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Walking the Dead

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WALKING THE DEAD

By

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ABSTRACT

The topic of my master’s thesis is a long time coming. Since entering the graduate program, even attending Florida State University as an undergraduate and taking my first writing workshop my sophomore year, I have been writing, essentially, about the same topic in different forms. The subject is my father. The first story I wrote was about a girl who wanted the life of her neighbor because her own life was not perfect. It was real. It had flaws. The father in that first piece of fiction was my father. He had a heart attack. He was living past his prospective expiration date. He was, expired milk. I was eighteen when my father’s life and death was called into question, and I had just finished my first semester of college. To me, at the time, I was a grown up, a woman finally in college, finally able to do what I wanted. And then he had a heart attack, a series of heart attacks actually, and what I thought was in the future was now in the past. Everything changed from that moment on. My thesis begins here. At that moment. That moment has redefined and given meaning to what my life has been for the last five years.

The second story I wrote for my first writing workshop was about an older girl, in her teens, attending college and working through neurotic, paranoid, delusions of what her life was supposed to be, what her life was, and how she was functioning in the hours following her father’s heart attack, and her group therapy session. Again, the theme was death, health, the essential organ that beats in the center of the body, pumping blood and building walls. Spreading cells.

From here, I’d begun several stories but not finished them, brainstormed topics and ideas, but never flushed them out. I wrote down phrases and sentences, blurbs of words that might have led to something else. And then I took a poetry workshop from Barbara Hamby. And I wrote poetry, and it came easily, at first, memories and tales I remembered from childhood popping up in my poems, my father, the divorce when I was three, my parents second marriage at the courthouse, the all white apartment he rented for six months and the girls playing double-dutch on the street outside. My poems were about our lunches together, me waiting for him to die. But he just kept on going like an energizer bunny, a broken clock still right twice a day, a bird with a broken wing.

My third complete story was not about him at all, but about me, in an alternate reality, a different version of me, somewhere, in college, living alone, not having to worry about any of the problems here, in this reality.

My fourth story was about a family dealing with a father’s heart transplant and his recovery, and the parallel events of the first two years, and the last two years. And the fifth, a complete departure. I was tired of the subject of hearts. And I tried to branch out. But what I found was that he wasn’t going away, and I couldn’t get him out of my head, out of my unconscious, long enough to go a different route. He was still there. And then he died the end of my first year as a graduate student. So, he set up camp in my head, and I haven’t really been able to write about anything else since he passed away.

It seemed that fate would step in then in the form of Wendy Bishop in the summer of 2003 when I took her writing non-fiction workshop. It was the first time I had ever really paid any attention to something that wasn’t short story or fiction technique oriented, and after a few grueling workshops up to the point, I found that it was creative non-fiction was a refreshing
change. It was perfect timing. It had only been two months since my father died, and what I was finding was that Wendy was teaching me techniques to let my feelings out in a way that didn’t quite require all of the rules that I was so used to in fiction technique. Like some of the writers we read, I felt free for the first time to really write about anything I wanted to the way that I wanted to. Wendy’s prompts in class led me down into memories that I hadn’t thought about in a long while, some memories that I forgot I’d had. In any case, I knew that my thesis would take on a non-fiction format after reading Maureen Stanton’s short fiction piece “Zion.” Hers is a story of her boyfriend with terminal cancer and the surreal experiences that led up to his eventual death. I was truly blown away after reading her piece because it read so much like lyrical fiction that I had encountered before in other short stories. Never did I imagine that the same lyrical and poetic technique could be applied to writing non-fiction, and so I set out to try and discover and learn what this “creative” part of non-fiction really meant. I learned that creative was synonymous with flexible and encompassed all sorts of writing techniques that are deemed “creative.”

Stanton’s story really spoke to me because it was also a story about a terminal illness, and her technique and style was the kind of narrative non-fiction that I wanted to use to try and tell the story of my father and its affect and aftermath on me and the rest of my family.

So I began to compile the prompts and exercises done in Wendy’s class into an essay about the powerful absence of my father in our family of four. Later, over the break before the fall semester of 2003, I began to read some non-fiction. I picked up Alice Sebold’s Lucky, and, after taking in her complete and total honesty and lack of sentimentality, I knew that the style of Maureen Stanton and the style of Alice Sebold was the format that I wanted to use for my thesis. I knew that I wanted freedom for showing and telling, and didn’t want to be limited by the rules that usually accompany a novel or short story.

My work in comparison with theirs is similar in that they all deal with some kind of trauma or traumatic event that, from that point on, dictates how the world is seen and taken in forever. Also, in relation to these texts I’ve mentioned, it will explore the creativity of non-fiction and play with white space, scene and exposition; I won’t be too caught up in the showing and not telling, and I won’t be afraid to interject my thoughts onto the page like Sebold and Stanton does. I want my piece of narrative non-fiction to have poetic and lyrical elements as well as technique from story and novel writing, but also having the freedom to experiment and redefine some of these preconceived notions of what is right and not right when telling a story.
PART ONE

“There is really nothing more to say—except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how.”
-Toni Morrison in The Bluest Eye

Dad never got to see the flowers. We had just planted gold and fuchsia Spiraea in the same bed the bushes rested in outside my bedroom window. It was the dawn of spring, and yellow speckles of pollen clung to my skin. One plant of three daisies from the same stem sat at the left of the flowerbed, closest to the door. I liked daisies, and I thought dad would like them too.

But he died the next day. We found him at exactly 6:02 a.m. that Sunday morning, his right hand hanging off the bed, and his mouth wide open. The skin around his nose and chin weren’t wrinkled anymore, and when I put his hand in mine there was nothing left to hold on to.

Lately, I can’t remember the exact way his laugh sounded, or the deepness of his voice. Spring has come around again, and the flowers don’t bloom outside my window anymore, and the grass on his grave has settled into the earth, dying little by little, soaking him dry.

A few species of sharks can rest on the bottom of a body of water and pump oxygen over their gills without moving, and some can’t.

Sometimes, because of the stress, a failure occurs in the neural mechanisms in the brain that signals the muscles to make the necessary movements. Maybe it’s really a failure of the will, a fear of loss: A natural occurrence that is unnatural.

We thought he just had the flu. It was a Thursday night, late, or quite early, when Mom flung open my hollow wooden door, almost hysterical. I was hazy and couldn’t concentrate on anything yet. I heard words and saw a vague shadow standing with yellow light behind her telling me something about my Father.

“Daddy’s unconscious. Sabrina! Daddy’s unconscious!” She kept repeating over and over as if I would try an answer she hadn’t figured out yet. I was groggy, my eyelids heavy, still in between sleep and awake and I wasn’t worried yet, or frightened. Just tired. There had never been anything wrong with him before, what was she talking about? He had the flu, right? I put my feet on the floor and jumped up, she was still screaming at me, and now I could see that she was crying.

I ran across the hall, my feet slapping against the hard wood floor and into my Father’s room, not their room for a few years now, and he lay there, propped up with several long pillows, naked except for his white underwear. His skin pale, his head lay parallel to the floor while the rest of his body struggled to remain upright. I didn’t know what to do. He was my Father, with a capital F, like God or something, the Parthenon, a few emotional bruises, a hard life, but standing…or not.

We just stood there, my mom on one side of the bed and me at the foot, staring at him, waiting to see if he needed our help. His feet were apart, one facing right the other facing left, a
wide divide in his lax and thin muscles. This would be the last time his chest would be so wide, hairy, and moving. Up to that point, he hadn’t needed us physically, so we waited, and I thought of several possible options, actions for me to take: pump his chest, breathe my life into his, smack him on the cheek. My mind spun through outcomes like a Rolodex. I couldn’t move.

My brother Brett was asleep down the hall, usually where my mother slept in half of a bunk bed split in two. Both Mom and Dad had said it was because of her snoring, but Brett and I knew that wasn’t it. But tonight, she had chosen to sit up with him, she was worried, and wanted to make sure nothing happened. But something was happening. I finally moved to the side of his bed and took his hand in mine. I said in a normal voice, “Dad? Dad, are you okay?” I started to shake him a little, pat his cheek, warm and wet. Pasty. It was all happening in slow motion.

His face was yellow and ashen, his lips parted, and his eyes flickering back and forth trying to decide whether or not to roll back in his head. He could almost pass for sleeping, like he was in the middle of any other dream, a very mouth-watering, life is good, dream. I started to shake him harder, just to get my touch on him, thinking maybe I was worthy enough to bring him out of it, of whatever was happening to him, and my Mother was not. My love was still pure, and her love, I knew, had changed. He wasn’t responding, his mouth wide, and then, his eyes shot open, like nothing was happening. Like nothing was wrong. This fooled us, my Mother and I, because our thinking had turned to the basic, the primitive and the only thoughts we could comprehend were eyes closed = bad, eyes open = good. This was good. He was going to be okay. He just passed out, or was so tired from no sleep and the flu. That was it. It had to be. He was alright. Awake.

“What, what happened? What’s goin’ on? What are you doing?” He looked frightened, confused, like a child just woken up for school.

“You passed out Skip, are you okay?” My mom said, kneeling down and feeling his forehead. She’d had a bad feeling she’d said. She “knew” things. Ever since I was a little girl she argued that she was psychic, had abilities, knew the future. One night on the porch in the middle of dusk, she said she’d witnessed a murder some time ago, in her head. A young woman, attacked in her home. Perhaps she was just remembering sections of her life she had long since buried. As a young girl, I thought she was joking, telling me ghost stories. I didn’t understand. It wasn’t until later, as I entered high school that I began to notice the large plastic rum bottles in the recycling bin. I thought the rum magnified her instincts, or perhaps, she was really just, crazy. She said I had it too, that I could know things, if only I tried. Sometimes I was able to feel out people, or situations, but I wasn’t able to feel out this.

He had been sick since Monday, came home after half a day at his new job, finally, his dream job. A route salesman most of his life, he had picked up dirty laundry from businesses and gave them freshly cleaned rugs and uniforms in return. Sometimes, when Brett and I were younger, he’d take us with him on local runs. Usually, he took me to the Riverfront Bar and Saloon, out on Capital Circle. I’d carry the smaller duffels, and marvel at how my Dad could carry large, heavy bags of wet and dirty laundry that weighed at least a hundred pounds a piece and throw them in the back of his truck like he was tossing stones. A demanding and time-consuming job, he often worked fifteen-hour days. He had just landed a job for McLane Industries where he would deliver food and products to convenience stores, a job that was less physically harsh, and gave more pay. It had been his first day alone. He walked in through the side door as I was coming out of the hallway that led to our bedrooms. The lights in the kitchen
were off, and I could barely see him as he walked in. I knew something had to be wrong. It was only 2:30 in the afternoon.

“What are you doing home?” I asked, freezing in the entrance of the hallway.

“I think I have the flu. I don’t really feel well.” He plopped his writing tablet and pens on the kitchen counter, and walked by to his room and closed the door. He was never sick.

Now, he looked even worse, pale, hot, sweaty, wet, and diseased. He hadn’t kept any food down since Tuesday. It was January, he had diabetes, and we didn’t think anything of it. Four days later here we were, standing over him, waiting to see what his body would do next, like he was a circus act, an artifact waiting to tell us a story. Up until now he had been a fortress, a John Wayne movie. We didn’t know what to do, how to move, where to go, how to help.

“I don’t remember anything. What happened?” he asked, staring at me, and then my Mother, no make-up on, in a baby blue cotton robe. His mouth was slightly parted and all I could concentrate on in the world was his cracked and eroded teeth. He hardly ever smiled with his mouth open, so it was rare we ever got to see in. But now, he was trying to breathe, and I could see his lower jaw, his soft and pink gums that were now a little gray, like well done steak. Several places he had no teeth all, and if you could catch him smiling, his mouth was a toothless desert.

I looked below to his chin, and his thick and wiry beard, in search of the little cleft that lived on his chin, the one I used to press like a buzzer when I was ten. I wanted to touch his cheek but that was covered too, and his hair was like thousands of sharp pencil shavings.

I reached out to feel his U shaped bald spot, to run my fingers through the long wisps that grew out of the very tip of his forehead. I felt his puffy cheeks too, and asked him if he was sure he was going to be okay.

“Yeah, I’m just tired. I can’t breathe too well, but I’m okay.” He shook his head as he said this, as double reassurance for me, and my Mom. He laid his head back down on his pillows and reached for the remote to the television. I brought the sheet up to his chest, and made sure he was tucked in. I looked at my mother.

“I’ll stay with him. Do you think we should call 911?” she asked.

“No,” my Father said, in his stern, Humphrey Bogart way. I knew that voice. I knew what it meant. I knew that if he had enough strength to sound commanding and strong, then he must be. I walked across the wood floor, cold and hard, yet comforting to the balls of my feet.

“I’ll watch him. If there’s any change, I’m taking him to the emergency room.” She walked around to the chair next to his side of the bed, the left side, sitting down and putting one of her pillows on her lap and a blanket over that.

“Goodnight, Dad,” I said, bending down to kiss him on his forehead. It was cold, and felt like wax paper.

“Goodnight sweet pea.” He patted my back lightly and I turned around, left his door open a crack, crossed the hall and plopped down in my bed. I pulled my covers close to my chin, and was a little worried, but not much. He was going to be okay, going to be fine. He was always fine. The covers were icy, smooth, and I slept. I slept while he was dying.

That Thursday afternoon my Father began to pass in and out. When I returned home from my Psychology of Women class, he was propped up with pillows, naked except for his saggy, white briefs, paler than I’d ever seen him.

“Get me some water, will you? Lots of ice.” He was panting as he said this, and his neck hung low, like his head was caught on a fishing line, or he was being propped up on someone’s
knee. Looking back, I admit now that I was frightened, more so than I ever could have known at that moment. My gut was telling me something was wrong, a dull ache, like cramps, but I didn’t know what it was or how to face it. I went into the kitchen and poured him a cup of ice water in his jumbo 44oz. mug from the Suwannee Swifty down the street. As I gave him the cup, I noticed a damp washcloth on the nightstand, something that he had built himself in shop class in high school.

“What’s this for?” I asked, reaching to grab the washcloth. He stopped me, took hold of my wrist.

“To keep me cool,” he said. I felt his forehead and his cheeks—he was so hot, so clammy. Now I noticed his fan going at full speed, the loud drum of the blades swishing back and forth. I don’t know how I missed it before. Things were starting to become clear. I kept noticing more and more clues strewn about his bed, about the scene. Damp washcloths, cups of melted ice, cold chicken noodle soup, and pants and socks lying on the floor. It was like one of those dotted pictures with hidden objects that are only seen by staring at it long enough and relaxing your eyes. I could never relax my eyes. Something wasn’t right. Something was actually happening, but I didn’t know what. Somehow, it was too actual, and I didn’t know what to do, or what should be done.

Friday morning, at the hospital, the woman at the front desk yelled at me. I didn’t know where my Mom and Dad were exactly, and I didn’t know where to go. Due to security reasons, I had to check in at the front desk. I remember she had on a bright red dress suit, and a little pearl underneath her white shirt collar. She was older with whitewashed hair and she wouldn’t tell me how to find my Father.

“Ma’am? Ma’am?” Her voice was nasal, and I wondered when it would be her time, what was lurking up there in her deep dark passages.

“Miss, what’s his name? Who are you looking for?”

I wanted so badly to scream at her, to yell at her for wasting time. I was crying so hard I could barely form a sound. I was trying to speak and I couldn’t, which made me panic even more. Finally, a nurse coming out of the side entrance way came up to the desk and asked if he could help, grabbing my shoulder and telling me to calm down.

“My Father’s been brought to the emergency room. I need to find him. My mother and Father are in the emergency room. Where is that?” My vision of the world around me at this moment was like a dirty watercolor. I wanted to find them, and I wanted to find them now.

He pointed in the direction that he came from, keeping his grasp on my right elbow, leading me to where I needed to go, mumbling something about a walkway. Some time after we left the lobby and before we hit the E.R. he left my side, and pointed me in a direction. “Go that way,” he said, “and you’ll see green double doors. Go through them.” I don’t know where he disappeared to, like a dream where people and places shape shift, where the concept of matter meant nothing.

Everything was happening so fast and so slow at the same time that I felt I was caught in a current of the speeding and the slowing of time. To my right, was a door, and through that door was the double green ones, and I pushed, hard. A long white hallway with bright fluorescent lights loomed ahead of me, and somehow, stumbling against the walls for support and screaming, “Mom,” I saw her run out of a room and turn in my direction.
The room reminded me of a shaded lot, and it was dark in the far corner behind his bed. He was propped up facing the large entrance in a diagonal, like he was resting underneath an awning. They were surprised to see me. Perhaps they were angry too.

“You’re supposed to be in school,” he said. His shirt was unbuttoned and I could see goose bumps on his skin.

“I’m skipping,” I said. I stood facing him directly, at the foot of his reclining chair. Mom stood to his right, and the shade of green gave it a Lego kind of feel.

“Are you sure you can? What class?” His voice was warped, raspy, annoyed.

“Just biology. An eighty to a hundred’s an A.” This week was biology basics, the basic make-up life. I’d remember this later, and wonder if I shouldn’t have actually gone.

“Oh.”

The crying had lessened, but my cheeks were still silky from the water, and I reached out to grab my Father’s very pale and very cold, hand. He was attached to plastic tubes and monitors. They were still running tests, trying to figure out what was wrong. Apparently, two doctors were arguing over a diagnosis.

And then he passed out again. His eyes fluttered and rolled back into his head.

In one swift rush of white linen, nurses and doctors filled the room and thrust us out. And I knew, like orange markers on pavement, that there was going to be a change.

The doctor who was in charge of my Father, and who ultimately confirmed his heart attacks was named Dr. McKenzie. After hooking my Father up to a number of machines, the nurses, we were told, were prepping him for immediate surgery to implant a pace maker into his chest. This was to regulate his heartbeat, and keep the heart from having the series of mini-heart attacks he seemed to have had for the last four days. It was the diabetes, they said, that kept him from having chest pains. That’s why he didn’t know. That’s why we couldn’t tell.

After we were pushed aside, we didn’t see him until they wheeled him down the hall past us, the gas already covering his nose and mouth. His eyes were like chiseled marbles placed on top of his face, wide and round, protruding skyward. I watched them run him past, like he was a shuttle, a rocket launcher to a new moon.

During the surgery, we waited in a small closet shaped rectangular room with two small loveseats on either side. I remember a family waiting, a woman and two men dressed in jeans, waiting to hear about their mother or sister; I’m not sure which. I don’t know what was wrong with their loved one, or what made them cry. I do know that they watched my mother and me, sitting on the couch silent, waiting to hear anything from the doctor. My mom went to call Aunt Elaine and Aunt Sally, my dad’s sisters. She disappeared behind a corner, and I was left to watch her purse.

“So what’s wrong with your family?” asked one of the men on the far side of the room. I didn’t look at him directly in the face, and looking back on this moment, he’s just a faded pair of blue jeans in my memory.

“My Dad’s had several heart attacks.” I didn’t want to talk, and I tried to convey this in my voice, though I was sympathetic to whatever or whoever it was this family was waiting on, or for. I just leaned over and rested my elbows on my knees, twisting my mom’s black purse strap in my hands, wanting so badly to chew on it with my teeth, just to give me something to pass the time.
“What about your brother? Who’s going to go get him from school?” My mother said as she walked up to the room that only had a curtain for a door. She was looking down at me, and I faintly remember standing up and telling her I would go. But she wanted to wait for my aunts, and before I knew any time had passed, Aunt Elaine was at my elbow, finding us somehow in this room, the family next to us watching our family unfold like a napkin. Aunt Elaine mumbled something about Ty, my cousin, picking up my brother. I wanted to be the one to get him, to be with him as he wondered what was going on here. It was my bed he had slept in when he was a baby and too scared to sleep alone, it was my cheek his hand had always rested on, it was me he followed around until he could find his own way.

But I was too shaky, Aunt Elaine said, too upset. Eventually, my Father’s side of the family began showing up, one by one: my cousins, my Uncle Jim. My Father wasn’t in surgery long, and Dr. McKenzie came by the waiting room to tell us exactly what was wrong. My mother had been resting her head on my shoulder, and when she saw Dr. McKenzie’s white coat, she sprung to attention.

“What’s going on? How is he?” Dr. McKenzie made sure he was on the outside of the open doorway, so as not to intrude into our space, so he wouldn’t get too involved. Perhaps, that’s just how it is when you gamble against death.

“We’ve imbedded a temporary pacemaker into his chest to regulate his heart. But I’m going to be frank with you Mrs. Boyer,” he kept moving his weight from foot to foot, “I don’t know how he’s alive. Almost all four quadrants of his heart are damaged.” I was sitting on the couch and staring up at his white coat, concentrating on a piece of thread that had come undone on the bottom corner. Could his heart have come undone like that piece of thread? Could he unravel like a tangled swing?

“What does that mean?” she asked. Perhaps to avoid the question, Dr. McKenzie was looking, and wiping the dirt from his glasses. That’s the thing about doctors, they don’t know how to tell the truth when it’s bad.

“I, I, I, uh,” he stammered, “don’t expect him to a… last the night.”

And at this point, she collapsed into me, laying her head on my lap, and letting me smooth down her hair. My Aunt Elaine and Aunt Sally were silent, and my brother was not there yet. She began sobbing like I’d never seen her sob before, and wailing, so loud wailing about her birthday. It was her forty-seventh birthday. The other family just stared at us, watching, but trying not to watch, ignoring the invisible line that separated our pain from theirs.

He’d been moved to the intensive care unit on the third floor of the hospital after his temporary pacemaker was imbedded, and by the afternoon, our whole family had infested the waiting room that was caddy corner to the secure door that led to his room, the first room on the right as we entered. We adopted the phone number of the pay phone in the waiting room as our own, and for the next few days my mother spent the night in an old vinyl covered chair that didn’t recline. The staff at the front desk came to know us, and by the end of the next Thursday, my Father was on friend level with the nurses. His favorite, a tall African-American man, Leonard, gave him his sponge baths, and changed his IV bags. It was this man’s shift where my Father’s heart stopped and they had to bag him, charge the paddles and bring him back.

Earlier, my brother and I left to buy him some new books from Barnes and Noble, and to retrieve his John Wayne posters, and a few Humphrey Bogart in order to decorate the room a little. He was going to be there awhile.
“Who do you want us to get?” I asked, as I looked out his window, the shades rolled up so he could see the petals of rain smash against the pavement, and the cars parked on the top level, exposed to the harsh sun and rain. They wouldn’t let in more than two people at a time, and my mother was a constant. She didn’t move.

“What ever you think honey, you know what I like.” He was pushed up slightly at an incline, covered by a flimsy cotton blanket and sheets. He didn’t have a shirt on, and wanted to keep covered the mark made by his pacemaker. He looked like he had lost twenty pounds in seven days.

“Some Dean Koontz? Perhaps a few military novels?” I asked, walking over to his left side and kissing his forehead. I patted and twirled the few remaining gray and black hairs that grew at the very top of his head, as if they were reminiscing about the once thick and luscious locks that used to live there.

“You know what I like.” I bent over once more to kiss him on the cheek and to hug him as best I could, trying not to snag a tube or round sticker stuck to his chest. He was doing better, had some color back in his cheeks. I said goodbye to my mother and walked by the curtain, drawing it closed as I left. Brett and I headed home first to retrieve his posters, and we grabbed a few shirts and underwear, socks too.

The Tallahassee Mall was approximately five miles from our house going south on North Monroe, and as we drove, the rain pelted our car, making the windshield wipers of my ’88 Honda Civic impossible to see out of. We turned left into the mall, a vast and expansive parking area. It was full, vertical lines of cars, rows and rows, as we drove up and down one looking for another. Finally, we found a parking space near the entrance of Barnes and Noble. It was a Saturday, and even though raining, the parking lot was full. Brett and I decided to wait out the angry rain in my car, listening to the drops hit against the metal roof. We kept the radio on. Neither one of us knew what to say, so we said nothing. A tender boy at thirteen, Brett had no words I knew, and I, there was nothing I could say. We were both in the same place inside.

Soon, the rain slowed, and we watched the water cascade down the front of the windshield.

“I think we can make it now,” Brett said. He was shorter than me and was able to make it out of the car quickly. I was stuck behind as we made a run for it.

We bought four books for my Father, a mixture of military and mystery, mostly Dean Koontz, and as we began to leave the store, the skies opened up and kept us trapped for forty-five minutes. We decided to get a coke, maybe some subs, and call the waiting room to let someone know where we were, and why we weren’t back yet. I had memorized the number by heart. 294-6737. My Aunt Elaine answered, and I told her we were stuck at the mall due to the heavy rain, and at that point, Brett and I could hear the hail pelting the glass ceiling of the food court.

“So how is he?” I asked.

“He’s fine, don’t worry. He seems to be doing better,” she said, “just head back when you can.” I had developed a fear of leaving him, that if I left, something bad would happen. Brett and I ate a pretzel, the first solid food I had been able to keep down in the past week. The rain slowed to a drizzle, and we headed back to the hospital, feeling, for the first time, that everything might be okay.

When the door of the elevator dinged and opened, we saw my Aunt Sally standing next to it, waiting for us. She had on a bright red cardigan, and her eyes were wet. Something was wrong, again.
“What’s wrong, what’s the matter?” I stood close and the feeling of being settled quickly left me. It took her a minute to speak. Brett stood close to my right side, just as anxious and frightened as I was.

“He had another heart attack, and they had to shock him. He lost consciousness. It doesn’t look good, honey,” she said, choking on the last word, tears dripping from her cheeks like candle wax. I felt like I’d been punched in the stomach and there was no air at all to be found.

“He’s asking for you two,” she said, grabbing me by the elbow. I took Brett’s hand in mine, and we walked toward the wooden double doors that led inside. There, in his room, he was breathing through an oxygen mask, and my mother, my Aunt Elaine, my cousins Ty and Sean, and a priest decorated the room. He held out his left hand and reached for us to come closer. I was first. He began to whisper to me in my ear, and I knelt down low so I could hear him, his voice soft and raspy, tickling my ear. He said, “Hi Sweet Pea. Did Aunt Sally tell you what happened?” I nodded yes, and he kept going. My eyes burned and I felt weak, and dizzy. He continued. “I want you to know that I’m so very proud of you, and you and Brett are the best things I’ve ever done,” and he whispered things to be about love and dreams, about being what he knew I could be.

I couldn’t stand, and I couldn’t move. All I could do was cry and hunch over him, placing my face and my cheek on his chest and neck, burying my face from the others in the room. I was eighteen years old but I felt like five. And all I could whisper was “I love you daddy, I love you daddy.” This couldn’t be it. He couldn’t die. I thought about the fights we’d had when I was in high school over nothing, my clothes, my money, I didn’t know what. The truth was, we fought because we were so much alike. We fought because I was the female version of him, and who can live with themselves? Every memory that I ever shared with him sped through my mind like a slide show, each moment replacing the next, my glitter red motorcycle helmet, burning the inside of my calves on the sides of his motorcycle, the swing set he built from scratch, buying me powder-covered donuts for breakfast, the two of us making a pact not to tell my mom, “me and you, you and me,” our private code.

“Do you want to me to take you to school today?” he would ask, leaning down near my ear so Mom couldn’t hear in the other room. I sat at the dining room table, waiting to go to the bus stop. I knew what he meant.

“Yes!” I’d say excitedly. I knew this meant a donut breakfast, being late, and if I was good, sweet enough, playing hookey and driving the golf cart on the golf course.

Later, while we drove to the closet Suwannee Swifty near our apartments, we listened to Billy Idol, and we talked about what kind of donuts we’d get, and if I wanted to later in the week, go golfing and I’d drive the cart.

“What do you think, sweet pea?” he’d ask, patting my back.

“You and me,” I’d say.

“Me and you.”

Eventually, I moved to the side, and it was Brett’s turn. All I could do was turn around and walk outside of the intensive care unit, find a seat in the waiting room and fall into it. Damn the world, and damn God, damn the priest that occupied space in his room, breathing the extra air that my Father needed more. I felt like I was on one of those fair rides, the scrambler or tilt-o-whirl, the latitude and longitude grid of my life breaking down and mixing together, the vertical parts swirling with the horizontal, becoming all a blur.
The last night he’s in the hospital Brett and I eat dinner at Larry’s Giant Subs, a local sub chain. We have hardly eaten anything in the last few days because he has been moved to two different rooms, one with a roommate, and one without. For the last night, he has no roommate except for my mother, and Brett and I unfold the bed hidden in our sectional couch at home and camp out in the living room, pigging out on popcorn and orange soda. Neither one of us want to sleep alone.

My mother and Father have not slept in the same bed since I was thirteen so when we take him home his bedroom is clean and his bed is made. We have cushioned his mattress with tons of pillows, and prepare his made-in-shop class nightstand for the moving in of pills. Of course, we have placed a red tablecloth over it to make his pills seem more appealing. But he doesn’t want to go to his room when we walk in the door. He wants to sit at our kitchen table, only five feet from the garage side door that we always enter in. We never use the front door. It’s too formal.

He plops down after placing several small pillows that I have gotten from his bed on the seat, because the chair is wood, and hurts his tale-bone on his now one hundred and seventy-five pound frame. He looks like he has shrunk too, because he used to be a full head and a half taller than me, and now, I come up to his eyes. We have to go get the eight different medications from the Eckerd’s pharmacy up the street. I look at the prescriptions, and the names of these drugs are in a language I’d never seen, but I’d come to learn what each one was for, and my Father would become a pill magician, spouting off about each one and its effects like a busted pipe.

He’s wearing his Pepsi t-shirt, the one of many we ordered with our Pepsi points we used to save off the bottles a few years ago. His bony legs are lean, and knobby, like a runner’s legs, we can see the veins and muscle tendons. But this is deception at its best, because my Father is no longer healthy, but far from it. All four quadrants of his heart have been damaged, and at this point he only has approximately ten percent blood flow through his body. Every heart attack victim with that much damage has died, except my Father. When we were packing his clothes and taking down his poster, Dr. McKenzie told him he was a medical miracle. And when my Father was still alive the next day after we brought him in, Dr. McKenzie walked in and my Father asked, “What next?” Dr. McKenzie smirked, and nodded. He replied, “I’m not sure, I expected you to be dead so we’ll start from scratch.” This was my Father’s favorite story, he used to tell it to every person he came across that hadn’t heard it before. Mom had been a steel beam throughout his hospital stay, which, I would come to find out, was like a cocaine high, and after such miraculous displays of willpower and strength, she would crash like any drug addict, low and needing another fix.

My Father had great stories of his high school days, and even younger. I loved to listen to him tell us stories about the boy and man he was before I knew him, like my Father had this whole other life that I never knew, that he was a whole complete person before I even entered the picture. This is what we took to talking about following the days of bringing him home.

In seventh grade, the mid-60’s, after he moved to Florida with his mother, Evelyn, to live with her sister, his Aunt Ruth, he punched a guy in the nose for stealing his hamburger. Back then, he said, it was kill or be killed, and as a new kid in school you had to stand up for yourself, make it known that you were not the kid to be messed with, or picked on. That’s the way my Father was. He was always bitter about having to bear the name of his alcoholic Father, Harry Marvin Boyer, and told us frequently that when it came his turn to choose names for his children,
he thought long and hard about our whole life, what our names would mean to us, and more importantly, what they would mean to other people. But it wasn’t really because of his name that he was bitter, or even angry. Rather, before he was even born, his bigger brother Billy Boyer was accidentally shot in the head by a gun kept in the desk drawer of a next-door neighbor. Billy, and Billy’s friend were playing Cowboys and Indians. Billy was seven years old. The rest of my Father’s life was spent trying to make up for his brother’s absence, a boy he had never met, and his Father never could get close to another son again, except to share with him a name, something to call yourself.

My Father, Harry, known as Skip to his friends and family, began a fight in the middle of Manatee High’s cafeteria in the late ’60’s during the peak of de-segregation. A black boy and his gang of friends, or so the story goes, cut in front of my Father, Skip, and his buddies on the football team. Back in the late ’60’s, letterman jackets and football actually meant having the right stuff, the epitome of what it meant to be cool, and during this highly charged political time period, no one saw the epitome of cool slipping away. He and his friends made the national news, and Dan Rather said the words “Manatee High” as he was walking in the door from school that day. As my Father tells it, the black boy was trying to exact compensation for the negligent treatment the black students were receiving from the rest of the white students in the school, and though he had nothing against them, you don’t cut in front of or mouth off to a football player. It just wasn’t done. In the end, several riots broke out, and police were on campus during the weeks following. Always in his stories he was the hero, and the terrible villain was defeated.

When he was fifteen he worked at Skate Park, a local skating rink, chasing the misfit children that went too fast or pushed people over. That’s where he met his first girlfriend, Tracey. There’s a picture of them skating/dancing on the rink, she was blonde, and he still had hair. He used to skate ninety miles an hour he said to “Devil in a Blue Dress” winning every fast skate competition they had. There were other pictures too of past girlfriends my mother and I found in his dresser drawer, all of them blonde, all of them with perfectly straight teeth and pixie noses. In his yearbook girls wrote things like “you’re the sweetest” and “you’re the cutest, sexiest guy in school.”

I always used to think he was just exaggerating about being a ladies man.

In the days and weeks following the heart attack we began to set up a routine, and my mom and he began to file for Disability and Social Security. He was forty-six years old. Days passed filled with pills and rules and diet. No longer able to work, he stayed at home all day every day, trying to pass the time, mostly occupying one seat on our blue sectional, creating divots in the couch, molds of his butt and head. Soon he became like a specimen to us, a scientific experiment, something to be watched and recorded, something to be poked and prodded. We treated him like a delicate piece of blown glass, full and crisp, but always on the edge of breaking.

At night, when he was propped up at 70 degrees, I’d go in and check on him, make sure he wasn’t alone for too long, wondering what it was that pushed his blood along.

“Are you okay?” I asked. I went over to fluff the pillows underneath him to make sure they gave maximum poofage.

“How are you feeling?”

“Same as usual.”
I hovered over him like a spacecraft, wanting to peer into him to see what his body was doing.

“Lunch tomorrow?” he asked, his eyebrows perked.

“Sure.” I gave him a hug, kissed him on his dry cheek, and walked out the door, my left hand hovering over the molding, wanting to hold on.

“You sure you’re okay?” I asked as I headed toward the door. I lingered with one foot perched on top of the other, and my right hand leaning against the doorframe.

“Yeah,” he said, pushing up against his three pillows behind his back. It made it easier for him to breathe; lying down caused the water filling his lungs to choke him. “I’m still kicking.”

Inside of him was like an undiscovered world, he should’ve been dead, but he wasn’t. So, like any other miracle, we waited to see when he would end, and began expecting and waiting for death as if it were an extra family member, a guest in our beds.

His favorite music artists were Elvis and The Rolling Stones, and this is what he demanded I play when I took him for rides in the late afternoon sun, the windows rolled down and the wind blowing the wisps of his hair all the way back. He’d reach his right hand out of the window, or prop his elbow out of the window and turn up his music to drown out any prospective conversation. I’d drive down canopy roads, ones with long, reaching branches, sharp and old, peeling with age. The shadows and shapes created on the road made him feel like he was escaping, his “Road Trip,” a playful name and clue to my brother and me, signaling that he wanted out of the house, and wanted to go for a ride, yearning for the sun on his arm and face. The soundtracks of these rides mostly included “You can’t always get what you want” and “Start me up,” by the Stones, and anything by Elvis, usually “Kentucky Rain.” These are the times when we began to get to know each other, when I truly found out what the cells and plasma trying to beat in his veins were all about.

“I want you to play these songs at my funeral,” he says, moving his right hand over and up through the wind, riding its cool waves. We were driving past the intersection of Mahan and Capital Circle, down the long road that maneuvered through newly built rich neighborhoods, houses we would never afford.

“What?” I ask. I turn my head towards him, trying to concentrate on the road ahead, making sure to stay in my lane. I almost lose control because I stare at him a bit too long.

“Watch out,” he says, and grabs for the wheel. “Stay focused.”

He taught me to drive when I was fifteen, taking me out to parks and small areas with low traffic; mostly we drove to Tom Brown Park and Lincoln High School, and all I can remember is the way he gripped the dashboard every time I began to brake.

“Definitely play ‘You can’t always get what you want,’ by the Stones, and some gospel Elvis songs,” he says, and I can’t see his eyes because I have given him my sunglasses. In turn, I’m squinting my eyes, and become paranoid about crows feet forming in the corners. I’m only eighteen.

“Oh, ‘Kentucky Rain,’ also, that has to be played. Promise me you’ll make absolutely sure that these songs are played at my funeral,” he says, turning to look at me, and lifting up his glasses. My glasses. We are driving down a large hill and gaining speed. The wind feels gentle and swift.

“Have you told Mom about this? Does anyone else know?”

“No, no, I just want to tell you because I know you’ll take care of it,” he says.
“I don’t want to talk about this Dad. It’s not going to happen any time soon,” I say, but I know that’s not true. It could happen at any time. The probability of his death has been looming over us: 5:1, 3:1, 1:1. Otherwise I wouldn’t take him on these rides, and I wouldn’t buy him lunch and take him to parks. I wouldn’t put so much effort into his life. This is the part where Death began to change things, to rearrange our lives like a juggler, and for the first time, I was thankful for his heart attack. For the first time in a long time, I began to feel like his baby girl and realized death can make you live again.

The summer following his heart attack, we decided to go to my Aunt Judy’s house in Anna Maria Island, off the Gulf of Mexico and Bradenton, Florida where I was born. I’m not sure who it was that proposed to go, maybe it was my Father, or maybe it was Brett and me, either way, we wanted to spend a vacation with each other, and in the back of our minds, we were thinking it would be the last vacation, the last time we would all be together at the beach. It was my Father’s favorite place to go, not just because of the beach (though he didn’t really enjoy the sun or water) but because he could go back to where he grew up from seventh grade on, the tennis courts where he played with his high school buddies Dan Douglas and Jim Robertson, Counsel’s Pool Hall with the best cheeseburgers in the world, Manatee High, the house my mother and he lived in until I was three on 26th street, the 7-11 my Father worked from midnight to seven to make rent, and the night he was robbed for eight dollars in the cash drawer. The drive down from Tallahassee to Anna Maria began with my mother falling asleep at the wheel at five a.m. heading east out onto 1-10 with our ’93 Ford Mercury weighted down almost scrapping the concrete with all of our suitcases and food. We thought it’d be a relaxing place to get away, and deep down, maybe we thought it’d give him a chance to re-live some old memories, give him some time with his past. We were going to stay a week, from Saturday to Saturday. I was sitting shotgun, and thirty minutes into the trip I looked over and saw my mother’s eyes closed, and the car suddenly beginning to swerve into the next lane. I screamed “Mom!” and jerked the wheel back towards me and the middle of the right lane.

“Mom, you can’t be falling asleep at the wheel on the interstate. Do you want me to drive?” I ask her, and she looks drowsily my way and proceeds to yell and scream about leaving for the beach so early, and having to be the one to drive. She was not a morning person, she said. No one had thought to have my Father drive the five and a half hours down to the beach because of his condition. He was weak, and tired most of the time and driving with our family was always a stressful activity. Still, I didn’t want to do it either, my eyes were burning and sore from waking up so early, and the sun hadn’t risen yet. Plus, there was the whole three-car accident two days after my sixteenth birthday, and I was still nervous driving on interstates. The cars and the speed were too taxing for me. So, we pulled over on the shoulder and it was decided my Father would drive until the sun came up and we were all awake so my mother could get some sleep and I would navigate. Five and a half hours later, my Father drove us over the Anna Maria Bridge and in two miles we pulled into the white gravel driveway of my Aunt Judy’s five apartments, including the one on top of her house.

We stayed on the bottom floor of her apartment building closest to the road called Magnolia. We stayed in “downstairs Magnolia,” with Magnolia flower paintings and pictures decorating the walls and porch. All three buildings she owns face the beach, and she rents them out to tenants, usually seasonally, and not for cheap. Since we’re family, she lets us stay there for free. Up until recently there have been rocks lining the beach from the sea oats to the water
every one hundred feet, put there to keep the sand and beach from eroding into the sea.
Sometimes, in the early morning, the water swarms or just lightly touches the steps of the deck
that leads down to the sand, over the large rocks and perhaps, boulders that separate the
apartment buildings from the water. We hadn’t been here in at least two years. When we pulled
up into the driveway of the Magnolia in the early afternoon, my Aunt Judy, a dainty woman with
the sophistication and clean, glamorous look of the late thirties and forties (actually growing up
in the fifties, being twenty years older than my mom) greeted us with a huge smile. Her hair has
always been short for as long as I can remember, always curly and swept up like cirrus clouds.
Her nose reminded me of a pixie, pointy and fine, and in the pictures I’d seen of her when she
was my age, she was quite porcelain like a doll, with the same haircut. She always smelled like
Christmas, sweet and homely. When I was a little girl, we had a tradition. Before I left to go
home to Tallahassee, we’d take a walk on the beach and talk about my life, what was going on,
the stars, or the sea creatures, what it was like when she and my Uncle Jim went sailing on their
catamaran, and sailboat.

When Dad opened the driver’s side door and got out, wearing black polyester shorts and
his forest green Big Dog golf shirt, she was surprised. Pleasantly so, even.
“Wow, Skip, you look great. I was expecting you to look sickly or thin or something, but
you look like nice and lean,” she said, giving him a quick hug. My Father always liked Judy,
often saying that she was the only sane one in my mother’s family. He mumbled thanks, and
walked to the back of the car to start unloading. Brett did the same, and Mom and Judy hugged
and began talking. I walked up and gave her a hug also, and then began to help Brett and Dad.
It wasn’t said but we all knew the real reason for this trip. The island was magical, and where
Aunt Judy lived her life was magical too, right near the water. Just breathing the salty air and
standing in her front lawn of sea oats and broken seashells burning and scraping your feet
released any stress or anxiety present in your veins. We knew this was what Dad needed after
his entire physical and emotional trauma, but, perhaps, more than that, it was what I, Brett and
Mom needed most. A break from waiting and wondering if he was going to die.

Before he died, my Father always wanted to travel to Alaska. My Aunt Judy and Uncle
Jim, both incredibly rich, she working at the Post Office and my Uncle Jim an engineer for
N.A.S.A., they used their money to travel; the Rockies, the Tennessee Mountains, Alaskan
cruises, trips to Australia. When you live in paradise, you often want to travel to unconventional,
colder climates.
They had pictures from their cruise, and the crisp, clear, white glaciers and snow,
according to my Father, was some of the most beautiful land ever created. Before this heart
attack period of his life, he used to enjoy the cold.
But, we couldn’t afford Alaska, so we gave him Anna Maria instead. The first thing I did
after we unpacked the car was whip out my camera and began taking pictures. I made him stand
on the wooden walkway from our front porch door to the deck leading to the beach, a backdrop
full of sharks and sea life drowning in water. He never smiled in his pictures, and his big, black
sunglasses were on, as if he knew the real purpose of these pictures: something to display at his
funeral.

When my Father was twelve he left the small town of Bucyrus, Ohio to move down to
Bradenton, Florida with his Aunt Ruth and his mother. His Father dead and his sisters much
older and moved on, Skip and his mother, Evelyn, pulled into the driveway of his Aunt Ruth’s
one story, two door stucco house. Skip turned to Evelyn and asked, “Are we in hell?” He proceeded to step out of the car and began, as he put it, to sweat to death. They didn’t have humidity and heat like this up near the great lakes. And bugs. He turned to his Aunt Ruth and yelled “What is that sound?” Aunt Ruth told him they were crickets, and that in Florida, there were bugs, roaches the size of your fist. Sometimes they flew. He looked to the house next, and again, turned to his Aunt Ruth.

“This is your Florida mansion? What’s my room, the broom closet?” He stormed inside and didn’t speak to his mother or his Aunt Ruth for two days. A week later, my Father woke up to construction men building on an extra room.

So when he took us around the city of Bradenton, we saw Manatee High, the old tennis courts he used to play on every Saturday, the house we lived in when I was three. These are the things we saw every time we were here, pretending that it was the first time.

“And there,” Dad said, pointing to an empty piece of sand and grass, “is where Aunt Ruth’s house used to be.”

She died before we were born, and my dad was quite fond of telling us the story of how she tried to pay him once for saving her life. He was driving home during his break from Publix, and found her passed out on the floor. She had had a mini-stroke. In the hospital, after it was all over, he came to see her and she offered him five dollars.

“What’s this for?” he asked.

“For saving my life. I don’t ever want to owe anybody nothing.” And according to my Father, that was that.

Other than road tours we took around the island, the only other activities my Father engaged in were relaxing in the apartment, watching golf and tennis, and occasionally, joining us in the late afternoon underneath the beach cover, me sipping homemade Pina Coladas, and the rest of us lounging on the sand or perching on the wooden steps of the deck, waiting for the sun to set, and then, playing in the water at dusk, searching for baby sharks and hammerheads. One of my mother’s favorite stories involves her swimming at night with Aunt Judy, just over eye deep, and her turning around and feeling a shark brush up against her. It was between her and land. It was feeding time at dusk for them, and we searched, scuffed the sand beneath our feet, and tore our skin on seashells buried in the underwater dirt. Afterwards, my Father and I sat on the wooden steps or benches that guided us over the sea oats from our apartment, wishing for the sun to come and set again.

When I was three, my mother left my Father, and they got a divorce. According to my mother, she was fed up with working part-time and living in a trailer while my Father worked long hours at a Piggly Wiggly forty-five minutes away in Georgia. She had to do all the traditional wife duties, cooking and cleaning, and taking care of me. We had just moved to Tallahassee to be closer to my dad’s sister, Iris, and his other two sisters, Elaine and Sally, followed as well. My Father and his sisters had been taking care of their mother for almost ten years up to that point, the whole right side of her body paralyzed from a stroke in her early fifties. Perhaps it was too day-to-day, or not enough affection from my Father, or both, according to my mother, but either way, my mother was unstable and my Father was a spoiled little boy who grew up with a house full of women. My mother’s mom, who I called Nana, used to beat her when she was younger. Nana used to sneak into her room and read her diary and wake her up in the middle of the night to accuse her of sneaking out of the house and sleeping with boys, things my mother couldn’t have done. My Father always said that there were mental
problems in her family, and this was the summer I began to realize that perhaps maybe he was right. Mom drank, heavily, and I began to notice this more and more. On the Wednesday night of our vacation, I was told that my mother and I were going to go with Andy, my cousin Drew’s wife, (one of Aunt Judy’s sons) to her monthly Mary Kay meeting. She was supposed to bring as many women as possible so that the Mary Kay representatives could have an audience to display their new product line. Mom was supposed to go with me. She suckered me in earlier that afternoon, and an hour before we were supposed to go, she backed out, said she didn’t feel like it. I told her I didn’t want to go in the first place, and only agreed because she would be with me. I didn’t know that she had been drinking.

“I don’t want to go if you’re not going,” I said, standing closer to the dining table than the couch. The apartment was small, so everything was one big space, with the bathroom and bedrooms on the side. I’m wearing the new white cotton dress I bought that afternoon at the surf shop, looking quite tan and red. I smell like aloe vera.

“I just don’t feel like going now. I’m tired and I’d rather stay here,” she said, dressed in her blue silk robe. This was how she operated. When was I going to learn not to depend on her? Her eyes were puffy and I could see the lines on her face clearly now, from the sun and the dehydration of the rum. It’s like she was being dried out from the outside in. My Father and brother sat on the yellow couch, watching baseball or golf or tennis.

“Mom, I don’t want to go sit with a bunch of old women who sell make-up. It’s like a Barbie convention,” I said.

“I don’t want to go to that kind of place either, I think I look just fine,” she said, tightening the knot around her robe. Her varicose veins were bright against her pale legs. No matter how hard she tried every time we were at the beach, she could never find the sun again on her legs, not like she did when she was my age, statuesque and dark, often mistaken for a Latina when she was younger. It was the thin, pitch black eyes and black hair that did it. Once upon a time, my mother had been worthy of her beauty queen status.

“Then I’m not going either,” I said, and began walking into the bedroom I shared with her. She couldn’t sleep in the same room with my Father. He couldn’t stand her snoring.

“You have to go, I promised Andy,” she said as she followed me into the room, her voice slightly raised. I could smell the bitter rum on her breath. She smelled like she was rotting inside. I didn’t want to cause my Father stress, which was the last thing he needed. But I was tired of taking her slack, doing things she just didn’t want to do anymore. I hadn’t married my Father, and I hadn’t chosen her life for her.

“Why? I hardly know her, and she’s your sister’s son’s wife,” I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks, and my sunburn began to pulse. “You promised. I had nothing to do with it.”

“You will go young lady,” she said, her voice scratchy and high pitched. We were screaming at each other now. I should have stopped. I should have taken the responsibility like I always did for her, sucking it up and trying not to provoke her further. She was just searching for an outlet, a place or a person on which she could unleash all of her anger. Since Dad’s heart attack, more and more lately, I was becoming the wife, and she was becoming the child. There was nothing I could do. She would win. I’d have to let her win. Finally I agreed to go in an inside voice, and she retreated to the room we were sharing. I met Andy outside, and she drove us to an abandoned warehouse turned Mary Kay headquarters for that area. They all wore red suits, and like a sacrifice, forced us to put on face paint and parade around in front of the other women, “ooing” and “awing” over our before and afters, taking home some free samples. I discovered the correct foundation for my skin tone, a cross between a beige and ivory with red
undertones. But I was tan then too, taking into account my burnt nose, forehead and chin. I looked good in pink. And at the end, I knew this wasn’t the first time I would sacrifice for her or for him, and when I got home that night I modeled for Brett and Dad, and went to sleep on the couch.

Brett and I went parasailing on Thursday. I talked him into it. You could do it as a pair, side by side, as long as you didn’t go over three hundred and fifty pounds. He had just turned fourteen that May. We found a place just on the other side of the island called Cortez Parasail, and you didn’t need a reservation. Their headquarters consisted of a small pier extending out to the water, near a dock for smaller boats. We waited until late afternoon, around 4:00, so it wouldn’t be so hot. Mom, Dad and Aunt Judy, with her video camera, were going to chase us in her car once we got up in the air. We had to wait underneath their tent-like cover over the pier for the one boat to get back, and there was a young couple waiting to go also, talking quietly in their corner of the small pier. I guess they did it in groups. Brett and I sat on the lawn furniture set up for waiting, and my tank top was sticking to my sweaty skin on my stomach, and my bathing suit top began to itch my neck. I turned to Brett and patted his leg and told him he had one last chance to chicken out.

“I just don’t understand why you would want to fly attached to a perfectly good boat?” he said, leaning forward, placing his elbows on his knees.

“Boat equals water, not air or flying. Why can’t we just go fishing?” he said. The sun had attached to him the last few days, and his sandy blonde hair had become a little lighter. “It’s like jumping out of a perfectly good airplane, why would anyone want to do that?” He was peach now, fuzzy like one too, his blonde hair on his arms and legs sparkling in the white hot sun.

I could tell Brett was nervous, and Dad stood close with his shades on. He was getting quite a kick out of the two of us, me, the older kid and the girl forcing the younger kid, the boy, to do something daring. Maybe he was a little proud of me too, seizing the moment, being strong, not afraid.

“You have to go Brett, if your sister can do it, you have to,” Dad chuckled, hiding his teeth behind his heavy beard. He looked tan and healthy, brown even, better than I could remember, lean, and fit, as if his body sucked in the extra weight for its survival.

“Yeah, I can’t be shown up by her,” he said, punching me in the arm. My Aunt Judy was permanently behind her camera, filming Brett’s anticipation to be out in the air and near the water. I felt that since we weren’t cooped up at home, we could all forget about what we had dealt with the last four months, and instead, maybe when we arrived back home, everything would start over and become less like a dream, less like a surreal experience that we were waiting to wake up from.

Up in the air, maybe a few hundred feet, maybe a few miles, it felt like a swing, carving out air pockets that didn’t belong to either of us. We hung side by side, and Brett clutched the cords tightly, so much so his knuckles looked white. We both let go long enough to place our sunglasses above our heads, and turned to the island that was now to the left of us, and searched the coastal road for Aunt Judy’s garnet Mazda.

“You see them?” I asked, looking at Brett. The cord was beginning to pinch in between my legs.

“Nah,” he said, and asked about the instant camera I had tucked between my breast and bathing suit.
"You wanna take some pictures?" I said, and fished it out. I was afraid that I was going to drop it, that without documenting the experience it would be lost forever, thrown out into the sea only to be found by sharks, and other life that lurked in the dark. I positioned the camera as best I could to capture both our faces.

"Say cheese!" and snapped the button. There were three pictures left.

"Take a picture of the width of the island." Brett’s voice was distant, the notes of his words floating off into pockets of air that we passed in and out of. It was if we were screaming at each other. "Check out how small it is," he said, letting go just long enough to point.

We were breathing hard, trying to catch the clean, cool, soft air that went into our nostrils, not like the air below that mixed with other people, cars, gas, living things.

In the silence of height and air, in what it felt like to be a cloud, the island didn’t look so big, and we marveled at how wide the island wasn’t. It looked like a sharpened pencil, a collage of trees and water and sand.

We were moving, and could see the boat below us, and the wake behind the boat was growing longer and longer. We were headed toward the end of the island. Brett pointed again.

"Look how close we are to the tip of things!" he said, and we both looked to see how it came together, how it was this piece of the Earth went uncovered. But off to our left, bulging, thick black clouds were forming and taking shape, expanding toward the sunny part of the sky. Just then, our cord began to pull us in, and we kept staring at the growling sky, hoping we would get back to the dock in time, hoping that they had seen us.

At the end of our trip, I think my Father knew that all of our efforts, no matter how noble or honorable in origin, were a way of giving him back one more chance to re-live his life in Bradenton, and the good part of his life with my mom, one last chance to say good-bye, to see a sunset, to eat lunch with his old friend Dan Douglas from Manatee High. He drove us all the way home and that fooled us too into thinking things were just like they used to be, the only difference being that Dad was a little more fragile than we thought he was. But it was for the best, he lost weight, he looked healthier, he watched what he ate now, he actually pricked his finger every morning to test his blood sugar. He had to now, he was being forced by the cardiologists and specialists, by the sheer fact that if he didn’t, he would die. We were fooled also into thinking that before the heart attack, life in our house was normal, or content, but it wasn’t. The attack didn’t just attack him, it attacked all of us, emotionally, physically, and in a way that none of us expected: Our memories had been tampered with, because when we looked at the past, it wasn’t nearly as bad, it wasn’t nearly as bad as having one of us almost die.

My Father was a movie buff, old movies mostly, the black and whites, westerns, a little romance, but romance according to Humphrey Bogart. I grew up all my life knowing who Bogart was, being told that he was partly responsible for my name, he and Audrey Hepburn. The other party responsible was the smart Charlie’s Angel, a combination maybe my Dad hoped I would turn out to be, a little Audrey, smart, angelic, and hard-nosed like Bogart.

We’d analyze movies together, and often after his heart attack, when he could sit still for longer periods of time and sustain the loud noisy crowds, we’d go to the movies. Often before his heart attack, when I was still a young teenager, we’d go on dates to the old movie theatre on Monroe Street, now a CompUSA, and I can remember when a theatre ticket for non-students was under five dollars. He took me to see the re-make of Sabrina there, the one with Harrison Ford. As we walked out of the theatre, he held my hand.
“It’ll never be as classic as the original,” he said as we walked toward the car in the back of the lot, “but it was a good effort. What’d you think?”

“Pretty timeless,” I said. I was somewhat self-conscious of holding his hand. I was a teenager after all, and he was my Father. The truth was, I had nothing better to do. Sometimes we’d even go to dinner before or after, mostly Mexican restaurants because it was the kind of food we didn’t usually get. We’d go in the afternoons or early evenings, when it was still matinee prices, and unlike a typical college sophomore, several times on the weekends I went out with my Father instead of people my own age, instead of trying to make new friends. After his heart attack often times I’d notice how annoyed I’d get if anyone sat near me, or how unfriendly and harsh my tone of voice was if a girl or especially a guy turned to me and asked for a pencil, a sheet of paper, what the rest of the sentence was the professor just said. I didn’t have time now for “normal” college life, and I didn’t live in a dorm, I lived at home, where at night and on the weekends, I spent the first year after his heart attack was spent ignoring and cleaning up after my mother, trying to settle my Father after one of their fights while she was drunk, spending time with him in front of the television, escaping at night to clubs and bars, drinking before we got there, and dancing the frustration, stress and anxiety under my feet.

I noticed early on as a young girl that my Dad didn’t like to be touched, rarely, if ever. He’d embrace me when he came home and often times asked for hugs, but he had to ask, I couldn’t just come up and hug him unexpectedly, or when he wasn’t looking. But more and more after the heart attack, though, he liked getting any sort of affection where he could. I didn’t want to think about it, but I knew that since my mother and Father hadn’t slept in the same bed since before I started high school, there was no way there was anything physical. I hadn’t seen them kiss since before I was a freshman at Godby High. But when I did touch him, for a hug, a kiss on the cheek, and later, to help him do stretching exercises, he’d jerk away or his face changed, eyes turn down, like it was painful to push on his veins, as if they were acid-like and the lack of blood caused them to become brittle, or hard. After awhile, it was hard to see the blue highways of his veins at all, disappearing, perhaps the rest of his skin and muscles overflowing and compensating for the lack of space his blood was leaving behind. It must’ve been a scary thing when his heart attacked back—when it said No, when it reached its fill line and cracked and peeled underneath the pressure, like the grinding of clay and dirt during earthquakes, forming ridges and lines like the Grand Canyon, all this in a muscle the size of a fist.

My mother was dating another man seriously when she met my Father, a friend of her roommate, Betty. My mother had been married before to a man who beat her frequently and grew pot in a hidden patch of field somewhere in Bradenton, and she was working as a teller. When she was younger, seventeen, she won runner up to a Miss Teen pageant, swearing to this day that she should’ve won the whole damn thing, but didn’t because Mary Steinman’s mother knew the judges on the committee.

Her first meeting was a blind date with my Father, a favor she did for Betty. She was repulsed by the notion, she said, and finally gave in to going on a real date because the boy she was dating seriously hadn’t called in a month. Eventually, my Father’s thick charm melted her down. They were married a little more than a year later, and my Father ended up with an almost beauty queen. I’d seen the photo albums of the mid to late seventies before I was born, how sheik my mother was, the definition of clean lines. There was a story she always told me of her summers on Judy’s slice of beach as a teenager, lounging in the sun all summer long socializing.
with the visiting boys that passed in and out of the sand. Often she’d take the bus into Bradenton to do some shopping, hang out with her townie friends. In some photos she had impeccable white porcelain skin, and others she was dark and looked Hawaiian, exotic, and perhaps, dangerous. She was so dark, once, before the days of tanning beds, lotions and oils to enhance the skin, riding on a bus back to Judy’s that two out of town boys spotted her from the back, and watched her gracefully move into one of the front seats. During the whole ride to Anna Maria, they spoke back and forth about who she was, where she might be from, did she speak English, what was her name? As she rose from her seat and exited the bus, she stopped and waved, and replied, “I’m from Michigan, and my name is Cindy.” But that’s the kind of woman my mother was, always beautiful, never having to be anything else. It was one of my favorite stories, and I loved the idea of my mother, a beauty queen, choosing someone like my Father, who was handsome during his own time, and quite charming as well, but not the boy of my mother’s high school prom who proposed to her, the one she didn’t love. We ran into him, so she said, at Six Flags over Georgia, but I don’t remember seeing anyone looking at her, or her looking at anyone. I imagine they had some passionate affair, and because of time and no fault of their own, it died. They were just young kids back then, my age, and for the first time, I began to look at my parents as human beings, as something completely and totally separate from myself. These are the only real stories I have of my mother, because as I grew older and entered high school, we grew apart because of her drinking, because of her attitude, because of the deep selfish hurt that beat within her heart, a different kind of attack.

At first, my dad’s sisters, my cousins (his nieces and nephews) and his good friend Grant, who used to work with my Father at Initial Linen Service, came over frequently to take him out on rides, to get food, weekend day trips to Andersonville, Wakulla, any place that was away but not too far. We’d do our part too, and for awhile after the vacation at Aunt Judy’s things were back to the way they were. Mom stayed clear of us and cooked dinner for him. She’d cook for us too, if we were home. I had work and Brett had football practice the fall of his freshman year at Godby. We weren’t immune to her drinking, but we didn’t advertise it either. We attempted to help mom in the kitchen or even with laundry when we saw it was getting to be too much, but when we did help, we didn’t do it right. Even my Father tried to pitch in during the day while the rest of us were at work, or school, but it didn’t help either. The money situation, the cost of his pills, the staggering loss of his income replaced by social security checks a little over a thousand a month was not enough to supplement four people. We didn’t even own the house we lived in, but rented it from an old couple that lived in Virginia. All of this was going on and in the back of my mind I knew that my parents weren’t grown-ups any more, if they ever had been.

The days went by fast, and the waiting was always the silent member of our family, the mime that acted out in our heads, but never came to life through our mouths. I knew he was terrified of his body, of the way it had changed course, the way anything you thought you owned changed without you telling it to. The level of deterioration progressed slowly during its existence, but now that I look back I think all of us, my Dad included, just didn’t want to see what was really happening to his body, and his mind.

If you deny enough, what you don’t want to believe really does fade into the background. He hid the signs just as much as we ignored them and pretended they weren’t there, his hunched over shoulders, and swelling belly full of acidy fluid drowning his lungs. He often lay in bed, almost as if he was dumped onto his mattress, lying still until he could move again, until he
could breathe again, until he could pump the oxygen through his own veins without the help or pressure of a broken heart. This was the time he most reminded me of the sharks we saw at the bottom of the ocean, still and quiet, pushing their will and their bodies to work on their own again.

Even the color of his eyes changed, and the medicines he was on, diuretics, blood thinners, and steroids on and off, interfered with the natural chemicals of his body. And because of his diabetes and weakening heart, it happened quite fast. After his monthly turned to bi-monthly visits to Dr. McKenzie, the doctors stopped telling him what to do because the truth was that they didn’t know. They didn’t know how he was standing, they didn’t know, with so much damage to his heart why he could even breathe, why the heart still had enough energy to pump. During his visits my mother would stay outside. Dad wouldn’t let her in. Maybe he was embarrassed or maybe he was keeping things from her and us.

McKenzie and others explained it away logically, like doctors do, crediting his strong lungs and other organs. My Father never smoked, and as he grew older, hardly drank. Before the heart attack, he played six sets of tennis every weekend with Grant, and beat him quite a bit, my Father, age 46, Grant, age 35. My Father never liked doctors before the heart attack and he sure as hell didn’t like going into such a sterile, white environment to be told, in medicinal jargon, that he was a freak, a miracle, both. They couldn’t define him, so they just shooed him away. And for months afterward, they told us over and over when we asked about other options, heart transplant, other techniques, that he was just too weak to survive it. That there was no way that anything could be done.

Psychologically, we’ll never know the extent of damage this experience had on my Father. He never shared it, rarely spoke of it, only to say that he didn’t understand, the doctors didn’t understand, and there was nothing to do. Months afterwards we finally purged a direct answer for his condition out of McKenzie. My Father had what was called Congestive Heart Failure, a condition where the heart is too weak to pump enough blood to circulate through the entire body, causing extreme weakness, tiredness, severe water gain in the stomach and ankles, dwindling appetite, and from the medicine he was taking, liver and kidney damage. And in the two years following my Father’s heart attack, I became obsessed with the body, with the functions of the heart, the inter-workings of the tubes and blood, how they fit together, how that little mass pumped and pumped and fed and transported all it is that we need to live. Some nights I sat beside him on the couch watching a movie, or baseball, staring at him as the glare from the T.V. lit up his face, wondering how it was that he looked like a little boy while his body was falling apart. In my fantasies, I cut open the veins in my wrists and neck, and dripped into him, one drop by little drop.

Grant came by every Wednesday night when he dropped off his three little girls at Thomasville Road Baptist Church and had a few hours to kill. Sometimes I eavesdropped on their conversations that were mainly about football, my Father a Gator fan and Grant an FSU alumni. But others, I know I heard Dad talking about his heart and about us. He talked about the fierce waiting, the dangling question mark over his head that he felt and we saw, and he told Grant that his greatest fear was one of us, Brett and I, coming home one day after school or work, calling his name, not hearing a sound and finding him dead, on the couch, his body stiff and cold.
I took it out on him sometimes, we all did, especially my mother, and she let him know it. We were mad at him for his body and his lack of will. My mother had taken care of his sister, Iris, who died of ovarian cancer, her daughter, my cousin Tiffany who both lived with us for a time before we moved to the apartments off Pecan Road. My mother took care of his mother when we lived in Bradenton, and then, when she lived with us a bit after we moved up to Tallahassee, and then, after we moved again into the house on Hastings Drive where we spent almost thirteen years. She had been taking care of other people so long, that she had never really learned how to take care of herself.

I was working thirty to forty hours a week paying for my tuition and books, my car, my clothes, my miscellaneous expenses. I lived at home, I told myself and other people it was because I needed to be home to help him, and my family, and that was true for awhile, but later on, I stayed out of fear, of losing him, of abandoning him, but most of all out of regret for how I’d feel when he finally died. It was always about how it would affect me, and though I played the part of a dutiful daughter who sacrificed so much, I didn’t really feel that way. On the weekends, I socialized with my friend Gina, we went out to parties, clubs, drinking before we went, mostly meeting new people she had already known from the Marching Chiefs, from her classes, from actually getting the privilege to get to know people her own age, people not having to deal with the maybe of death, looming ahead not knowing which will be chosen, and when.

After awhile, we, my mother, Brett and I got used to nothing happening. Dad didn’t fall over, he wasn’t losing his mind, and his body, though it was definitely changing, was not something we could see right away, like a hologram, or a picture coming into focus. It was a slow process, and after months and months passed, and, once we hit the one-year anniversary, January of 2000, we knew he had beaten the odds. When he went for check-ups, to refill his prescriptions, to make sure they still worked, Dr. McKenzie said time and again that he wasn’t sure how he had walked in the room, that he was one for the medical books, that the cardiologists sat around sometimes after eighteen-hour shifts and talked about him, the walking corpse. The hand of God animated him, literally, perhaps. At least, that’s what Dad believed. He began to carry his Bible with him around the house, kept his volumes in his room, and for Christmas, Grant bought him a new King James Version. Dad even got us to go to Grant’s church, not long after a year had passed and his heart was still managing to find a will to beat. I think we went because he believed he had a purpose, some kind of task God wanted him to fill here. I didn’t want to go. The last church I visited with my family was when I was three, and to go to my friend Sarah’s bat mitzvah at her temple when I was thirteen. God was not my friend. I had never been very religious growing up, though there was knick-knacks like “God eats at our table” and “God is the silent watcher, the silent guest in our house.” I barely knew what “Baptist” meant though I heard stories quite often, before and after the heart attack about Pastor Byron and his hands that would burn the skin off you.

It was when they lived in Bradenton, late seventies and my Father’s sister Elaine persuaded both Mom and Dad to attend her Baptist Church, they had to see this guy in action. My Dad wasn’t a big church man, never had been up to that point, always found logical disagreements with the way of the word, until one day in 1978 my mother was called by God to accept Him, and two weeks later, my Father joined her, and they were baptized in a lake not far from the church. I’d always heard my Father’s temper had been fierce, and as a little girl, it was, his voice alone shook the very marrow of my bones, and I often hummed afterwards inside my
skin, vibrating from the deep bass of his vocal cords. To me, my Father was the only God I’d known.

I had to wear a dress, or some kind of long, conservative skirt, and being nineteen and in college, I owned no such thing. I tried to keep it clean, dark colors. I didn’t want to draw attention to myself. These people were not my own. Finally I chose a long, navy skirt with baby blue flowers I found buried in the back of my closet that I hadn’t worn since I was fifteen in high school, conservative and shy back then. I wore a white, sweater top, and tried to be natural in my make-up. Was lipstick even allowed? In the car ride over, we were all silent; my parent’s old Bibles seated in between Brett and I, separating us like I knew it did in the words on the page. Man first, woman second. I didn’t know what to expect and was somewhat angry with my parents for making us do this. My Father wanted to pay respects to the pastor at Thomasville Road Baptist Church, who had been there to read Dad his last rights in the ICU, but who had defiantly, stayed anyway. I remembered him trying to approach Brett and me in the burgundy waiting room, and I remembered swearing that if he came near me I’d spit in his face. “Do you want to talk?” he said, standing near the doorway of the room, sort of glancing in our direction. I looked at Brett, and his head hung low, and he didn’t say anything. I nudged him, and he looked my way, trying to hide from the pastor. He shook his head no, so I replied for us.

“Not to you,” I said, without looking at him. I heard some gasps from my aunts and cousins.

As we pulled into his church now, we couldn’t find a place to park, and my stomach was a mixture of hunger and fear. I wanted to cry though I didn’t know why. We didn’t know anyone but Grant and his family, and from what I’d heard from my friends Chris and Stella, these were fundamentalists, not to be messed with. They were weird. Chris’ Father was the choral director at a church downtown, a Protestant church, a more relaxed, liberal kind of place. My kind of place.

We parked in the “guest” section, and as we got out of our green Mercury Tracer, and followed the other families and people inside, we were tagged and greeted specially, as if they had known we were coming. Two older men held open the double doors handing out programs for the sermon that day, and I felt like I was at a play, a performance of some kind. Immediately I wanted to flash them, tear off my shirt and run around in my bra, my breasts bouncing, me screaming “Be proud of your girly parts!”

Afterwards, my Father thanked the pastor for visiting him in the hospital, for putting his name into the prayer group. It had helped, really. I just wanted to get out of there, rip off my skirt and put on some jeans.

I knew why we were there. I imagined that if you went through something like my Father had, an experience where you realized your body was breakable, that it would someday give, you had to search for some kind of faith, some kind of myth. It was in times like these that excuses were all that mattered.

It was one day, a Saturday I think, when something happened. I had just woken up from a late night with friends. I remember walking out of my room and down the cold wood floors and into the kitchen. Dad was already there, standing at the corner of the kitchen counter that stuck out farther, the side that could double as a bar. He was in his underwear, his tighty whiteys, drinking a glass of water. He looked like he was taking his pills, so I didn’t pay much attention to him as I reached up into the cupboard to grab a bowl and my Lucky Charms cereal. I thought it was strange that he was walking around in only his underwear. Usually he had on his garnet
robe and slippers. I walked by him, and placed the bowl and cereal on the counter next to his left side, and turned to reach behind me to grab the milk.

“Hey Dad,” I said as I carried the milk and set it on the counter. He didn’t answer, and when I looked up, he gave me the strangest stare, his eyes full and dry.

“What are you doing here? What are you doing? Who are you?” he said, staring at me, his voice unlike any I had heard before. It was low, and accusatory, and his eyes were so wide, and he looked confused, and angry like I was an intruder. Intruder of what?

“Dad?” I asked, touching his arm. “What are you doing? Did you take your pills this morning?” He snapped his neck toward me and jerked away.

“Don’t touch me, I don’t know you.” My brother had come in behind me, moving around trying to get some Bran Flakes too. At this point he stopped and turned toward Dad. Brett stood directly behind me. He had grown several inches and since playing football, his shoulders and neck had widened, like fat grapes.

“Dad!” Brett yelled. I just stood there, not knowing what to say. And then he began to come at me, like he was going to chase me. And he did. I screamed, and darted past him, Brett just in shock, rooted in his place, watching this surreal scene unfold as if he were trying to figure out a piece of abstract art.

My stomach shook and I felt immediately scared and anxious, taking off toward my room, ready to run down the hall and slam the door in his face. He chased me as best he could for a man barely breathing until he reached the door of the hallway, turned around and plopped down on the old, brown couch we kept in the dining room, which was attached to the kitchen. There was no separate wall. It was as if he ran out of spunk, or forgot what he was doing. His whole personality had changed.

Finally, Brett was standing, towering in front of him, and I had stopped and stood in the hallway entrance. Mom came out of the bathroom and asked what was going on.

“Dad’s acting really funny. He started to chase me around the room, and then he just stopped and sat down,” I said, pointing at him like he was a dog, or a bug that had escaped into our living room.

“Skip? Skip, are you okay?” my Mother said loudly, and moved toward him. My Dad lunged at her with his hands, and tried to grab her neck.

“Who are you? What’s going on? I don’t know you, why am I here? Why am I here? I just want to go, I just want to go! Why won’t you let me go?” Whatever this was, I thought, it was what he really wanted. The scared little boy lurking underneath his skin and behind his heart was speaking the truth; he was telling us what he really wanted.

His voice was loud, and whiney, like a child’s. He seemed to be looking at somebody, but not us. He seemed to be looking past us, and into some other place that we couldn’t see.

We were all scared now, and I began to cry, sob really, and my brother was leaning down and holding on to Dad’s shoulder, trying to shake him. Dad reached out for Brett, and tried to lurch upward, but couldn’t make it. Brett backed away. My Mom, in her flimsy silk nightgown and hair disheveled bent down from two feet away and tried to get his attention.

“Skip, Skip, can you hear me? Can you understand me? It’s Cindy, you’re wife. Do you know who I am? Who we are?”

He shook his head, and began to drool like a baby, and Brett reached for a tablecloth off the counter. Mom turned to us and told us to join in, tell him who we were. All at once, my mother, brother and I tried to get him to recognize who we were, and where he was. Where he
belonged. He didn’t respond, and his head stayed drooped over, his eyes closed. His skin was pale and ashy. He slumped over, and this is when we knew.

“Call 911 Sissy, call 911 now!” Mom yelled at me, and I ran to the phone attached to the wall behind her. I was crying hysterically, the fear in my chest making it almost impossible to breathe between the gulps and the tears. Brett and Mom tried to wake him, tried to get him to drink some juice that he smashed away with his hand and it spilled all over the floor, and my Mother’s face. I heard her scream. The woman on the phone told me to hold on, and asked me to describe what happened, what his condition was. And then he began to scream again.

“Who are you? Why are you keeping me here? Why won’t you let me go? I just want to go, I just want to go, I just want to die!”

I told her he was passing in and out, and that he didn’t know where he was or what was going on. I told her about his heart condition, and she asked me if he had diabetes. Yes, I said, and she told me to get some sugar in him and fast. He probably had low blood sugar, and he could go into a coma. She’d send an ambulance and a fire truck. I hung up the phone and told my mother, and she tried to get some more juice, but he just wouldn’t drink. He kept drooling and screaming and smacking it away. I walked down the hallway to the front door, and waited with it open behind the screen until I heard the sirens, and I ushered them in. All of a sudden I was ashamed of our messy house, the cups on the counter and the magazines and mail strewn all over the table and kitchen counters, the dirty dishes in the sink, the jackets and shirts thrown on the couch. He sat with his legs open in nothing but his white underwear, and I was embarrassed about that, too.

It was his blood sugar, they said, that the dispatcher was right. He was passed out when they arrived. They fed him a glucose tube. I stood near the doorway, not wanting to get too close. He had scared me, and that part of him I had seen was not my Father. I didn’t know who that was. He came to, and didn’t remember anything. The paramedics told him what happened, that he had almost gone into a coma from a low blood sugar level of 42. Any lower and he would’ve been under. I starred at his body from just inside the hallway that led to the front door and the living room, and he looked at me, eyes wide, and worried, not being able to remember what he had just said, or did, or what happened. He couldn’t remember a thing. Out of all of us there, I seemed to be the one he was most worried about, I could just tell from his eyes and then suddenly I remembered the summer I was thirteen, a Saturday, and my Father and his friend from work, Wayne, are setting up their magic show in the auditorium of the 4-H center. My Mother is the secretary for the main 4-H office, and for a side job, extra money, my Dad is Wayne’s assistant. He isn’t wearing a shiny leotard, but rather, black polyester pants and a white collared shirt and his black Greg Norman shark hat.

He’s a golfer, sometimes, and he likes to show it off. Wayne does birthday parties, bar mitzvahs, and food festivals; anywhere he can get a gig. It’s mostly a kid show, and I know this because I can see through the magic. I’m thirteen. On the wall of the stage behind my Father and Wayne are cardboard stars wrapped in aluminum with names of 4-H campers, Jenny, Sara, Margo, Peter, and so on. 4-H has a fashion show once a year, and this year’s will be held next week.

The stage lights illuminate the stars, but my Father and Wayne could care less. Wayne has on a shiny black cape with red satin on the underside. My Father has no cape, only his hat, which will make him stand out. Brett and I stand outside the metal pale green door that leads to the outside lawn, waiting with neon yellow and pink flyers in our hands, ready to place them on cars and pedestrians.
PART TWO

We have been advertising the magic show for weeks now, and are worried that no one will show. Brett, only eight, almost comes up to my shoulder. Though he is a chubby boy, I think, he will eventually grow in proportion to his weight, like a square. It’s hot, and we use the flyers to fan ourselves instead of actually walking toward the sun-dried houses across the street. Faded oranges and greens, they remind me of dried up banana trees, bland and lonely.

“You think anyone will show?” Brett asks, fanning so quickly the stack in his hand flopping over instead of remaining straight.

“Aren’t your friends coming?” I say, savoring the future sun damage underneath my skin. He nods.

“What’s Mom doing?” he asks, motioning his head to the main entrance, a large heavy door painted white. It’s been propped open. She’s carrying out boxes of cardboard and stacking them outside, on the lawn.

“I think she’s cleaning out the storage space in the back of the kitchen,” I say, “for the fashion show.” As Brett and I move our hands over our eyes like a misplaced salute in order to focus better on our mother, my brother’s friend, Daniel Sharer, jumps out of his mom’s black Honda before she can park. He slams the door and runs up to my brother, smiling like Jack Nicholson, a devilish smirk. It’s too bad really, because he’s a cute kid, platinum blonde silky hair, bright blue eyes and a natural tan. He’s skinny, unlike my brother, and Daniel makes sure he tells my brother so any chance he gets. My brother turns and hands me the flyers.

“Here, we’re going to go watch Daddy and Wayne get ready,” he says, and they bolt into the doorway, dissipating into the darkness. I’m left to deliver the flyers, but lay them down on the grass instead and take a seat, trying to earn some color on my pale, flabby legs. It’s the early nineties, so I have a flannel shirt tied around my waist, because it’s the style. My mother’s boss, Elaine Shook, stands next to the boxes, blocking the way while my mother holds a large box. It looks like it would be heavy. I always call her boss by her full name, Elaine Shook, though I don’t know why, but think it has something to do with her large curly auburn hair. It is bouncy. All of a sudden I hear my Father’s voice yelling my name. I look over from my hot spot in the sun and he’s leaning out of the door, motioning with his hand and long fingernails to come inside. I try to thrust myself off the grass, but it’s a struggle with my flannel, and I decide to leave the flyers on the ground.

I pass through the doorway and my eyes are hit with a sudden wheel of color, circles of red and blue and green while my eyes adjust to the much darker and much more air-conditioned auditorium. My tennis shoes squeak against the marble floor. My Father and Wayne are up on stage next to a stool with a large magician’s hat upside down. My Father motions to me to come toward him.

“Come here, you’ve got to help us with this one trick.” I step onto the stage, hoisting myself up, and stand next to my Father. He smiles wide, and I know that he is enjoying himself. His thick black and white beard cannot cover his smile this time, and I finally get a glimpse of his teeth, and I can see the dimples of his cheeks buried underneath the coarse whiskers. Wayne smiles too, and it reminds me of Daniel, my brother’s friend, and from that point on I imagine Wayne as the real live devil. I know, somehow, that he has thick red leather skin underneath his people skin, and his horns and tail are tucked behind his ears and cape. My Father wants me to reach into the black magician’s hat and pull out a multi-colored scarf, and when I do, it keeps
coming and coming and coming. The scarf doesn’t end. Brett and Daniel, seated in the fold-up chairs, laugh. I just hand him the scarf and smirk.

The show is set to begin at one-thirty, and it’s a little after one. No one else has shown up yet, and I don’t know if any neighborhood kids will show. All of the 4-H members know there is a magic show this afternoon, but it’s a Saturday, sunny outside, and breezy. Perhaps the children are off riding their bikes through mud puddles and drawing chalk on the sidewalk. But Daniel and Brett are now playing monster truck in the dirt outside of the propped open door that leads to the auditorium. Wayne and my Father have put on music now, a Peter Gabriel song that sounds quite mystic and sexy and it drifts out over the manicured lawn. My mother stands next to the main entrance with her hands on her hips, staring at the pile of boxes, her dark hair blowing behind her shoulders. It’s almost one-thirty, and still no one else has shown. I watch the neon flyers blow across the grass and my brother and Daniel try to catch them. My mom screams for me to help, but I just stare inside, trying to get a glimpse of my Father playing with magic tricks, not really caring if the show will go on, but it does, just for practice, and my Father stands off to the side, handing Wayne trick after trick, a changing face clown palette, the black hat, a trick wand, the colored scarves. Brett, Daniel, Mom and I all watch from the front row, the lights turned off, the spotlight casting a yellow tint on the background stars, the light off the aluminum blinding my eyes.

“Sabrina?” my Dad asks, after taking a moment to relax, and drinking a few glasses of orange juice. “Are you okay?” he asks from the couch, his robe now closed tightly around him. My mother had done this right after I had called 911, so he wouldn’t be embarrassed later. His face was the color of his robe, and I knew that he was afraid of what’d he’d said. Of what he might have done. Mom was thanking the paramedics, and watching them leave, and Brett had left to go into his room to call my Dad’s sisters, Elaine and Sally to let them know what had just happened.

“Come here and stand by me,” he said. I had my blue terrycloth robe on by this point and my arms crossed over my chest. Honestly, I didn’t really want to go near him. Who was that other person? Who was saying those awful things he’d said? What part of him was trying to get out and only could at a lower, or higher conscious level?

“Did I do anything or say anything too embarrassing?” I shook my head no, and he raised up his arms for a hug. I bent down only halfway, and gave him a short, semi-encircled hug with a reassuring pat on the back, the kind you give to strangers. Brett walked in from his room, and stood there, his hands holding on to his tiny love handles, still in his black shorts.

“What about you Brett? I didn’t do anything too strange to you, right?” Brett shook his head, and Mom appeared in the walkway of the living room, near the front door.

“Naw, you just didn’t know who we were, and you spilled your drink,” he said.

“Yeah, we were scared to death. You didn’t sound like yourself at all,” my mother said, and I shot her a hard glance. I didn’t want him knowing what his subconscious must already know. Wanting to leave, wanting to die. It wasn’t healthy to let these things walk around consciously in your brain, like houseguests that might not leave.

“No, Dad, you were fine, it was just weird, that’s all. But it’s okay now,” I said, giving him a reassuring smile.

“Aunt Elaine is coming over with Uncle Jim to check on Dad,” Brett said, “so we better get dressed.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s a good idea,” my Mom said.
“Help me up?” Dad reached out his arms, and I helped him up, his legs still wobbly. The light shined through the window behind the magenta curtains on our sliding back doors and hit his face. I think he could tell how nervous I was being so close to him, because the rest of the day I stayed in my room, listening to my stereo and reading, trying to figure out who my Dad really was, and what other lost, dark things he had locked up in his mind; if he really meant what he had said. He was floundering on the inside. His body was trying so hard to will itself to be okay again.

We tried to forget his low blood sugar episode. Dad began to prick himself every morning like he was supposed to be doing, and making sure that at night, he drank some orange juice, had a cookie or two, something to keep his blood sugar level from plummeting too low in the night. Sometimes during breakfast in the mornings before my classes, I’d watch him do it, prick his finger, and follow the blood as it slowly trickled out and wonder about how much he could spare. He’d show me his battle scars, what he called the marks left on his fingers and skin. The things we do to stay alive.

It had been almost two years after the heart attack, and I was moving ahead in college. I kept mostly to myself, remaining close to what was familiar, my best friend Gina, the occasional acquaintances I met through her, weekend trips to Panama City, and the parties during Halloween or after finals week. I wasn’t interested in meeting anyone new, and indulged in self destructive behavior on the weekends and our trips because that was the only place I could act my age, be myself, but really, and without admitting this to anyone else, a time to escape what I had to face every time I walked through my front door.

It happened slowly for us, for all of us. The heavyweight of denial crept into every crevice and the withered, dry way his shoulders slouched and his legs swelled made my heart ache every time I looked at him. I can’t hide emotion now, and I think it’s because I spent so much time and energy, so much of myself trying to hide what I was truly scared of, from him. I didn’t want him to see his reflection in my eyes, and I didn’t want him to see what I saw when I looked at him. But I think he knew. His belly was like a bursting waterbed, bubbled and thick. I thought his skin might explode. The longer he took his meds the less they worked, and the doctor visits became more like guessing games, trying to figure out what to give him next. He was a guinea pig, a walking question mark, and the doctors didn’t know what to do with him, we didn’t know what to do with him, and I hated the way that must’ve made him feel.

Soon, his body took on a different form. It began to decompose right in front of our eyes. His shoulders became like twigs poking out of his white oxford shirts that he had to wear because they were button-up, the easiest thing for him to put on. He couldn’t raise his hands above his head. Sometimes, veins showed up on his cheeks, and they swelled, along with his chin and neck. This fooled us into thinking he might be okay, that he might actually be happy, but the longer he went on without dying the quieter he became. His body was shutting down, we knew, but it wasn’t that simple. We had been waiting and waiting for a year, a year longer than the doctors said he would live, and he was still here. Soon, he became invincible, and everyone became comfortable, dependable on the fact that he would not die, as if he were Superman, able to defy death. Grant’s visits became less frequent and his sisters Elaine and Sally stopped by when they could.
He was always sick and always surviving, and that hadn’t changed. But he couldn’t fake health anymore the way he could at the beginning and right after the heart attack. His coughing fits overtook him and at night he had to sleep at a forty-five degree angle. Otherwise, he couldn’t breathe. But that’s how congestive heart failure goes. There was nothing to do but let the body give out.

At night, when I couldn’t sleep, I’d listen to my walkman and wish for one moment I could be in his body and feel what he felt, what it was like to have your lungs fill with liquid, drowning at the slowest possible rate, the warm, dewy water sticking to your insides, your kidneys kicking in and out, the numbing weight of your ankles and legs, the sheer desperation of wanting to get out of bed, to close your eyes and sleep one restful night, the wishing before you went to sleep that this would be the night you didn’t wake up again.

We got the news from Dr. McKenzie not long after the year anniversary of his heart attack. I was twenty years old. They were going to put him on the heart transplant waiting list pending insurance approval. They figured since he had lived this long, his body could withstand the shocks of heart transplantation. In fact, they said, his body was a prime candidate. My Father said yes, reluctantly because he hated doctors, hospitals, and surgery of any kind. But it was yes, he said, because he had to try.

He was given pamphlets, folders of information about the procedure and what might happen in the unlikely event of a donor. Hearts were scarce, and finding a match was going to be a gamble. Most transplant patients die before a match is found. In order to get on the list in the first place the patient has to be near death to begin with. When my Father’s name, Harry Boyer, was placed on the list, there were two men hooked up to machines being kept alive until a donor that matched came in. One man, we didn’t know his name, had been on machines for almost six months.

Without them, he would’ve already been dead. The procedure costs a few million dollars, and the insurance company had to approve to pay for the procedure before Dr. McKenzie could proceed. McKenzie argued for my Father to be put in the hospital while he waited, he was deteriorating that fast, but the insurance company said no, and he was given a beeper instead.

We were given an information packet describing, in detail, the exact procedure and its aftermath. And it was brutal, to say the least. In the event of a donor, you were contacted immediately, and you were to rush to the hospital to be cleansed and disinfected and prepped for surgery. All doctors from both the giving and receiving end of the heart itself were to check it out and confirm that it was a match and that it was healthy and ready. You were cut open and spread apart until the heart arrived, waiting to be saved.

So we waited, and I asked my Dad if this is what he really wanted. I argued for a peaceful death, a death that required no more pain than he had been subjected to. When I asked him why he was doing this, he replied, “I don’t have a choice.” And that was that. After a few months, we forgot about it, the beeper Dr. McKenzie gave him collecting dust on top of his dresser in his room, and life carried on as usual, he watched T.V. in the living room every day, and the rest of us went to school, worked minimum wage jobs and searched for the dharma in things. I took him out to lunch at the Waffle House and Shoney’s and we went on joyrides, trips to look at the canopy roads that sometimes made him feel like a person again.
Memorial Day weekend of 2001 his sister Elaine had a barbeque at her house, the sight of Christmas dinners for the last twenty years, since they had moved to Tallahassee from Bradenton. They were smokers, so it was hard for Dad to even step into the matching magenta furniture, overdone Laura Ashley style with flowers and deep mauves covering the wallpaper and carpet. Elaine was a pistol, a real survivor. And even though they didn’t get along politically, my Father a stout conservative and she a flaming liberal, he respected her. She was affectionately known as “Sarge” in the family for the way she took control of things, for the way she got things done. And since my Father’s illness, there seemed to be one or two more of these family gatherings a year now than there ever were before. My youngest cousin was at least ten years older than me, and most of them were married with children. When we walked into the magenta living room, the food was already on the table in the dining room behind the fireplace. Dad looked worse then he had since the whole ordeal started, and he didn’t even wear his pager anymore.

“Hey Skip,” Aunt Elaine patted him on his back, “you’re looking good.” She sort of smiled, and my Dad just looked down and grinned his toothless grin and said, “yeah, sure.” He sat down on a patted chair in the corner next to the kitchen. Almost everyone on his side of the family was there. It was the one thing I always noticed about getting together at Aunt Elaine’s place: The absence of representation for my mom’s side, as if it were a competition. But that’s how I had always thought of the two of them, always competing as if their marriage were a race.

His sister, my Aunt Sally, sat in the opposite corner, and my cousins Ty and Stephanie were in and out of the dining room and kitchen chasing after Ashley, Ty’s little girl, and Justin and Ryan, my cousin Tiffany’s boys. There wasn’t a whole lot of room in Elaine’s dining area, and every time I noticed the size of the place, the decoration and the smell of smoke embedded in the walls, I thought of how this place used to belong to my parents, to us, before my Father lost his job at a Piggly Wiggly and they had to sell to his sister so someone had a place to take care of his mom, my grandma.

My cousin Sean, Stephanie’s brother and Sally’s son, came over to sit next to my Dad, and I took up space standing next to the wall, watching everyone as if I were another flower on the wallpaper.

“So I watched the gator game last night,” Sean said to my Dad, “and I couldn’t believe they almost lost.” It was always easiest to get my Dad talking when it was about football, or the Florida Gators. I don’t know if anyone could tell, but he was looking bad; his shoulders were the pointiest I’d seen, and his face was pale. He walked slouched over, as if it hurt to look at things. Dad was like blown glass, a physical representation of the tenderness of things, of the fragility of the heart. There were secrets buried deep within my family history, but Dad wore his on his entire body.

Later, we took a family photo outside on the lawn in front of the above ground deck and pool Elaine and my Uncle Jim never used. Dad’s eyes were low and overcast, like a gray, rainy morning. We stood in front, my Father in the center, none of us acknowledging the emotion we shared about his heart in the middle of his chest trying to beat, purple and dying. It was a like an elementary school class picture, and Dad was the plaque, the sign of what was.

My mom had planned to leave my Dad that January, his heart attack coming a week before she was going to break the big news. All this time I had been trying to picture what was going on inside the cells and walls of my Father’s body and mind, when really I should have been wondering about hers. I didn’t want to end up like her. Several times my Father
approached Brett and I about some kind of intervention for her drinking, perhaps a plea actually, to save herself, but more importantly, to save us. It was 100% selfish. A “we’re tired of denying this” kind of thing. I began to have daydreams of when I was a kid in the mid-eighties, when I wore jelly shoes and watched *Fraggle Rock*, when all I could remember about the world is the sound of my Father’s voice telling me to just reach out my hand and introduce myself to people, strangers, children of a different color on my first day of kindergarten.

I remember my Magic Years daycare and Mary, the girl who was my best friend and my enemy all at once, the girl who bit me and locked me in closets and bathrooms. But when I look at my dad now, all I see is the long hallway leading to large double doors, and I don’t know why I’m running. Maybe I’m late, or I was on the playground and didn’t hear Ms. Susie call us in for lunch. My clear neon blue jelly shoes make shockwaves of noise against the linoleum floor, hard and cold like a doctor’s office. The jelly shoes make it slippery. I’m wearing pink polyester shorts and it’s blistering hot—I throw open the green double doors and the last bit of sun chases my calves, warming the thin blonde hair as my legs hit and pump. The hallway seems so long as I’m holding tightly to my Dukes of Hazzard metal lunchbox, where, along with my thermos and my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I keep my Dukes of Hazzard mittens. My thermos clangs against the metal and seems angry with me for moving so fast and swinging so hard. But maybe the hallway is too long or my shoes are too slippery or my balance not as developed because somewhere along the way, between the door with life size cut outs of three-year-olds and the room where the toys sleep, I stumble, and throw out my hands to try to break the fall, and the hurt. But my metal lunchbox is there and swings with me, the bright orange car catching me instead. I bang the tip of my chin on the edge of brown and orange metal, hard. The hallway seems so long as I’m holding tightly to my Dukes of Hazzard metal lunchbox, where, along with my thermos and my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I keep my Dukes of Hazzard mittens. My thermos clangs against the metal and seems angry with me for moving so fast and swinging so hard. But maybe the hallway is too long or my shoes are too slippery or my balance not as developed because somewhere along the way, between the door with life size cut outs of three-year-olds and the room where the toys sleep, I stumble, and throw out my hands to try to break the fall, and the hurt. But my metal lunchbox is there and swings with me, the bright orange car catching me instead. I bang the tip of my chin on the edge of brown and orange metal, hard. I have a heart-shaped face, two pointy ends colliding, and it bursts open and bursts with blood. I don’t remember being carried out of the hallway, or what happened to the lunchbox. The red blood against the white reminds me of Valentine cards, made of white squares and red wild flowers.

Later, I feel like a captive of aliens in a hospital room. I’m laying on some hard, cold metal surface with one large bright light close to my face, in my eyes, and I think it’s the sun. I can hear my Dad somewhere, calling to me, perhaps holding onto my hand as a man with one large metal eye touches my chin, and it hurts, and I scream. Mom, I think, is on the other side of me, or maybe near my feet to keep me from squirming, and I can’t see anything, and water is in my eyes, stingy my eyelashes and salting my lips. For what seems like hours I try to move and sit up, but I’m being kept down, and I am moving my right hand over what I think is my Father, the mass is big, and takes up a lot of space, the volume of air replaced with a volume of him. His beard tickles my hand, and I try to reach for his nose, his eyebrows, and his chin. On the tip there lives a cleft, an indentation hidden beneath mounds of graying hair that I try to find in the light, and in the pain. I know that if I press that cleft, I’ll be transferred out of there, and into a room full of strawberry ice cream. I move to the right, to the left, nothing but hair, until I hit the tip, like mine a heart-shaped face, and I press it, and he makes a loud buzz, a buzzer sound like a game show, or oven timer. The pain resides, I forget about the doctor sewing my chin, and grab onto my daddy’s heart-shaped point, pressing, buzzing, letting him be my morphine drip.

It’s July 2001, and I’m driving to a job interview at a jewelry store when my mother calls me on my cell phone. She never calls me on my cell phone, which we got only for emergencies. My music is up loud, and I barely hear it ring.

“Hello?” I knew it was her, that she was calling from work, but I wasn’t sure why. Was Brett in trouble?
“Your Father has a donor. Meet me at home in thirty minutes, and tell him to get ready. We have to be at the hospital now as soon as possible. He has to get prepped.” Her voice was breaking up, static and far away sounding. My cell phone started to crackle, and I didn’t know if I had heard her right. Prepped? Like a ham? A turkey? A processed food?

“What?” I asked. I swerved to avoid hitting a parked car along a neighborhood road. It was a good thing I was taking a short cut, staying away from mainstream traffic.

“You heard me. Your Father has a heart donor. Now go.” She hung up, and I’m left over. I place the cell phone in my cup holder, turn up my radio, and try to weave myself in and out of swervy streets and stagnant cars.

As I’m driving I remember when I was six years old, I had to leave my dog outside, in case our townhouse collapsed, or caved in. It was Hurricane Kate, and I can remember my mother trying to hurry as she picks me up school, rushing to the car in the pelting rain. I sit in the car and we listen to the radio, for anything, some kind of information. Dad is supposed to meet us at home, Mom said. At home, we wait for him, and on the television there’s a hurricane coming, the man on the weather station said, where behind him were dark, wet clouds looking angry and sad moving their pieces of hot and cold air around. Mom is in the living room trying to wrap our breakables, pictures, flower vases, pretty glass dishes we put holiday candy in, mostly at Christmas and on birthdays. Our toys are strewn around the brown carpet and we’ve been told to pick them up and stack them in our closet, but Brett plays with his dump truck while staring at Mom while she wraps and disposes. Our closet, we share only one, has our lives inside, Brett’s Tonka trucks and my Barbie houses stacked on top of each other with odd shaped space in between them. We aren’t allowed to touch the toys. They might fall down. I hear Brett downstairs as Mom takes away his truck. His Bigfoot, which he can fit into and drive, has already been thrown into the tool shed, on top of the washer and the dryer. I’ve grabbed Kristie’s chew bits and dog food, but Mom says she has to stay here. Aunt Elaine won’t allow her to come. “We’re going to chain her up outside, just in case.” But she will be scared; she doesn’t like the rain and the thunder. She has nothing to hide behind. But Mom says we can’t worry about that now.

Dad still isn’t home from work yet. He hasn’t packed his overnight clothes. My New Kids on the Block comforter is wrapped into a round ball, along with my overnight bag and my Tiffany and Debbie Gibson tapes, which are in the trash bag. Mom said I couldn’t take my bike because there’d be nowhere to put it. I make sure the closet is shut tight and the window is covered with silver tape, I don’t want my bed to get wet. We can hear the thunder outside; it shakes my heart and bones. Kristie comes and wraps her body around my feet and ankles, and looks up at me as if I know what I’m doing.

I make the turn into our cracked driveway and into the carport at about thirty miles an hour, and my tires screech as I slam on the brakes. I don’t even turn off the car before I’m out the door and throwing open our side entrance that leads into the kitchen. He’s washing dishes, wearing his polyester black pants that hang on his hips, slippers, and blue Oxford. For a minute I just stand behind him and watch him before I speak. He turns around and stares at me, and I don’t say a word.

“What?” he asks. “What is it?” His eyebrows are turned down and his big blue eyes look so striking against his shirt. I try to catch my breath.

“You have a donor. Mom just called. She said you have a donor, and you have to pack some belongings and get ready to go. She’s on her way now.”
He just stares at me like I’ve just torn my own heart out of my chest and its still bloody and beating in my hands.

“What? What?” This is it, Dad. This is it.

“You have a donor. You have to go get ready, wash up, pack some stuff, and we have to go. Now.” He places the round plate that he was drying on the counter, and turns off the hot water. His torn twenty-year old sweater with the green gator in the left shoulder hangs on him, and I can see his chest hair underneath. He’s got on his blue oxford work pants, and it was ironic, I thought, that as a linen route salesman he collected the heavy bags of other’s dirty laundry. It was this dirty laundry that put him here in the first place, the physicality of trying to survive in the world.

He turns around, and looks at me as he passes by me on the way to his room, his bright blue eyes still not sure if this was a joke. Down the hall, I follow him, and as I reach the doorway, he’s kneeling down on his floor in front of his bed, his elbows resting on the mattress.

“What are you doing?” I ask him. Brett comes up behind me, not quite taller than me yet. “Praying.” His eyes are closed, and he nods, a little. Through the dusty mirror next to his bed I can see his pointy shoulders perfectly, a V shaped back.

“What’s going on?” Brett asks. He comes up behind me and breathes onto my neck. He has passed me in height, and even though I am the oldest, he is the one who towers. Before I know it, the words just shoot out of my mouth. There’s just no way to be subtle about these things. Life or death things.

“Dad has a heart. He has a real live heart, and we have to get ready to go.”

Mom pulls up in our ’91 Mercury Tracer, swings open the door and looks directly at Dad and asks him if he’s ready to go.

“Almost,” he says, and I bend over to brush off crumbs and dirt that have attached to his pants. Lately, he doesn’t bathe much, and I guess there was no need to. He didn’t go anywhere, and he couldn’t do anything. He had packed some clothes, some books, razors and aftershave, some travel-sized mouthwash. This was another undisclosed reason he didn’t like hospitals, or doctors. He was a private man, and he didn’t like being poked like a lab study, something he practically already was. Brett and I didn’t bother packing anything; we’re going to meet them there in an hour or so. Dad has to go get prepped, ready, shaven and disinfected like a counter top, a new baby.

Mom throws some of her things in a bag too because she knows she will be there awhile, staying nights, taking care of him the way she always has. The way she has always taken care of everybody.

Dad shakes his cane at me, the one he uses to walk now because it’s just so tiring to move his muscles back and forth, for no reason, no real purpose other than to move. He says, “Are you coming now?” His voice sounds hoarse or just really scared and I nod my head no. I have a job interview to go to I say, but I’m dressed like a ten year old who is ready for a play date. My pants swim past my ankles and hit the floor. I keep stepping on them and trip, grabbing spare chairs and stools, anything in my way.

He walks outside first, and my mother looks for her keys. Okay he says and plops down in the passenger seat, his silver cane we bought at Wal-Mart hugging his lap like it was his life bar, as if to say, here I go. Brett and I stand outside and watch them move backward, away from us. They pull away like a roller coaster and I wave bye. I don’t go to the interview, or call. I just stay at home, in his bedroom, wondering what Bogart is staring at.
When I was little my Father bought me powdered donuts at the convenience store by our
townhouse on Pecan Street on mornings he took me to Riley Elementary. Sometimes he’d let
me be late so we could spend more time together as long as I agreed not to tell Mom. His
favorite was the coconut covered ones that tasted like cinnamon on the inside. Sometimes, on
the weekends I can remember my two Aunts, Elaine and Sally, and my Uncles Jim and Curtis
with my cousins Sean, Stephanie, Ty, and Tiffany, my Aunt Iris, and of course, Mom and Dad
playing UNO around the dining room table, with the overhead lamplight shining down brightly
on everyone’s hands, me not yet understanding how to play, watching from the background.
Back then, we had an eight-track player and my Father had bought Michael Jackson’s “Thriller”
and the eight track tapes of the Culture Club, Billy Idol, and Stevie Nicks. I’d pop these in and
sing along, dancing and spinning around the living room while the adults played cards, grabbing
my Barbie doll to use as a microphone, my favorite song “Karma Chameleon.” Sometimes, he’d
come over and we’d dance, he’d sing along and we’d put on a show.

Dr. Bixler orders the nurses to whisk Dad away to get him prepped for the transplant
surgery. They have to get him ready. When we enter the waiting room, his sisters, our Aunt
Elaine and Aunt Sally, are already waiting, having driven straight from work the moment my
mother called to let them know. Aunt Elaine comes up to my mother, and looks from her to me.
“Where is he? What are they doing to him?” she asks.
“They have to get him prepped for surgery,” my mother says, “shave his hair, disinfect
him, so Dr. Bixler can plop the heart right in.”

Aunt Elaine nods.
My Aunt Sally has her right hand resting on her chest. The waiting room is pretty big,
with purple carpet and dark blue chairs, office chairs I call them. No one else is waiting. This is
where all five of us will stay the night. We place our bags down, and take a seat. The transplant
surgeon has only given us a few details. The man is from Miami, forty-five, an accident, brain
damage. The man met my Father’s body weight, blood type, tissue type, lung and actual heart
size. Dr. Bixler has flown with two other doctors to retrieve the heart, inspect it, make sure it is
usable.
Later, after they have disinfected his body, and shaved his chest, found the veins and
began administering the pre-transplant drugs, we are allowed to see him. But only us. As we
walk in what looks like a waiting room for surgery, he looks peaceful, covered in white cotton
blankets and sheets. I guess that’s just what is done here, lots and lots of waiting. One of the
doctors on the “transplant team” is standing next to him, shaking his hand and whispering
something to him. Transplant Team is what they called themselves, a group of seven doctors
whose only job is to conduct transplants, like they’re just passing the day playing baseball and
giving high fives. His eyes are big, huge and round, and he’s tucked in under sheets to keep him
warm. It is quite cold in this white sterile room, with no other beds, no other people, just us. I
go to his right side, and Mom is on the other, and Brett behind her. We all stare down at him,
and he stares up at us.
“Look at what they did to my arm,” he says, and he takes his right arm from under the
covers and displays it, dark purple and blue, bruised up and down.
“The nurse came in to find a vein to hook me up to an IV and she couldn’t find it. She
kept poking and poking me.” My mother grabs his arm and brings it closer to her.
“Does it hurt?” she says. I wonder if this isn’t a sign that we shouldn’t be going through with this. That he shouldn’t be going through with this.

“Hell yeah it hurts, what do you think?” He snatches his arm back, and I take it next. He is like a sideshow.

“I guess it’s not their fault I’m dead, they couldn’t find a pulse. They’re probably wondering what I’m even doing here.” He chuckles after he says this, but I know he truly feels this way. He has for a while.

“I guess not,” I say, and I laugh a little to try and lighten the mood. Another tall blonde man walks in and comes up to us. He introduces himself as Steve, the anesthesiologist who will be in during the surgery, in charge of putting Dad to sleep. He’s quite chipper and relaxed and I can’t tell if it’s for show or for real; if he’s just trying to put us at ease. But it’s not working, at least for me, because his humor and lightheartedness seem misplaced; he should be somber and worried, like we are. I don’t pay attention to the rest of his spiel, his giving us a play by play of what’s going to happen throughout the next seven hours. It’s already around nine or ten. Instead I look at Dad’s eyes, perfectly round and popping, and the brightness of his blue eyes doesn’t match his tired and aged face. They look like his eyes the day he picked me up from my first day of school at the bus stop on Hartsfield Road.

I remember I had dirty blonde hair back then, and I grabbed the edge of the slippery brown seat in front of me, trying to hold my balance on the bumpy, yellow bus. The windows are down and my hair blows out of my eyes, and the notes pinned to my pink dress flutter about. One says Bus 2715. Another, Ms. Caldwell Kindergarten. Another, (all on yellow paper) my name. Just in case. I am one of the last children on the bus, waiting to get to my bus stop, the last one, and walk the half-mile home alone. There are three other children that get off at my stop as well, but I don’t look at them.

I watch the older woman with the short, cropped curly gray hair that’s driving the bus, and steering the large wheel in front of her. I pay attention to the outside, the streets and houses to make sure they look familiar. My eyes seem clouded, but they are just paying attention to the trailers, and the houses with the bright red flowers.

The bus turns right onto Hartsfield and I know that my stop is the one at the top of the hill, and I lean back with the bus as it lurches forward to try and climb. The smell of gas makes me crinkle my nose. My legs and feet are halfway in the aisle, on the black rubber, and I brace to pull myself up. The small windows to my right are open, and I hear an engine, something idling.

I turn my head to the right and peer down. It’s Dad in white shorts and a t-shirt, with his legs like kickstands as he waits for me at the bus stop, on his motorcycle. He isn’t wearing his usual black helmet, but he has mine with him, in front, on his lap. I carry my small yellow book bag behind me as I walk toward the front and down the thick steps. He hands me the glittery red helmet as he places his hands underneath my arm pits, lifts me up and plants me in front of him, my legs too short to rest on anything. I put my bag in front, on top of the black metal, and grab on to the side. He whispers “hold on” and circles around. He goes slowly, and as we move on down the street, watching the old white houses with porches and swings go by, the wind lifts my bangs off my forehead. It is this day that I burn the inside of my calves, the aching sting of a hot afternoon.

Finally, Steve leaves, and we ask my dad if he wants to back out, tell him that he still could. But he’s so calm, as if I were taking him on a road trip, as if it were like any other breezy day.
After we leave him to be taken into surgery, Brett asks me if I want to pretend we are explorers in a wild jungle. I say sure, just so we can get our mind off what they’ll be doing to him before the heart arrives. And after, spreading him open like a bat, or a window, peering right in, plopping and trading what’s damaged for used. It’s late, and we have never been let loose in a hospital before. We walk to the elevator in our socks and leave our shoes in the waiting room with Mom and Aunt Elaine and Sally. I press the up arrow. The doors open, and we enter. We’re the only ones in the elevator.

“Hit number seven. Let’s see what’s up top,” Brett says. The elevator begins to ascend, and it wobbles. We brace ourselves, placing our palms on the cool metal. Finally, it dings, and we let out sighs of relief. The doors open, and we see the words “Cancer Unit” across the top of the wall that faces the doors. This is the floor where other people’s bodies are attacking them. Brett is already out and moves toward the left, down a hall, where at the end is a large window. He reaches it before me.

“Hey, Sissy, come here. Check this out.” I approach his side, and lean my forehead against the foggy glass. I can barely make out what is outside. I see lights and buildings, but that’s all.

“It’s the helicopter landing pad. This is where life flight lands.”

“What?” Of course this couldn’t be the only place where the helicopter lands. There had to be another place, right? We couldn’t have just stumbled upon this thing, now, up here in the Cancer Wing. Brett was excited, unable to calm down.

“This is where the heart doctors are going to land with his heart. We’re going to be able to see it.” Brett has both hands pressed against the glass, and he’s going to be a junior in high school when school starts in two weeks, but he seems like he’s five again, here, now, leaning against the glass. His growing shoulders almost take up all the room, but I squeeze in next to him, and for awhile, we stand there, leaning against the glass in silence, checking every so often to make sure no one is behind us. Checking to make sure this is allowed.

“Hey, there it is. See those lights? Here it comes.” Brett was right. I could see the yellow lights on the chopper coming closer, two small specks getting brighter and brighter, gleaming against the moon. Soon, the thin landing legs beneath it, aiming for the X on the landing pad touch ground. The blades swooshed against the air, and had begun to slow down. There isn’t a door, and we can see pairs of white pants, and then a leg stepping out of the chopper. The first doctor is out, and waiting for the second. We see another leg, and then a man falls out of the chopper and onto the concrete, landing on his right hip. In his hands, he carried a cooler, one like I used to take to camp when I was twelve. One that looked like it could hold old breadcrumbs or chocolate crumbles from Little Debbies.

“His heart. The doctor just dropped Dad’s heart that’s in the cooler,” I said, not worrying about Dr. Bixler.

“No way, is that for Dad?” Brett asks. “Where’s the cooler? Where did it land?”

“I want to see his hands. Check his hands. Are his hands okay?” We both strain our necks to try and get a good look. We pound on the glass. They are both walking away, the doctor with a slight limp, but his hands, and the cooler seem to be intact as he walks off the landing pad, and through a door a story below us.

“Take care of him,” I scream. Sometimes I wonder why hearts are such tangible, gooey things.
We both know sleep is not an option so Brett and I wander about the hospital all night acting like we’re at a slumber party, in our pajamas and socks, as if this is where we slept every night. We pretend we’re double agents, we act like cops and robbers, we play hide and seek. In the cafeteria, we eat fried chicken fingers, the best we’ve ever tasted, and ignore the fact that it’s almost five in the morning, ignoring the idea of what is happening two stories above us. This night Brett and I truly bond, giggling at each other and running from nurses, from aides, coming to tell us to be quiet, to keep it down because patients are sleeping. It is this night my body learns to stay awake. These sleepless nights are soon to follow.

“Let’s go look in people’s rooms,” he says, and we do, skipping the baby ward on the second floor and hitting the ICU on the third, and regular rooms on the fourth and fifth. We creep by through fluorescent lights blaring down on us like sun, tiptoeing down the carpet and bending over, as if we couldn’t be seen. We knock on doors and run. We yell like banshees, pretending we are ghosts that haunt the hospital. We run on sheer adrenaline and fear, trying not to think about our Father being split down the middle, his ribs cracked and pried open like a sardine can, how things will be when we finally get to sleep.

Later, early in the morning before the sun comes up, Dr. Bixler comes into the waiting room and tells us that Dad is stabilized, and that we can see him. He’s still asleep, hooked up to the breathing tube, and he’ll be out for about four hours. He’s in a special incubated room on the fourth floor, sealed off by glass doors and the only entrance in is through a bathroom. He’s been quarantined, and anyone who visits must wear facemasks and gloves, must wash from elbow to fingers before entering. His immune system is weak, the anti-rejection drugs strong, killing off his antibodies.

Bixler leads us to the double doors, the entrance into the station, an aisle of rooms for special patients, patients needing special care. Brett and I begin to giggle uncontrollably, chasing each other around the hallway while we’re waiting to be let in. It’s funny what doctors will tell you, how graphic and specific they can be, but what they won’t let you view, as if your mind can know the difference. Aunt Elaine and Sally yell at us to be quiet, that this isn’t funny but we can’t help ourselves, it’s either laugh or cry, and we both agree silently, through looks and shrugs that we’d rather laugh. We’ve been through this before. Finally, we were led inside, and through a big, thick glass wall that reminded me of my elementary school library we saw him set at a forty-five degree angle with tubes going in and out every opening we could see, his eyes closed and puffy, peaceful. I couldn’t help thinking how much he was like a sideshow attraction, a circus freak. Come one come all and see the living dead man, who now had survived his heart being removed and replaced. I had no idea that’s how we were going to treat him for the next year and a half.

We weren’t allowed in the room for the first day or two, only my Mom and the doctors, no one else. We could only look at him through the glass walls, wave, and mouth things, show him what we brought and then have Mom bring it to him. He didn’t want us there, to see him like this. Mom told us after she went up that morning after he got out of surgery, and Brett and I were passed out on the pull out bed buried in our couch in the living room. We weren’t saying much and we weren’t feeling much, just going through the motions. Maybe it was because we’d been through this before or we’d become numb to the whole idea. I only slept a few hours that morning, surprised at how well I was functioning on just four hours of sleep. My head felt garbled and foggy.
The next few nights after the surgery I laid in my bed listening to Chris Isaak, trying to write poems with the wrong words. I searched for words to give this experience context, a scavenger hunt for form, a living, breathing, anti-body. It was just all too surreal and strange to think about; some other man was dead, some man from Miami who lost control, like we all do, because it was raining.

Some man with two kids, now dead and without a heart that was now in my Father’s body, taking up residence, giving life and pumping, pumping the blood in his veins that have been starving for so long.

When I was in the ninth grade my best friend Leslie played guitar and wore her blonde hair real long. Her parents were hippies in the seventies and her lifestyle and wardrobe were very different than mine. Her Dad was skinny and quiet, and listened to The Who and Pink Floyd, The Beatles. My Dad was a conservative from Ohio who liked Elvis and the Stones. He had said there were two types of people in the world, those that liked The Beatles, and those that liked The Stones. You couldn’t be both.

I remember Leslie let me borrow Pink Floyd’s “Dark Side of the Moon” album and I played it in my room, listening to the bells and getting high off notes and chords I had never heard before, letting the sound and the music wash over me like a baptism and my mother, shortly after, pounding on my door, asking me what that noise was.

“It’s Pink Floyd, Mom,” I said. I opened the door and peered out. “What?”

“Nothing, I heard bells and I thought I was hearing things. I thought it was the end of the world,” she said very calmly, and walked away, back into the kitchen.

Now, as I looked at where she was sleeping in my Dad’s tiny room filled with tubes and machines, I thought of that moment, of how my mother could be totally nuts and totally together in separate but never coinciding intervals. She had a pillow on a beige leather chair that moved backward, allowing the back to fold down. She was bringing him books and socks, his slippers. He had asked Brett and I to go buy some books from the bookstore like he had before, the eerie déjà vu happening like a bad rerun in my head. When we went to visit him, most of the time was spent sitting silently, not knowing what to say. He showed me the scar on his chest for the first time about four days after the surgery, when I went up to visit him from seven to eight at night while he watched sports on T.V. and as I walked in the room, I asked him if I could see it.

I set the Dean Koontz and war books I brought him on the hospital table next to his bed. He pulled his flimsy gown apart and let me peer in, like the doctors must’ve done. It began right under his neck and traveled down to just above his belly button. It wasn’t thick and bubbled like I thought it would be. It was clean, and thin. I tried not to look at his legs and feet, scrawny and rusted, but finally with veins surging.

“How do you feel?” I asked.

“Right now, the same, but they tell me that’ll get better. I’m pretty damn tired, actually.” He moved to grab the bag of books I brought him. He pilfered through, and then looked at me, a small smile on his face. “Thanks for the books. You wanna just sit with me and watch T.V.?”

I nod, and I sit in the chair my mother’s been sleeping in and wonder about how it is that love can take so many different faces.
Doctors, I found out, like to fib a little bit. They told us it was going to be a hard recovery because his heart had been worse than they had thought, more than half of it like a prune, shriveled and practically dead. They pulled my mother aside and told her that they had never seen a heart so badly deteriorated as Dad’s had been. They honestly had no earthly explanation as to how he walked in to have the surgery in the first place. But they had no idea about what was going to happen to him either. You just can’t predict these kinds of things. He was supposed to stay in the hospital at most two weeks, but more presumably, ten days, tops. Not my Father. It wasn’t enough he was split down the middle as if he had been struck by lightening from the inside. The doctors argued over imbedding a permanent pacemaker. Finally, they did, and about a week after his surgery the pacemaker went haywire, literally, not regulating his heart rate, but accelerating it, shocking it, giving it bolts of electricity. When the nurse on duty that night came rushing in to see what was wrong, he didn’t know what to do. Finally, they sent an electric current through with a defibrillator to regulate that pacemaker again.

Later, when he was telling us the story, I imagined that it was his new heart wanting out of its new life, giving up on its new contract, protesting that it had done its time, ready to go in search of its previous owner.

After the transplant and the many more ordeals we would endure with him, my mother, brother and I could look back on our years, and realize they could be split into four parts, like the quadrants of a heart: Before the heart attack and after; Before the transplant and after, culminating in his eventual death that had been dragged out four years in the making.

After the incident with his pacemaker, his kidneys and other organs were taking longer to kick in and work on their own, as if they were staging a protest. Deprived of blood for so long, it’s how they functioned now. Blood was a foreign object, full and thick and available.

Then it was pneumonia from being in the hospital for more than two weeks, stationary and planted in bed not moving except to move from sitting in one place to sit in another. He had breathing treatments through a plastic tube that gave off a kind of smoke, as if he were toking up. It was the same template of action and consequences. Another one of his nine lives used up. It was the same story we had lived the last few years: A bad heart, bad lungs, bad kidneys, bad veins, potential death, miraculous survival. He was just a forty-eight year old man trying to clear out his insides, trying to survive for the sake of us.

When I was a girl around the age of ten or eleven, every time I heard the song “Maneater” by Hall and Oates I thought of my mother, of the heavy make-up and shoulder pads of the late eighties, and how mysterious and unreachable she seemed, how glamorous for a past runner-up in a beauty pageant. And when it was finally time to take him home, my mother was late because she couldn’t find parking, and I was left alone with him during the lag time of my mother’s arrival and my two aunts. When I walked in the room he was crying. Real tears. Water. It was the second time I had seen him cry in my life, the first being at his mother’s funeral when I was in the sixth grade.

“Are you okay?” I move to hand him a tissue on his bed table.

“Why were you crying?” He bends his head down toward his knees, and I feel like a visitor, an outsider, a daughter who can no longer relate to her Dad because of the vast highway of dead and bloody organs between us.
“Dr. McKenzie just came in and so did Dr. Bixler,” he kept his head down and wiped his eyes as he spoke, “and they told me they’d never seen a miracle before.” His robe fell open and exposed his tight white underwear. He had managed to put on his socks, one navy blue, and the other black.

“I’ve never been this emotional before, and the nurses, they all came in and said they’d miss me, and wished me luck.” He tried to move to the side and plant his feet on the ground. I didn’t know what to say.

“And that Jenna girl? That real cute blonde, she was real sweet, she said she’d miss me and called me ‘Mr. Skip.’"

I nodded, and just stood with my arms crossed, and looked out the glass wall searching for this Jenna, this blonde girl. What kind of name was Jenna?

“It must be this medication, my God, I can’t stop crying.” He kept rubbing his eyes.

“Where is Mom?”

“She’s coming,” I say, and wonder about what Brett might be doing in class, doing anything but this. I start to cry too, but turn around so he won’t see. How small and delicate he looked in his robe half open, a scar separating his right half from his left, an alien heart pumping and surging, and moving right along. Finally, Mom arrived and so did his sisters, and we gathered him up like a paper doll, complete with his clothes and books, all that he had left to own.

Before we brought him home my aunts and I scoured the house from top to bottom cleaning every crack and wall, dusting every furniture pore in the house to get rid of germs and anything that might make it easier for him to become sick. Now that he was going to have to take anti-rejection drugs for the rest of his life so that his immune system would not attack the foreign object invading his chest, he would be more susceptible to illness, colds, and germs. He was not to go to heavily crowded areas, sports games, large populated restaurants, movie theatres. So what I did was take him to late lunches like I had done before, jumping back into our old routine before the transplant. And soon we would notice how things hadn’t changed as much as we’d hoped, all of us realizing for the first time that a new heart doesn’t equal a new life, a new body, new chances to play golf and tennis, to breathe hard and fast and gasp for air.

He had around eight different meds to take in the beginning, the most important the anti-rejection drugs Cyclosporine and Prednisone. Among the others were diuretics, Imuran, meds to help the kidneys kick back into gear, laxatives, fungal meds for mouth and throat, anti-hypertensives to lower his blood pressure, not to mention the meds he still had to take for his diabetes. The Cyclosporine, which prevented rejection by attacking T-cells had forty-two side effects alone, among the worst being kidney failure, depression, diarrhea/constipation, irregular heart beat, numbness, back pain, swelling, liver damage, lowered blood cell count and bloody urine. Prednisone, the steroid that reduces white blood cell activity, has fifty-seven side effects, much the same as Cyclosporine. Among them there was heart arrhythmias, high cholesterol, congestive heart failure, loss of bone, psychosis, hallucinations, and abnormal adrenal gland function. Also, because of his diabetes, he had to prick his finger every morning and every night, and sometimes, the blood dripped on the floor and we had to wipe it up with wet paper towels. I had written down the name of his meds without him knowing, and looked up these side effects on my computer. Afterwards, I ran from my desk and into the bathroom to puke.
All I could do was imagine his body from the inside, like I had always done, red and mushy, tissue and nerves saturated with all of these medications attacking and fighting each other, little medicine men with swords and guns trying to outdo the other, trying to win in this swamp of the blood.

His recovery was riddled with setbacks, right from the start. He had lost so much body weight from the surgery and spending almost three weeks in a hospital bed that he could now feel the bones in his back rubbing together, and since his muscles had weakened from lack of blood and use, he could not stand up straight or walk. He waited to get back to his old self, sitting outside on the carport in his rocking chair letting the wind and the air into his lungs, trying to breathe deep, choking on it sometimes, all the while staring at his hands and feet wondering if they looked any different, looked any more alive.

I helped him with his stretching exercises, his bad back. Brett and I bought him a stationary bicycle to ride in the house. His regimen was to begin with two minutes on and five to ten minutes off, building up eventually to fifteen minutes four times a day. The doctors had no advice but to take it slow and see what happened. He took it very slow. Since his back was sore and he could barely walk, he wasn’t motivated to move very much, to walk, to lie down, and definitely not to ride a bike. Sometimes, in the afternoons, I’d put on Creedance Clearwater Revival, Elvis, or the Stones to motivate him, and I’d show him how to do an exercise, and he’d do it. We would both lie down on the floor, facing upward, and I would place my hands over my head like scissors, stretch my lower back by twisting my waist and bringing my leg over the other, and he would mimic me. I would walk him through it, urging his blood to pump and swim. Every now and then he’d remind me of the baby sharks we’d see in Aunt Judy’s ocean, shuffling our feet, trying to get them to scurry away, to walk again.

At times, I’d move his legs up and down like I was his physical therapist, his doctor, his walker, the one person who could inspire his body to change, make his heart pump, fill his lungs up with air.

It was almost like being in the Boy Scouts, or a bowling league the way the heart transplant patients were treated. There were dinners once a year, monthly newsletters about who still lived, who died, the newest developments in technology. These people, the ones who didn’t have to live with it, die with it, acted like the glass was half full. But the rest of us, those of us in the thick of it, the bristly, muddy dirt of the heart knew that the glass was permanently half empty, and that death could always be a better alternative.

Sometimes, when I was helping him do his stretches, pulling on his arms as he lay on the ground, pushing him on, I wanted to unzip him down the middle, right where his scar was and pull out the heart and examine it, dissect it, look at it from the inside to see how it worked, how it pumped, how it bled, how it was that I could hold my Dad’s entire life in the palm of my hands.

Approximately two months after his transplant, my mother left him. She moved out. She said out loud that she had been planning on doing so before he had his first heart attack. It was late afternoon, after 5:30 on a Friday, when she said that she had gotten an apartment near downtown and Leon High School, something for $450 a month. Le Parc Apartments, a low-income complex.
“Can we afford that?” I asked. Brett and I had just come from Best Buy on a C.D. hunt. It should’ve been obvious that something was wrong when both mom and dad were so close in physical proximity.

“I have to get out of here,” she replied. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Do what?” I asked. Brett sat next to me, silent.

“Take care of anybody any more. I’ve been doing that for so long, and I just can’t deal with it.” She sat next to my Dad on the couch, her knees pointing toward him. He sat, quiet, his head and gaze shifted down to the floor. I guess there wasn’t anything to say.

“Like we can?” I said.

Brett just sat there, the calm person that he is, and I sat fuming, wanting to spit in her face, make her burn from the inside and peel. Instead, I walked out of the living room, trying not to look at her. Everyone had a choice it seemed, and I never realized how many wrong ones my parents made.

She moved out that next week, a Budget truck backed up to the carport on a Wednesday afternoon when I got home from class. The wind made the heavy oak trees in our yard sound like rain.

That night, because of his back, my Dad sat in her bed watching the small television in Brett’s room, the bed she had been sleeping in for almost four years now. He had the lights off, just the glare of the screen hitting his face. It was blank, sad, his round blue crystal eyes droopy, and his mouth lax and flexible. I came in to check on him, to let him know I was going out with Gina to a movie.

“Are you okay?” I asked, standing next to his side, touching his leg. He was propped up on his floor pillow, puffed up behind his back so he could breathe easier. I wondered about the color of the air moving in and out of his lungs, the color of the tissue. Swell, release. Swell, release.

“I can’t believe she’s really gone.” There was a football game on the little T.V., but he reached up with the remote to lower the volume.

“I didn’t think she’d really leave. I mean, I never wanted to be a burden to anyone, it’s not like I chose this to happen to me.”

“She’s just weak Dad. She’s weak and selfish and has problems of her own, she just isn’t strong enough.” I kept staring at Brett’s posters on his wall. A Braves baseball poster, glow-in-the dark stars on the walls and ceiling, his red, white and blue painted dressers.

“You know, when I took my vows, I meant them. For better or worse. And it’s definitely been worse for us. But I never left. I’ve stayed. Her brother told me she was a handful, a little naïve.” He was talking out loud, but he wasn’t talking to me. Maybe he was talking to himself, or maybe he just needed to get this out. But I knew that it was an act of communication he never would’ve done before the heart attacks, before the transplant, before death came to live inside of his chest.

“Do you love her, Dad?” I asked. I moved and perched on the bed, next to his bony legs, chicken legs we called them.

He took awhile to answer, just staring at the T.V. screen, looking back and forth between anything he could focus on, to gaze into.
“Did you ever love her?” I said. Lately, I imagined my mother as just another pretty face, and my Dad just another nice guy jock that happened to come along.

“Yeah, I loved her.” His eyes seemed to glow in the light of the screen. “I still do love her. But of course, it’s different now. I’m different now. I just don’t understand how people can think it’s okay to abandon someone when it gets rough.” He looked up at me, and he seemed to be asking me with his eyes to answer him. To provide him with an answer that he had been too old to find. Too old to comprehend or understand.

“I don’t know Dad,” I said. I didn’t know what to say. I was thinking the same things, had the same questions.

“If I could help myself I would,” he said. “Does she think I like not being able to breathe, or work, or take care of myself? Have to depend on you guys to push me around, take me places, make sure I’m okay?”

These were questions I just couldn’t answer, so I listened, and nodded. We sat there together for a little bit, neither one of us saying anything. I knew what it really came down to. He was afraid we’d come home one day and find him dead. It was as simple as that. We had all been walking around the possibility of death for so long, it was a dance we did, together.

“Do you know what you can get for me?” he asked.

“What?”

“Some glow in the dark stars for my bedroom. That would be fun at night when it’s hard to sleep.” He pointed upward at Brett’s ceiling.

“Turn off the lights for a second.”

I walked over to the wall switch and flipped it. The stars glowed brightly on top of us, and he turned off the T.V. so it would be dark, dark against the glowing stars.

This is how it went for the next six months on into December. Near Christmas, when money finally ran out and her guilt took over, she came home. Until then, it was the three of us. It was hard at first, getting used to her not being there until we all realized silently that it was much the same as before except without the screaming fits and freak out sessions from the alcohol and the sadness. Brett and I took care of Dad as best we could. There wasn’t much to do, of course, he took his pills, went to physical therapy for a month, tried to build his back muscles, and waited for his body to catch up with his super heart able to pump and bleed as much like normal as it could. His sisters came by a little more often, and away from our ears I’m sure had their own opinions about my mother. She had never fit in with them, if anyone ever could. And as time progressed and I lived just with my Father for the first time in my life, I began to realize my mother’s side of the story; the helplessness, the selfishness, the little boy still inside a grown up man. I pegged it right off the bat; my mother had been a beauty looking for a prince, my Father had been a baby boy looking for someone to take care of him, perhaps someone to replace his mother. Either way, they both had issues they weren’t going to deal with, and until then, Brett and I were caught in the middle.

On Friday nights, if she felt like it, my mom would go out to dinner with us. It was the one night of the week when Dad got out of the house because he said, “it was the weakest T.V. night.” These dinners were awkward; Often, we danced around each other, circling around the issues that existed in the very center of us.
It was the middle of December when I came home from class on a Tuesday and found Mom in the living room next to Dad. They were watching golf. She never watched golf.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I dumped my book bag on the far end of the sectional. “Why are you watching golf?” She turned to me then, her legs crossed, the left over the right, and she leaned back into the couch; a groove had formed from leaning.

“I’m ready to come back,” she said, and turned her head back toward the screen.

Dad didn’t say anything, just sat there with Pepsi stains on his blue oxford, staring at the putter.

Later on that evening, I pulled Dad aside in the kitchen and asked him if this was the best thing for everyone.

“It’s the best thing for me,” he said, and walked away with his slouched shoulders being pulled downward by gravity and time.

It took only a few short weeks before everything went back to the way it was before, like a warm and familiar pattern that fell over our heads, back before the transplant, where we waited. Instead, this time we were waiting for him to recover, and no matter how much we waited or patient we were, there just seemed to be obstacle after obstacle. First, it was his back. After his physical therapy wasn’t covered by insurance anymore, we did his back exercises as best we could on the floor of our hard wood living room, pillows behind his head. We copied positions off 8 x 11 pieces of paper, trying to mimic the drawings on the page. I pulled his arms over his head, I pushed his legs to one side and then the other, stretching out his muscles, like a coma patient whose muscles have atrophied from lack of use. Then, it was Pneumonia from staying inside too much and not getting enough air. So if he went out, he got sick. If he stayed in, he got sick. There was nowhere for him to exist, nowhere for him to go. He didn’t fit geographically, and he didn’t fit physically. His body had left him behind to deal with the effects of age, with the drama of the heart.

He stayed in, watching T.V. all day.

His health went up and it went down. Some days he felt renewed, others, he was weak, bloated or swelled, constipated or throwing up. It was hard for him to stick to a schedule, and it was hard to get motivated. I couldn’t imagine the whirlwind going on inside, the very place where his heart lived.

I began to take him on road trips again, and occasionally, on cool summer days with no clouds I’d let him drive down the coast to Carabelle and St.George, the windows all the way down and our hair blowing in our eyes.

In November of 2002 Dr. McKenzie’s nurse gave my Father new medication. She did not go through McKenzie like she was supposed to. He had check-ups every six months, and during this routine check-up he had too much acid in his urine, so, without checking with McKenzie, she prescribed him a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. What she didn’t know, and what we didn’t know was the effect of mixing a NSAID and anti-rejection drugs like Cyclosporine. Just a few days after taking these pills, my Father complained of weakness and heavy fatigue. He could barely breathe, and barely ate anything. We didn’t know what to do.
It was my brother’s senior year of high school, and his last fall playing tight end on the Godby football team. Every year, it was tradition for the seniors and their parents to walk across the field with their son during halftime of the last home game of the year. Mom had called McKenzie and told him of Dad’s complaints and of the prescription given to him by his nurse. McKenzie almost fainted. Dad walked into his office and sat down on the patient table. Later, McKenzie had said his nurse hadn’t gone through him for authorization, and that combining such meds together was practically deadly for a heart transplant patient. He hadn’t known how Dad had walked into the office. He had never seen anyone with such a low white blood cell count be able to move anywhere. But we’d heard this before.

The next week, during Brett’s senior awards night, we sat on the bleachers on the bottom rows near the entrance to the field. It was around fifty degrees and Dad wore Brett’s blue and white letterman jacket.

“Are you going to be able to do it?” I asked. He was thin and his shoulders stood out, the bones defined and pointy, but he took his right hand and tightened his NYPD cap I had brought him back from New York last spring.

“I don’t care if they have to carry me off in a stretcher, I’m walking across that damn field.” And then, over the intercom they asked for the senior parents to find their son and line up against the fence. It was four minutes to half time. He and Mom got up, walked down the ramp leading from the bleachers, and stood against the fence, waiting to walk across the field. When their time came, they announced Brett’s name, Brett William Boyer, and Dad’s head flew up a little, and he kept up with the best of them, moving swiftly like he was any other healthy man.

Harry Marvin Boyer, my Father, turned 50 five months later on April 3, 2003. His birthday was on a Thursday, and in between my pop culture theory class and my poetry workshop, I went by Publix and bought him red and yellow flowers that looked like overgrown daisies, and bought him a balloon with “Happy Birthday Handsome” written across it. I surprised him when I walked through the door, and we drove over to Smokey Bone’s and ate barbeque chicken and fresh, made from scratch sugar donuts dipped in sweet sauce. I dropped him off and arrived to workshop late.

Later, we took him out to dinner, and it was as normal as it had been in a long while. Brett and I fought over the bread. I stole a piece from his plate while he was talking to Dad about football. We hadn’t even gotten our salads yet. Then, he turned to me, abruptly in mid-sentence.

“Did I eat all of my bread already?” he asked, searching the basket for more, and staring peculiarly at his plate.

“Yep,” I said, and turned my head to the right to try and hide my giggles.

“What?” he asked. “What?”

He didn’t get it. Mom and Dad burst out laughing, and by the time the salads came, it felt like home.

Later that week, on Wednesday, April 9, 2003, Dad and I sat outside in the front yard on the walkway, watching Brett mow the front lawn, taking in fresh air and the breeze that wafted through our tall pine trees.
“Man, I just love spring,” he said. He sat in his rocking chair his sister, my Aunt Elaine, had bought him awhile ago, soon after the first heart attack. It struck me how I measured time in terms of his heart, like a national date on our own calendar.

“So Dad, how does it feel to turn fifty? And you didn’t think you’d make it,” I said, sitting in a fold-up lawn chair next to him. We could see the hurricane of freshly cut grass behind Brett and the lawnmower, drifting and settling behind him.

“I’m just glad I got to see you two grown up—that’s all I ever really wanted.” He rocked back and forth, occasionally resting to sip his sweet tea, staring out into space, into nothing at all.

My Father died on Palm Sunday at approximately 4 a.m., April 13, 2003. I woke up to the screams of my mother at six in the morning, immediately registering what it was that could be wrong. Him. Only him. I flew open my door and ran out into the living room only to see her hyperventilating on the phone, her face wet, pale and swollen. The light next to his bed was on, and he laid there, the sheet barely covering his lower half and I could see his underwear. He had on a t-shirt. His head sort of laid loosely to his right, and his mouth was open, his eyes only half shut. I stopped short and tried to catch my breath. And then, the next motions were like a blurry painting. Brett came in after me, walked over to the other side of his bed, and we looked at each other and touched him, shook him, tried to wake him up. I put my ear to his chest and tried to hear a heart beat. It wasn’t unusual to me not to hear anything because I had done this before, and heard nothing. I stood up and grabbed his hand. It fell out of my grip, had no weight, no movement at all. It was a stationary thing, a lifeless, undefined lack of energy. And I knew. I knew he was gone. But I asked anyway.

“What should we do?” I asked Brett. “Should we try CPR?”

“I don’t want to break him,” he said. We both just stood there, whispering “Dad” and wondering where we should touch first, what it was that we could do. I didn’t know that tears were running down my cheeks, and I could hear Mom on the phone. His hands were cold, and lacked any sort of color. He looked placid and gray. And finally, we heard silence in the other room, and both Brett and I, without saying a word, walked out into the dining room and hugged Mom. It was just going to be the three of us now. Soon, we went about the business of burying the dead. And before the men in dark suits took him away to be embalmed and prepared, this time for good, we looked in his closet for his burial clothes, and found his old golf shirts, a static shark emblazoned on the front left pocket corner. A symbol for the dead.

I climbed on top of his body and laid there, my arms wrapped around his body trying to keep him warm, promising him that I wouldn’t leave, that I would never forget.

As a family, Dad wanted to travel down to Aunt Judy’s for a two-week summer family vacation to relax like we had four years earlier. The weekend before Mom had taken Dad to Sam’s to pick out a birthday present, and he came home with a light blue rayon Hawaiian shirt complete with a hibiscus flower print. It was the shirt he was going to wear down to the beach. Dad had made plans to watch the sunset every night, relax in the apartment, sit on the beach at dusk, and meet up with his old friend Dan Douglas from high school. But instead, we took the shirt and chose to bury him in it, complete with his gator jacket and a gator hat that he would hold in his fingers. That Sunday afternoon, Brett, Mom, Aunt Sally, Aunt Elaine and I made the trip to Culley’s Funeral Home, the same place that had handled my grandmother’s funeral twelve years earlier. We picked out a casket, gave our coordinator his clothes, and set up the viewing for Tuesday from 6-8 p.m. and the funeral on Wednesday at 2 p.m. We were to go home and
hunt for pictures to display on a magnet board during the viewing and funeral, and the way I saw it, we were going home to try and assemble his life in thirty photos or less, and suddenly that’s all that he had become. Just another dead heart on a piece of paper.

I made sure, that at his funeral, Elvis and the Stones were played. At the viewing the night before, seeing his freshly made up body set in his casket seemed like a piece of abstract art. His edges hard and I couldn’t remember the roundness of his eyes. His skin was freshly painted and hard as wood. I couldn’t press it inward no matter how hard I tried. Lying there, he looked younger, and when I saw him again ten minutes before the funeral began I cried so hard I thought I wouldn’t be able to stand. I was going to read a poem I had written not one week before he died, about what his funeral would be like. We were going to play the Stones “You can’t always get what you want” and Elvis’ “Kentucky Rain” and in the middle of the pastor reading scripture, we were to invite friends and family to share memories of my Father, and to listen to Elvis’ “Amazing Grace.” All I remember about that day is Brett and I in the limo before the funeral, on our way to Culley’s pretending we were in a 747-jet airplane. Brett put his hands to his mouth like he was speaking over an intercom and in his best intercom captain voice said, “Shhh, Hello folks, this is your Captain speaking, we are getting ready for take-off and the weather outside looks pretty scary; we’ve got heavy winds and a helluva lot of hail, but if I can dodge the lightening, we should make it one piece, or at least two.” I giggled and played along. Anything to take our minds off things, off what we were headed to do. The other thing I remember is this: Standing in front of an almost full chapel with my mother on one side and my brother on the other, reading my poem aloud, slow and specific, saying each word the way it’s supposed to be said, enunciating every syllable, concentrating on every beat. And when the beginning notes of “You can’t always get what you want” played, it was all I could do not to fall over like a spilled purse.

It was a decision that didn’t have to be made. Brett, Mom and I decided to go to Aunt Judy’s beach house apartments in Anna Maria anyway, without Dad. Mom said we needed to get away, that the stress of the last three weeks merited a break.

It was strange, the sense I had after his funeral, of watching him being placed in the ground for good by a yellow Tonka truck, watching the business of burial plots, how much it costs to say goodbye. The business of death was very lucrative, and after it all, I felt like nothing really mattered. The things that really mattered, like death, or how it was you spent your life were all things that fell through the cracks and the irony was, the living could never know what they missed. It was only in death that you could really figure out how to live.

Rocks used to line either side of the beach on Anna Maria Island, in front of my Aunt Judy’s house, like a sectioned off square of sand and water. Some were smooth and others were rough, but all had sharp, pointy edges and blocked beach pedestrians from coming too close to where we were. The tide came in at night, less than a foot away from the sea oats in Aunt Judy’s yard, so close the waves sounded like loud thuds against the walls of the apartment where we stayed, on top of her house, and the sea spray jumped into our porch windows trying to tag us all night long. They’re gone now, covered up by adult-sized Tonka trucks scraping the sea bottom and burying the smooth and rough sand blocks as if they were never there. I miss the rocks. They scraped my feet and ate my Frisbees, and offered me a place to rest when I counted the stars. Our first day on Aunt Judy’s beach, without Dad and the sun beats down and slices our skin and
plants future blisters. We soak it in and welcome them. It’s a Tuesday in the beginning of June, and there are few people sprouting up on the sand, mostly families with small children, buckets and sand shovels. The tide has drifted farther out than I have ever seen, and my mother, brother and I are blobs in fold-up chairs people-watching and listening to the heavy wind, and the angry waves.

“These waves are kickin’” Brett says, looking out from under his sunglasses, holding up the earphones of his Walkman. “I should have brought a boogie board.” He leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, scanning the vast ocean in front of us, watching the waves crash in and out.

“I’ve been coming to this beach for forty years, and the rocks have always been here. It must be because the rocks are gone,” my Mother says. “They really shouldn’t mess with nature.”

My Father and I used to sit on benches facing the beach in front of Aunt Judy’s house. But he didn’t really like the sun, made him too hot, too sweaty, too exhausted, especially after the first heart attack. I’d drink real Pina Coladas while he put his arm around me and we watched the sunset until long after it was gone, hoping it would start all over. I knew that this trip, things wouldn’t be the same without him here, like a large hole torn out of the fabric of the sky or the apartment and the beds we slept in, his ghost following us around everywhere, wanting to be a part of it all.

While we are down near Bradenton, Brett and I decide to go to Counsel’s Pool Hall because they have the greatest cheeseburgers in the world. My Father used to take Brett there, a boy’s day he’d call it, while Mom and I went shopping at the outlets in Palmetto, or baked on the beach until we could peel our skin. I wanted to go for him, to show him I was still the daughter that he knew, still the girl that wanted to do what he wanted to do, because he was my best friend. The sunlight against the concrete downtown among the shiny buildings, lawyers and beach property burned my eyes, and I couldn’t make out the dirty walls or aged pool tables with torn felt. I could smell the smoke as the light turned to brown, aged drywall, and it stung my nose. There were only barstools at the counter, and the two older men in light cotton shirts and golf polos used a stove from the early ‘30’s to grill the burgers. There were only four items on the menu: cheeseburger, hamburger, chili, (cup or bowl) and a salad. I was the only woman in the place. Brett turned to me, and his profile, his jaw and nose, the way he hunched over and slurped his chili, looked more like my Father than ever. I kept jumping every time I looked at him gulping his chili and eating his burger. He looks at my face, and rubs his goatee. I’m the only woman in the dirty room.

“I told you not to complain,” he says. “You wanted to come.”

My Father’s best friend is Dan, who lives on Riverside Dr., where, once my Father told me, the rich people in Bradenton live. He has done well for himself, we can tell, because his house is much larger than we’ve ever seen up close, in person. On the other side of the canopy street perch other houses much larger, with newer paint and cleaner lines. But Dan’s is aged, and looks like it could tell us ghost stories. The plans are to go to lunch, though I’m not sure where, and to talk about my Father while we are down here visiting. Dad was one of his best friends at Manatee High and the year and a half he went to Manatee Community College. Jim, my Father’s other best friend from high school, lives in Atlanta. They were the three musketeers, as he used
to call them, and we didn’t know what to expect. He owned a Volvo, parked in his carport with antique coca-cola bottles and cooler. The driveway was at the back of the house, and we weren’t sure where the front door was. Luckily, Dan was waiting outside. A portly man, he had glasses and thick brown hair brushed to either side, well kept. Not what I imagined him to look like. Brett and I glanced at each other, and we both mouthed “money.” He looked like a librarian, or an Ivy League professor. Inside, Dan led us to his living room, which smelled of mothballs and old books. We sank down into his sofa, and reached for the yearbook he specifically left on his coffee table. Class of ’74. Something to talk about. We picked it up and browsed, setting it between us.

“What do you want to look?” I asked Brett, and he just shook his head.

“We’ve seen it.” Dan was forty-five degrees to our right.

“So, what did your Dad tell you about me?” Brett and I weren’t sure who should answer. Mom stared at both of us, a fake smile trying to cover up how uncomfortable she was.

“That one of you was a Communist and the other a Nazi, and that he was the mediator,” I said.

Dan looked stricken or surprised. I couldn’t really tell.

“Well, I guess you could say that.” He paused, taking in his words and laying them out like on blueprints, examining how it was he was going to string them together.

“Well, Jim grew up in Alabama,” he said, “and bought me a subscription to the National Review once, for Christmas.” Ironically, that was something our Father would’ve done as well, and the space between Dan and my Father and the boys they were then, seemed to grow right before our eyes.

He’s looking at us, and we’re looking at him, and then I’m looking at the floor and the golden kitty that is the color of caramel. He or she plays with my feet, and rolls around on its back. A friendly cat, for sure. I wonder what Dan thinks about us. Surely he must recognize Dad in Brett, but I wonder if he recognizes anything about me. I continued.

“Well, he showed us the wedding pictures. The Nazi symbol Jim drew on the car?” I said.

My mom smiled, and looked at Dan.

“Sure, sure, I remember that,” he nodded his head.

“Hey, Cindy, didn’t your Mother freak out about that?” My mom wore that fake smile she gets, where her mouth curves up ever so slightly when she’s uncomfortable and trying to hide it.

“Yes, yes, she went crazy.” It must’ve brought her embarrassment almost twenty-five years later. She smiled coyly, and titled her head and said nothing else.

We sat there in silence for a few minutes, something that seemed like hours. I looked at Brett, and he was staring at me, his eyebrows raised, mouthing “Now what?”

“You know your Dad was a great man. He really was,” Dan said. He looked at Brett, who at age eighteen towered over us at 6’2” and then at me, who had my Father’s hands and nose. I looked at Dan then, and corrected his mistake.

“Is a great man. He is a wonderful man,” I said, not looking at Dan or my Mother, but instead, stroking the belly of the cat. It was shedding and I had cat hair all over my black slacks.

“Yes, of course,” Dan said, “that’s what I meant.” He sat in the chair, rocking back and forth and smiling at Mom, Brett and me.

“So, where do you want to go to lunch?”
We decide to eat at Peach’s, a local chain only five minutes from Dan’s neighborhood. It’s small, located in a strip mall, and pulling in I realize that the last time we were here, my Father and I ate breakfast here on our way to Sarasota to see the Ringling Art Museum. We take the last available table, and I sit on the corner, my brother and Mom on the other side facing us, and Dan sits next to me. Dan tells my mother about his real estate business and his wife and daughters while Brett and I scan the menu. Carmen, the waitress, delivers glasses of ice water and takes our order. Everyone orders the club special but I have a turkey sandwich. It’s quiet at our table except for the chatter around us. I stare at the intricate pattern of peaches, bananas and apples on the tablecloth, and Dan speaks.

“Did your Dad ever take you around to see his old house, or school? Did he talk about his Aunt Ruth?” No one else speaks, so I guess I’m supposed to answer.

“Yeah, he did, a little, and where he used to play tennis and stuff. He told us the story about when Aunt Ruth had her stroke she wanted to pay him five dollars for saving her life. That she never wanted to owe anyone anything.”

“Yeah, yeah, it was the strangest thing. Your Father was on break at Publix and decided to drive to get something to eat. But he ended up just driving home and found her unconscious on the floor. And later, when she died, we didn’t know about it, or the funeral until like weeks later. We were over at his house and Jim and I asked where Ruth was and he said ‘Oh yeah, she died.’ We were like, what? But that’s just how he was, a very private guy.” Dan took a swig of sweet tea, and looked at me, waiting for a response. I felt like I should continue.

“Yeah, we didn’t know that he was offered a Coast Guard scholarship when he graduated Manatee High. He never told us that.” Mom and Brett were just staring ahead at both of us, like they were two strangers eavesdropping. Lately, we’d been finding out information about my Father that not even my Mother knew. He sold Amway for three weeks, he worked night shifts at a dirty convenience store when I was six months old, and he had kept the pictures of his old girlfriends hidden in his sock drawer. We were desperately searching for any other secrets my Father had kept hidden.

“It was because of your grandmother. He was fourteen when she had her stroke. And you know it was just he and his sisters. They were hysterical and didn’t know what to do. So he had to take care of everything. He never left her side.” My Mom and Brett looked disappointed, wanting the waitress to deliver our food, to give us an excuse to stop talking. We aren’t finding out much we didn’t already know. I sneak a glance up at Dan and he smiles at me, beneath his glasses, and I’m left with having to find some last words.

Our last night on the island Aunt Judy and her husband, my Uncle Jim take us to Johnny Leverock’s, a popular seafood restaurant right on the marina as you head over Cortez bridge. We are tired and dried up from the sun, and wait in the bar to be seated. After just a few minutes our party is called, and the too thin and tan waitress named Kimmy leads us to our table next to a window facing the bayside, and we can see the sun reflecting on the water. Brett and I sit on one side, and the adults on the other. The table seats six, but there are only five of us. The empty chair is next to the aisle, and I am next to it. While I look at the menu and try to decide between mahi mahi and grilled shrimp, my brother glances at me, asking what I’m going to have.

“I’m not sure yet.” I put down the menu and stare out at the water, and wonder what the sunset will look like.

“What’s wrong?” he asks. “What’s the matter?”
When I go to the grocery store, or on Father’s Day, Christmas, Thanksgiving, I can’t
fight the urge to buy him a gift, to look for his muffins or Pepsi, to search for him in the places
that I go, as if it was a game of hide and seek, as if I would find him someday. Grief, I have
learned, is the business of trying to fit in what life is forcing out.

I’ve been having flashbacks, like a war survivor, of memories I hadn’t thought about
since I was twelve. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, I wake up having had a dream that he
was still alive, and for a moment, I feel like I am whole again. Without him here, it’s like
missing one of my limbs, a whole foot or hand. I go to reach for him, to find him, to buy him
mini-chocolate muffins, or tell him about a new Dean Koontz book that’s out for him to read.
But he’s not there. I feel like an amputee. When I walk into the living room and look at his seat
on the couch, the rounded top where his head used to rest, I see flashes of his face and his
decaying body. When Brett, now a wide-shouldered, six-foot ex-lineman with a receding
hairline coughs or clears his throat, I whip around to see if my Father is there; I forget that he is
gone. They sound so much alike. And more often than not, I refer to him in the present tense, as
if he’s still acquiring time and age.

My Father’s been dead for almost six months now, and when I visit his grave, the
orange, clay dirt has settled into the ground, finally finding a place to rest. The squares of grass
laid on top have also grown together and settled too, so it looks like he has always been down
there, alone in the dark. My mother, brother and I have placed fake roses, irises and daisies in
the granite vase that sits on his marble and granite tombstone, flat and facing upward. The
flowers have faded now, and house cobwebs and daddy long legs. Lately, when I muster up the
strength to go to his grave, I sit on top of him; He’s eight feet below in a granite vault. I wonder
what his body looks like, and remember how cold and hard his skin felt during his viewing. I
imagine his heart, bruised and shriveled, purple and hard like a raisin, with grooves and ripples
acquiring the age of death like a fine wine, bleeding down in between his bones and rusting
away.

Sitting in the cemetery as if it were a park or any grassy plane on a cool, breezy day fools
you; what’s really surrounding you are dead people, dead memories long gone like fading music
notes, the bone and muscle of the melody grating against your skin. All that’s left is to figure out
how to pass the time without them here.

Now that the battle is finally over, I don’t have to pull him through the water anymore.
But sometimes now I wonder: Was I pulling him or was he pulling me? In the end, who was the
shark and who was the walker? In the end, does it even matter?

What I’ve found out then, is that grief hollows you, the cutting and scraping out of your
insides like a pumpkin, burrowing deep into the flesh of your body like a parasite.

A year after his first heart attack in February of 2000 I got a tattoo of a heart with wings
on my lower back. I knew that I wanted to represent him on my skin, to signify his struggle, to
splash his death into my cells because life peels away like layers of skin, what was there, gone,
and the rest of us left to begin anew. I’m looking for him everywhere I go. I don’t feel him
anymore, and I can’t remember the way he used to light up the room with his wit, with his heavy
Republican banter, with his taut and sturdy love of the Florida Gators. At night, when I can’t
sleep and I look for him in my dark corners I can’t see anything that says he is still here other
than the nights when I feel like somebody is watching me.
I am told we are all just pieces of stardust, pieces of the universe that are so small and tiny we might never be found, molecules and elements with infinite syllables, bursting or glowing versions of blue and purple and orange that we have never seen. Could he be broken up into pink on the edge of the sunsets we used to watch together, or passing over the gills of a baby shark, giving it life, swimming back and forth during low tide?

As I think back to the last twenty-three years that I knew him, I can see that he held in bombs of emotion.

You were either a Beatles person or a Stones person but you were never both. And in the immortal words of the Stones, and of my Father, you can’t always get what you want but sometimes you get what you need. The truth was, wild horses couldn’t have dragged him away until he was ready.

He was a walking pharmacy, a palette of side effects and burping organs. You couldn’t really call that living, even though he survived another twenty months. Perhaps, simply put, it was delaying the inevitable.

The simple truth is this: sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. And all that’s left is to try, no matter how many times you get pushed back, no matter that you’re going to die in the end.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Born July 14, 1980 in Bradenton, Florida, Sabrina Leigh Boyer grew in Tallahassee, Florida. She attended Riley Elementary and Astoria Park Elementary, and moved on to Griffin Middle School and Amos P. Godby High School. She attended undergraduate at Florida State University majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She continued her education by enrolling in the Master’s program in the Creative Writing department of which this is her thesis. While in graduate school at FSU, she held the position of Graduate Instructor, and has published in the online journal ginbender.com.