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Invisible, not invincible: A fiction and memoir thesis on domestic abuse

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Eastern Illinois University

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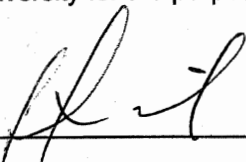
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Invisible, Not Invincible:

A Fiction and Memoir Thesis on Domestic Abuse

(TITLE)

BY

Jennifer KayLynn O'Neil

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English: Literary Studies with Creative Writing Emphasis

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2010

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Invisible, Not Invincible:
A Fiction and Memoir Thesis
on Domestic Abuse

By Jennifer O'Neil
Eastern Illinois University
Spring 2010

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Preface

Quite a bit has been written about domestic and childhood abuse, both in fiction and nonfiction. Some survivors of abuse who write about their experiences often do so through the lens of fictional stories in order to put distance between themselves and their painful pasts. Other nonfiction authors who are uncomfortable with the topic of abuse tend to write clinically about it in order to obtain the same distance they would get if writing the same experience as fiction, though this is not always the case. Many nonfiction authors are fairly comfortable writing about their own abusive pasts and find it very easy and even therapeutic to be as open as possible about it. Dave Pelzer and Elizabeth Kim are both examples of abuse survivors who find it helpful to write about their experiences, and seem to be comfortable in doing so.

Literature about abuse, whether fiction or nonfiction, can be beneficial to readers because it shows them the many unfortunate possibilities of abuse in their own world. When we read about horrific things happening in neighborhoods similar to our own, we as readers tend to feel very strongly about it; perhaps more outraged, more prone to do what we can to stop these things from happening. Even realistic fictional writing can have this effect because somewhere, at some point in time, it is possible for nearly any realistic abusive event to actually occur.

American author Sapphire's novel *Push* chronicles the miserable young life of a teenager abused since childhood, raped repeatedly and impregnated twice by her own drug-addict father, and forced to be a slave to her abusive, invalid mother. Though this book is a work of fiction, it has the very real potential of being nonfiction, especially since scenarios similar to this have no doubt happened all over the world time and time again. In this way, writing fiction about abusive experiences can help to achieve the same sort of activism against childhood and domestic violence that true, real-life stories can, simply because of the potential for them to become reality. By combining truth and what could be truth, readers may be able to get a better sense of

just how serious and, what's more terrifying, how common abuse is. Perhaps then they will be more alert the next time their neighbor tells them the bruises on their young child came from an accidental fall, or they'll pay more attention when a seemingly shy housewife finds it nearly impossible to make eye contact when talking about her home life.

For my Master's thesis, I have drawn on personal reflections and experiences that have influenced my writing and personality, as well as my college creative fiction and nonfiction classes, and the authors I have read, to create what I hope to be an inspiring set of works for future students and especially survivors of domestic abuse. With my writing, I hope to try to convince victims of child abuse that they never have to allow themselves to be a statistic; that it is possible to overcome hardships experienced at the hands of those you trust the most and to use those experiences to become stronger individuals. I believe my writing can and will convey the most important message possible to survivors of child abuse: that there is always hope. My familiarity with child abuse has helped me to create a set of stories and memoirs depicting domestic violence, especially toward children and young adults. I have interspersed fiction and memoir in order to show how my personal and academic background has helped shape my fiction. I have taken this opportunity in writing my thesis to showcase the skills I have developed for various creative writing techniques.

My greatest strength in creative writing is dialogue, which I have exhibited in all of the works for my thesis. Dialogue serves to strengthen imagery and action by providing a solid tone for each scene based on what is said, and how, as well as what can be inferred by what is not said. I write convincing dialogue in my fiction, and real-life conversations as accurately as I can in my creative nonfiction. This has been particularly important to my thesis because domestic

abuse is not just physical; it is often vocal, and what is said can sometimes be more hurtful than physical violence.

I use a lot of humor in my writing as a way to lighten the reading as well as to show my personality as a writer. Humor helps me to exaggerate or single out an important idea or aspect of my writing. I have found that it makes the readers pause and think about why they are laughing and why that should be important to their understanding of the text. David Sedaris often uses humor in his serious nonfiction in this way, and I believe studying those works might benefit my understanding of this technique. I also tend to use humor as a way of distancing the strong emotion of some real-life events from the descriptions of the events so that the reader does not get lost in the emotion of each scene, but rather can better appreciate the experiences themselves.

On the topic of childhood violence, one nonfiction author that has stood out to me above all others is Dave Pelzer because though he had a much rougher childhood than I did, we have a common bond through childhood domestic abuse at the hands of hateful women and how our experiences have changed and strengthened us in so many ways. I am currently reading *Ten Thousand Sorrows* by Elizabeth Kim and *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl*, both heartbreaking narratives of loss, grief, and violence in youth. Both of these young girls were forced to endure unthinkable suffering and yet did not waver in their faith in humanity. They both also display great resilience throughout their deplorable situations and recite their stories as mere fact while still conveying their feelings about the things that happen to them. Kim's work in particular has had a great impact on me because of the many atrocities in her young life, innocent though they may seem, that she discloses. These writers, among others, have inspired me to write about my own resiliency through hardships.

David Sedaris and Charles Simic are two other nonfiction authors who talk about some of the less than perfect moments families have with each other, and some of Sedaris' writing focuses on borderline child abuse, as well. Simic, who is more widely known for his poetry, portrays family in his nonfiction with such blatant honesty that it gave me some sort of guideline to work with in terms of just how honest and open a writer can and should be with their readers about their family and personal experiences.

Relatively few authors mix fiction and nonfiction quite the way I have, but Tim O'Brien uses autobiographical metafiction in his book *The Things They Carried*, which is fiction that displays a nonfiction element by drawing attention to the fact that it is fiction. Mark Doty, in his short memoir, "Return to Sender: Memory, Betrayal, and Memoir," does this in the opposite way that O'Brien does. He writes nonfiction, but continuously takes short breaks in the memoir to comment on the memoir itself, or on his book in general. In his book *Naked*, David Sedaris writes a series of short memoirs with fictional elements throughout them that he also brings attention to as being fiction. Dorothy Allison writes fiction about domestic violence in her novel *Bastard out of Carolina* in first person, which gives the illusion of memoir.

Beginning with nonfiction, I have written a series of fiction and memoir depicting the horrors of domestic abuse in many forms. I have included four memoir pieces and two fiction pieces. I have separated the genres by using first-person, present-tense for my memoir pieces, and third-person, past-tense for my fiction works. Each memoir is intended to shed light on the fiction pieces by introducing a real-life experience that, through a scene from my life, explain what inspired me to produce each work of fiction and why it is important to both my life and my writing. Because these pieces are all reflective of each other, I hope to have created a sort of

dramatic tension between the fiction and nonfiction works that will reflect upon my own experiences with domestic violence and survival.

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The Definition of Fear

1) Noun: a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether the threat is real or imagined; the feeling or condition of being afraid.

2) Fear is trudging 17 miles through the woods at age 15 wearing nothing but jean shorts, a t-shirt, and flip flops when it's 23 degrees outside because you're sure that this time she really will shoot you. Fear is hiding in your high school gym after school and pleading with your fellow students who all hate you not to tell her where you are because you know it's gonna be really bad this time. It's calling the cops on her when she puts a loaded gun to your forehead when you're 12 and watching in disbelief as they buy her lies because she shows them her own badge. Fear is lying in bed pretending to be asleep and praying that, just this one time, she'll actually let you sleep through the night, be it restless or not.

It's not knowing if you're going to have enough money for groceries this month. It's trying to convince yourself that this time next year you'll have a boyfriend whom you love rather than a body bag and a funeral to attend. It's realizing all too late that all four of your tires were slashed in a very bad neighborhood at 1am and being thankful that you were stupid enough to drive on them anyway. It's being blamed for the stroke your father had when you know damn well that it was because she caused his blood pressure to spike, probably by yelling at you for something you didn't even do. It's sleeping in an unfamiliar house and being convinced that because a light came on upstairs when no one was up there all day, there's an axe murderer in the house. It's the irrational fear of amputation and vowing that if it ever happens to you, you'll end your own life because you don't want to live in an incomplete body. It's climbing on top of the doghouse and screaming like a little girl because, well you *are* a little girl, and because there is what you deem to be a "huge" snake mere feet away from you. It's dropping straight down from

50 feet in the air and just knowing that you're going to die, even though you're strapped into a secure seat, and then wanting to do it again. And again. And again.

It's blocking out certain memories, or at least pretending to, because they trigger irrational fear. It's being diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder and knowing exactly where they stemmed from. It's opening up to people, no matter how long you've known them, because you just know they're either going to feel sorry for you or want nothing to do with you. It's riding a horse named after the god of war who clearly does not *want* you to be riding him. Fear is realizing that within a year you'll be completely on your own in the world and you have no idea what your plan is yet because suddenly, after five years of college, you're not so confident about your intended path anymore. It's seeing how fragile life is and hoping you don't lose anyone else anytime soon. It's not knowing if your father, whom you haven't talked to in over seven years because he and his wife disowned you, is even still alive. It's anticipating what your mother is going to say when you tell her you can't come home for Thanksgiving this year because you have to work.

It's being chased by a rooster that does *not* want you to clean out his pen and *will* draw blood to prove it. It's being told by your step-mother that if you don't beat the shit out of a girl at school who picked a fight with you, you're going to have the shit beat out of you when you get home. It's being bred to fight, (everyone but *her*, of course), when all you really wanna do is play basketball and read. It's dreading going to school because she made your own dad shave your head on Christmas Day when you were 15 and now you have to wear hats that school officials of course won't let you wear, and you're so hated by your classmates that they inform you that they really hope it's because you have cancer. It's her pulling you out of the boxing ring during a match the day one of your "friends" tells her you're getting a C in math and being

beaten till you can't breathe, and then having to explain to everyone at school the next day that the busted lip and black eye you show up with are from the boxing match, even though everyone knows they're not. It's knowing that, at any point in the eight-and-a-half years you spent with her and your father, she could have killed you, and only a handful of people would've cared.

Snapshots of a Broken Dream

I can't sleep tonight, too excited. I'm eight years old, it's Christmas Eve, and I have the feeling that I'm getting the Super Nintendo I asked for from Santa. I don't actually believe in Santa anymore, but I pretend to because it's fun. After what seems like forever just lying in bed, exhaustion finally takes over and I'm soon asleep. When I wake up, it's almost three in the morning, and "Santa" has come and gone. I creep out of bed as quickly and quietly as possible and sneak into the living room to peek at my presents from "Santa." The Super Nintendo is nowhere to be seen. I'm really disappointed, but there are Barbies and Barbie clothes and snow globes, which I love, so I tell myself that maybe I'll get the SNES for my birthday in three months and quietly crawl back into bed. Normally, I would wake up Dad and Necia as soon as I saw that "Santa" had had been here, but Necia has to get up to go to work at the prison at three, and I want to let her sleep. Even though I'm still excited, I quickly fall back to sleep.

"Santa came! Santa came! Get up, get up, get up!!" Necia is jumping on me. "KayLynn!! Come on!! Get up!"

I wake up startled, but can't help laughing. Necia has her Christmas nightgown and a Santa hat on. The fuzzy orb on the tip of the hat is bouncing around as she hops on my bed.

"Mama!" I groan.

She's sitting on top of me now and she suddenly leans down to kiss my cheeks and forehead. "Mwah, mwah, mwah!" she says as she lays sloppy kisses on my face. She gets up, tosses my blankets back, and tugs on my arm. "Come on! Santa came!"

I pull myself out of bed, still drowsy, and stumble toward the living room. My dad is in the kitchen making coffee. He looks at me and grins. "Mornin'! Don't you look bright-eyed and bushy tailed! Wake up, KayLynn, it's Christmas!"

In the living room, Necia is teasing me. "Guess she doesn't want her stuff from Santa! There's some neat stuff here, too. I bet some other little girl would love to have these!"

I laugh and rush over to the pile of presents around the small tree and kneel in front of them.

"Homey?" Necia calls. "You gonna play Santa, papa?"

"Yep, I'm coming." Necia takes off her Santa hat and plops it on Dad's mostly bald head. His joints crack and groan as he kneels next to me and starts handing me unwrapped presents from Santa and wrapped presents from him and Necia. I rip through Dollar General wrapping paper and countless thin, cardboard boxes, quickly untying my new toys and dolls from their packaging.

Necia is rushing between watching me open presents and getting ready for work in the bathroom. I hear her belt jingle as she slides her keychain, handcuffs, mace, and holster onto it while feeding it through the belt loops of her uniform pants. I hear her spraying aerosol hair spray on her short, brown hair and the sound of her Exclamation perfume bottle as she spritzes herself. I smell the perfume waft into the living room, where Dad is still kneeling painfully and handing me endless amounts of gifts. This is the morning schedule I have become so accustomed to. The sounds and smells of Necia getting ready for work at three a.m. have become familiar, soothing.

When she emerges from the bathroom, she looks like some sort of hero. She is short and squat, wearing entirely too much makeup and hairspray and perfume, but there's something

superhuman about the way she looks. Her dark blue uniform contrasts nicely with the shiny, black patent leather accents of her belt and boots, which Dad has shined to perfection as usual. Her golden badge is fastened in place over her heart and her sleeves and pant legs are starched and pressed, with perfect creases. She is wearing a white t-shirt underneath her uniform top and I watch it disappear as she fastens the last two buttons of her uniform. She is wearing bright red lipstick and I know exactly why.

Suddenly she stops, sees me staring at her, rushes over and plants a huge, sloppy kiss on each of my cheeks. She uses me as a lipstick blotter, but I don't mind, as long as she's happy. She sits down on the couch and starts tying up her boot laces.

"Mama?"

"Yeah, baby."

"You really have to go to work today? Can't you call in sick?"

"No, baby, I can't. I'm sorry. I have to go to work, but I'll be back before you know it and then we can have a nice Christmas dinner, just the three of us, okay?"

I frown. "Okay, Mama."

"Oh, you look like a poor, little deflated balloon like that!" She pulls me to her and hugs me. "Ooh, almost forgot. Santa told me he hid one of your presents. You didn't find it already, did you?" She looks at Dad, who shakes his head, but grins widely.

I perk my head up. "Where?"

Necia laughs, a beautiful sound, and one that I love to hear. "Well, silly, if I told you that, it wouldn't be hidden! Wanna play hot/cold before I have to leave?"

I nod my head vigorously. Hot/cold is my favorite game. I get up and walk to the tree.

"Cold," Necia says.

I turn and walk toward the kitchen.

"Freezing. Icy, even."

I head to the bathroom.

"You're at the South Pole now," Dad chimes in.

I think of heading to their bedroom, but the bathroom is right next to it, so I figure that's wrong, too. I turn around and walk back to the living room.

"Warmer," Dad says.

I stop and look around. Pot-belly wood-burning stove, Christmas tree and wreckage, my bedroom, gun cabinet, pantry cabinet, Dad's CB radio shelves, TV stand, 50-gallon dog food container. I face the gun cabinet and look at Dad and Necia.

"Cooler," Necia says.

I move slightly to my right to face Dad's radios.

"Warmer."

I move further to my right and look at the TV.

"Getting hotter," Necia says. She sounds excited, which is making me really excited.

I take a few steps toward the TV stand.

"Little warmer," she says.

I move to stand directly in front of the TV.

"Cold."

I turn more to the right, facing the dog food container.

"Hot."

I walk up to the container.

"Smoking! You're on fire!" she squeals.

I lift up the lid of the half-full container to find a large, wrapped, rectangular box with about a million shiny bows on it. I grab it and run back to my spot between Dad and Necia, ripping the paper off as I go. As soon as I see that iconic "N," I know exactly what this is.

"Super Nintendo!" I scream.

"And it even comes with a game," Necia says.

"ZELDA!" My face hurts from smiling by now. I jump up and throw myself at Dad and Necia, who both hug me tightly. "Thank you!!"

"It was from Santa, not us," Dad reminds me.

I laugh. "Oh, right. Thanks, Santa!" I say to the ceiling, as if he is hiding on the roof.

"Welp, I'm off," Necia says, glancing at her watch. "C'mere Cupcake," she hugs me and kisses me on the cheek. Her starched uniform feels rough against my skin, and her body is rigid, but soft at the same time. Her perfume nearly chokes me, but it's comforting. "We'll play when I get home this afternoon, okay, baby?"

"Okay, Mama. I love you."

"Mmm, I love you, too, sweetie."

"Poopsie?" she says when she lets go. They both stand and kiss each other lightly on the lips. "Merry Christmas, baby!" She squeezes his butt with her thumb and forefinger, then puts on her heavy uniform coat and leaves out the front door. We stand at the window and watch her carefully back down the snowy driveway, then pull out into the street and she's gone.

"You goin' back to bed, Boo-Boo?" Dad asks.

I yawn. "Yeah, I'm pretty tired still. You goin' back to bed?"

"Nah, I'm gonna stay up for a while. Maybe we can hook up your game when you wake up."

I smile. "Okay," I say, and hug him. "Thanks, Daddy. I love you."

"You're welcome. Love you, too."

I crawl back into bed, happy, safe, loved. Or so I think.



As I lay here naked on my bed, on top of the blankets and sheets, I wonder what I could have possibly done this time to deserve this punishment. I did the dishes right tonight and didn't ask to go to the bathroom before I was done. I cleaned the bathroom well enough this week. I brushed my teeth three times today and made sure to write down the exact time of each one and have Dad sign off on them. I vacuumed the house. Twice. I didn't backtalk or say anything out of turn. I gave her a backrub. I was up on time. I did all my chores. Did I accidentally splash water on the floor when I got out of the shower? I don't remember. Why is she doing this to me again? She must know how embarrassing it is, knowing that at any moment, Dad could walk into my room—she left the door wide open—and see me like this. That's probably why she does it.

I squeeze my eyes shut as tight as I can make them go and pretend she's not making me do this again. I think about boxing, about the geometry homework I'll probably get at school tomorrow, the Robert Redford movie we watched on TV earlier this week. I try not to think about how cold I am, and how pathetic I must look being forced to lay here, vulnerable. I'm trying so hard not to cry because I know if a single tear comes out, this will last longer. I remember the last time she did this to me and I cried, she made me sleep naked all night with the door open and no blankets. I don't want to go through that again. I lose myself in my thoughts as much as I can without falling asleep in my dark bedroom. I think about Bobby. The image in my

head of his smile makes my body feel warm again and for a moment I forget where I am and what's happening to me. I could never tell him what happens here.

After a couple of hours, Necia comes back into my room and stares at me, at my body, smiling, and then finally tells me I can get dressed and go to bed. I get up quickly, but not too quickly, and get dressed, shivering. I don't want to seem too eager to be released from her punishment or she might be inclined to extend it. I'm only thankful that she hasn't touched me today. I'm fourteen now, and old enough to know that the things she has done to me are not okay.

Lying here trying my best to go to sleep, to forget what just happened, I wonder what drives her to do these things to me. Does she enjoy watching other people suffer? Does it make her somehow feel better about herself because she's in control of something? Suddenly, a more horrifying thought hits me: If I ever have children, will I do the same to them? Am I capable of hurting my own children because of what's been done to me? I fall asleep with these thoughts tumbling through my mind. *You're nothing like her*, I tell myself.

But I don't actually believe that.



She seems happy today, and has allowed me to play basketball with Shelby and Corey all day.

"Mama?" I say. "Could I stay the night at Shelby's tonight?"

"No, I'd rather you not," she says. "I don't know her mom very well."

She sees my face droop and adds, "But she can stay here if she wants. You two can swim if you clean the pool."

I glance at Shelby, who nods emphatically. "I'll go ask my mom." She sprints down the street and returns a few minutes later with a small backpack.

"That was quick!" Necia says, laughing.

"Yeah," Shelby says, out of breath. "She said I could. Let's go clean the pool!" She tugs at my arm. We change into our bikinis and go out back to the pool. Dad is puttering around in his shed, hears us bound out the back door and comes out to see what we're doing.

"Mama said Shelby can stay over and we can swim if we clean the pool!" I tell him.

"Ah," he replies. "Corey gonna swim, too?" Dad knows Shelby and I both have a crush on our next-door neighbor Corey, who is almost seventeen, and as much as he wants to protect me, he also knows it's better for Corey to hang out with us when he's around.

"Um, I don't know. We just got done playing basketball. I didn't think to ask him."

Necia comes out the back door with Corey in tow.

"Guess that answers my question," Dad laughs.

"This young man apparently can't get enough of you girls," Necia jokes. "I told him he can swim, too, if he helps you clean the pool."

Shelby and I exchange looks and grin. We are more than okay with spending more time with a shirtless Corey. He comes up and nudges us with his elbows. Necia and Dad sit down on the back porch, pull out their cigarettes and watch us for a while.

"You wanna swim, Poopsie?" she asks Dad.

"Ah, no. Maybe when the kids are done."

She leans over and kisses him, takes a puff of her cigarette. I try to take in as much of these moments as I can, since they are so few and far between. I look over at Corey and wonder what my first name would sound like with his last name. *Jennifer Terney*. I like it. *Shelby Terney*. Doesn't sound as good. In my mind, that means he'll marry me. I laugh a little. Shelby and Corey look at me. "Nothing," I say. "I just thought of something funny."

"So what are you guys doing this weekend?" Corey asks as he skims the water with a net.

"My mom and I have to go to Eufala for a couple days," Shelby says. "She's looking at houses up there."

I hold back a smile and say, "I'm gonna be around. Not doing anything that I know of. What'd you have in mind?"

"Oh, nothing, really. Just thought we could play some more basketball. Hey, aren't you starting softball soon?" he asks me.

I blush. "Yeah, when school starts back, but I've never played anything but basketball for a team before. Well, and track, but that's different."

"Well you know I'm on my school's baseball team...I could help you practice if you want."

Shelby looks at me, half grinning, half glaring.

"Yeah, that'd be so awesome!" I try not to sound too excited, but I can't help it. I look back at Dad and Necia, who are smiling and holding hands. Dad sticks his cigarette between his lips and gives me a thumbs up with his free hand. Necia playfully slaps his leg.

With all three of us cleaning out the pool, we get it done quickly and jump in. The pool's not very big, about fifteen feet across and three feet deep, so it's cozy with the three of us. Necia and Dad decide to wait to swim until after we get out so they don't crowd us. Dad lights the anti-

bug candles in tall bamboo holders stuck into the ground around the pool when it starts to get darker and Necia brings some towels outside for when we get out of the pool.

"Don't stay in there too long, you'll turn into prunes!" she tells us. "Have fun." She and Dad go to the front yard and start watering the flowers.

"Your parents seem really cool," Corey says.

I scrunch my eyebrows. "Yeah, I guess, sometimes." I leave it at that, because I don't want to jinx things.

"Probably better than mine," he says. "My dad's so into this new wife of his, but she's such a bitch. She's always trying to seem so nice, but she's just sucking up so I don't bitch about her."

"Yeah, I know the feeling," I say.

After about an hour-and-a-half, we get out of the pool and wander around to the front of the house to tell Dad and Necia the pool's open.

"Why, thank ya, baby!" Necia says, and puts her arms around me, kisses the top of my head, even though she can barely reach it anymore. It's days like today that I remember I actually do love her, and why.

"Whatcha kids doin' now?" she asks, cheerfully.

"I was thinking, if it's okay, that Corey and Shelby could come in and play video games or watch a movie or something," I say, then add, "since Shelby's already spending the night and Corey lives right next door."

"Fine with me! Poopsie?" She looks at my dad.

"Yeah, that's fine. We gonna swim now, Bevis?" he asks. Whenever he uses Necia's nickname, I know all is well. He bends down a little and kisses her. It's a big, wet kiss and their lips make a smacking noise. I giggle.

"Aw, are we embawassing the wittle giwl?" she jokes and then kisses me on the cheek. "Don't wipe it off now!" she says when I start to lift my hand to my face.

I smile big and blush. "Ma, I'm not a little girl!" I glance out of the corner of my eye at Corey. He pretends not to notice my embarrassment.

"Oh, but you're *my* little girl," she beams.

~~~~~

When she told me to sit in this chair completely upright until she says I can move, I thought she was an idiot. Why would she assign such a menial, painless punishment? Now I understand. I've been sitting here for more than an hour and I ache from head to toe. Who knew sitting up straight could hurt so much? She hasn't tied me to the chair yet, though she threatened to. Instead, she watches me intently and as soon as she sees me start to slump even a little, she whacks my bare thighs with a broken chair leg. At least it's not a switch, or the flyswatter, or even Dad's belt this time. At least the chair leg is thick and doesn't hurt as much as the others do.

My back muscles are on fire and my neck feels like it's pinched in a vise. My legs and arms are starting to tremble with the effort of keeping my back straight now that my back muscles have become too weak. I feel like a statue sitting here with my knees clamped together, heels touching, back and head perfectly straight, arms resting at ninety degree angles on the chair arms. Suddenly, as if she realizes the chair's arms are helping me sit up straight, she tells me to

put my hands in my lap. She is right. It is much harder to stay straight without the support of my elbows on the chair. My back is not touching the chair, as she has made me sit almost on the edge of the seat, so I don't even have the comfort of sneaking in a slump on the rare occasion that she's not staring at me. She sits on the couch, watching both me and a Robert Redford movie on TV. During commercial breaks, she makes trips between the living room, kitchen, and bathroom, making a point of walking in front of me to flaunt the fact that she's not the one being forced to sit in this chair.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" she asks.

I don't know if she expects me to answer or not, so I don't. I figure silence is probably safest at this point.

"I asked you a question," she scolds and slaps my thighs again with the chair leg.

~~~~~

Necia and I are lying on the couch together, watching an old black and white movie where all the women are wearing beautiful jewels and evening gowns and all the men are wearing sharp, tailored tuxedos. Necia is stroking my hair. These are the times with Necia that I try to hold onto the most, because they are the most fleeting. I lay here, content and sleepy, watching a movie I normally wouldn't watch in a thousand years, simply because Necia and I have the opportunity to watch it together. I enjoy spending time with Necia when she's placid and I feel closer to her than even my own father right now. Dad hasn't been very affectionate with me since I was little. Yeah, he loves me, but he doesn't really show it. Too macho, I guess. Or too broken. Necia is very affectionate and I genuinely love her for it. She often braids my hair

or plays with me outside and she even lets me do her hair sometimes. She taught me how to put makeup on and lets me practice on her, too.

Though I'm a tomboy and I'd much rather be outside building something with my dad or working on his trucks with him, if Necia is in a good mood, I'm more than happy to help her around the house. On the days when she's on a cleaning rampage, but happy, we clean together during commercials and take breaks when our shows come back on TV. She makes a game out of it.

"Let's see how much we can get done on commercial!" she'll say, and we'll jump up and run around like idiots cleaning, doing the dishes, and throwing laundry in the washer. When we hop back on the couch to watch our shows, she always smiles and laughs, says I'm doing a good job. These are the moments I drink in. I have to. They're so short.

On the couch, Necia pulls her hand away from my hair and puts her arm around me, squeezes. She doesn't have to say it. I know she loves me, no matter what she does to me. Somehow the good times, few and far between, outweigh the bad times. Perhaps that's what she wants me to think. Or perhaps that's what I *need* to think in order to survive.

~~~~~

It's almost Thanksgiving and a bunch of her family is coming to our house in less than a week. She rushes around the house tidying things and getting everything together that she will need to make Thanksgiving dinner with. I am only in her way. Whatever goes on in her brain can barely be interpreted even by herself and she gets frustrated when I don't understand what she

wants me to do. I am fifteen years old and she still spans me when I “get out of line.” “Whips” is probably the more appropriate term. She uses anything near her that looks painful. Usually it’s my father’s thick leather belts, giant metal buckles still attached, but she can get creative, too.

Today she tries out a new weapon: my softball bat. But I’m not stupid, I run this time. She finally corners me in the bathroom and as she swings wildly at me, I realize she has corralled me here, just as a cowherd drives cattle. There are no windows and only one door, which she is standing in the way of, so I keep backing up until I’m cowering in one corner of the bathtub. I put my arms up to defend my face and body. I hear the bat clink against a cheap, gold ring I am wearing on my left hand. The bat hitting my arms and hands does not hurt at first, but when it clinks against the ring, pain shoots through my hand. As I stand in the bathtub, trying to shrink away from her blows, all I can think is, *Why does it only hurt when it hits the ring?*

Finally, Dad pulls her off of me and takes the bat away, which is now pretty well ruined with all the dents in it. I know the drill well enough by now that I don’t need to be told where to go. I run outside and sit on the front porch, examining my wounds. The finger I am wearing the ring on is swollen and blue and now I see that the ring has been crushed completely around my finger, cutting off all circulation. I grab a hammer from the toolbox in Dad’s pickup, lay my finger against the wood of the porch, and start pounding on the ring to reshape it enough to get it off. Eventually, the ring comes off and there’s a dark bruise encircling the base of my finger. I can see busted blood vessels just under the skin. By now, deep purple, blue, and black bruises have begun to show on the undersides of my forearms. My arms and hands hurt so bad I can barely move them.

The screen door opens behind me, and I look up from the steps to see Dad standing there, looking stressed.

"What'd you do this time?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I don't know," I answer, and I honestly don't. I often find myself in these situations with Necia. I've done something to set her off, but I rarely know what.

"Well knock it off. I'm tired of her yellin' at me cuzza you. I want some peace in this house. Just do what she tells you to do and stay out of her way." He looks at my arms. "You okay?"

I clench my jaws shut, relax them. "Yeah, fine," I growl.

"Lose the attitude before you go back in."

I say nothing. What can I say?

### Child's Play

"Catch me!" Amy yelled as she bounded across her cousin Randy's backyard.

"I bet you can't! You're not fast enough, Randy!" She giggled incessantly as she ran.

"Oh, you just watch, little missy! If I catch you, you're my slave for the day!" he yelled back as he chased her.

"Oh, yeah? And what do I get if you can't?"

"Then I'll be your slave!" he laughed.

She bolted behind a big tree and stopped, trying to catch her breath. Randy came racing around the tree and tried to grab her arm, but she quickly slipped away from him, laughing as she ran to the other side of the fenced-in yard.

"See? I told you, Randy, not fast enough!"

"Alright, alright, I give," he said, walking slowly toward her, breathing hard. She began skipping back toward the middle of the yard where Randy was, and suddenly he grabbed her and wrestled her to the ground.

"Ha! Gotcha!" He began tickling her as she kicked at the air and rolled around on the ground, squealing. After a few minutes, they both laid on their backs and stared at the sky, out of breath.

"So I guess this means you're my slave, huh, Ames?" He nudged her ribs with his elbow and grinned.

"Hey! No fair! You said you quit!"

"I lied! Besides, I'm older, anyway. And it's not like I'm going to make you rob a bank or anything. You could start by getting us some cookies." He laughed when he saw the look on her face.

"Only by a couple years!" she whined.

"But I'm almost eleven now, and you're not even eight yet. That makes me a lot older."

"Does not! You're not gonna be eleven for another month!"

"Still older," he said, still grinning.

"Fine," she said, crossing her arms. She couldn't hide the smile creeping across her face.

"But next time you have to be *my* slave, no matter what!"

Randy thought for a moment.

"Sure," he said, and stuck his hand out to shake hers. "Deal."

"So what are you kids up to tonight?" Randy's mom Cara asked as they all sat down to dinner.

"Mmm...I don't know. Whadya think, Ames? The usual?" Randy glanced at Amy while shoving another bite of meat loaf into his mouth.

"Eh. I don't really feel up to riding bikes tonight, Randy. I'm kinda tired. Maybe a movie? I brought 'The Princess and the Frog'..." she said hopefully.

Randy looked sideways at his dad, Bill, who was smirking. When he saw Randy looking at him, he straightened up, cleared his throat and said, "Ah, well, that sounds like fun, eh, Randy?"

Randy laughed. "Oh, alright, sure. You're already my slave for the day, so I guess I can at least let you watch the movie you want to watch."

Amy clapped her hands together and squealed. "Thanks, Randy, you're the best cousin ever! Even better than a big brother!"

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far, if I were you. Don't forget, you have to do whatever I say tonight."



"Yeah, but you said..."

"I said I wouldn't make you rob a bank."

Amy stuck her tongue out at him. "Aunt Cara, Randy's a cheater. He didn't even earn it fair and square."

"Earn what fair and square?" Cara asked.

"Her enslavement, apparently," Bill laughed.

"Yeah, my en-slave-ment," Amy said slowly. "Whatever that is." They all laughed.

When dinner was over, Cara said, "Hey Randy, I'll take care of the cleanup tonight, kiddo. You just go have fun with your cousin. I know you're *dying* to see that movie."

Randy rolled his eyes at her but said, "Thanks, Mom," and led Amy to his room to get her bath stuff out of her small, purple suitcase. After they had taken turns bathing and putting on their pajamas, Randy and Amy got tucked under the Star Wars covers on Randy's bed and started the movie. About halfway through, Amy fell asleep. When she woke up, Randy had turned off the DVD player and was watching a show about dinosaurs on the Discovery channel.

"Couldn't even stay up long enough for your own movie, huh?"

Amy groaned. "I *told* you I was tired."

"Yeah. Well, you wanna finish it now or try again tomorrow?"

"I'm really sleepy. Can we just go to bed now?"

"Sure. You go ahead and sleep. This show's almost over," Randy said.

"Well, if it's almost over, I guess I can watch the rest of it with you. What's it about?"

"Dinosaurs. You know, like how they lived and stuff."

"And how they died?"

"Yeah, I guess. They haven't said yet." He continued watching for a few minutes before saying, "You know, you're supposed to be my slave and I haven't made you do anything yet."

"Ha, yeah. You're bad at this. I would've made you do soooo much stuff by now!" she joked.

"Oh, yeah? And what would you make me do?"

"I don't know. Stuff. Like, cool stuff."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. I'd have to think about it. So what're you gonna make me do? You don't have much time left, it's almost midnight," she said, glancing at his alarm clock.

"Hmm...let me think. You know, I saw something cool on TV a couple nights ago." He gave her a sly look. "But you're probably too chicken."

"Too chicken for what?"

"Ah, nothing."

"Randy, what is it?"

"Really, don't worry about it. It's nothing."

"Randy! You have to tell me!"

"I don't know. Maybe you're too young."

"I'm not *that* young."

"Yeah, but you're still younger than me, and you're a girl, which means you're definitely too chicken."

"Am not!"

He raised his eyebrows at her.

"Aw, come on! Just tell me!"

"Okay, okay, fine. But you have to make a promise."

"Anything!"

"A pinky promise."

"Yeah, sure, now tell me!"

"Hang on." He got up and looked out his bedroom door, then ducked back into the room and quietly shut the door.

"Okay, everyone's asleep. Hand me the remote. I have to show you something."

Amy handed him the TV remote and he switched the channel to a late-night program.

"Swear you won't tell anyone?"

"Yeah, I swear," she whispered. "What are we waiting for?"

"It's commercial, wait till the show comes back on. It's so cool!"

He turned the volume down so it was barely audible unless everything else was completely silent.

"Okay, it's back on."

The screen showed two scantily clad secretaries dancing to techno music in a room that looked like a basement. Amy gasped and looked over at Randy.

"Shh, just watch," he said. "It gets way better."

A man wearing a button-down shirt, tie, and dress pants appeared. He seemed to be angry with the two women and began yelling at them, pointing at the stereo. The women looked frightened for a moment, then leaned toward each other and said something, looked back at the man and smiled. One licked her lips as she looked the man up and down, while the other let her hair down and lightly bit the tip of her forefinger.

"What are they going to do?" Amy whispered.

Randy held his finger up to his mouth and she looked back at the screen. They both watched as the two women caressed the man, whose glare slowly turned into a sly grin and he began to grope the women's breasts. They began undressing and touching each other. The women took turns kissing the man and then one another.

"Randy?" Amy looked worried.

"Shh! It's okay, we're not gonna get in trouble. Just watch."

"Yes, we could!"

"No one's going to know."

"But Mom said it's not okay to touch people like that."

"Only if they don't want you to. Look, they really like it. Have you ever had a massage? Like a back or foot massage?"

"Yeah."

"It's kinda like that, only better. It feels really good."

The man had pulled his penis out of his trousers and one of the women started to move her hand along it.

"See what she's doing? I did that. To my...you know. I can't describe it. It was like, the best feeling in the world. Even better than a massage."

She hesitated. "Really?"

"Yeah. Remember when we used to play doctor?"

"Yeah..."

"It's like that, only more touching...down there."

"Well, I know that. I don't know, Randy. Mom says only grownups who are married are supposed to touch each other like that. We could get in big trouble."

"Not if we don't tell anyone. We could just try it and if we don't like it, we can stop. It'll be just like playing doctor, or even house. We could pretend we're a married couple and then it'll be okay."

"Oh, okay, yeah! That's a good idea."

Randy was quiet a moment. "I guess...we have to take our clothes off, then." He hesitated and then started to pull off his pajamas. Amy watched him and then turned away to take hers off, as well.

"Kay, just lay back and relax. Spread your knees apart, like the lady on TV."

Randy hovered over her as she pulled her knees back with her hands and looked down to see what he was doing. With the fingers on one hand, he exposed her vaginal opening, and with the other he guided his penis to it and started to push. Amy yelped.

"Shh!! You have to be quiet! What's wrong?" he asked, frightened.

"It really hurts, Randy!"

"It'll stop, I promise. The girls on TV always act like it hurts but then it stops. Here, bite this when it hurts, okay?" He handed her a pillow.

"Okay," she said, uncertainly.

He pushed again, harder this time. Amy writhed and pressed the pillow hard into her face. Randy could hear her muffled scream. Staying exactly as he was, he gently lifted the pillow off her face and said, "Almost there. Hang on, Ames." He tried pushing again, but couldn't break past the resistance. Finally, he shoved all his body weight into the thrust, forcing his way all the way into her tiny vagina. Amy screamed into the pillow again.

She lifted the pillow off her face and pleaded with him to stop. She was crying now.

"It's okay, really. It'll stop hurting. It'll stop. Don't cry, it's okay, Amy. We'll just stay like this for a while till it stops, okay?"

She whimpered an agreement and they lay interlocked on the bed together for a few minutes before Randy said, "Ames, I have to move or it's gonna get soft again. You ready?"

Amy took a deep breath and nodded weakly, wiped away her tears. He slowly moved his body away from hers a few inches, and then back again. He did this a few times before she stopped him.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Yeah, but not as much," she sniffled.

"You want another break?"

She started to nod but changed her mind. "If you don't move, it'll get soft and it might get stuck in there, right?"

"Right. Okay, I'll keep going, then."

He began thrusting again. With each thrust, he moved faster, with a little more intensity and before he knew what was happening, Amy was clawing at him, begging him to stop.

"We can't, Amy. We can't stop. How can it hurt you if it doesn't hurt me? Stop being a baby. The women in the show like it."

"But it hurts, Randy!" She was close to bawling now. He put the pillow back over her mouth and looked her in the eye.

"It'll be over in a minute, I promise."

"Hurry up, Randy! It hurts so bad!"

"Shush! You're gonna wake everyone up! You don't wanna get in trouble, do you?"

"No," she whimpered, then whispered, "Just please hurry," and squeezed her eyes shut.

Once Randy had finished and rolled off of her, he said, "There, see? That wasn't so bad. Felt pretty good, huh?"

Amy was crying softly and holding a blanket over herself, her hands between her legs.

"No, Randy, I told you, it really hurt!"

"You're just a big baby."

Amy was facing away from him, toward the wall, with her eyes still closed.

"Just please don't make me do that anymore, Randy."

"Fine, as long as you don't tell."

Amy sniffled. "Okay." Both of them were quiet for a while. Finally, Amy asked, "Can I go to sleep now?"

"Yeah, sure."

Amy scooted closer to the wall, wrapped herself tightly in a blanket, and went to sleep.

The next morning, Amy called her mom and asked her to come pick her up.

"But it's only Saturday, sweetie. I thought you wanted to stay with Randy and Aunt Cara and Uncle till tomorrow?"

"I changed my mind. I just want to come home."

"Did something happen? Did you and Randy get in a fight or something?"

"No, I just feel like coming home is all. I miss you."

"Are you feeling sick?" Sarah asked suspiciously. Amy had never been this adamant about coming home early from anywhere, especially her cousin's house.

"No, Mom! I just want to come home! Just please come get me," Amy pleaded, exasperated with her mother's inquiries.

"Okay, okay. Put your Aunt Cara on the phone."

Amy handed the phone to Cara. "Mom wants to talk to you."

Cara took the receiver from Amy. "Hey there! What's going on?"

"Amy wants to come home. Did something happen? Or does she seem sick or something?"

"No, not that I know of. She seemed fine yesterday. She and Randy were running around the backyard. She kept saying she was tired after that. I don't think anything happened, though. After their baths, they went to Randy's room as usual and watched that movie she brought with her. They didn't make a peep all night."

"Huh. Okay, well, I'm on my way over there. She really wants to come home but she won't say why. Maybe she's not feeling well and just doesn't want to take medicine, haha!"

"Yeah, maybe. I'll get her all packed up and ready, then. Let me know how she's doing later, 'kay?"

"Yep. Be there soon, sis."

Cara hung up the phone and finished helping Amy get her things together as Sarah pulled into the driveway and honked the horn.

"You gonna say bye to your cousin?" Cara asked.

"No. He knows I'm leaving early."

Cara frowned. "Okay, well your mom's here. Guess you'd better head out there. Come see us again soon, okay?"

Amy nodded once and sprinted to the car.

Sarah kept prodding Amy to tell her what was wrong until finally she just said she was really tired and wanted to sleep. Sarah seemed to accept that answer and let Amy go to her room.



A couple of weeks later, Cara was on the phone with her sister and mentioned that Randy had been asking when Amy was coming back over.

"I don't know. Usually she begs to hang out with her favorite cousin, but I mentioned it the other day and she didn't seem very excited about sleeping over. I asked her if she'd rather have him come here, thinking maybe she was homesick when she goes over there, but she said that her room was now a 'boy-free' zone and she didn't want him to come over. Are you sure they didn't have a fight or something? She says nothing happened, but she's been acting like something did."

"No, Randy seems fine and he said they got along just as well as they always do. He said she mentioned a few times that she was tired that night, but nothing to make me think that they got into it about something."

"I don't know, maybe I should take her to the doctor? Maybe she's sick or something."

"Yeah, maybe. Well, let me know what you find out. Randy really misses her. We all do. She used to be over here nearly every weekend and now we haven't seen her in weeks."

"I know. I'll call the doctor tomorrow and see if we can get her in, find out what's going on."

"Okay, keep me posted. Give her a big hug and smooch for me. I'll talk to you later."

"I will. Love ya, sis."

Sarah went to Amy's room, where she was huddled on her bed reading a book.

"Ames?"

Amy jumped slightly. "Oh, it's you, Mom. Sorry, you scared me."

"Sorry. So I just got off the phone with your Aunt Cara. She said they all miss you.

Randy's been asking when you're coming over again."

Amy shrugged. "I don't really feel like sleepovers anymore. I guess I grew out of them or something."

"You sure you're okay? You really have been acting different lately."

"I told you I'm fine, Mom. Really."

"Well, just in case, I'm calling Dr. Reynolds in the morning to see if we can get you checked out, okay?"

"No! I mean, I'm fine. I don't need to see Dr. Reynolds. Besides, she'll just tell you something's wrong so she can make money, right? That's what doctors do, isn't it?"

"Who told you that? I've been friends with Dr. Reynolds for years. She wouldn't tell me something was wrong if it wasn't. Why are you so against going to see her?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to see a doctor. There's nothing wrong with me."

"Yeah, well that's what my great aunt Tessa thought right before she died from meningitis. You're going to the doctor. It'll be quick and painless, I promise."

"Fine." Amy turned her attention back to her book. Sarah stood in front of Amy's bed for a moment, and then left.

The next morning, Sarah was able to schedule an appointment with Dr. Reynolds that same afternoon. As she and Amy sat in the waiting room, Amy began asking questions.

"So what's she gonna do? A physical? What all is she gonna look at? Is she gonna take blood?"

"I don't know what she's going to do. She might take blood, she might not. I don't know what she's going to look at, either."

"Does she have to look 'down there'?"

"What? Why? Does she need to look there?" Sarah sounded concerned.

"No."

Sarah was silent for a moment. "So why did you ask if she was going to look there?"

"I don't know. I just didn't know what she was going to do. I...was curious."

The secretary called Amy's name. "You're up," Sarah said. They stood up and followed a nurse to an exam room.

"Dr. Reynolds will be right in," she said, and left.

A few minutes later, Dr. Reynolds, a tall woman with dark hair and eyes, came in. "Hi, Sarah," she said, as she embraced Sarah. "Amy! You've grown so much! How have you been since our last visit?"

"Okay, I guess. Mom thinks I'm sick, but I'm fine."

"Well, we're just going to put Mom's mind at ease today, okay? No big thing." She glanced at Sarah.

"You're gonna take blood, aren't you?" Amy asked.

"Yeeaah, unfortunately, hon, I have to. There are lots of blood-borne diseases that could be making you sick."

"But I'm not sick."

"Sometimes we don't know when we're sick, so the blood test will tell us for sure, 'kay?" She squeezed Amy's hand.

Amy nodded. "Okay."

"Your mom says you've been tired lately?"

"No, not really, just a little. The last time I was at—" she stopped.

"Last time you were where?" Sarah asked.

Amy lowered her head. "Randy's. Last time I was there I was really tired, but that's only 'cause I was playing all day."

"But you've been staying in bed practically all day since then."

"No, I haven't. I haven't been sleeping that much, so I take naps." She stopped again as if she'd said something wrong.

"You haven't been sleeping at night, sweetie?" Dr. Reynolds asked.

Amy shook her head. "I mean, like, sometimes."

"What's keeping you awake? Do you have nightmares?"

Amy's eyes darted from Dr. Reynolds to her mom and then to the floor. She nodded slightly.

"About what?"

"I...I can't remember," she blurted out.

Dr. Reynolds and Sarah exchanged looks.

"You can't remember what your nightmares are about?" Dr. Reynolds asked.

Amy was silent.

"It's okay. You can tell me."

"I can't. It's...embarrassing."

"Oh, hon, it's just a dream, it's not real. I can't help you if I don't know what's wrong."

"I can't. I promised not to tell."

"Promised who?" Sarah asked.

"Randy," Amy whispered.

"Your cousin Randy? What'd you promise him you wouldn't tell? It's okay, you won't get in trouble."

"But he will," Amy said, near tears.

"What did Randy do that's so bad that he'd get in trouble for it?" Dr. Reynolds asked.

"He seems like such a good boy."

Amy started bawling. "I can't!" she said between sobs. "I...just...can't...tell you! I promised!"

Sarah scrunched her eyebrows and tilted her head. "Did Randy do something to *you*? Did he hurt you?" she asked, holding Amy's face in her hands.

"He...didn't...mean to. He said...it would...be fun." She broke down again. "But it wasn't! It hurt!"

Sarah put her hand over her mouth and stepped back. She looked at Dr. Reynolds.

"He...*raped*...my baby? My *nephew*...*raped* my little girl?"

"I told him to stop, Mommy! But he wouldn't! He said we had to finish like the people on TV or it would get stuck in there."

"The people on TV?" Dr. Reynolds asked.

"Yeah, there was a show he made me watch. I wanted to watch the show about dinosaurs, but he changed the channel and there were two ladies and a--and a man and they were doing things to each other. They were touching each other's private parts. I told him I didn't want to do that, but he said it was okay and then he wouldn't stop!

"They're just children! She's only nine! He just turned eleven! *How* did this happen??"

Sarah sat down in a chair next to Amy and put her head in her hands.

"He said there must be something wrong with me if it hurt 'cause he liked it and the people on TV liked it."

Sarah was sobbing now. Dr. Reynolds kneeled in front of both of them, holding Amy's hand and resting her other on Sarah's knees. "We'll get through this. We'll get you both through this. Do you want me to call Cara?" she asked Sarah.

Sarah cried for another couple minutes and then suddenly stopped and said, "No. I want you to call the police."

When Cara found out what Randy had done, she tried over and over to get in contact with Sarah, who was refusing her phone calls and any other contact with Cara and her family. She left so many messages that Sarah's answering machine was completely filled and unable to receive any more messages.

"Sarah, it's your sister. *Please* pick up the phone. I can't believe this is happening. I'm so, so sorry. I didn't know. Amy, please. I'm so sorry for what Randy did to you. I really am. I love you both so much, please talk to me," one message said.

"Sarah, you're my family. You're my sister! Please don't do this. I had no way of knowing what would happen! Please just call me back, I'm begging you. Don't let this tear our family apart. You know I love you and I would never want anything to hurt you or Amy."

One sobbing message said, "Randy's been arrested! He's barely ten and they hauled him away to juvenile detention! Please, Sarah, I need you. They're talking about keeping him in jail till he's thirty! They took my son, Sarah. I'm so sorry about what he did, but he's my *son*! What if Amy had done something like this? Could you sit there and watch them take your child to jail?"

Sarah stopped the message short, disgusted. "Amy *didn't* do this," she said to the machine. "*Your son* did this to *my* child. I can never forgive you." The following day, she called the phone company and had her number changed. Even after the trial, once Randy had been sent to a juvenile sexual rehabilitation center for a minimum of six months, Sarah and Amy refused to have any contact with Cara and her husband.

Dr. Reynolds started Amy on bi-weekly counseling sessions with a childhood sexual trauma therapist only a few days after her initial appointment with Dr. Reynolds, and she seemed to be making only minimal progress. Amy stilled jumped whenever anyone, including her mother, would touch her, often woke up crying in the middle of the night, flinched any time the name Randy was mentioned, and refused to talk to or be friends with anyone named Randy.

Sarah never let Amy sleep over at anyone's house again, instead opting to have only all-girl sleepovers in the living room of their own house, where Sarah could keep a close eye on all the girls. She even refused to allow her ex-husband, Amy's father, to have unsupervised visits with Amy.

Years later, on medication and still having nightmares, Amy would ask Sarah, "Mom, do you think it's possible to forget something bad that happened to you a long time ago?"

Sarah would shake her head and say, "I don't know, baby. I guess only time will tell."

## Not a Single Bullet

She's screaming at me. She's always screaming at me. I don't even remember what her problem is today, but it's dark outside and we've just arrived home from her sister Connie's house a couple hours away. On the way home, she got so angry she kicked my dad and me out of the car to walk on the side of the highway, only to come back and pick us up about 20 minutes later. Now I'm standing outside listening to my dad and his wife arguing about me in the house. Something feels different. She's angrier than usual. Whatever they're arguing about, I can hear my dad trying to explain to her that I'm only 12, I didn't know any better, she should take it easy on me.

"She's a little bitch is what she is! I'm going to beat the shit out of her. She *needs* to learn, Robert."

I'm scared, but I'm used to that by now. I know that whatever she has planned for me is gonna be bad, but there's nothing Dad or I can do about it. If he can't talk her out of it now, nothing will stop her. I huddle down next to the doghouse in the front yard and wrap my arms around my knees. I'm not crying. I learned long ago that it's only worse if I cry, so I don't shed a tear. The dog, Max, a big Rottweiler, barks at the argument still going on inside. I want to call him to me, but I'm afraid of drawing attention to myself. She hits him and he yelps.

"Oh, Necia, don't take it out on the fucking dog, for Christ's sake!" my dad yells at her.

*Great, I think, she's just going to take it all out on me later.*

Max pushes the front door open and runs down to the doghouse I'm squatting against. He always knows when I'm scared or hurt, which lately seems to be more frequently than usual. He sits down beside me and leans into my shoulder. I hug him to me and try to listen harder to what my dad and step-mother are saying.



"Well, if you wouldn't spoil the little bitch...you let her get away with murder!"

"She's just a *kid*! What do you expect?"

Most of their words are muted by the thick house walls, so I'm blindsided when Dad rushes out of the house with two small duffle bags in his hands.

"KayLynn! Come on, get in the truck, now!" I scramble to the front porch and he grabs my arm hard and pushes me toward the driveway.

"Go!" he yells. We're both running toward his panel truck now. I've never seen my dad act this way before. I'm more scared than ever. Why is Dad running? What is he afraid of? He opens the driver's side door and shoves me in, pushing me across the seat.

"Stay down! Get on the floor!"

My step-mother has disappeared into the back of the house.

"Dad, what's wrong? Where are we going?"

He slams the truck door shut and the engine makes me jump as it roars to life. He jerks the gearshift into reverse and floors the gas pedal. Gravel flies up from the ground as he speeds backward down the long driveway and into the street. He's about to shift into drive when I pop my head up from my place on the floorboards to see Necia burst out the front door with my new puppy Stubby in one arm, and Dad's loaded .38 caliber pistol in the other. She's running down the driveway, waving the gun between the dog and the truck. This is nothing new. She's pulled a gun on my dad and me before. I think nothing of it, except that she might actually get away with shooting my dog. She's yelling again.

"I'm gonna kill your dog, you stupid bitch! You'd better come get him or I'm gonna fucking shoot him!"

Before my dad can grab the back of my shirt, as he tries to, I'm opening my door and jumping out of the truck, running toward my step-mother and Stubby. I'm about a yard away from them when I stop and reach for the dog. She drops him four long feet to the ground and he lays there, hurt. My eyes are on him, and I'm about to reach for him when I feel something cold slam into the middle of my forehead. I hear my dad yelling in the background, but I've somehow forgotten how to interpret language; his words are garbled, muted. I look up into her furious eyes, her right arm extended in front of her, the .38 pressing hard into my forehead. Waves of heat and cold run through my body as I try to understand what is happening. My eyes immediately fall on the safety of the gun. She never takes it off when she threatens us, she just wants to scare us.

This time it's off. I barely have enough time to think *oh, God* before I see her finger twitch on the trigger.

All those movies that show the moment before someone dies in slow motion have it right. My short life does not flash before my eyes. It doesn't have time to, even though this one moment seems to take forever. The only thing I have time to think of is how it's going to hurt more than anything she's ever done to me up to this point. The fact that she is about to become my murderer does not surprise or scare me. I've been ready to die for a while.

She pulls the trigger all the way back till it hits the metal of the handle behind it. I even hear the metals click together. And then I hear nothing except a loud click that resonates deep into my ears through the bones of my skull. Confusion floods her face. She pulls the trigger again. Again, it only clicks. By the time she's ready to pull the trigger a third time, Dad is there grabbing the gun away from her. She swings at him with the loaded gun and he wrestles it away from her.

"Are you fucking crazy?" he's screaming at her. "You just tried to *kill* her! You're going to prison, Necia. You're going to prison for a long time so I hope you've made a lot of con friends there! They'll rip you to pieces for this. What is wrong with you? You're not getting out of this by flashing your badge, not this time."

"Thaaat's right, I can get out of anything because I work at the prison. And for all the shit this fucking whore puts me through, I should have every right to shoot her in the face."

She turns to me and I instinctively back up a step.

"You bitch, I'm gonna fucking kill you! You're worthless, I hate you. Your whore of a mother should've aborted you."

"That's enough, Necia. I'm calling the cops."

"Oh yeah, you do that. Let's see how well they listen this time. No one's going to believe that little lying sack of shit," she says, nodding toward me.

"Get back in the truck, KayLynn," Dad says.

"What about Stubby?" I ask.

"Leave him. Get in the truck."

"But..."

He whips his head around to look sternly at me and I run back to the truck. A few seconds later, he returns to the truck with the gun, turns the safety on, and tucks it under his seat. Necia picks Stubby up by his throat and stands holding him like that in the driveway, smiling at me. I know she's going to kill him.

My dad shifts gears and drives away from the house as I continue watching Necia out the back window. I watch her stand, unmoving, till we turn a corner and she's no longer visible.

When we're a few miles from the house, Dad pulls the truck over, takes the full clip out of the gun, and puts both the clip and the gun in the glove box.

"Don't touch that," he says to me.

"Where are we going, Dad? What's gonna happen now?"

"I don't know, kiddo. You okay?" In one of his rare moments of open affection, he reaches over and strokes my hair. I can tell he's trying not to cry. I've never seen him cry before, but I know that most of the very few times in his adult life that he has cried have been over me.

"I think we're gonna go back to your Aunt Connie's house. We'll stop somewhere and call her in a while. You hungry? We didn't get around to dinner, did we?"

I shake my head feebly. "I'm sorry, Daddy," I say.

"Sorry for what?"

"For jumpin' out of the truck. You think she's gonna kill Stubby?"

"Nah, she won't kill him. He'll be fine, don't worry."

We drive on for a while in silence and almost complete darkness. After about half an hour, I ask, "Daddy, what happened with the gun? Wasn't it cleaned good? Why'd it jam?"

Dad inhales sharply. He doesn't want to talk about this.

"I don't know, KayLynn. I cleaned it last week after we went to the range." He hesitates.

"It shouldn't have jammed." I can almost hear the words he isn't saying: *But I'm glad it did.*

"Anyway, don't worry about it. You want some food when we stop?"

I shake my head again. "No, I'm not hungry. Thank you, though, Daddy."

He looks at me, searching my face. Finally, he says, "Kay, well how about you try to get some sleep then? I'll wake you up when we get there."

He pulls the blanket from the back of the truck seat down around my shoulders.

"Love you," he says quietly.

"Love you, too, Daddy."

The next day, at Connie's house, Dad calls the local police for our town and tells them what happened last night. Two officers go out to our house to talk to Necia, who tells them she has no idea what they're talking about, that she doesn't even own a .38 caliber pistol and invites them to look in our gun cabinets as proof. By now, she's already hidden all the .38 ammunition. She explains to them that she is an officer at the penitentiary in the neighboring city and they end up talking more about being cops than her trying to shoot her 12-year-old step-daughter. She convinces them that nothing of the sort happened, and shows them that Stubby is perfectly alive and healthy to satisfy my "lie" about her vowing to shoot him. She even tells them that my father is molesting me when it is actually all her. Everything is her doing. I explain this to the cops over the phone, and many times in person. I explain that my dad has never laid a hand on me. But she has the badge, not me, not Dad. This is the third time Dad has called the police on her, and the third time that they have left without solving anything. I've begun to hate cops by now. Cops don't protect me, they hurt me.

We stay with Aunt Connie for a couple of days to let Necia cool down some before making the long trip home. In these couple of days, I beg Dad not to take me back, for us to stay here, with Connie, until we can figure out somewhere else to go. I beg him to divorce her so that he and I can move somewhere together and not ever go back to her. He tries to convince me everything will be okay when we go back. She's sorry for what she did, she wishes she could take it back, she misses us, misses *me*.

*Of course she misses me, I think. She has no one to violate, no one to take her anger out on. Yeah, she misses me alright.*

The day we go back, I walk into the house trembling, anticipating whatever punishment she has concocted for my running away from her yet again. At first, I don't see her, which both relieves and frightens me. At Dad's prodding, I go to my bedroom and start unpacking my duffle bag and sorting out the clean clothes from the dirty. I take the dirty clothes into the laundry room and suddenly I hear her raspy voice call my name. I put my clothes on top of the washer and go into her bedroom, where she's laying down with a cold washcloth on her forehead. She smiles weakly at me. *Another trick.*

"Come 'ere, baby. I'm sorry, honey. Come see Mama."

Relieved that she's in a rare good mood and thinking that maybe she really is sorry, I take advantage of it and crawl into the bed next to her and hug her tightly. I know this will only last for a day or so. She kisses my forehead and rubs my back and all past transgressions are once again forgiven. We lay there like that, my head on her chest, for several minutes before she asks if I'm hungry.

"I bet Aunt Connie fed you well, though, huh?"

I panic. If she thinks about Aunt Connie, she'll remember we ran away from her, and she'll remember that she has to punish me. Under my hot cheeks, I feel her tense slightly, then relax.

"Let's go make some dinner for your dad, huh?"

She seems to have forgotten and I am safe, for now. I know that within the next day or two, I will bleed at her hands. But right now, I'm content to live in the moment because I am not in pain, I am not bleeding, I am not afraid. I feel more love for her than is natural because she has

spared me, if even just for a day. I just want to be near her, to make her happy, make her proud of me. Tomorrow, or the next day, or the day after that, I will hate her, so I revel in being able to love someone, anyone, and in being loved back while I still have the chance.

## Ashes to Ashes

Smoke curled up from the pile of burning embers in the backyard. Six-year-old Alex sat on the ground a few feet away with his knees pulled up to his chest, his arms wrapped around them, crying as he watched the remnants of some of his most beloved possessions smoldering. A talking stuffed teddy bear his mom had given him for his third birthday squealed a garbled, slow-motion phrase as the flames ate away at the plush fur and white stuffing.

Alex's father Jason stood over the pile, leering at Alex and the stuffed bear through the smoke. "Next time it will be something more important to you, understand?"

Alex nodded.

"What's that?" Jason asked loudly.

Alex straightened up and said, "Yes, sir. I understand."

"Get on inside, then. Nothing left to see."

Alex shuffled back inside and glanced at his mother, Christy, who was careful not to make eye contact with him or Jason as she went about tidying the living room.

"Now stop sniveling and get back to cleaning your room. Whine about it one more time and we'll have another bonfire, got it?"

"Yes, sir," Alex repeated, trying not to cry again. He went back to his room and began putting things where they belonged.



"You're so spoiled," Jason was saying to three-and-a-half-year-old Alex. "All I ask is that you do well in school. Is that so hard? Are you so spoiled that you can't even do your



schoolwork right? Guess we need to get rid of some of these distractions.” Jason had begun toting armfuls of Alex’s toys out to the backyard.

“No, Daddy!” Alex had protested. “Those are *mine*! No no no!”

“Oh, Jason, for crying out loud. Give him his toys back,” Christy insisted.

“Stay out of this, Christy. Boy needs to learn a lesson. You spoil him to death. He’s gonna learn what sacrifice is.”

“He’s only three!”

“He’s *almost* four, Christy. Jesus, you’re an awful mother, you know it? How on Earth did your parents raise you? Mine taught me discipline, and it’s obvious you haven’t been teaching this child anything useful, so it’s my turn.”

Christy opened her mouth to protest, but Jason interrupted her.

“I’m not kidding woman, get back in the damn house. This isn’t your business.”

“It *is* my business. He’s my son, too.”

“Not anymore. He’s *my* son and the sooner you accept that, the better off you’ll be. Don’t piss me off, Christy.”

Christy had seen Jason lose his temper before and she thought it best to drop the subject for the moment. Perhaps she could bring it up later when Jason was in a better mood. *If* he would be in a better mood.



“Alex!” Jason called.

Alex rushed to stand in front of his father, who had settled himself into his easy chair and was watching Christy nervously cleaning.

"Yes, sir?"

"You've got twenty minutes to finish cleaning up in there. Anything that isn't put away by then gets burned. Your time started three minutes ago, so you'd better hurry up."

Alex started to run back to his room, but Jason stopped him. "Come here." Alex returned and stood facing his father again. "Walk. We don't run in this house, correct?"

"Correct, sir."

"Now go. You're wasting time. Looks like you want to have another bonfire."

Alex walked as calmly as possible back to his room and began hurriedly, but carefully and quietly, putting things away again. What seemed like seconds later, Jason called Alex back.

"Are you finished?"

Alex started to tear up. "No, sir. Not yet. Just a couple more minutes, please," he begged.

"Fine. You have two minutes. Hurry up."

When the two minutes were up, several belongings were still strewn across the floor: A toy robot from the last Christmas, a picture book about spaceships, some clothes and a pair of shoes. Jason looked around the room and told Alex to begin gathering everything on the floor into a clothes basket. As Alex bent down by his bed to pick up the clothes, he noticed the last picture taken of him with his deceased grandparents barely sticking out from under it. He slyly tried flicking it out of sight, but Jason saw it.

"Oh? What's that, Alex? Nana and Pawpaw, huh?" Jason took the photo from Alex and studied it. "You must not care very much about this picture if it's lying on the floor. Right?"

"No, sir."

“‘No, sir,’ what? ‘No, sir,’ you don’t care about it? Or ‘No, sir,’ I’m wrong?”

Not wanting to say his father was wrong, Alex replied, “‘No, sir,’ I care about it.”

“Well, here’s the deal, bud. You can keep it...”

Alex lit up.

“...if you pick something else to burn.”

Immediately Alex thought of the old Glo Worm in his toy box. He’d never really liked it, and never played with it, which is why it was never caught on the floor when his father randomly decided to have his little backyard bonfires. He went to the toy box and dug it out, held it out to his father expectantly.

“Something you *like*,” Jason said.

“I do like it.” He sounded a little too hopeful.

“Okay, fine. I’ll pick something out.”

“No! Okay, burn the picture,” Alex pleaded.

“Too late. You made your choice.” Jason scanned the half-empty shelves in the room.

Finally, his eyes rested on the handheld game system Alex had just gotten for his birthday from a friend only days before. He hadn’t even had time to take it out of its packaging yet.

“Guess you don’t like this too much, right? I mean, you haven’t even opened it yet.”

Alex was silent. Maybe if he didn’t confirm either way, his father would pick something else. Jason searched Alex’s face and posture. “Look at me,” he said. One look at Alex’s eyes told him all he needed to know. “Yep, this is it. Let’s go.”

After making Alex arrange his belongings on top of the other burn pile ashes, Jason gave him a bottle of lighter fluid and told him to douse everything with it. “You’re going to start doing this all on your own. It will teach you self discipline. You *will* learn. Eventually, you’ll stop

leaving your things strewn about and start putting them away when you're done like I've told you over and over again. Go on, I said douse it. More. More!"

Once Alex had applied enough lighter fluid to the pile, Jason handed him a matchbox. "Now light it." Alex began to cry. His hands shook and the matchbox began to rattle. "Knock it off. You did this to yourself. Why are you always whining about *everything*? Just light it, hurry up."

It took three tries before Alex could get a match to light and he threw it onto the pile, watching as it burst into flames. Jason made Alex stand there and watch everything burn till there was nothing left but a black mark on the dirt and the fire had died out.

Inside, Christy had continued to keep herself busy cleaning and straightening anything she could find. She fussed with things she had already straightened, re-dusted the coffee and end tables until it seemed like she'd rub the stain right out of them, folded and re-folded afghans and fleeces over the backs of chairs, couches, the ends of beds. When Jason brought Alex back inside, he called to Christy to start dinner.

"I shouldn't have to tell you when it's time to cook, Christy."

"I just thought...I didn't know how long you would be outside."

"Does it matter? Dinner should have been ready whenever we walked back in that door. Instead, you flutter around here trying to look useful when you're doing absolutely nothing. It's your job to figure out how to keep the food hot if I'm not ready for dinner right when it's done. Don't make me tell you again."

"Yes, love."

"Should I get rid of something of yours, too? That pretty new necklace you just got, perhaps? I'm sure you could come up with a nice little lie for your father about why you're not wearing it, huh?"

Christy shook her head slightly. "I'll start cooking right now."

"Yeah, well hurry up. My son and I are hungry," Jason sneered as he returned to his armchair.

Christy didn't say another word as she prepared dinner. No one spoke as they ate. Jason ate in his recliner watching TV, while Christy and Alex sat at the small table in the kitchen and ate quickly and quietly. Just as Christy was finishing up the dishes, the doorbell rang.

"Christy! Alex! You're both sleeping in his room tonight. I've got company. Get in there and don't come out till tomorrow."

Christy and Alex shuffled into Alex's room and shut the door. Jason opened the front door to a beautiful, thin woman with fiery red hair. "Hey, babe," she said as she kissed Jason. "Ready to have some fun?"

"Always," he said, grabbing her ass.

"Where's the kid?" she asked, glancing around the spotless living room.

"Ah, sent him and the wife to his room. We're all alone, don't worry."

The redhead clucked her tongue. "Good, 'cause I've got something reeeaaal special for you tonight."

"Oh, yeah? Well then, you'd better get your hot little ass in that bedroom."

They disappeared into the master bedroom and Alex and Christy could hear them from Alex's bedroom.

"Mommy?" Alex whispered.

Christy turned to look at him and put her forefinger up to her lips.

"But Mom, he's doing it again."

"Shh! Please be quiet, honey. He'll hear us!" she whispered back frantically. "Just lay down and go to sleep, okay? Please."

Alex nodded and they both laid down on his bed and tried to tune out the sounds coming from the master bedroom. Eventually they fell into a restless sleep.

The next morning, the woman was gone and Jason seemed to be in a much better mood, nearly skipping out of the bedroom when he heard Christy making breakfast.

"Mmm, smells great, honey!" he beamed as he kissed her on the cheek.

"French toast, your favorite," she said nervously.

"Where's Alex?"

"He has some homework to get done, so I told him to work on it while I'm cooking."

"It's Saturday, Christy. The boy doesn't have to do homework on Saturday. And what the hell are you doing telling *my* son what to do?? You think you're the boss now? You think you get to tell us what to do?"

"N-No, I just, thought that..."

"No. You don't think. That's just it, Christy. God! You're so stupid! No wonder you could never go to college. You're too dumb. I can't believe I'm letting you raise my son."

"Our son."

"What?"

"He's *our* son," Christy said, quieter this time.

Jason picked up the pile of plates Christy had set on the counter and threw them to the floor at her bare feet, shattering them. Christy tried to jump away from the pieces, but instead landed in them and fell to the floor, crying and bleeding from her soles.

"Oh, god, shut *up*, Christy! You and that brat are always crying about something. I'm so sick of it! Quit your whining and finish breakfast. Then you can clean up this mess."

"But I can't stand, Jason. I need to go to the hospital! Look at my feet!"

"The *hospital*? You think I'm gonna pay for you to go whine to a bunch of quacks? Bandage your feet and get back to work, if that's what it takes. And be quick about it, I'm hungry. Had a long night last night." He turned and went directly to his recliner. "Oh, and those sheets are gonna need to be washed when you're done," he called from the living room.

Alex poked his head around the doorway of his bedroom and looked down the hall at his mother, still kneeling in the kitchen, trying to pick glass out of her feet and off the floor. Christy looked up and saw him, waved him back into his room while quickly glancing toward the living room. She picked up one large piece of broken glass and held it, point out, for a moment and looked toward Jason in the living room. She gritted her teeth and threw it in the garbage can under the sink. Once she had cleared out every shard of glass in the kitchen and her feet, she gingerly crawled on all fours to the bathroom to find gauze and medical tape and double bandaged her mangled soles. Ignoring the searing pain, she forced herself to stand and finish preparing breakfast and then cleaned the kitchen thoroughly before asking Jason for permission to sit down for a few minutes.

"I know someone who could stitch up my feet without going to the hospital," she said quietly when she was finally allowed to sit.

Knowing that if she didn't get medical help now, the problem could become even worse, Jason sighed and asked who.

"My co-worker Kevin used to be a nurse. He learned how to do stitches and keeps a medical bag with him in case of emergencies."

"A male nurse? Is he gay?"

"No, not as far as I know."

"Well, then you're not going to see him, or any other guy. Knowing you, you'll fuck him on the spot. I can't trust you, you know that."

"I've never been unfaithful to you."

"Oh yeah? Then why don't you ever fuck me, huh? And you wonder why I'm always having other women over. You wanna go off and fuck other men, fine. But don't expect me not to bring other women home."

She knew it would be better not to argue with him, so instead she said, "You could go with me, if you want. I don't know any women who can put in stitches."

"Why the hell would I want to go with you just to see you flirt with another man? I'm not going, and neither are you. Just deal with it, it's not that bad."

"If they get infected, I won't be able to do anything around the house. You'll have to do everything. I have to see someone."

"Fine. Go be a slut with your male nurse friend. Not like I ever wanted to have sex with you in the first place. And take that fucking kid with you, he's annoying the hell out of me."

She started to say that Alex had been quiet and in his room all morning, but she thought better of it, and realized that if she and Alex didn't go now, Jason was bound to change his mind. She quickly hobbled to Alex's room and told him to get his shoes on as quietly as possible.



Christy put on a pair of house slippers and they both silently slipped out the side door of the house and got in Christy's car.

Christy's mind raced on the drive to Kevin's house.

*"You cross me one more time and you'll never see this kid again, you hear me?"*

*"Yes, Jason. I won't do it again. I promise."*

A tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it away on her left shoulder, so Alex wouldn't see. She looked in the rearview mirror at Alex, who looked terrified and was sniffing.

"What's the matter, baby?" Christy asked him.

"All Daddy ever does is hurt us. Why won't he stop?"

"I don't know, honey. What I do know is that Daddy loves you, and I love you and we have to be grateful for the things that we do have, okay?"

Alex sniffled again. "Okay. But why can't you make him be nice? Or why can't we run away? We could go to Grandma and Grandpa's house."

"Alex, honey. Grandma and Grandpa are gone, remember? And besides, we can't run away."

"Why not? We could go somewhere Daddy couldn't find us."

Christy's eyes welled up and she said, "Baby. You don't understand. I can't take you away from your dad without permission. You remember when we went to the courthouse with Daddy? The man at the front of the room wearing the funny black robe?"

"Yeah, and he had that hammer. The...judge?"

"Yes, the judge. Well, I need a judge's permission to take you with me, or else I'd have to leave you with Daddy and I might not see you again."

"But why? I don't want to stay with Daddy. I want to go with you!"

"Baby, I'm not going anywhere, okay? I promise. I'm not going to leave you behind. If a judge said I could take you with me, then we could go, but we can't even think about leaving until a judge says we can, okay? Do you understand?"

"Yeah. Can't you ask permission?"

"Maybe. We'll see." Christy pulled into the driveway in front of Kevin's house. "We're here," she announced, and helped Alex out of his seatbelt in the back seat.

Kevin looked surprised to see them when he opened his door.

"Can you still do stitches?"

"Yeah, of course. Why, what's wrong? Alex hurt himself again?" Kevin ruffled Alex's hair.

Christy shook her head. "No. I....well, you'll see. Do you have time?"

"Yeah, sure, come on in."

He noticed her limping and rushed to help her sit down. He lifted one of her feet out of its slipper and looked at the bloody bandages covering the sole. He looked up into her face.

"Christy. What the hell happened? Did he do this to you?"

"No, no, of course not. Jason never gets violent with us. I mean, well, he threw the breakfast plates on the floor, and silly me, I stepped right in them." She laughed lightly.

Kevin had grabbed his medical bag and started unwrapping the bandages on one foot.

"*Stepped* in them? Christy, it looks like you did a fu—" he stopped, glanced at Alex, then whispered, "it looks like you did a fucking *jig* in them!"

"Well, I didn't *just* step in them. I sorta jumped when he threw them because I wasn't expecting him to react like that."

"React like that to what?"

Christy clasped her hands together and raised them slightly, then let them rest in her lap.

"Oh, it was my fault. I said something that made him mad."

"What could you have said to make him *that* mad?"

"Well, it was silly, really. I just, well I reminded him that Alex is *our* son, not just his. He keeps calling Alex *his* son, and I made the mistake of correcting him, that's all."

"That's *all*? Christy, the man got mad at you for saying that Alex is your son, too, and you think it's *your* fault?"

"Well, yeah. I mean, he was in a great mood this morning when I was cooking breakfast and if I hadn't said anything, he might've stayed in a good mood. I just shouldn't have said anything, silly me."

"You think standing up for yourself is 'silly'?"

"Well, I didn't mean it that way, I just meant that it was a bad idea to say what I said when I should've known it would make him mad."

"Right, so if standing up for yourself is going to make your asshole husband mad, just don't do it, is that it?"

"Maybe I shouldn't have come. I'll just—"

"No, you're not going anywhere, not with your feet like this." He huffed out of his nose.

"You really should go to the hospital."

"I can't. I was barely able to convince him I should come here."

"Because I'm a man."

Christy nodded.

"But Mom, Daddy has girls over all the time! Why doesn't he want a man to fix you?"

Alex wondered.

Kevin stopped and looked at Christy. "He has other women over while you're home? As in, he has affairs with other women in your home while you and your son are...?" He couldn't finish the thought.

Christy sighed sharply. "It's...it's really not like that."

"You mean he doesn't have women over while you're home?"

"Yes he does," Alex chimed in. "He had a lady over last night. Mommy had to sleep in my room. That's why Daddy was so happy this morning. He's always happy the days the ladies come over."

Christy looked helplessly at Alex. "No, he does," she started. "But who am I to interfere? It's none of my business, really."

Kevin's eyes widened. "'None of your business'? 'Who are you to interfere'? You're his wife! His *wife*, Christy. Are you seriously telling me you see nothing wrong with him tarnishing your marriage bed with other women right in front of your eyes?"

Christy looked at her hands in her lap and then very quietly said, "I'd rather it be them than me."

Kevin said nothing as he began numbing and stitching the cuts on the bottom of Christy's feet.

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Jason was heaving and grunting over Christy. She kept her eyes shut and tried to convince herself she was relaxing on a beach in Puerto Rico, enjoying margaritas.

"What's the matter, you don't like this?" Jason was saying. "Well too bad, you frigid bitch! You're my wife and you'll do what I say."

She turned her head away from him, trying to drown him out with the sounds of the ocean in her mind.

"Only sluts don't enjoy sex. You fucking someone else? That why you don't want to fuck me? Good. I don't want you to enjoy this, you dumb whore. I can't believe I married you, let you have my kid."

Christy squeezed her eyes shut as tight as she could, trying to hold back tears.

"Answer me! You fucking someone?"

Christy shook her head. "No," she squeaked.

"You're a lying bitch and just for that, I'm gonna keep going till you're in so much pain that you'll never even think about cheating on me again. You got that?"

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"He's a good man, he really is," Christy said to Kevin.

"Clearly," Kevin responded.

"I know I must make him out to be a monster. I should just stop talking about him. He doesn't mean to hurt us. It's mostly my fa—"

"Stop, Christy. Just stop. It's not your fault and you need to stop blaming yourself for the shit he puts you and Alex through. I can't imagine treating anyone that way, let alone my wife and son."

"I didn't think you were married, Kevin."

"I'm not. I'm just saying that if I was...if you were my family, I could never be as hateful to you as he seems to have been."

Christy blushed. "What do you mean by that?"

Kevin shook his head and went back to stitching. "Nothing."

"Oh."

Kevin took a deep breath. "Have you ever thought of leaving him?"

"Leaving Jason? He's my husband, we took an oath."

"An oath that he has clearly violated who knows *how* many times?"

"We don't believe in divorce."

"You don't, or he doesn't?"

"I can't divorce him, he'd take Alex away." She glanced at her son. "He's all I have. And besides, Jason and I don't have a bad marriage."

"Christy, he gets mad at you for claiming to be your own son's mother, he's violent, he unfaithful, and he keeps you and Alex prisoners in your own home. Not to mention that he destroys your possessions to teach you a lesson! How is your marriage *not* bad? You stay in that house and he's gonna kill you someday."

"Oh, haha, no he won't! Jason isn't physically violent with us. He's never hit us, he just throws things and yells. Everyone does that."

"Does everyone cheat on their wives?"

"Oh, I'm sure there are a few men out there who don't, but mostly I would say every man cheats."

"Wow, he's really got you believing this stuff. No, not all men cheat. Especially not with their wives and children in the next room."

"Look, Kevin, I appreciate that you're trying to help, I really do, but we're fine. There's nothing wrong with our home life. We're well fed and taken care of, Jason makes sure we have everything we need. He's a good father."

"No, he's not!" Alex cried. "And you just said in the car that you wish you could run away with me!"

"Run away?" Kevin asked.

"Alex asked why we can't just run away and I had to explain to him that it's not that simple."

"So what if it's not simple? If he were a good father, he wouldn't allow his son to see his mother like this. He wouldn't want his son to grow up thinking it's okay to treat women badly. And if he were a good husband, he would've rushed you to the hospital the second you stepped in those god damned glass shards!"

"Jason does things a little bit differently. Sometimes he just doesn't think."

"Why do you keep making excuses for him? He does think, that's just it. He thinks about himself and what he can do to cause you and Alex the most harm, and he knows he can get away with it. I don't know how you don't see that. He calls you both names, tells you you're worthless or stupid or ugly and that no one wants you. He does that because he wants to control you. He knows that eventually you'll accept it as truth and you'll have no choice but to stay with him,

even though *he's* really the one that doesn't want you. I think you've already accepted it as truth. Maybe not Alex, since he's still so young, but he's made you think you're worthless, hasn't he?"

Christy smiled nervously and began fidgeting. "You almost done?" she asked, looking at her feet.

Kevin frowned. "He's not going to change. You're just going to go back there and he's gonna act like nothing happened, like nothing's ever happened."

"There's nothing I can do."

"You could leave him. Take Alex and get a restraining order."

"Ha! I can't do that! He's my husband and Alex's father. He's never hit us, why would I want a restraining order?"

"You don't get it, do you? He doesn't *have* to hit you to be abusive."

"He's not abusive, Kevin! Would you just stop? I should never have said anything. This is no business of yours. Jason would be so mad if he knew I was spewing our home life to a total stranger."

"Oh, right, 'total stranger' here."

"I know you, but Jason doesn't, so you're a stranger to him. I shouldn't talk about our home life to anyone, let alone another man."

"Oh, is he afraid you're going to undo the sanctity of your marriage by—oh wait, he's already done that for you. Can't you see what a hypocrite he is?"

"Well, if you're done here, I think we'll just head back home now." She stood carefully and walked to the front door. "Here." She held out two twenty dollar bills. "For your trouble."

Kevin looked at them, disgusted, and backed away. "So that's that? You're just going to go right back to him over and over and over until he kills you."



"Will you please take the money?"

"No. I won't. You need to call the police."

"What the hell are the police going to do for us, Kevin?!?" she snapped, tears in her eyes. "What the *hell* can they do for us? Don't you get it?" She was holding her hands over Alex's ears as she stood near the front door. "We have 'accidents' like every other family. He may be the cause of our injuries, but not directly. He may burn our possessions, but he can't be arrested for it. He may be unfaithful, but no court would send him away because of it. And with his connections, there's no way on earth I would get custody, even partial custody, of my own son if I tried to divorce Jason, and I'm sure as hell not letting him stay there alone. I wish I could leave with Alex, and I would if it was possible, but I can't."

"I don't wanna live with Daddy by myself," Alex said, clutching Christy.

Christy looked at Kevin, raised her eyebrows.

"Why? Why are you so sure he'd get custody?"

"He's the best prosecutor in the country, Kevin. He's the Johnnie Cochran of prosecutors. Everyone believes every word that comes out of his mouth, and if they don't, he eventually convinces them to. I have no choice. He would convince everyone that I'm a bad mother and that Alex would be better off living with him instead of me. He could probably even have my visiting rights denied. I can't risk that."

"So, what? You just stay there for another twelve years until Alex is 18, and *then* leave? Once your life is thoroughly ruined?"

"You don't have kids, you don't understand. We have to go. Thank you for stitching me up."

"You'll need to come back in about two weeks, so I can take the stitches out."

Christy shook her head. "That's not going to happen. I'll take them out myself. Goodbye, Kevin."

Kevin sighed. "Fine. See you at work. Please be careful."

Christy nodded, took Alex's hand, and led him back to the car. Kevin stood in the doorway watching them and Alex waved and smiled a sad smile as they drove away.

The following Monday, when Kevin got to work, he found Christy's desk empty and all of her belongings missing. He asked a fellow co-worker, Lacy, what had happened.

"Oh, Christy's husband called and left a message over the weekend. Said something about having to leave town on short notice to take a new job in D.C. or something. Told us to ship her belongings to their new address."

Kevin panicked. "You have the address?"

"Yeah, right here." She handed him a sticky note with the address written in black ink on it.

Kevin rushed to his desk, pulled up an address database and punched in the address on the paper. It came up as a storage facility near Washington, D.C.

He went back to Lacy's desk. "Did they leave a phone number or anything?"

"No, just the address and a short explanation. Why?"

"This address, it's...it's not a house. It's a storage unit."

Lacy shrugged. "Maybe they're storing their stuff till they can get settled somewhere."

"Yeah, maybe. Thanks."

Kevin sat down at his desk again, staring at the computer screen. He picked up the phone and dialed Christy's home number. Disconnected. Then he dialed Christy's cell phone number. Also disconnected.

He racked his brain trying to think of one good reason why Jason would have called Christy's employer instead of Christy. Maybe he was just that controlling. Or maybe her feet had gotten infected and she'd fallen ill. All the more reason for Kevin to try to get in touch with her. He called all the local hospitals and even a few in surrounding areas. None of them had ever heard of a Christy Hart.

On his lunch break, Kevin raced to Christy and Jason's house. It looked deserted so he parked in the driveway and looked through the windows. There was nothing inside the house that he could see. No furniture, no rugs, no electronics, no personal belongings of any kind. He walked around the house, starting in the front yard. When he reached the backyard, he saw a large, round patch of black soot on the ground about twenty feet from the back porch. He walked up to it, crouched down and used a stick to sift through the burnt remains of toys and books. The stick caught something deep in the pile and he maneuvered the stick underneath it to pull out what appeared to be a singed piece of the shirt Alex was wearing two days before when he and Christy had come to his house for stitches. Clinging to the piece of the blue and white striped fabric was a long piece of thick, bloody gauze bandage, like the one he had wrapped Christy's feet in the Saturday before.

He ran back to his car and on his way back to work, he called the police station to report what he had found, but by the time anyone managed to go out to the house to investigate, the pile of ashes had mysteriously vanished and the police said there was nothing they could do.

“But if you find anymore ‘clues,’ Sherlock, be sure to let us know, okay?” one officer had said. The police department didn’t take anything Kevin told them seriously after that, and he soon gave up trying to find out where Jason had taken Christy and Alex, or what he had done with them. Eventually he moved away, started his own family, and forgot about them altogether.

## My Darkest Winter

It is early October, 2001, and I am fifteen years old. My dad and step-mother Necia have recently purchased a house closer to my step-mother's job at Oklahoma State Penitentiary.

Today, we are at the new house, feverishly planting flower bulbs. Necia is mad at me, as usual. I'm whining about the plants. I hate gardening. I'm cold and wet and muddy and I just want to go into the new house, or back home, and warm up. It is so cold outside, but she has made me wear a holey t-shirt, jean shorts, and flip-flops so it won't be as hard to get cleaned up when we're done planting. She even made me leave my zip-up hoodie in the car. We're nearly finished, but I don't want to do this at all so I continue begging her to let me go inside. Suddenly she takes the five-gallon bucket next to her and dumps the remaining water and mud in it onto my head as I'm squatting in her garden.

"Now you're cold and wet. Shut your fucking mouth and stop bitching. I'm so sick of you. Finish planting the bulbs and then you can go inside."

I do as she tells me and finish sticking her stupid plants in the ground before she says, "Now go rinse off, you're not getting in my car like that."

I get up, shivering, and walk stiffly to the corner of the house where the garden hose is laying. I pick it up and gingerly begin to spray the freezing water over my feet and legs.

"Oh, you're such a fucking baby. I'll do it."

She yanks the hose out of my hand and a full-force torrent of icy water covers my body from head to toe. I'm in so much pain I scream unintentionally and she stops spraying for just long enough to hit me across the face with the metal hose nozzle before she returns to jetting water at me. Dad comes out of the house wanting to know where the scream came from and sees her hosing me down.

"What the hell are you doing, Necia? It's like 35 degrees out!"

"Robert, just mind your own business. The stupid bitch got filthy. She's not getting in my car like this."

"So have her go take a fucking shower! She's gonna get pneumonia! Jesus Christ!"

"Good, she deserves it. She doesn't deserve to take a hot shower. That would be rewarding her for her bad behavior, Robert. Why don't you ever back me up on her discipline? No wonder she's so out of line."

As usual, my father, weakened by his ailing health, backs off and goes back inside.

She finishes hosing the mud off of me and gives me a thin towel to dry off with. I dry myself as much as possible and wrap the towel around my body, trying to get warm. She gives me a trash bag to sit on in the backseat of her car so I don't get it wet.

"And don't lean back, either. You'll get the back of the seat wet."

I spend the 45-minute long drive home leaning forward against my seat belt and by the time we get home it's dark outside and I'm chilled to the bone and my stomach muscles are aching. Once inside the house, she immediately tears into me again.

"Why do you bitch about everything? I ask you to help me with one thing and you can't even do that. I've done so much for you. I've given up a hell of a lot so you can be here with us, and you can't even help me with *one* tiny little thing? You're a selfish bitch, just like your mother. You never think about anyone but yourself!"

Without thinking, I interrupt her. "That's not true."

Her eyes widen in disbelief and then she squints hard at me.

"Don't. You. *Ever*. Talk back to me." In an instant, she's hurling whatever is in her reach at my head. She's grabbing plates out of the kitchen cabinets and whipping them at me. I duck and each one hits the wall behind me and shatters.

"You're breaking my plates, you stupid bitch!"

She goes to the microwave, opens it, grabs the large, glass plate out of it, and launches it at me. It, too, shatters as I dodge it. She grabs a decorative gold-painted brick in our living room and stomps toward me. I keep backing up until I hit the front screen door. But she doesn't touch me.

She puts her face only inches from mine, the brick raised at her right side and says, "Get out. Go back to your mommy. Get out of my house. I hate you! Go find your fucking mommy!"

I'm confused. She's not hitting me, she's telling me to run away. *Is this another trick? I get in more trouble when I run. Should I stay? Is this a test?* I hesitate, trying to decide if it's worse for me to stay or to go. She raises the brick a little higher and I decide it's best if I go. I run out the front door and down the porch steps into the dark. It's colder now. I look at the outside thermometer hanging on the fence as I stumble past it: 23 degrees. *It's awfully early in the year to be this cold*, I think.

I am still wet and still wearing only jean shorts, a t-shirt, flip flops, and my light zip-up jacket from the car. My instinct tells me just to run, but my mind doesn't know where to run to. I bolt to a house at the end of the block where an old couple I know lives and bang on the door frantically. The old woman opens the door, takes one panicked look at me, and rushes me inside. I don't have time to explain the details to her. I ask if I can use her phone and she doesn't hesitate in handing it to me. I dial the only number I have memorized; my friend Heather who lives in another town 17 miles from here.

The phone rings and rings and finally I give up, toss the phone back to the woman, and rush to the door. She asks if she should call the police for me.

"NO! God no!" I shout. "That will only make things worse." I pause at the door and look at her concerned expression. "Thank you. Thank you so much." Before she has a chance to say anything back, I'm halfway across her backyard and dipping in and out of wooded side yards on the way to the entrance of my neighborhood, and the highway. Every headlight I see forces me to duck into the underbrush on the side of the road or deeper into the woods as I race through trees and thorn bushes. I know that at any moment I could be bitten or stung by any number of creatures in these woods, but I would rather risk that than risk having her find me.

I reach the entrance to our neighborhood, which is set off from other communities by a back road from the highway. I check for vehicles and dart as quickly as I can to the pay phone near the small gatehouse and dial a collect call to Heather's number again. This time, her mother picks up the phone and accepts the charges.

"Jenny? You okay? What's the matter, hon?"

"Please, can you come get me? I ran away. Well, she kicked me out, but I can't go back. Please. Please come get me."

"Oh shit, honey, I can't. I don't have the truck. Can you make it here somehow? Can someone bring you? You can stay with us as long as you need to if you can find a way here."

"I can't. There's no one." A vehicle approaches from inside the neighborhood gates.

"I have to go. I'll be there soon." I hang up the phone and sprint back to the safety of the woods and crouch down, praying that whoever is in that vehicle didn't see me. I stay here for several minutes before daring to move again, trying to make sure that they don't turn around and come back for me. When I finally find the courage to move my stiff body again, I glance at the clock tower outside the gatehouse: 9 o'clock. 17 miles. *If I run, I can make it by midnight.* So I run. I'm so cold, but after maybe an hour, I'm sweating. Without thinking, I take my jacket off



and wrap it around my waist. I'm finally beginning to dry out, but I can't feel my arms or legs. In my flimsy flip-flops, I trip too many times to count, but I don't feel anything when I fall except warmth suddenly sliding down my skin. I finally realize it's blood.

When I'm maybe halfway there, I relax just a little and begin running along the roads, jumping back into the woods only when a vehicle approaches. I'm exhausted, I just want to go to sleep and the cold has numbed my body so much that I imagine I'm wrapped in a warm, fluffy blanket, safely drifting off to sleep. But every rush of terror from a passing car rips that feeling from me until I'm sure I'm going to give up and die cold and alone and terrified in the woods. I imagine that no one will find my body, and that Necia will finally feel some remorse for the things she's done once I'm dead. I wonder if my death would make things easier for everyone. I decide that it would, but I still want to live. At least for now. How selfish of me.

After what seems like an eternity, I see the porch light of Heather's trailer. With my last ounce of willpower and energy, I hobble quickly up the driveway and to the front door, but before I can reach out and knock, I collapse and everything goes black.

I wake up on their couch, with Heather and her mother and father rushing around me, barking orders at each other.

"Go get her some clean clothes!"

"Bring me a warm washcloth!"

"Bring more blankets, she's damn near hypothermic!"

"Oh, my God, look at this poor child's feet! She must've been runnin' through the woods in them thongs! Get her some socks and bring me some bandages, will ya?"

I hear the phone ring and Heather's dad answers it.

"Jennifer? Here? At this hour? No, of course not, why?...Okay, I'll letcha know if she turns up."

"Was that *her*?" Heather's mom asks as he hangs up the phone.

"Yeah, I don't know how she knows she's here, though. That woman is one crazy bitch, lemme tell ya."

I feel only tiny bits of pressure where Heather's mother begins undressing me and wiping my bloodied skin with hot, wet hand towels. The warmth from the water is almost painful as it touches my hypothermic skin. I'm barely conscious now and everything is moving too fast and too slow at the same time. I hear their voices calling my name, asking me questions, but I can't speak, can't even focus enough to look at them.

I wake up again, and I am in Heather's bed wearing clean pajamas and wrapped in a thick blanket but I'm still shivering. The room is dark but through my barely open eyes I can see Heather sitting next to the bed, staring at me. I can hear her parents talking quietly in the kitchen. When I open my eyes all the way, Heather jumps to my side.

"Jesus, you okay, Jenny? We were really worried about you."

"What time is it?" I manage to squeak out.

"It's almost two now. You been here since a little after midnight. Mama and Daddy got you cleaned up and put you in bed. I wanted to make sure you were okay 'fore I went to sleep."

"I don't know. I can't feel anything. I can't feel my legs, my arms. I can't even feel my face."

"Yeah, you were really cold when you got here. Mama had to put three pairs of socks on your feet, they was so cold. And bloody. You're all cut up from runnin' through them woods."

Mama bandaged you up, though. You need anything? You hungry, thirsty? Mama can make some hot chocolate if you want it."

"No, I'm okay. Thank you. I'm just so tired."

Heather brushes my hair out of my face and kisses me on the forehead.

"I'm so glad you're okay. Just go to sleep now. You're safe here."

I'm out the second I close my eyes, but only minutes later I am woken up again, this time by Heather's parents.

"Jenny? There's cops here to talk to you."

Still only half conscious and using Heather's stocky father as support, I slowly make my way to the front door, where two sheriff's deputies are standing, hands resting on their holsters.

"Yeah?" I say.

"You run away, young lady?" the husky one asks.

"No, my step-mother kicked me out of the house. This is the only place I had to go."

"Yo' step-mama told us a different story. Says you got outta control tonight, starting throwing things at her and took off without telling anyone where you's goin'."

Anger has fully awakened me now.

"And you're gonna believe her, I take it? She flash that shiny badge o' hers again? She's a liar. She threw shit at *me* and then told me to get out of her house. Why in the world would I walk all the way up here through the woods, put myself through all that trouble, for no reason?"

"Why, I don't know, missy, but you'd best git yer butt back there right this instant, ya hear?"

"What? Walk back there now? *Walk* back there *tonight*? Are you fucking insane? Is it the badge that makes you all crazy?"

"Now, now, watch that language, girl."

"I won't watch my language, *boy*, and I ain't goin' back to that God damn house tonight, so you'd better get that straight right now. I'll go back when I damn well please. She kicked me out, and I'm out. You can just tell her to get her nosy ass to bed cuz I'm goin' back to sleep right here. Unless ya'll wanna arrest me and take me back there tonight. No? Didn't think so."

They talk for quietly for a minute on the front porch before the fat one says,

"Okay, fine, you stay here for tonight, but you go back first thing tomorrow, got it?"

He looks sternly as Heather's dad, who is still standing next to me and holding me up, ready to lunge if they try to take me. "That clear?"

Heather's dad nods his head. "Yessir. First thing tomorrow when we wake up."

"Alrighty then, ya'll have a good evenin'." He takes one last look at all of us standing in the doorway and they both return to their patrol car.

"Thanks," I say to Heather's parents. "You didn't have to do that."

"You and Heather's like sisters. That makes you family to us and nobody messes with family," says her dad.

"Go on back to sleep now, girls. We'll sort this out in the mornin'," her mom says.

Lying in bed, Heather and I try to figure out a way for me to not have to go back in the morning.

"You could run away for real," she offers. "Like, ya know, hitchhike and all that? I bet some trucker's gotta be headed to Illinois. You could go find your mama."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. But I don't know where she is, or what her phone number is or nothing. All I know is her name."

After a little while, Heather and I eventually drift off to sleep, and I have dreams of hitchhiking my way back home. *Home. What is home?*

The next morning we wake up and eat breakfast slowly and get ready for my return to hell. Heather's mom has washed my bloodied clothes, but gives me some of Heather's clean clothes to wear anyway, since it's still cold out. Heather's dad decides it will be best if he takes me home himself in case anything gets out of hand when we get there. We get back to my house and Dad is in the driveway working on his truck. He thanks Heather's dad for bringing me home. Necia bursts onto the front porch and starts screaming at him for "kidnapping" me and refusing to bring me home when the police told him to. She threatens to have him arrested. I thank him quickly and urge him to leave before she does something stupid. He pets my hair, kisses me on the forehead, and tells me I'm always welcome at their home if anything else happens. Then he leaves.

I'm standing in the driveway, staring at the ground, trying desperately not to make eye contact with her. I hear her go back inside and slam the screen door. Finally, Dad says something.

"You're in deep shit, ya know. She thought you got killed. Run over or something."

"As if she'd care," I mumble under my breath.

"Yeah, well, she does, but you'd better steer clear of her for a while. Be good, try to help as much as possible. Please? Maybe when she cools down, you should apologize."

Shock floods my body. *Apologize? For what?* But I say nothing. Good children should be seen and not heard.

I enter the house, trembling, and go directly to my room, trying to figure out my next plan of action. Should I suck up now? Ask if I can help with anything? See if she wants a backrub?

Stay away? Everything is always different with her. She changes it up to keep my on my toes. Maybe last time I could calm her down by giving her a hug and saying sorry, but this time, she might kill me if I go near her. Or maybe she'll think I'm lazy if I stay in my room and don't offer to help with anything. Somehow I find the strength to carefully approach her, keeping my head down, and my voice submissive.

"Mama? Can I help you with anything?"

"You'd better get the hell away from me, girl. I'm warning you. You wanna keep your face intact, you'd better leave me alone." She doesn't look at me, but her tone tells me all I need to know. I go back to my room, but I dare not occupy myself with anything there for fear of looking like I'm enjoying my isolation. She has broken, burned, and thrown away my things before just because I touched them while I was in trouble. I sit on the edge of my bed, feet on the floor, hands together in my lap, and stare at my feet. I feel like she's going to yell at me any second for not being productive, but she doesn't come near my room for over an hour.

The week after I "run away," she and my dad take me to see our family doctor, whose daughter is my best friend. Necia thinks I'm depressed and shows concern for my well-being, but Dr. Trent knows something isn't quite right. He knows me well enough by now to know that I wouldn't run away without a damn good reason. Without going into detail or telling him how bad things have gotten, I let him know that things are far from perfect and that I don't know how much longer I can deal with it. He decides to refer me to a psychiatric hospital in a town far enough away that it will be difficult for Necia and my dad to visit me often. *Thank God.* They check me into the hospital the following day, and the entire time we're filling out paperwork and talking to the people that run the hospital, Necia tells her tragic story about how her poor step-

daughter must be incredibly depressed to have run away for no reason at all and *cuss out police officers!* She can't imagine what could possibly make me so rebellious and mean-spirited.

I sit, quietly fuming, and biting the insides of my cheeks to keep from saying something stupid before I have a chance to leave her behind and enter the hospital ward. People are looking at me like *I'm* the one who's crazy. Hell, I wish I was crazy, so then I'd at least have a decent excuse to blow her face off with her own sawed-off shotgun while she's sleeping. But fortunately, or unfortunately sometimes, I'm smarter than that.

The doctors plan to keep me here for about a week to see if I'm really as depressed as Necia seems to think I am. One week. Vacation time. I cycle through six counselors in my first few days. I refuse to talk to any of them. They want to talk about feelings. I try not to allow myself to feel anymore. It's easier that way. Something they see in me prompts them to keep me for a second week. They diagnose me manic depressive and put me on Zoloft and sleeping pills, because I sleep restlessly or not at all, and keep waking my roommates with my nightmares. They keep me for a third week. I start finding anything I can to hurt myself with. I stab myself in the wrists with pencils until I bruise or bleed. I twist plastic bottle caps into my arms until they leave bloody circles. I snap rubber bands on my skin until I can't feel it anymore. I ask often to go to the "quiet room," a white, padded room they lock us into when they can't, or don't want to, handle us. I pace back and forth barefoot or sit in the corner and pull my hidden stash of pencils or bottle caps or broken razor blades out of my bra to do more damage until they notice me on the camera.

A few times I am tackled and held down by the male nurses while they pry my sad little paraphernalia out of my bloody fingers and then throw me in the quiet room for a couple of hours. They put me on an almost constant suicide watch starting the fourth week. They pull my

bed into the hallway for me to sleep at night so they can keep the lights on and watch me. I start writing poetry. Dark, dark poetry about death, suicide, hate, murder. I lash out at everyone, anyone. My counselors finally realize that, though I say nothing in their sessions but "Shut the fuck up," and "I don't wanna talk to a fucking shrink," and "I'm not the crazy one," that I am saying plenty without words. I realize myself that I have been acting this way to lengthen my stay here for another week, another day, another hour. Anything to keep me from going back to her.

Eventually, my fear of her subsides and I behave. It doesn't disappear completely, but being here in this place with these other kids who have seen and been through so much worse than I have makes me realize I've got it good and if I would only stand up to her, put her in her place, I'd have it even better. After all, I'm taller, physically stronger than her. I could easily take her in a fight, it's just a matter of willpower.

I dread going home from the hospital today. I have had seven weeks away from her and I've finally found the bravery to tell her off, but I have no idea what the consequences will be. I have refused to see her the entire time I've been here. I have only seen my father once, which I'm sure is her doing, her way of pouting or punishing me for not wanting to see her. I've barely even talked to him on the phone. It hasn't hurt as much as I thought it would. I tell her over the phone that her actions haven't brought me down. Though she seems amazed that I could think she would ever try to hurt me by keeping my father from me, I know deep down she's pissed that she hasn't done any damage.

They arrive to pick me up, and we go through the motions of a loving family who have missed one another after being separated for so long. We hug, we smile, she cries, even Dad



looks like he might shed a tear, but I won't. Never again for her. We arrive home and everything is the way it should be; my room has been put back to nearly the same way it was, broken things have been fixed or replaced throughout the house, and there's even a gift lying on my bed waiting for me, though I don't care enough to open it. I leave it there and unpack my things. She comes to my room with a bright smile on her face, a genuine smile, which is rare.

"You hungry, baby?"

All wrongs in my home are always fixed with food, or punished with the lack of it.

"Sure," I say. I don't even want to talk to her. She comes up to me, a little too quickly, and I flinch. She puts her arms around me. *Just a hug.*

"What's wrong with you?" she asks, irritated.

"Nothing. The girls in the ward hit people sometimes, that's all," I lie. If I don't make it someone else's fault besides hers, I know she'll go into a rage.

"Did they hit you, baby?" *I really wish you would stop calling me that.*

"No. I wouldn't let them."

She seems happy that I stood up for myself, even if it was against something that never happened.

"Well, finish up in here and then come help me in the kitchen, okay?"

I nod my head, but don't say a word. As long as I comply with her demands, and I do it well, everything will be fine. And everything *is* fine, for a while. Thanksgiving is coming up, a stressful time for even normal families, and I just know it's going to get bad again real soon.

On Christmas Day, 2001, she all but loses her mind and forces my father to shave my head in our kitchen while she's at work. She thinks we have mites. She thinks this because she

put a hair in the toilet with the bathroom lights off, shined a flashlight on the hair and saw dark spots at the bottom of the toilet. The shadows of the hair touching the water, we keep trying to tell her, but she's a runaway train and nothing can stop her now.

Dad cries as he cuts off my long, straight blonde hair. "Cries" isn't the right word. He's sniffing, so I know he's trying *not* to cry, but it's as close to crying as he usually gets. He might even be shedding a tear or two, because he keeps pulling his hands away from my head for brief moments and putting them near his face. He's mostly standing behind me, but to my side I can see a little of his movements. I can see my hair piling up on the floor and I start to feel a little dizzy. I feel like I'm floating away from my body and suddenly I'm very, very hot.

*Is this really happening?* I reach with trembling fingers to the top of my head and feel cropped bits of fuzz sticking out. I want to cry, but I've sworn to myself that I won't. She doesn't deserve my tears. She and my father shaved their heads yesterday. It's so strange seeing my father without his thin, gray ponytail. Seeing her without hair almost makes me laugh—it's even worse than her normal MacGyver haircut—so I think about that, rather than what is happening right now. I try to tell myself that I don't have it bad right now, though, that I'm lucky.

Last night she decided to give our Rottweiler and Siamese/Calico mix cat flea baths without diluting the solution with water. Both nearly died and she seemed almost happy about it while Dad and I rushed around trying to save them. They wheezed and laid, barely moving, all night while Dad and I just held them, thinking it was the last time we'd get to while they were still alive. This morning they were still a little weak, but because we acted quickly enough in rinsing the concentrated flea bath off of them last night, the vet thinks they'll be fine.

For the millionth time, I wonder why on Earth Dad hasn't left this crazy bitch yet. I guess it's because he can't. He's too sick, too weak, too poor. Too lonely, that's probably the biggest

factor. No matter, there's always some reason, some excuse. He seems to think she'll just stop being crazy; that one day we'll all wake up and she'll be the kind of mom and wife she's supposed to be; one that doesn't hit her kid and throw things at her husband and pull guns on them or make them shave their heads in the middle of winter because she's too stupid or demented to know the difference between a shadow and a tiny bug.

A couple of days after Christmas, my dad and I go to the store to pick up a few things and develop a roll of film. Somehow, I manage to leave the film in the car and as I run back outside to grab it, a familiar voice calls my name. When I turn around, I see Bobby, my Bobby, standing in front of me in a white Navy uniform, a huge grin on his face. All the breath leaves my body and I rush to hug him to me. I hold him so tight it feels like I could absorb him into my body and never have to lose him again. He hugs me back just as tight and presses his face against the hat I'm wearing to conceal my new baldness. We talk for a while and exchange numbers for the first time, and then he has to go. His mother and grandmother are waiting to take him home until he has to fly back to his base in Chicago in a few days.

He calls me every day and we sometimes stay on the phone for hours catching up. Dad manages to keep Necia away from me for these times, and at Dad's prodding, I tell Bobby I love him, that I always have, and was always too stupid or too scared to admit it. He says he loves me, too, and he doesn't know what he would've done if he hadn't found me when he did. He says nothing will separate us again.

On January 16<sup>th</sup>, 2002, a social worker from the Department of Human Services in Oklahoma calls me out of my last, and favorite, class of the day, art. My friend Shelby has told them that she has seen bruises on me, and that I've come to school more than once with a busted

lip or black eye. She tells them what I told her; that Necia beats the hell out of me almost daily, and that she does things to me that no adult should do to kids.

Kim, the social worker, prods me to tell her everything, or at least enough to warrant having me taken into the state's custody. I don't know what this means, but I know it will get me away from Necia for a while. She asks me to tell her what Necia does to me...sexually. I blush when she says it's okay to use anatomical terms like "vagina" and "breasts," and that saying them will make things more clear for her, anyway. I stare at the floor, face on fire, sometimes shutting my eyes tight as I tell her the things that Necia has done to me for nearly eight years. Finally, she tells me that she will call my parents and tell them I'm not coming home today. My stomach churns.

"Please don't call them!" I beg her.

"I have to, Jennifer. I have to tell them you're not coming home today or they'll wonder where you are and I'll get in trouble. Don't worry, you won't ever be going back there."

"But what about my stuff? And my cat? How am I supposed to get them?"

"We can get some of your stuff, but you'll have to leave your cat there, sweetie."

Tears well up in my eyes. *Won't ever be going back? What about Dad? Will I get to see him again? What about Max? I can't take Chopper with me?* Suddenly, this doesn't seem like such a great idea. I allow a few tears to escape, but I hold back the flood that's trying to burst me open at the seams. Suddenly I'm scared, more scared than I've ever been of Necia. *Where am I supposed to go? I'm only fifteen!*

In the back seat of Kim's car for the almost hour it takes to get to McAlester, where the DHS office is, I stare out the window and cry silently. She explains to me that she's going to put

me in a safe house, or a shelter, as they call them, until they can find a suitable foster home to take me. It doesn't even cross my mind to ask what will happen if no one will take me.

Once I get set up in the shelter, which houses only a handful of other girls, one of the women who works there takes me shopping since I wasn't able to bring any clothes with me. Eventually, someone, I don't know who, is able to confiscate several trash bags full of my possessions from Dad and Necia's house. Most of the things they bring to me are useless: a broken CD/cassette player, clothes I haven't worn for ages and have grown out of, a box of my fake and mismatched jewelry, old shoes, an empty lipstick case. I can't imagine why, out of all the things they could have brought to me, they brought things I have no use for. From what I've been told, they got a warrant to go into that house and seize my things, so I know they had enough time to pick through things carefully.

They haven't even brought me any pictures. I think about all my childhood memories in photo albums that Necia will surely burn now. The photo of me on the green Sinclair gas station dinosaur somewhere in Colorado, the photo of my dad sitting in a chair in the front yard with our old dog Bulldog, who we had to put down years ago because she had cancer, the black and white photo of a six-year-old sleeping me tucked under my dad's huge arm, looking so fragile, the picture of me in my princess nightgown holding my pet rooster Golden in the driveway, the early morning breeze gently swirling my hair around my face. All gone. There's nothing left, only what I can remember, and I know these memories can't last forever.

My first interview with a foster family goes badly. I've decided to dress in all black all the time and I slump in my seat, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. I mumble half answers and display a bad attitude, thinking it makes me look cool. Who wouldn't want a cool foster kid? They decide they'd rather help a more normal foster kid who isn't as problematic as I

am. My first foster home is with a relatively young couple that has already taken in several fosters besides their biological kids. I hate biological kids. They throw it in your face.

"I'm the real kid, you're just a *foster* kid," like being a foster is a bad thing. Eventually, we all believe it is, that we were abandoned for a reason. After only a few weeks of the other kids bossing me around and making fun of my short hair, which is growing in like a mullet, I can't take it anymore. I threaten one of the kids and get sent back to the shelter.

We've got a new girl now. She smokes pot. On several occasions, a couple of us put pillows under our blankets at night, turn the shower on in the bathroom and lock the doors—we've figured out how to pick the locks to get back into the bathroom—and sneak out one of the bedroom windows. We sprint across a park separating the shelter from a nearby neighborhood to this girl's friend's house to score pot. When we get back, we try it, but it's all stems and seeds and none of us feels any different after trying to smoke it. We decide not to try it again.

All this time I have stayed in contact with Bobby. No one is allowed to call the shelter to talk to us except immediate family, so Bobby does his best impression of an old man, and they believe him when he says he's my grandfather, who, along with my aunt and grandmother, is allowed to call me. We continue our long talks many times a week and really have a chance to get caught up with one another. One night in early March, he calls and seems really nervous. I keep asking him what's wrong but he keeps saying everything is okay. He starts rambling about things like the future, and kids, which we've talked about before, and I keep wondering why he's repeating conversations we've already had. His voice is shaking. I'm starting to get worried that something is wrong and he's just trying to keep me calm by not telling me. Finally, he says something I'm not expecting at all.

"What I'm trying to say is, maybe we could, I mean, do you wanna..." He takes a deep breath. I'm so confused. "Jennifer, would you be my wife?" he asks finally.

I don't know what to say. My head is swimming. *Did I hear him right?* I want to scream "YES!" but my mouth isn't working.

"Would you, I mean, *will* you marry me?" he asks again.

Finally I find my voice and choke out, "Yes, yes, I absolutely will!"

A couple of weeks later he calls to tell me that he's being medically discharged from the Navy because he messed up his knees a while back. He tells me he's going to Biloxi, Mississippi with some friends of his until he can get on his feet, and then he'll join me wherever I am so we can start our life together. This saddens me because I know DHS will be sending me to live with my mom in Illinois soon, and this means he'll no longer be there, but it also makes me a little happy because Biloxi is a little closer to me right now in McAlester, Oklahoma than Chicago is and I am hopeful that maybe he can come visit me. He tells me he will call me when he gets to Biloxi so I know that he got there safely, since they're driving.

A couple days later, I get a phone call, and a woman at the shelter who answers the phone argues with the caller for a few minutes, saying that only family is allowed to call and she can't allow the caller to talk to me, let alone reveal whether I'm here or not. She finally gives up and hands me the phone. I just know it's Bobby calling to let me know he got to Biloxi okay and I'm so excited to talk to him, my future husband, but I wonder for a brief second why he didn't pretend to be my grandfather like usual.

I put the phone to my ear and say, "Hey! How'd the trip go? Was it fun?"

The caller, an older male by the sound of his voice, explains to me that he is Bobby's superior officer and that normally he wouldn't be calling me but I'm the first entry on Bobby's list of people to notify in the case of an emergency. *Emergency? What emergency?*

I ask him if Bobby is okay. I think maybe his knees are giving him trouble or something, since his doctors said he might need another surgery to help fix them after a car accident he was in a few years before.

The man tells me that Bobby has been in another car accident. I immediately tense, trying to think of a way to go see him in whatever hospital he's in and I'm completely unprepared for what comes next.

Finally he says, "I regret to inform you that he died on impact."

So simple, straight to the point, clinical. I don't hear the rest of what he says. I keep the phone to my ear but I'm somewhere else.

Once I'm able to bring myself back, the man is saying, "I'm very sorry, Ma'am."

I manage to whisper a thank-you, and put the phone back in its cradle. I slump, my head hanging toward the ground and slowly walk to my bedroom. I sit on the bed and wonder if this is just a really bad dream. I slap myself hard in the face. I can't feel it. *Thank God*, I think. *Just a dream*. But I still cry. I lean back on the pillows and eventually fall asleep. When I wake up, the side of my face is hot and tingling. I look at myself in the bathroom mirror and my right cheek is still bright red. I've only been asleep for half an hour. The phone call comes flooding back and I realize it was real. I collapse on the bathroom floor and my chest begins to heave with sobs. I cry all day and so hard that I bruise my ribs. I don't care. It's nothing compared to the pain in my empty chest.



The women at the shelter keep asking me why I'm crying, what's wrong, who was on the phone. I don't answer them. I can't. If I say it, it makes it real. So I cry. For days and days I cry. I cry in class, if I even go. I take frequent bathroom breaks to cry in the stalls. I cry at night lying in bed. I can't sleep, I can't eat, I can barely breathe. And then one day, my grief turns to anger.

I pierce my nose with a safety pin in the bathroom. I do it without ice or a lighter. I want to feel pain. I want to feel anything. But I don't feel anything when I stick the pin through my nostril. It doesn't even bleed. I stick an earring in the hole and two other girls decide they want to follow in my footsteps. The shelter decides they've had enough of me. I'm a bad influence and I have a bad attitude and they can't handle me because they think I'm so out of control. They tell me they're transferring me from McAlester to another shelter in another town over an hour away in Eufala. I refuse to go. Heather has since come to this shelter because her parents got in trouble somehow, and I refuse to leave her side. She and her family were my saving grace months ago, and I plan to be here for her as long as possible.

Heather and I lock ourselves into my bedroom, and bar the door with anything we can find. The women call the police, who come and try to talk me out of the room. Heather and I sit on my bed hugging each other and crying. We know they're not going to just go away, so we try to hold onto the last few moments we have together as long as we can. Eventually, I decide I'd better go with them rather than cause any more trouble, so I gather my things and leave.

When I get to Eufala, I learn that Bobby was once in this shelter when things got bad with his mom and grandma a couple years ago. Just being here makes me feel closer to him and helps to keep me calm. I turn 16 in this shelter. I learn that the man I've thought was my biological father my entire life isn't. I've always known that my dad isn't my real father, but that didn't matter because I have his last name and I consider him my dad. This other man, Bob, is

the one my mom has always thought is my biological father, but there are two possibilities. In the process of trying to figure out where I belong, the state conducts a paternity test for Bob. If it is positive, they intend to send me to live with him and his wife. Weeks go by as the results are being processed. Bob and I talk on the phone almost every day, just getting to know each other. I yell at him, accusing him of running away from his responsibilities when my mom told him she was pregnant. He explains that he never knew for sure and Mom never contacted him once I was born. For my 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, he and his wife send me a card with money in it and the book *The Princess and the Bride*. He sends me typed letters. He says his handwriting is terrible, but he always signs his name at the bottom. He sends me pictures of himself standing next to a Darth Vader statue in front of a sci-fi store, and a picture of his house in Iowa, the house that we both believe I will be moving into soon. He looks like someone who could be my father, my dad. His wife Victoria already feels like a step-mom; a sane, sweet one.

DHS plans to send me to live with Bob and Victoria as soon as the paternity test results come back positive, so the week before I'm told the test results should be in, I begin to pack my things, start saying goodbye to my friends at school. Finally, the test results come back. Bob is 0% for fatherhood. He cries on the phone as he tells me this. He has no other children and he and his wife were very excited at the prospect of suddenly having a daughter.

When the test comes back negative, no one knows what to do with me. They can't legally send me to live with someone I'm not biologically related to, other than foster families, and my grandmother refuses to tell them where my mother is or how to contact her. Initially, they want to put me in my Aunt Valerie's house, but that falls through and Grandma Jo says she can't take me in.

They stick me in another foster home, this time with an elderly couple, Nana and Pawpaw and a few other girls. I am only there for a few weeks. One of the girls' mothers is a stripper and the girl shows us some exotic dance moves. When Nana and Pawpaw see the other girls making these vulgar movements, they automatically assume it is my doing since I'm the oldest, and send me back to the shelter.

Finally, DHS is able to get in contact with my mother, who immediately starts making arrangements for me to return home to her. In the meantime, I am put into another foster home with a couple who has two biological daughters in the house, ages six and nine. I quickly learn my place as a foster in their home, as their nine-year-old graciously informs me that I'm "just a foster." I also learn that the parents are easily manipulated. I can get out of any punishment by simply offering them a back rub, foot rub, or by cleaning something. I am never grounded or in trouble for more than a few hours at a time.

After being with them for about a month, they decide to take a family vacation. Without me. They drop me off at another foster home in the town I used to live in with Dad and Necia, and I'm grateful to be back around people I know, even if it is dangerously close to Necia. While I'm in Canadian, an old friend of mine from the high school brings me a dozen red roses and tells me how he's felt about me since we first met. I make the mistake of going to his house with him and he tries to force me to have sex with him. He gets angry when I say no and struggle away from him. Finally, his dad takes me back to my temporary foster home and we never talk again.

I go to a bowling alley in McAlester with some friends from Canadian and meet a charming boy named Ray. He catches my eye because he's bowling a 300 game, and because he's really cute, but mostly because he's missing his legs from the knees down, and has four fingers altogether. He intrigues me. He doesn't use prosthetics, he just walks on his knees, bowls

with the three fingers he has on his right hand, balances the ball with the one finger on his left hand. I can't help but talk to him. I get up the courage to exchange numbers with him right before my friends and I leave the alley.

I'm only in Canadian for a week or two, though, before I'm once again ripped away from my old friends and sent back to the cruise-going foster family. It's almost a relief to be out of Canadian.

I lose my virginity to Ray while living with my latest foster family. I rush into another short-lived engagement with him. My foster family, especially the little girls, love Ray but eventually we break up and I give up on guys for the time being. Soon after, seven of my closest female friends and I decide we're going to all date each other, to see what it's like. The eight of us "date" for a couple of weeks. One girl proposes to me but we all decide that it's better to be just friends. After the girls and I break up, I jump into a relationship with a boy named Steven, whom I have nicknamed "Chia Pet" for his spiky hair. I think I love him.

About two months after my foster family has come back from their cruise, DHS finally makes arrangements to return me to Peoria, Illinois to live with my mother. Before I leave, my foster parents give me a gold ring with heart cutouts in it as a going away present. They say it's so I'll always have them with me. In the couple of days before my flight, I pack my things into several large duffle bags provided by DHS, leave most of my stuffed animals in a big cardboard box in the living room for the girls, and leave with my social worker Kim early in the morning, before the sun is up, so I don't have to say goodbye. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2002, Kim, who has been by my side through this entire ordeal, and I board an airplane to Chicago where my mom and sister Tiffany are waiting to take me home. Kim clutches my knee upon takeoff. She's never

flown before and is terrified. It's not usual for social workers to personally escort their foster kids on flights, but she feels the need to see me safely home after all we've been through with each other. I sleep the entire three-hour drive home and when we get there, there is a welcome home sign in my bedroom from my sister Kelly. I finally feel like this is where I'm supposed to be.

Steven and I continue dating even after I've moved to Illinois. We talk on the phone often. One night, he tells me to expect something in the mail from him. Something special. A few days later, a small package arrives from him. Inside is a smaller velvet box, and a letter. The smaller box contains a gold ring with seven small diamonds in it. The letter asks me to marry him. I call him and say yes. Shortly after the proposal, it becomes clear to both of us that a long-distance engagement won't work. I can't legally leave the state without DCFS's permission until I'm 18, and he has no way of moving up here. We decide it's best for both of us if we break up and see what happens down the line. I tell him I'll send his ring back. He insists that I keep it. "I bought it for you," he says. "It's yours." We keep in touch for several months, but eventually stop calling each other. It's easier that way.

My mom and I are mandated to go to family counseling every week for six months after my return, and I hate going. I hate counseling, I hate talking to people in general, let alone when they're trying to get inside my head. We make no progress in our counseling sessions. I refuse to talk, especially with my mother present. The things I've been through aren't anyone else's business, let alone some stranger's. I'm embarrassed and angry and scared, but I have been raised not to feel anything. Anytime I start to feel, I shut myself down; lock everything out so I can get back to zero. My smiles are mechanic. I refuse to allow anyone to take pictures of me or to get close to me, for fear of losing anyone else. To me, photos are just memories that can be

taken away. Friends and family are only temporary comforts and not worth further heartbreak. I mostly keep to myself at school, only talking to people if I have to. I try not to make friends, and though I really do try to stay out of trouble, I can't. I'm constantly being sent to the dean's office. People make fun of me, call me Sinead O'Connor because of my still short hair, stay away from me as much as possible. Some of my classmates are even afraid of me, though I've given them no reason to be. I've managed to keep my anger directed at myself so far.

My mom's and my private counselor and my school guidance counselor come to the conclusion, along with the rest of my family, that it would be a miracle if I even stayed in high school long enough to graduate and that no one should expect much out of me. They expect only that I will be a burden and continue to cause trouble. They see no college, no positive friends, no prospect of a good job in my future, only abusive and unhealthy relationships, and they suspect that eventually I'll off myself, as I have a history of suicide attempts.

What they don't know is that I'm a stubborn bitch. I don't like to settle, and I intend to prove them all wrong.