crashing of waves on land.

Gene stepped into the ocean, where waves lifted his surfboard and carried him out into the sea. As riptides tossed Gene down the coast, I ran beside the water, watching him kick towards land. But the undertow was too powerful. The ocean pulled him farther and farther out and I knew that if Gene fell off his surfboard the sea would drown him. *Please don't try to stand up!* The boardwalk grew distant as I continued running. I finally dropped to my knees and begged God to bring Gene safely to shore. I prayed for a return of the magic that let him walk on water.

Gene did find the shore and we walked the distance back to the boardwalk. Under blinding rain and gray skies that shook with thunder, I thought about Gene and what he might have experienced in that water. I wondered if there was one instant in his swim against the storm when he

thought that he might not survive it. And I imagined how it must feel to confront your own mortality.

### Chapter 3

*A baby is God's opinion the world should go on.*  
-Carl Sandburg

Gene and I sat on our back patio beneath the night sky. He rubbed his lips back on forth on his forearm, thinking about having a child. Neither of us knew if we were ready. Having a child meant sacrifice and commitment, a complete shift in our lifestyle, a risk of failure—things we did not know how to approach.

*I can't believe we're having a baby.* Are we, I wondered? Gene's lips rubbed over his arm again. I looked to the sky for answers. I did not know whether to consider my pregnancy as an accident or a mistake, maybe a blessing—it seems perfectly natural to fall in love and have a child. It just seems like our relationship could have matured fully before this decision fell upon us. The timing in our lives could have been better, but there never is a perfect time to conceive and raise a child. *We haven't even had a honeymoon, yet.*

The moon cast shadows in the yard, but it felt like heaven shadowed us. Maybe we offended God by moving in together and making love without ever taking our wedding vows. I thought about the times I lay under Gene, staring up into the deep center of the tapestry that hung above our bed, where all the colors evolved and blended together to create a living cosmos. It was like making love in the sun. It did not seem possible that God looked down and saw our actions as sinful. *Maybe He's throwing us a life preserver.*

I knew what Gene knew. A child would deliver change in all aspects of our lives. We could return to school, seek out new professions, and leave the service industry to the tourists. We could save money to pay off Gene's fines so he would no longer be under the supervision of the state. We could become the people we always dreamed of being and we could make the changes we always spoke of making. *We do have an extra bedroom.* Gene stopped moving his lips over the hair on his arm.

I turned to him under that night sky and thanked him for wanting to keep our child. He looked to the heavens and thanked God, for choosing us to have one.

Morning sickness followed me through afternoons and well into evenings. I began to feel less and less beautiful when I vomited on the way to school, during school, and on the drive home from school. It humiliated Gene when he had to pull our car to the side of the road, where I stuck my head out the door and retched. *Isn't there anyway to control that?* Walking into a grocery store, the smell of Clorox hit me so hard that I nearly missed the bathroom. It was not long before I stopped working at the barbecue pit to take up bookkeeping for a drugstore down our street. Although I no longer dealt with a stomach upset by baked beans and pulled pork, I worked early morning hours and heaved my way through the shift.

One morning on the way to school Gene offered me a hit off his joint. The smell alone made me ill, but I gratefully excepted his offer. I took a small hit before I passed it back to Gene, held my breath, and released the smoke with a choking cough. Gene rolled the windows down and amazingly, my nerves settled into an euphoric high. The nausea passed with one small hit. I

went through the school day comfortably and even felt a twinge of hunger on the way home. We stopped at our favorite bar, the Thirsty Whale.

While we waited for our tuna sandwiches to arrive, Gene and I talked of baby names. Gene wanted to name a baby boy Jeremiah Joseph. *We could call him "Jerry."* I agreed on the condition that I could choose a little girl's name. Gene shook his head as I rattled off names like Victoria Christine and Christine Lynneah. Just as our sandwiches were placed in front of us, I jokingly threw out the name Summer Rain. Perfect little flower child name. *Yes! Summer Rain. Let's name her Summer Rain.*

That night I lay in bed, thinking about how good I felt all day and how crummy I had been feeling earlier in the week. I thought about the next day and whether or not I would smoke pot to get past my morning sickness. It was a paranoid thought. The last thing I wanted to do was damage the child inside of me. I decided that I would not smoke anything until I spoke with my doctor. *Got it! Here, listen to this.* Gene pressed play on our stereo. Jim Morrison's melancholy voice came through the speakers:

*All the children are insane  
Waiting in the summer rain.*

Gene drove me to the hospital the next afternoon. I had been unable to hold anything down all morning and my doctor sent me to the emergency room because I was so dehydrated. She came by to check on me a few hours later, after I had finally stopped vomiting and fallen asleep. Gene spoke with her and learned that she had heard of no studies that linked birth defects with marijuana smoking. She did mention, however, that cigarette smoking had been directly linked to lower birth weights and asthma-related problems. Gene recalled this information for me on the drive home.

I still could not bring myself to smoke. And soon I grew resentful of the bag of weed that sat on our dresser and the money we threw away buying it.

## Chapter 4

*The one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life. So let's not allow ourselves to get fatigued doing good. At the right time we will harvest a good crop if we don't give up, or quit.*

*-Galatians 6:8-9*

By May the child had grown large in my tummy. I painted the nursery while Gene worked in the garden. We still did not know the sex of our child so we wanted to keep the nursery as neutral as possible. I chose a lily pad theme and painted larger than life sized frogs on each wall. As I moved my brush to detail a straw hat on one of the frog's heads, I flinched. *Goddamn Christmas ferns!* I looked out the window in time to see Gene's shovel head soar through the air and land in the grass. The house shook with the slamming of our door. It was not the first shovel that the thick roots of our Christmas ferns destroyed.

I walked into the kitchen and leaned against the sink while Gene searched the fridge for a beer. His back was covered in dirt and sweat and sweat soaked through his bandanna. Summertime was just around the corner. Gene swallowed his beer and turned to me with stormy eyes. I smiled to humor him and lifted my heavy body onto the kitchen counter. Gene came to me and placed his hands on my round stomach, hidden behind paint-stained overalls. His eyes cleared and looked into my own. *How about a swim?*

The nicest thing about the pool was the bushes. They lined the fence, creating a shield between ourselves and the outside world. Winston rolled up just as Gene removed his shorts to sunbathe. Winston brought his three-year-old daughter, Cassidy, with him. I was amused, watching Gene struggle to pull his soaked swim shorts over him when he saw her hop out of the front seat. She opened the gate and walked to the pool's edge. I raised my arms and Cassidy came to me, climbing down the steps and into the water. I carried her around the pool, distracting her from the pipe that was being passed between her father and Gene. I scowled angrily at them, but neither noticed.

Cassidy asked about the baby. I told her the baby was not due until early August. Then I held up her fingers to show her how many months. She felt my stomach and looked up at me mysteriously. *How's it gonna come out?*

## Chapter 5

*Take the way home, leads back to Sullivan Street.  
'Cross the water, home through the town.  
Past the shadows that fall down wherever we meet.  
Pretty soon I won't come around.  
-Counting Crows' "Sullivan Street"*

Tigger had not been home in days. Gene took the box of cat food outside, where he shook it back and forth and went *sspspppspppspppsppp!!* Dusty came immediately and wrapped his body around Gene's leg, hungry for a back rub and a bowl of Friskies. But there was no sign of Tigger. Gene

poured Dusty a bowl of food and closed the back door behind him. *I hope nothing happened to him.*

I followed Gene to bed and together we lay there, thinking of places where Tigger could be. *Maybe he got himself a woman!* We laughed at the thought of our little Tigger, neighborhood stud, camping out with the ladies and maybe even grubbing on some good cat food. We could not afford the canned cat food with fancy labels like "Sheba" and probably gagged our cats with the stale, dry food that came in a box. *No wonder he hasn't come home.* We settled into our bed with one final thought of Tigger sleeping snugly with an old, lonely woman who befriended him.

On our way home from school the following afternoon we turned the corner onto our street and I saw a dead animal on the side of the road. It grew more distinguishable as we neared and I looked to Gene to see if he noticed, but the car already slowed. *Is that Tigger?* The car came to a stop and we leapt from our seats to look closer at the animal. A tire had flattened his head, but the stripes along its back definitely belonged to Tigger. I gathered his crumbled body into my arms and walked slowly back to the car. He rested against me for the remainder of the drive, his soft fur absorbing tears that fell from my eyes. Gene's hand instinctively rubbed Tigger's stomach, but it no longer rose to his touch. *He was just a kitten.*

We wanted to bury Tigger in our garden. Gene dug a hole and I wrapped Tigger's remains in a blanket we had bought for the child. I sorted through our closet for a small shoebox to lay Tigger's wrapped body in. When I tugged on a pile of sweats, a crusty, brittle shirt fell to the floor. Before I threw it in the hamper I saw that the shirt was covered in dried blood. I had never seen the shirt before nor did I know how the bloodstains

originated. I folded the shirt again and returned it to the pile of sweats, then continued looking for a shoebox.

Gene finished digging by the time I returned to the garden. Tigger now lay in his box but I did not have the strength to close the lid. It looked like such a cold and ugly bed. Gene picked two budding roses from a bush in the corner of our garden and placed one on either side of Tigger before setting the box in the ground. We kneeled beside Tigger's small grave and patted the earth down around him.

That evening I asked Gene about the shirt I found in our closet. His eyes clouded over as he told me it was the shirt he tried to kill himself in. I knew Gene attempted suicide shortly before we met. Gene did not talk much about his past, but the scars on his wrists told their own stories. It shocked me, though, that Gene wanted to cling to such a horrifying reminder of that night. I caressed his wrists and wondered to myself how he could ever feel so sad and alone.

## Chapter 6

*The child was brought in, its infant beauty  
shining like a jewel in the greyness of dawn.  
-Lady Murosaki Shikibu*

In August I gave birth to a beautiful and healthy baby. Gene was present through the whole delivery, though I would not allow him to come near me during labor. I was not one of those women who shout horrible names at their men and hit them and kick them out of the room. Gene was not

one of those men who got in their women's faces, told them to breathe, and then passed out at the first peek of the head. We both stayed calm and did what we had to do to make it through labor. In my case, I held my breath, hoping to pass out and sleep through the rest of the pain. For Gene, he watched behind the doctor and described the child's pointed *Spock-head* as it crowned my vagina. The child must have crawled out of me because I do not remember pushing more than once before Gene announced that we had a boy, then giggled and realized it was a little girl with swollen genitals.

Summer Rain was taken to the nursery for blood work within minutes of her birth. I held her briefly before the nurse stole her away and left Gene and me staring at each other in awe. *I think we just saw the face of God.* Gene was torn between staying with me and going home to shower. He had been working when I called to tell him I was in labor. He was covered in barbecue sauce and sweat so I sent him away but encouraged him to return quickly. It was already dinnertime and visiting hours ended at nine.

I fell asleep after Gene left and did not awake until eight. The nurse brought Summer to me and taught me how to get her to latch on to my breast. When she finally started feeding I was filled with a soothing pleasure and watched the magic between us. Her nursing nearly rocked me to sleep but Gene burst in the room with Winston. *Congratulations, Sweetheart! A baby girl! Summer Rain, huh?* I smelled the pot on Winston's breath when he kissed me. Then I noticed that Gene's eyes were just as puffy and red. It hurt that Gene was off getting high instead of rushing back to the hospital to be with Summer and me. I let it go. I convinced myself that Gene wanted to share a "cigar" with his buddies in honor of his newborn daughter.

A roll of film and half a pizza later Winston left. Gene snuggled up beside me and watched Summer nurse. His hand caressed her soft, fuzzy hair

and squeezed her tiny toes. She swallowed four or five little gulps, then just sat there for a moment with my breast in her mouth. Then she swallowed another few gulps, then sat real still again. This went on until Summer fell asleep and we laughed softly at her dining delicacy.

## Chapter 7

*Ring the big bells,  
cook the cow,  
put on your silver locket.  
The landlord is knocking at the door  
and I've got the rent in my pocket.*

*Douse the lights,  
Hold your breath,  
take my heart in your hand.  
I lost my job two weeks ago  
And rent day's here again.  
-Maya Angelou's  
"Contemporary Announcement"*

The six weeks I spent recovering from Summer's birth reflected in our inability to pay bills on time. Gene pulled double shifts at the restaurant, leaving at ten each morning to return home exhausted at midnight. He leaned over Summer's crib and rested his hand upon her back until his own heartbeat slowed before he came in to see me. By the time he came home, I slept. Gene ached for my embrace, but the most I could do was roll over to meet his lips and fall back asleep. Summer awoke several times throughout the night, hungry for my breast, and I stole as much time as I could between feedings to rest.

Gene spent those lonely nights unwinding in front of Star Trek. The back door opened and closed several times throughout the episode. He burned his weed outside since we brought Summer home from the hospital, but I longed for him to drop the habit entirely. I never bought myself new clothes to compensate for the weight I had gained during my pregnancy. We had fallen months behind on rent. There were even times when I rolled pennies to purchase a bag of diapers. Money was tight. I could never justify his habit when it used a good portion of our income.

I started back to work two weeks earlier than my doctor recommended. Gene cut out his lunch shifts at the pit so I could continue bookkeeping at the grocery store. He supported my decision and spent his afternoons growing closer to Summer. I returned home at lunch to a meatloaf baking in the oven and Summer cradled in *Daddy's* arms, sucking a bottle of breast milk and staring up into his eyes. He acknowledged my entrance, but I busied myself washing dishes or making the beds, stealing glances at my loved ones in their moment of bonding. After Summer fell asleep, Gene lay her in bed and crept up to me from behind, wrapped his arms around a waist he had not felt in months, and kissed my neck . . . my cheek . . . my mouth. I pulled him close to me, inviting his advances. He lifted me and carried me to our bedroom, falling with me onto the bed. Even our lovemaking changed with Summer's birth. We spent more time holding and hugging, kissing and rubbing. We slowed the act down, to savor our stolen moments together. I lay next to Gene, stroking his hair, feeling his breath. Then I noticed a strange smell. *Is something burning?*

Gene spent the following day at the lake. Our friends helped out with Summer, taking turns holding or rocking her while Gene skied. Our friends

were good people, hippies with children of their own. In the meantime, I looked out on the Florida afternoon from the prison-cell of the courtesy booth. Customers approached me demanding refunds, throwing expired yogurt or bad lunchmeat in my face. I smiled through my agitation, apologized that their lives were so miserable, and convinced them all that I could not have been happier to meet their demands and bow down to their service. I pictured the lake, then I pictured myself in a bathing suit, still fifteen pounds shy of my pre-pregnancy weight. I wished I could use half the money Gene blew on dope to buy a gym membership and get myself back into shape.

I closed out my register at the end of my shift and stood in the sun, looking for our Toyota. Twenty minutes later, it pulled into the parking lot and stopped dead center in the driveway. I watched Gene, as he looked around the shopping center and pulled the car forward another five feet. A Lexus behind him sped around the Toyota and moved into a parking space not far from where I stood. I walked towards our car and as I got closer I noticed Gene's head falling forward and his efforts to lift it back up. *He's drunk.* Summer slept in her car seat. I yanked the driver's side door open and demanded that I drive home. Gene slid over to the passenger side and slouched in his seat. *How are you going to work tonight? Do you really think you can sober up in an hour?* He tried to respond, but his words slurred into one another and I could not understand what he said. Instead of trying to talk to Gene, I turned the radio up. His head fell back against the seat.

At home, I carried Summer from the car to her crib. After I tucked her in, I went to our bedroom and found Gene under the sheets. I tugged his arms. *You have to go to work! C'mon, Gene! Get in the shower! You have to go to work!* I started to cry. Gene's eyes kept rolling up into his head. It was useless—he could not talk, he could not stand up, he could not even see.

Although he drove our child around town completely obliterated, although he had to work in less than an hour, and although I knew that he lost his job at the pit in that moment, I had no energy to be angry. I sank into the overstuffed armchair beside the bed and sobbed.

When Summer awoke an hour later, I packed her bags, filled her bottle, and set out for a walk. We went to Crane's Roost, walked the boardwalk around the lake, and lay on a blanket to watch the sky become a rainbow with the setting sun. We returned home after sundown. Gene still slept.

## Chapter 8

*The right word at the right time is like a custom-made piece of jewelry,  
And a wise friend's timely reprimand is like a gold ring slipped on your  
finger.*

*-Proverbs 25:11-12*

Fourth of July was exciting for all of us. Summer turned one year old in August and started to wake up to the world. She could distinguish our voices and even pulled herself up on the coffee table to a standing position. I wanted more than anything to watch her eyes light up under a fireworks display in the sky.

Altamonte Springs had the largest fireworks show in Orlando. People swarmed the streets, bands rocked around Crane's Roost, BBQ stands sold ribs and beer. Winston lived on the street running alongside Crane's Roost and planned on enticing people to park in his yard for a small fee of five dollars. I thought it sounded like a great way to make money, but I was disappointed that Gene volunteered to stand in the street and direct people towards Winston's house for half the profit. I started back at the restaurant,

picking up two shifts a week to help with our money situation. Management allowed me to leave early in my shift, recognizing my need to spend the holiday with my child. Gene offered to send my brother to pick me up from work, but I hung the phone up in anger before he finished. The restaurant was slammed and if I did not leave right away, they would throw me back out on the floor.

Sweat formed a small swimming pool in my bra. I jumped a fence, tore my pants, and cursed the world loudly. My khakis stuck to my legs and my hair frizzed from the humidity. Cars passed and honked, which made me even angrier because people taking the time to honk could also take the time to offer me a ride. I passed Winston's house on my way to Crane's Roost and saw Gene standing behind a poster that read "Parking Available. \$5."

Summer was not with him. *Your brother took her up to see the show.* And I'm supposed to find them among all those people?

Gene just did not get it. I wanted so badly to see my daughter's eyes light up with the night sky. I wanted to giggle with her when the fireworks exploded. I wanted to share the night with my daughter, but my hopes vanished because of Gene's gallant offer to help Winston manipulate tourists into his yard. I turned away and started walking home.

When I was only a block from the house, our Toyota rolled up and slowed. Gene offered me a ride. I snapped something about already being home and kept walking. Gene sighed and looked straight ahead. He spoke softly. *Why can't you, just for once, support me?* After walking three miles, in the middle of a Florida July, wearing khaki pants and a long-sleeved oxford, he still managed to chill me with his words.

## Chapter 9

*Once divided, nothing left to subtract.  
Some words, once spoken, can't be taken back.  
Walks on his own with thoughts he can't help thinking;  
Futures are born, but in the past he's slowly sinking.  
Caught a bolt of lightning—curse the day he let it go.  
-Pearl Jam's "Nothingman"*

Our air conditioning went out on the same Independence Day weekend. The clock at the bank read 101 degrees. By Monday, our air conditioner had been out for three days and the repairman still had not shown up. I suggested to Gene that we take Summer to the pool. When the sun set, we could return home, shower, and go out to eat. I talked him into Margaritas and Mexican food and even teased him with the idea of falling asleep naked under our ceiling fan later that night. But he was frustrated, tired, and hot. *I'll meet you two at the pool. I want to call the repairman again.*

Summer giggled when she hit the water. One tiny tooth grew from her upper gums. Her goofy grin made me laugh. The swimming pool was wonderful and we shared it with no one. I kept peering through the bushes, looking for Gene. He still had not arrived.

I carried Summer through the water, pulling her gently from under her arms. The sky grew dark to the east, an afternoon storm brewing. I heard the sound of flip-flops and I squinted through the bushes and made out a pair of purple shorts. Finally!!

But moments passed and so did the stranger. Suddenly, the sky groaned with thunder, sending fear into Summer's eyes. With thunder came lightening. I did not want to stop swimming, but I welcomed the afternoon storm. The rain would lessen the humidity and cool the early evening hours. I carried Summer home.

The house was still when I opened the door. *Gene?* He did not answer. I thought he must have walked to the pool and we somehow missed him. We stepped back outside where the breeze was picking up. I looked for Gene all the way to the pool, but when we got there it was empty. *Hmm, Baby Girl. I wonder where your Daddy went.*

When we reached our house Gene had still not returned. Summer and I undressed and just as I turned on the shower the phone rang. I shut off the water, lay Summer on the bed, and spoke briefly with my brother. He asked if he could stop by but I explained that it wasn't a good time and that I didn't even know where Gene was. While we said our good-byes, I turned and faced the closet. All the shelves had fallen to the floor, taking racks of clothes with it.

I walked over to the closet and scanned the mess. Board games were scattered, books thrown in all directions, hangers and clothes in disarray. And right there, among all that clutter and chaos, was Gene's face. *NOOO!* I went to tear the shelves off him. I pulled and pulled but they were too heavy. I grabbed the phone, dialed emergency, and proceeded to scream for help through the line. *My boyfriend! He's hurt bad! The shelves in our closet fell on him and I can't lift them off!* I couldn't breathe or swallow. I couldn't believe what was happening. He hadn't moved. His face just lay there framed among the mess. His eyes were closed. *I think he's unconscious.*

The emergency line ordered me to start CPR. I went back to the closet and pulled at the shelves. I stood up and tried to drag them. I pulled again, only this time, I noticed his head was pulling with one shelf in particular. I lifted it again, and sure enough, his head lifted. *What the hell?* I started taking the hangers of the shelf, clearing the area around his body. As I exposed more and more of his neck, I saw it. Wrapped around his neck and

tied to the shelf. A belt around his neck and tied it to the shelf—*He hanged himself! God no! No, Gene, God Baby, can you hear me? Can you hear me, Gene? Wake up!* I felt the floor under him—it was dry. People dirtied themselves when they died. Gene was still clean. Gene was still alive!!

I untied Gene and dragged him from the closet. His head fell backwards while I pulled his deadweight. His mouth turned purple and the belt left a purple lace around his neck. I positioned Gene. I didn't even check for breathing, I just sealed my mouth around his damaged lips and exhaled. The most Godawful noise came from inside him as my air passed through his throat and into his lungs. At first I backed away in fear, but when I saw that he did not respond, I sealed his mouth and blew again. Summer started to cry from her view on the bed.

I placed my hands on his chest and counted *One-one thousand, Two-one thousand, Three-one thousand, Four.* . . I heard sirens. They grew louder and for the first time since I found Gene I realized that I was completely naked. A voice yelled into the home. The paramedics arrived. I threw a shirt over my head and slipped a pair of shorts over my hips and lifted our baby. They were walking so slowly! They stepped into the room and looked at Gene. *Is he OK? Can you help him? Can you bring him back?* I watched them place an air mask over Gene's mouth and nose as the older paramedic steered me from the room. He guided me all the way outside where the sky was dark with storm clouds and lightening streaked the sky. The trees above me swayed in the breeze. As we walked towards my neighbor's house, the paramedic asked me to tell him what happened in that room.

I turned and looked at him.

*Gene hanged himself.*

Later that night, after Summer fell safely asleep in my father's bed, when the rain stopped falling, the sky cleared, and the moon reached its peak in the night sky, I returned to our townhouse.

Winston blew bubbles from our front porch as I pulled into the driveway. I sat next to him and faced the street that overflowed with ambulances and firetrucks only hours earlier. Now the street was still, the houses around us dim. We sat in silence and watched the bubbles float effortlessly through the air. I pulled a flask of gin from my backpack and tipped it back before passing it to Winston. Our tree cast haunting shadows over the yard. *He's dead, Winston. Gene's really dead.*

I do not know why we agreed to meet at the house. Neither of us wanted to go inside. I thought of Gene still in there—his spirit—confused and lost, wondering how it all happened so fast. Maybe Gene did not want to die. Maybe it was a cry out for help that backfired. The sudden death that followed would cause any soul confusion—wondering how it died. Wondering if it was really dead. Maybe Gene was waiting for us to tell him to go on and assure him that we would survive without him. I was not ready to assure him. I had no idea whether or not I would survive.

## Part 2

*Sunlight warms my skin, but the internal flame burns me. Nothing looks the same. But nothing has changed. Waves still give life to the ocean's edge, swelling in her chest, overflowing with energy, falling softly into the water's hypnotic hymn. Ripples creep towards me, as if to tease this small child into play. But my eyes shift to shadows of birds, drifting across the sand, the way they have for twenty-two years. . .*

*. . . She chases birds, flinging sand and stone. They always wait until she can just reach out to touch the feathery tails—suddenly taking flight, leaving small footprints that wash away with the incoming tide. How quickly the birds are forgotten! "Daddy? Daddy! Carry me out with you! Promise you won't drop me, Okay?" He gathers her in his arms, jumping the waves until they reach a point where the crests rise above. He lifts his daughter into the force of the wave and she giggles when she feels it carry them. . .*

*. . . Sand slips through my fingers like lost love. Sitting on the beach where I spread his ashes brings an emotion of detachment, a willing withdrawal from the land that surrounds me. The ocean is a movie screen; I view the scene from an empty auditorium, losing all desire to find myself within this world. Broken shells reflect the scattered fragments of his bone, when I released him, allowing him to return once more to the earth. He drifted away, leaving me far behind, empty-handed, bleeding. Saltwater stings this oozing wound, but Daddy can't save me from these waves. I walk this sea alone. Alone, I choke on crashing swells and riptides.*

*Afternoon storm clouds gather on the horizon. I struggle through the dunes towards my car and hear the laughter of children. Their sound feeds this flame.*

## Chapter 1

*Going Home. Going Home. By the waterside I will rest my bones.  
Listen to the river sing sweet songs to rock my soul.*

*-Grateful Dead's "Brokedown Palace"*

My mother returned to her home in Montana the day after Gene's funeral. She asked me to come to Montana with her, but I was not ready to leave my life behind. I wanted to stay with my friends and I hoped to stay in my townhouse; it was my home and it was where I belonged. Mom and Dad thought that returning to my townhouse would only torture me further, but I knew my strength. Although they discouraged my decision, they understood my stubbornness and recognized the fear that it masked.

I had not been in my home since the night Gene died. I chose to return home alone. I did not want sympathy from anyone; I did not wish to be rushed away from the scene—from my home. When I opened the front door a wave of heat smacked my body. I walked slowly down the hall and into the kitchen. On the table was a card. I turned the card over in my hand and read the request to evaluate the paramedic's service. I crumbled the card in a fist. *You couldn't save him!*

I walked down the hall and stumbled upon the chaos of our bedroom. The shelf Gene hanged himself from still lay in the middle of the floor. All our clothes were still strewn across the closet. I scanned the scene slowly, looking for any clues to what occurred. *Why had he not wet himself?* I fell to my knees and looked closer at the floor but there were no urine stains. *Did he prepare himself for death?* As I pulled myself up I noticed several black markings along the wall. I studied them a while before I made out footprints. It looked like Gene lifted his legs just before the shelves fell down on top of

him. *Why did I come here?* I ran from the house and sped back to my father's. I never could live there again.

My friends started to change. People stopped coming around quite so often and when we did cross paths it seemed like they struggled looking for something to say. Even people I worked with started treating me different. They took up a collection and donated to Summer's trust fund. I sensed their discomfort around me, their uncertainty of how to approach the issue of Gene's death, how to approach me. I caught a look of pity where I used to see a genuine smile. I understood that I would never be treated the same by anyone because I was not the same. My character changed overnight. I was given a role that I never asked to play. And people needed time to adjust to this "new me". Maybe I needed time to grow intimate with this person I had become.

I called Mom before Summer's first birthday and made arrangements to fly out the following Monday. Dad helped me pack up our—my—townhouse and move the bulk of our—my—things into storage. *I'll find a new place to live when I get back from Montana.* We painted over the nursery and the footprints in the closet. We re-hung the shelf that collapsed on top of Gene.

Dad left before I did on our last day in the townhouse. I stood in the center of the living room and looked out into the backyard. The family of bluejays returned to nest, building a new home for their babies. *Maybe He's throwing us a life preserver.* I never thought it would only be temporary.

I stepped into the August afternoon and locked the front door for the final time. The black asphalt of the driveway burned through my sandals. I walked faster to my car and almost stepped on a flower that lay in my path.

Our rose bush had not bloomed in months. I turned and looked to be sure it was still bare beyond its thorns and leaves. Then I bent down and picked up the flower. Its petals had not withered from the heat of the asphalt or the summer sun. The flower had not even opened yet. It was a perfect red rosebud. I remembered the roses that bordered the tapestry above our bed. I thought about the day we buried Tigger in his own bed of roses. I looked to the sky and thanked heaven—thanked Gene—for that offering.

## Chapter 2

*“Wonder of time,” quoth she, “this is my spite,  
That thou being dead, the day should yet be light.”*  
-Shakespeare’s *“Venus and Adonis”*

I awoke in Montana to the singing of birds and the filtered light of the sun as it peered in through the blinds. It took all my strength to rise from bed. I struggled with my options of sleeping awhile longer or forcing myself from bed, to enjoy the few minutes of solitude that Summer blessed me with by sleeping in later than me. I remembered the mountains that I eagerly searched for as I stepped off the plane the night before, when the Montana air chilled me and a dark, western sky shadowed the rising hills. I lifted myself out of bed and stood on the two legs that carried me into this foreign land. An empty house echoed the opening of my bedroom door and the heavy steps of tired feet as I made my way to the back door. The door opened to a deck that invited me outside, to rest beneath penetrating rays of warmth from the midday sun.

I choked on my own breath. I had never seen birds so big. Magpies lined the fence separating my mother’s yard from the one behind it. They took turns diving into the two dishes of dog food, stealing crumbs of food and soaring

back through the air to safety on the fence. Kodiak and Alfred took no notice of the birds. Instead, they bounced up to me and licked my face. After a few moments of introduction and petting, both dogs returned to their slumber on the grass, in the shade that fell from the northern side of the house.

My eyes rose to the horizon. Hills beyond hills backdropped the city of Helena. I followed the mountains to the east, to the south, to the Great Divide of the west, and back to the north. They hugged the town from every angle—a protective, solid embrace. The mountains camouflaged Helena in pine green and dusty brown. Lazy clouds drifted across the graveyard sky and a man of stone rested in the northern hills, tracing their path with unseeing eyes. Life slowed down in Montana.

Summer still slept when I tiptoed to the kitchen and poured myself a cup of black coffee. I looked at the clock for the first time that day. *Almost noon?* I remembered the time change. Montana fell two hours behind Florida. But Summer never slept in past nine. I grew concerned and walked down the hall to Summer's room. Inside she slept, tightly snug in her blanket and angelic with her dreams. But her blanket—it did not appear to be rising. I sneaked closer to the crib and looked in. Her pursed lips slightly pouted; her eyelids were softly shut. She could have been a doll with the stillness of her body. I rested my hand on her forehead. She felt cold—too cold. It frightened me; I moved my hand down to her back and still did not feel her body rise with breath.

With that, I dropped one side of the crib and leant in close to Summer's face. Short, slow breaths came from her slumber. I felt overwhelming relief, let out a deep sigh. I realized as I looked down at Summer that I would forever peek in at her, walk close to her sleeping, and

feel for her breath. Gene lived in Summer. If I lost Summer, I would lose Gene forever.

Mom came home that evening and mixed a margarita for me and a vodka tonic for herself. We rested in the lounge chairs on the deck, watching Summer stumble around the backyard on legs she was still learning to use. The mountains in the east mirrored the sky, reflecting shades of pink and mauve from a setting sun, as if God wiped a giant paintbrush across their jutting edges. I stared into the hills while Mom spoke of Carroll College and the appointment she made for me to meet with the admissions director. I thought about hiding in the mountains for a while to settle into my new identity. I could not cope with being alive. I no longer knew what it meant—what value life had. I grew scared at the thought of returning to Florida and all the pieces left for me to pick up. More than anything else, I feared for Summer. My desire to live burned with Gene's body. The ashes mingled with his somewhere off the Florida coast. My cowardice prevented me from attempting suicide, but I prayed each night that my eyes would close in a permanent state of rest.

Mom continued to speak of the wonderful programs Carroll College offered. She believed that I could get accepted—*If you'd like to live in Montana*—and study. Mom invited me to live with her until I worked through Gene's death. *That could be forever.* Mom reminded me that nothing in life was permanent and someday I would get back on my feet. No, nothing in life is permanent—except death.

### Chapter 3

*Life is the first gift,  
love is the second, and  
understanding the third.  
-Marge Piercy*

Classes started the following week. I walked through the campus alone and sat alone in my classes. The classes were small and I saw familiar faces in each of the classrooms. The students seemed friendly enough and comfortable with each other. Still, no one spoke to me.

Until I sat in my first education course. The instructor had us number off into groups and interview each other. What is your name? Where are you from? What are you studying? What brought you to Montana? The last question tripped me up. I answered honestly. I poured my heart out to the girls in my group. I described the tragedy I experienced in Florida, the changes that lead me to my mother in Montana, my last minute decision to remain in Helena and enroll in Carroll College. Both girls stared at me when I finished. Neither said a word of response or comfort. Instead, the both looked like they wanted to rewind the class, number off into different groups, and interview normal people with normal lives. That is how they made me feel—like I was not normal. Like they wanted to be anywhere else in the world besides there, with me.

I realized then that Carroll College was a traditional school with traditional students. The students threw themselves into their studies, lived on their parent's dollar, had few to no experiences with trauma, and had no idea how to deal with a person who did. I could never open up to those people and my hopes at meeting new friends were quickly abandoned. When it became time to introduce me, I shrank in my seat. *This is Jessica, from Florida.*

*She's studying Secondary Education, Broadfield English Literature and Writing. She came to Carroll College because, well, um. . .her mother told her about it.*

I passed these same girls in the halls several times a day. Each time I smiled, forgiving them for their simple, happy lives. But the tendency for them was to look away and pretend that they never saw me.

Living with my mother did not just change my identity; it erased it. It was impossible for me to be a mother to Summer when I was reminded everyday that I was a daughter. I felt that I could not be a daughter and a mother at the same time. I felt, instead, that I was under constant subtle scrutiny when I would discipline, or when I would allow Summer to sleep in my bed at night, or when I would give her ice cream for breakfast just so she didn't go to daycare hungry. It was embarrassing to be living with my mother, to have failed in life.

Although I spent long days trying to finish school and even longer nights working in a restaurant so I could afford those long days at school, it was going home at night that became a challenge—because I never went home at night. I went, instead, to my mother's house. There was nobody awake when I got there. Nobody greeted me, hugged me, and told me they missed me. There was no cold beer in the fridge, no warmth in the bedroom. And perhaps the biggest difference with living in my mother's house compared to living with Gene was the closing of doors.

I closed the door when I showered. I closed the door to brush my teeth. I closed my bedroom door when I studied, got dressed, talked on the phone, slept at night. My mother closed her door, too. There was this

consistent closing of the doors whenever anyone did anything. It drove me mad. I had shared everything with Gene. We had not shut a door in our home from the time we moved in together. We could flop on the couch naked, Summer could crawl around the bathroom when we showered, we could even ask each other for a “courtesy flush” when one of us was sick. Privacy was not an issue. We shared a home. We shared a love. And we shared a life.

## Chapter 4

*What do girls do who haven't any mothers  
to help them through their troubles?*

*-Louisa May Alcott*

It surprised me to see the garage door open and Mom's car inside when I pulled into the driveway. Mom never came home early and I truly embraced the hour I had after school when the house was empty, Summer was at daycare, and I could just sit out front, sip a glass of wine, and stare. No one to answer to, no one to justify my early afternoon drinking to, no television blaring, no one tugging on my leg or patting me on the back. I could sit for an hour, look out to Mt. Helena, and think about absolutely nothing. I relished in my solitude. But today, Mom was home. Something was not right.

*Mom?* The kitchen was empty. *She must be out back.* I opened the back door and after the dogs attacked me I walked out towards the garden. *Mom!* Even the yard was empty except for her dogs and me. *Maybe she's in her room. C'mere! Alfred! Kodiak!* The dogs followed me in, wagging their tails uncontrollably and nipping where my hands swung by my sides. *Mom!* Still no response. At that moment the anxiety began. My breathing grew heavy, my heartbeat irregular—beating against my chest like a warning. I did

not want to walk into her bedroom. Horrible thoughts filled my head, visions of Mom lying still on the floor. Images of her body, limp, hanging over the bathtub. Or maybe she was in the closet, under a pile of clothes and books. I did not want to go into that room. I was not ready to confront this yet. I hadn't been long enough, God, no! *Don't do this to me again!*

But I couldn't not know. My steps set softly through the hall, stopping completely in the doorway. Though my eyes surveyed the scene, I saw nothing unordinary except the light in the bathroom. Because it was the middle of the day, even that seemed wrong. I told myself to breathe more than once before walking towards the bathroom. Then I heard it. The backdoor slammed, sending vibrations down the hall and into the bedroom. *Mom?* She answered from the kitchen, out of breath from a run.

I cried when I realized the incredible horror I had just put myself through. I sunk down at the dining room table and wept while my mother tried to make sense of my tears. *I came home and saw your car and I just thought something was wrong—I mean for you to be home so early. And when I couldn't find you I just couldn't stop looking. I thought you were hurt and I couldn't figure out where you could be. I got so scared. I can't believe how scared I was.*

Mom sat down beside me, her head falling into her hands. She spoke very slowly when she asked me if I was ready to get some help.

## Chapter 5

*I've dreamt in my life dreams that have stayed with me ever after, and changed my ideas; they've gone through and through me, like wine through water, and altered the colour of my mind.*

*-Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights*

I sleep all night, into the next day, and through the following night. I did not just make up for my lack of sleep, but I caught up on dreaming, too. Gene sits next to me on the couch, tells me about heaven and the light that warms him. He speaks of how cold he feels inside his corpse and before I can tell him how very much I love him, how sorry I am that I didn't hear his cry, he looks up. He listens attentively to a sound I can't hear. Then he looks at me and says he has to go. His eyes close slowly and his body wilts. I am crying out to him. *Not yet, I have so much to tell you. No, don't do this to me again. Take me with you, let me come. Please, Gene, don't go!*

I wake from the dream with wet eyes. The pain becomes unbearable after my dreams. Just when it begins to feel normal again, to have Gene back in my life, I am awakened by reality as it beats on my chest, reminding me of the hole that replaced my heart. I tremble through my tears and roll over to the empty space on the cold side of my bed.

The following morning I stared into the mirror. I did not recognize my face. I lost touch with all I thought I was. I was no longer the gymnast, the honor roll student, Daddy's girl. I was never the prettiest, the most popular, the most likely to succeed. I had grown immune to drugs, numb to abuse. Sex no longer stimulated me; school did not excite me; life no longer inspired me. Tears gathered and overflowed, caressing my cheeks like the fingertips that once extended from his hands. I lifted my arms and grabbed the air around me into fists. I threw myself at the girl in the mirror. Glass shattered

and sliced my hands, but I beat her. . .harder! Blood sprayed the wall, the vanity, my clothes. But she looks back at me, laughing and tormenting. My arms went up again, came down again. My head crashed into the door in my crumble to the floor.

## Chapter 6

*Seeing you sleeping peacefully on your back among your stuffed ducks, bears, and basset hounds would remind me that no matter how good the next day might be, certain moments were gone forever.*

*-Joan Baez*

Montana winter approached in early October, bringing with it freezing winds which cut through my skin and chilled the blood in my veins. I awoke to frost on my windshield that I scraped with the edge of my driver's license. I dressed in turtlenecks and sweaters, doubled my socks, and invested in several pairs of long underwear. I thought my leather coat would keep me warm through the snowy months. *A million cows can't be wrong.*

Summer and I watched the first snowfall out the living room window. It quilted the ground, tucking the earth into a quiet slumber. The city of Helena looked like a winter wonderland as the town lights twinkled under a full moon. I tried to ignore the approaching holiday season, stuffing it into the same hole where I hid my grief. But Summer took notice of colored lights framing homes; Mom bought a Christmas tree; and school ended for the semester. I did not have my studies to distract me anymore.

A barren land added to my loneliness. Rivers and creeks froze up. Trees lost their lush leaves and revealed gray, jagged branches, void of life since their birds left for warmer lands. Horses no longer grazed in the pasture.

They hid in stables, snorting thick, hot breath into icy air. The sky hid behind a shield of clouds. Each day when I awoke, I turned towards my window and ached for a ray of sunlight to pierce my eyes. Day after day, for weeks at a time, the sun hid its face, rising and falling without notice by anyone on the ground.

I rocked Summer to sleep at night, singing *Silent Night* and *The First Noel*. I often rocked her long after her eyes closed for the night, embracing her small body and stroking the hair that was just starting to grow on her head. Each day she grew into Gene, as her arms and legs lengthened, her hair lightened, and her blue eyes looked into my own. On the nights when I rocked her past sleeping, I could almost feel Gene's breath rising and falling with her own.

Winter dragged on for months. I cursed the snow and ice each morning as I defrosted my car windows and skidded my way back to school. *Four months until summer*. I longed to ride a bike or lie in the driveway and stare into a blue sky. But I still had not seen blue by late February. I felt confined by the cold months, imprisoned by a sky that held no beauty.

I trudged across campus to my car and slipped on a patch of ice. As I pulled myself back up I slipped again, slamming the same kneecap against the asphalt. I looked up to the sky, preparing to curse God and His creation when I noticed, just off to the west, a slight break in the clouds and a glimmer of sun shining through. *Need a hand?* I turned and met the eyes of a female student, her arm outstretched to help me up. I took her hand and thanked her, steadied myself, and asked her name. *I'm Jean. What's your name?*

## Chapter 7

*Wake up to find out that you are the eyes of the world.  
The heart has its beaches, its homeland, and thoughts of its own.  
Wake now; discover that you are the song that the morning brings.  
But the heart has its seasons, its evenings, and songs of its own.  
-Grateful Dead's "Eyes of the World"*

On the last day of spring finals, I celebrated my completion of another semester at Carroll College by climbing Mount Helena. The air felt warm, but the breeze still carried a slight chill. I raised my hands to air out my underarms and felt my legs burning from the climb. I feel my body growing stronger, my mind growing stronger, with every step. My heartbeat increased and my breathing became heavy, but my muscles continued to carry me further up the hill. Half an hour into the climb I forgot about my pain and felt only sweat as it rolled down my forehead and dripped off my chin. For the first time that year, my racing mind quieted.

I reached the mountain's peak and paused, looking over the Helena Valley below. The Sleeping Giant lay stoned beneath the northern sky. Carroll College stood illuminated by the setting sun, backdropped by a tie-dye sunset. I thought about the Florida coast. Often I sat on the sand and stared across the water at the horizon, wondering how I was to ever reach it when it moved farther away the closer I came. As I stood there on that mountaintop, I realized that I had reached the horizon.

As I began my descent, the flame inside me still burned; the world beneath me still turned. Descending, I search my soul for new horizons—a different direction for my mind, a new destiny for my heart.

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