

S W E E T
B A B Y
L O V E R

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A true story of love, death, and hope

Jule Kucera



Poppyseed House

POPPYSEED HOUSE

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For the eight women who carried me

Ginger and Laura

Laurie and Linda

Denise and Sabine

Kendra and Elaine



Trent Price, March 2007

I WISH I COULD WRAP YOU UP LIKE A COCOON
SO I COULD HOLD YOU FROM ALL AROUND
AND BE LOVING YOU. THEN YOU COULD BE A
BUTTERFLY EVERY MORNING.

—TRENT PRICE

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Author's Note

This is a true story, or as true as I can tell it. It is inherently flawed because it is my perspective, and it is told in hindsight. My commitment to you is to tell the story as honestly as I can. I will not change the facts to influence your opinion of someone, I will not change what happened to make the story more interesting. Real names are used most of the time. When the name is a pseudonym, it is marked with an asterisk the first time it appears.

Others would no doubt tell the story differently. But this is my story and this is my truth.

COMING
TOGETHER

1. The Beginning

July 2003

He was late, more than an hour late. I paced my upstairs two-flat—what Chicagoans call a two-story, two-unit residence—stomping from the living room, through the dining room, through the kitchen until I reached the door to the back porch. There I spun and headed back to the front. If the floors had been carpet instead of wood, I would have burned a path. Where could I get somebody if this guy didn't work out? He was a contractor from Michigan, recommended by my friend Jane.* She had a three-flat about a mile away, and he did a lot of work at her place.

The doorbell rang, and I tore down the twisting front stairway, deciding whether to be mad that he was late or glad that he was finally here. When I pulled open the heavy door, he was framed in sunlight. He wasn't what I expected. He was beautiful.

He wore a yellow T-shirt, heavy canvas shorts, work boots, and thick socks with the top rolled down so the fuzzy part showed. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with blond hair that shone in the sun, a blond beard flecked with white, and blue eyes that were smiling at me. I smiled back.

He said his name was Trent. I said mine was Jule. We walked through the narrow side alley to the backyard, talking about what needed to be done—tear out the old fence, make a parking pad, build a new fence. In Chicago, it's important to keep a fence between your house and whatever lurks in the alley, especially for a woman living alone.

I didn't care about the heaps of flowers the previous owners planted in the backyard, but said I would dig out and move the small redbud tree that stood where the parking pad would go. Trent said he would take care of the rest. We talked about the dimensions of the parking pad and how thick the concrete needed to be to withstand winter and the weight of the vehicles. I explained I needed room to park two cars—one space for me and one for the downstairs tenants.

He asked what I wanted the fence to look like. I remembered a fence I had spotted in the new-to-me neighborhood while walking my dog, Charlie, a graying standard poodle. Trent and I walked to where I thought the neighbor's fence was, but I couldn't find it. I had gotten confused about which street it was on, maybe because the man at my side distracted me. He was patient as we searched the alleys.

Found it. The bottom part of the fence was solid, the vertical boards alternately projected and recessed. In the top part, only every other board was there. I liked the top—it nicely mingled the lightness of the air above with the solidity of the wood beneath. I was pretty sure Trent was going to tell me the style was too difficult or would cost a lot more when he said, "This shouldn't be too hard," and asked me to hold the end of the tape measure. I took the end of the tape down to the bottom of the fence, putting myself at eye level with his calves.

I looked at his muscles at the back of his calves (the gastrocnemius) and how they were thick and angled at the bottom rather than rounded. I looked at his tanned skin and the blond curly hair that ran from the top of his socks to up under his shorts. He said, "Okay, I got it," and it was time for me to stand up and let go of the tape. I didn't want to.

August 2003

He came back a few weeks later, driving a 1980s Chevy truck that had mellowed to a soft blue. I stood on the upstairs enclosed back porch, sometimes leaving to do other things, but most of the time watching him and hoping the reflection of the sun off the porch windows made me difficult to see.

He had a heavy chain he attached to the back of his truck, the other end to part of the fence. When he stepped on the gas, the truck moved forward, the chain unfurled and then snapped straight, the truck lurched, the section of fence came down, the brakes screeched, and the truck jolted to a stop. Accelerate-jerk-slam, over and over. It was tricky because the alley was only a few feet wider than the truck.

There were actually two fences to deal with. The wood stockade fence bordered the alley, and a chain-link fence ran alongside it, on the house side. After both fences were down, I realized we also had to contend with an out-of-commission telephone pole, naked now that the fences sprawled at its feet.

Trent backed the truck up to the telephone pole as I watched him from my perch. He had taken off his T-shirt and wrapped the heavy chain around the tall, thick pole. Accelerate-jerk-slam, again and again until the telephone pole wobbled. Then he got out of the truck and pushed on the pole.

It tilted but wouldn't fall. He got back in the truck and jerk-slammed it a few more times, but the pole stayed where it was. The driver's door swung open and Trent got out of the truck, squatted down, wrapped his arms around the pole, and lifted it out of the ground. He turned slightly and let the pole fall in the alley, away from his truck. I may have gasped.

He told me he was going to the dump. (How did he tell me this? Had he hollered up to me? Had I gone down to offer him something to drink?) I disappeared into the house. When I looked out the porch window a few minutes later, the wooden fence was gone and the truck was gone, but the chain-link fence was lying in the alley, and I was angry again. Why didn't he take both fences at the same time? Both would have fit in the truck. He was being paid hourly—was he just trying to make the job take longer?

As I stood there, an old pickup truck with mottled plywood sheets affixed to both sides of the truck bed pulled up and stopped. Three small men got out, picked up the fence, threw it in the back of the truck, and drove away. "Scrappers," Trent said when I told him about it later. "They come through about every twenty minutes." A booming business in Chicago, he explained. He offered to take me over to the scrap yard if I wanted to see it, but warned it was kind of scary—a *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* kind of place. I declined.

The Bobcat

The next Saturday, Trent brought a friend with him. He said the previous owners had brought in a lot of soil for their flowerbeds and he needed another set of hands to dig. The extra dirt had changed the drainage—the backyard now sloped

toward the house and water drained into the basement. This explained why I heard the sump pump running every time I went down to the basement to do laundry.

The two of them shoveled dirt into the back of the truck all day Saturday and all day Sunday. Sunday evening, I looked out the window but couldn't see any difference.

On Monday, I came home from work to see a little Bobcat (the earthmoving equipment, not the animal) in the backyard, Trent driving it, picking up a load of dirt in the front bucket, then spinning around to drop the dirt in the bed of his pickup. He seemed to be having a good time. I watched them, the man and the machine, mesmerized. They looked like they were dancing together across the dirt. I wanted to take a picture but didn't want to be embarrassed if he caught me. I walked outside instead.

Trent apologized for not asking before renting the Bobcat, but said it was the only way to get the dirt dug before the ground froze. Chicago is built on a swamp, and the soil is heavy clay that sticks to every shovelful. It is a backbreaker.

When he stopped for the night, I looked out the back window and saw the Bobcat resting by the neighbor's garage. This time I took a picture. The slope of the ground appeared to be changing, but I still couldn't tell for sure. The alley was tightly lined with fences and garages, except for my backyard. There was nothing between my two-flat and the alley. I felt exposed, vulnerable.

The next day when I came home from work and looked out the window, I could see the difference in the ground. It sloped away from the house and ended at the alley, a few inches below the asphalt. Trent was just finishing nailing bright-

orange plastic webbing to 2×4s planted in a row where the future fence would be. I walked outside, and he said, "I thought this might make you feel a little safer until the real one is up."

We talked about the exact dimensions of the parking pad, how it should meet the asphalt of the alley, and the grade of concrete he should use. I hadn't known that concrete came in different grades and accepted his recommendation.

Trent said he wanted to show me something on the side of the house, and we clambered over the low chain-link fence that blocked the side yard. A climbing vine crawled up the butterscotch brick of the two-flat, and Trent said the vine should come down, explaining what I was vaguely aware of, that the vine puts its climbing feet into the brick and damages it.

As we climbed back over the fence, Trent held out his hand to help me. As he pulled me over, I felt a powerful wave go from his hand to my hand and through my entire body. When I got over the fence, he let go, and all I wanted was for him to hold my hand again, to touch me, for me to feel his hand, to feel that wave. I held out my hands to show him how green they were from pulling down the vine, hoping he would touch me again, but he didn't even look. I let them fall.

Concrete

Trent and his friend Paul were just finishing up pouring the concrete for the parking pad when I got home. The orange netting of the temporary fence was down on the ground, waiting to be put back up when they finished their work.

A few minutes later, my next-door neighbor Jim got home from his construction job and also came outside. Jim and I had

been on uneasy terms ever since I had moved in, when repairs to my roof had raised a black dust that went through his open windows, covering the inside of his home with a fine layer of soot, including his best dress shirt, which he had laid out for a special evening.

Jim stood there in his T-shirt with cut-off sleeves, his long light-brown hair pulled back in a thin ponytail, his eyes surveying the operation. Jim will tell you, as he told Trent and Paul, that he is an ex-Marine. Trent will tell you that Jim is also bit ADHD. When Jim saw they had finished the concrete pour without him, his shoulders drooped. Trent told Jim he could help with brushing the surface, but they would have to wait about an hour for it to firm up. At the prospect of being part of the action, Jim got excited, and his feet shifted on the ground.

Paul asked if they could put their names in the concrete and Trent said yes, in the corner he pointed to, where they had started the pour. Paul went first. Trent added his name and 2003. Then Paul asked whether, since Jim was there, he could leave to go into the city. Jim would take over for Paul, who was gone so fast I almost didn't see him leave.

Trent and Jim discussed brushing the concrete, the brush they would use, the extender pole, and how they would work together to do it. This energized Jim. "Let's brush it now, man."

"If we do that, the brushing won't hold. We need it to firm up first."

"No man, it will be okay. Look—it's stiff enough already." As Jim moved to touch the concrete, Trent stopped him.

"Nope. Not yet. It will lose the brush marks."

"So what, man. You don't really need those. Those are for appearances. We'll smooth it out and call it a day."

"Smooth isn't good—not when it's wet or snowed on."

Jim's feet started shifting faster, and you could see just how hard it was going to be for him to wait, which is when Trent turned to me and spoke in a voice low enough for Jim not to hear.

"Can you talk to him for a few minutes while I go get something? When I get back, you can go inside, and you won't have to be out here with him anymore. Just don't let him touch that brush."

Trent then turned to Jim. "Hey man, I want to go get us something. I'll be right back."

Then Trent was gone, and I was standing next to my neighbor. I needed to change his focus and get him talking about something else quickly.

"So, you were in the Marines?"

It was enough. Jim was still talking when Trent walked up the alley a while later with a six-pack hanging from each hand. I went inside and heard them talking and laughing for a long while, until it was almost dark and there was just enough light left to brush the concrete, which is when Trent finally let Jim pick up the brush.

When I got home from work the next day, I went to my usual perch on the back porch. Trent was cutting boards for the fence. He would place a board on his table saw and then slice it with the blade, sawdust swirling in the sunlight. It was hot and he was sweating, and the sawdust was sticking to him, and the sun was glinting off the sawdust. He looked like a great golden bear. I watched how he held the boards, how he felt the weight of them, how he measured them, how his strong hands carried and placed them carefully. I wanted to trade

places with those boards. I wanted him to carry me and place me carefully.

The Drill

Trent was assembling the fence, attaching the vertical boards to the horizontal stringers he had placed earlier. I walked outside, told him I had my own cordless drill, and asked if I could help. I was proud of my drill. It had been acquired five years earlier, after I left my husband and all my tools. At the hardware store, seeking to rebuild my collection, I had picked up flat- and Phillips-head screwdrivers, a hammer, a tape measure, and a short level. A salesperson approached as I eyed the wall display of drills—some corded, most cordless.

“So, you’re lookin’ for a drill?”

“Yes. I am.”

“What kinda drill you lookin’ for?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, what do you want to use it for?”

“Basic stuff around the house, like hanging up shelves. Stuff like that.”

“Okay, then. There’s a lot here that’ll do that for you.”

I stopped looking at the drills, turned to the man.

“Really, it just needs to be better than the one my ex-husband has.”

“What does he have?”

“A Makita.”

“Well, then. You need a DeWalt.”

I stood next to Trent with my 12-volt DeWalt and helped screw in screws to build the fence. He stood nearby with his 20-volt DeWalt. He never got mad when I slipped off a screw

or drove one crooked, and he showed me how to lean on the end of the drill (drill motor, he called it) to make the screw go in straight and quick.

It got late and I got hungry. I told Trent that I was going to get some dinner and asked him whether he wanted any. I hoped he did.

We sat upstairs on the back porch and ate falafel and rice. He was easy to talk to. He had a nice laugh and crinkles at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. It got dark and I suddenly felt stupid—pining after the man who was building my fence and making him have dinner with me. Could he honestly have said no? I felt guilty and embarrassed and told him it was getting late. We both stood up. As I watched his back move down the stairs, I noticed a slump in his shoulders and for the first time thought maybe he had been having a good time, too. I wanted to say I was sorry, and I wanted to be left alone, and I didn't want to be hurt, and I wanted him to hold me.

2. Five Years

September 2003

"I haven't had sex in five years."

I said this to Persephone after I sat down at the back corner of the classroom where we were to observe a new training program at work. I hadn't even said hello first.

Persephone is one of those people who takes things in stride. She looked at me with a steady face—no shock, no surprise, no discomfort with the topic—and said, "That's not good." When the program ended, we went straight to her

office: me desperate to solve the problem, Persephone determined to help me.

She asked, "Do you have any friends?"

"Sure, I have friends."

"No, that's not what I meant. Do you have any friends... with benefits?"

"With benefits?"

"With benefits."

She leaned in closer and clarified. "Friends who would be interested in participating with you to end your 'no sex in five years' problem."

Persephone smiled. She let the wheels turn in my head until my eyes widened and I asked, "Do people do that?"

"Yes, they do."

"Really?"

"Really. In fact, I may have done such a thing myself. So, can you think of any friends in that category?"

The idea of Persephone maybe having done such a thing was intriguing, but I pushed those questions aside and focused on the task at hand. Did I have any friends in that category?

"Umm... no."

"No? None?"

"Well, there's this one guy. He's not really a friend, but—"

"But he might be interested?"

"He might."

"There you go."

"There I go what? What do I do, just walk up to him and say, 'Hey, you wanna have sex?'"

"You could do that."

"No, I couldn't. I really couldn't."

We agreed that verbalizing my request might be too much for me and that a written note might be better. I didn't know what to write, but Persephone gave me the first line: "How do you feel about casual sex?" I finished the rest of it, ending with "If you're interested, let's talk. If not, please throw this note away and never mention it."

I waited before I gave him the note—I wanted a safety check before proceeding. My therapist thought it was a splendid idea. I decided to give it to him on a Friday. If he wasn't interested, he would be in Michigan for the weekend, and I would have two days to hide and feel stupid.

On Thursday night, I took out my favorite 100% cotton cream-colored stationery with the rag edges and wrote the note several times. The first few versions were to get the spacing of the words right on the page. The next few were to work some unsteadiness out of the script. I got it as nice-looking as I could.

On Friday morning, I took out the note, reread the words, put it in a matching cream-colored/rag-edged envelope, wrote Trent's name on the front, and put it in his giant toolbox. Then I left.

Friday, October 3, 2003

I was worthless at work. I went to meetings, spoke when spoken to, and did what I needed to do to appear to be functioning. My body was present, but my mind was on a cream-colored note sitting in a large toolbox inside the downstairs back door of a two-flat.

People at work knew something was up. I was wearing a short black leather skirt, chunky black sweater, black tights,

and little black heels. They were used to seeing me in blue jeans and a blazer. I didn't say a word. They didn't ask.

By the time I got to the 'L,' Chicago's elevated subway system that would carry me home, I was nearly dizzy. My brain had spent the day considering every possible response Trent might have and all my possible reactions. I was exhausted. I wanted to stay on that train and ride it past Rockwell, past the end of the line at Kimball, past Wisconsin, into Canada. Canada sounded good.

I got off the 'L' at Rockwell and walked the two blocks home. Trent wasn't waiting for me by the front door, which was Ideal Scenario #1. I unlocked the outside door, walked upstairs, unlocked my door, and put down my work things. I couldn't hear any sound coming from the back—no sawing, no drilling, nothing. Maybe he had fled—that was another of the possible outcomes that had whistled through my head. I went down the back stairs and found him in the backyard. He said there were some things he wanted to show me. It was cold, and I wrapped my arms tightly around my chest for warmth and self-bolstering.

He was talking about some aspect of the fence, but I could hardly hear him. All I could think about was the note he wasn't talking about. Trent walked me from the fence to the back of the house to show me something that needed repair. His mouth moved, but I heard nothing. I wanted to melt, dissolve, sink between the blades of dry grass and gray dirt and disappear. I stood there in my little black heels and wanted to die.

This is when he said, "Do you want to talk?"

"What?"

"Do you want to talk?"

"Oh. Talk?"

"Yes. Talk. Do you want to?"

"Uh... yes."

"It would probably be good if we could sit down somewhere."

"The back porch?"

"Sounds good."

I led the way up the back stairs and hoped he thought I had nice legs.

We sat down at the corner of the little square wooden table on the upstairs porch, me with my back to the house, Trent to my right, facing me.

"Does Jane know?" he asked.

Jane, my friend who had recommended him for the work? Of all the things I had imagined he might say, this was not one of them.

"Does Jane know what?"

"Does Jane know about the letter you put in my tools?"

"No, Jane doesn't know."

"I thought the two of you might have talked about it."

I remembered back to the phone conversation Jane and I had a few weeks earlier, where Jane complained about the lack of good men in the world.

"What about Trent?" I had said to Jane.

"Trent?"

"Yeah, Trent. He seems like a nice guy."

"I'm not interested."

"Why not? He's cute."

"I'm not interested in Trent."

"Well, if you're not, then maybe I am."

"I wouldn't recommend it."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a drunk, he's broke, and he has a terrible temper."

"Really?"

"Yep. I've known Trent for years. He's not a guy you want to date."

"Then maybe I shouldn't have him work on my backyard."

"No, he'll do a good job at that. I just wouldn't date him."

"I don't know if I should hire him."

"He's not going to drink on the job. He does really good work... and he's cheap."

You can always hook me with frugality. I pulled myself back into the present and the conversation with Trent.

"No. Why would I tell Jane?"

"You might have."

"Well, I didn't. And why would she care, anyway?"

"Because Jane and I are seeing each other."

It felt as if someone had pulled the chair out from beneath me and I was on the floor—my butt on the terra-cotta tiles, my feet stretched out in front of me.

"You're seeing each other?"

"We have been."

"For how long?"

"Five years."

Five years! I did the math. Five years included the ten-day vacation Jane and I had taken together in Greece, when we sailed in a boat while the world watched people fall from two collapsing buildings on a bright blue September day. After that Tuesday, Jane called someone almost every day and wouldn't

tell me who she was calling. Toward the end of the trip, she gave way a bit and said, "Just an old friend from Michigan."

On that trip, when I'd complained about my nonexistent love life, Jane told me she was content because she was quite good at self-pleasure. She said nothing about a tall blond man from Michigan, and suggested I improve my personal-pleasure skills.

For this conversation with Trent, I kept leaving. I was on the floor, I was on vacation with Jane, I was under my own mental whiplash, feeling stupid. *Focus*, I told myself. *Focus*.

The man sitting with me at the table asked if I minded if he had a beer. I said no. Trent pulled two blue cans from the kangaroo pocket of his camouflage sweatshirt and set them on the table. He snapped one open and spoke. "It's been a rough day for me. I thought she might have pimped me out."

"What?"

"I thought Jane might have pimped me out."

"To me?"

"Yes."

"Oh, no. No."

He let go of a long breath and looked out the window for a long time. Looking at the redness in his face, I realized there had been several beers ahead of the two on the table.

Trent spoke again. "What do you want to do?"

I thought about it. I had propositioned the boyfriend of what I thought was a good friend of mine—a boyfriend she had dated for five years and never told me about.

"I'd like to keep talking."

He took a draw on his beer. "So would I."

I thought a minute, then asked, "How would you feel about cheating on Jane with me?"

"I think it's fair."

"What makes it fair?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm not her only, so she doesn't need to be mine."

He looked sad when he said it, and I wondered if he loved her.

The next thing he did was pull out his key chain, thumbing through the keys until he came to a plastic tab with a photo on it. He held it out to me.

"This is my daughter, Jenna. Jenna Jo."

I was on the floor again. Jane had told me he had a daughter. "He's a good father" was something she had said when persuading me to hire him. But in all my reveries about Trent, I had left out his daughter. I quickly added her to the rapidly expanding circle: Trent, Jane, me, and Jenna.

"She's beautiful."

I have learned that this is what you say when you see a picture of someone's daughter, no matter what you really think. It was hard to tell what Jenna looked like—the plastic tab was badly worn, with large patches of white obscuring the photo. Trent smiled.

"She's a sweetheart."

"She looks darling."

"She's older now—older than the picture."

"How old?"

"She's ten."

"How old is she in the picture?"

"Five."

Trent looked sad again, and I thought I should change the subject. I groped for a new conversation topic and came up with nothing but a question.

"So what else should we talk about?"

"What we're not talking about."

"Yes."

He paused and I said nothing, so he said, "You want to have sex with me."

"I do."

"Why?"

Now I was embarrassed.

"Because I haven't had sex in five years."

"You're shitting me."

"No. I'm not."

"Nobody goes that long without sex."

"I do—or I did."

"Shit."

"Yeah!"

We both laughed. He looked at me closely.

"Why me?"

After the laughter, I had hoped the conversation would become easier. Instead, it was getting harder.

"Because I liked watching you out the window."

"There are lots of guys out the window—your next-door neighbor."

"No. Not him."

I still hadn't answered his question, so he asked it again.

"Why me?"

He wanted a reason and deserved it.

“Because when I watched you sawing, I watched how you held the wood, and I wanted you to hold me like you held the wood.”

I was close to tears and didn’t want to be. I didn’t think “being so needy you are close to tears” would win over a potential bedmate. Everything was in pieces. My black leather skirt and little black heels were irrelevant. I was sitting in a room with a man, a girlfriend, and a daughter. He was sitting with a woman who wanted to trade places with a 2×4.

Trent took another long haul on his beer and finally spoke. “So, with the sex, what are we talking?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are we talking once or more than once?”

Oh! I hadn’t even considered more than once. Fireworks of possibility went off in my head.

“How about once, but if we like it, we could do it more than once—if we both like it.”

He looked at his beer and then back to me. “Sounds like a plan.”

I looked at him. I was going to have sex! With this man! I said nothing. I couldn’t. The fireworks were too loud.

“So, when do you want to do it?”

“When?”

“Yeah. When do you want to have sex?”

“Oh! I don’t know.”

In my mental imaginings of this conversation, I had never gotten this far, to the decision and then the practicalities of scheduling. Trent was way ahead of me.

“How about Sunday?”

“This Sunday?”

"Yeah." He smiled. "This Sunday. That would be the day after tomorrow."

I smiled and laughed. We agreed on five o'clock on Sunday afternoon.

I had both of my hands on the table because I had been using them to hold myself upright. He drained his beer and put the unopened second can back in his pocket. We both started to stand but then he covered my right hand with his left and kissed me. I fell back into my chair as the kiss continued. His mouth was warm and beery. Not only had I not had sex in five years, but I hadn't been kissed in five years. This felt very good.

We stood and kissed some more. As we broke apart, he looked down at my black tights and said, "Don't wear those on Sunday."

I closed the door behind him and stood on the porch. We had really been here, we had really had this conversation, and he had really kissed me! I picked up his empty beer can and put my mouth where his mouth had been. I thought about Sunday.

Saturday, October 4, 2003

I waited.

I thought about what to wear and decided on a chamois-colored skirt and a tight V-neck print top. The skirt looked and felt like suede, and I thought Trent would like how it felt. It was one of those outfits I'd bought when I started dating men from the dating service. I'd never worn it.

The dating service men were mortgage brokers, bankers, and lawyers, and one of them was retired. They were all nice enough, but I didn't connect with any of them. I had dated a

handful when I realized I was connecting better with the men I worked with than the men I was dating. The men I worked with were commercial property building engineers and construction managers. They lived in the physical world, the world of machines and blueprints and physics. They could fix things. They told stories about their wives and kids. They referred to their buildings as “she” and took good care of them.

I called the dating service and asked if they had any “just guys.”

“Just guys?”

“Yeah—guys whose job it is to build things or fix things. Just guy guys.”

The dating service man didn’t respond. I figured out the reason and offered it. “Guys like that don’t use a dating service, do they?”

“No. They don’t.”

I thanked him and asked him to cancel the remainder of my twelve-man subscription.

Saturday night, I lay in bed and thought about what I was about to do. In high school, I had decided I would never be one of those girls who dated her friend’s boyfriend. Now I was about to sleep with a friend’s boyfriend, a boyfriend she had been with for five years.

Jane had told me she wasn’t interested in him. I could take her at her word. If she had deceived me, then I could deceive her. While my head was busy looking for justification, my body let me know I wanted to have sex with Trent. I put my head aside. Let the chips fall.

I did not sleep that night for a long time. With my hands at my sides, I lay on my back and felt the pull below my belly that wanted him. I knew I was swollen. I could feel the river.

Sunday, October 5, 2003

I took a shower and shaved my legs, laid out the chamois skirt and the knit top on the bed. I put them on. In a bathroom drawer, I found some mascara and lipstick. I didn't know what else to do, so I sat on the living room couch, smoothed my skirt beneath me, and waited. I looked at my watch. It was a little after three thirty. I got a book but couldn't read, so I got another book with lots of pictures and looked at those.

At five o'clock, the doorbell rang.

I met him at the front door. We hadn't been at the front of the two-flat since the first day, when he came to do the estimate. He was wearing a nice light-yellow sweatshirt, not the camouflage one he had been wearing when we arranged this meeting, and clean jeans, not dusty shorts. We were seeing each other in clothes we had never seen each other in before. He looked down and noted my stockings. I thought I saw a whiff of disappointment cross his face.

I led the way up the stairs and hoped he liked my skirt. In the living room, I noticed he had a six-pack in each hand—Icehouse for him and Rolling Rock for me. I thought it considerate that he had thought about what beer I might like. We walked back to the kitchen, and each took a beer. When I came back after putting the rest of the beers in the pantry fridge, he had opened my beer for me, and I thought that was nice, too. I took a sip and thought what I think every time I taste beer: *It tastes like my father.*

We went back to the living room and sat on the couch. I took another sip of the beer, to be polite. I drink wine, not beer.

As I was deciding what to talk about, he kissed me. His lips felt like they had before. They felt good. He didn't stop kissing and neither did I. His hand was on my leg, and the small part of my brain that could still think concluded that the chamois skirt had been an excellent choice. Then I felt the heat of his hand on my thigh and realized that his hand was no longer on top of my skirt, but under my skirt and heading north. When the tips of his long fingers reached the top of my stocking, his hand stopped. Then it moved sideways and found the rubber and metal clip of my garter. My lips could feel his lips curve in a smile.

We headed to the bedroom. His clothes were already mostly gone, and that surprised me. Maybe he had started taking them off on the way to the bedroom. There was a naked (gloriously naked!) man standing in my bedroom, his jeans and briefs at his ankles, stopped from further progress by his work boots. I was fully clothed. I hurried to catch up as he pulled at his boots.

We jumped into bed and landed on our knees. The first thing he did was lick the outside of my thigh, once, a friendly greeting, like a golden retriever might, a physical "Hey, let's have fun!" I laughed and then thought that maybe I shouldn't be laughing during hot sex, and with that thought covered my mouth with my hand.

"I think laughter is good," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah. It kind of... greases the wheels."

And then he made me laugh some more.

During sex, when we were sideways on the bed, I said something the man I had been married to, the man who caught my eye with his purple suspenders, liked to hear during sex. By the constriction in Trent's eyes, I could tell he suddenly knew more about me than he wanted to know, and more than I wanted him to know. Embarrassed, I turned my head away. But only for a moment.

Afterward, Trent held me. We were nested, folded together, his arms curled around mine. I was glad he couldn't see my face because my eyes were wet. He had just showed me what sex was supposed to be like. He knew how many years it had been since I last had sex, but he didn't know how many men I'd slept with. He was the second.

So much care, so much attention and thoughtfulness had come from his body into mine. Tears for all I had not been given went sideways out of my eyes and down into my pillow. I would have sobbed if he hadn't been there. I told myself to be still, to be grateful for the man wrapping himself around me, now falling asleep. I looked at his arm, with its flock of curling blond hairs, and beneath them, the tanned skin, and beneath that, the cords of his forearm. I looked at his hand, at the long strong fingers and the thumb, set wide and low on his palm. I looked at how gently, still, his fingers touched me, and I fell asleep.

3. Birth Control

October 6, 2003

I went to work the next morning and when I came home, saw a note on the kitchen counter, written in all caps:

JULE,

THANK YOU FOR HAVING ME OVER LAST
NIGHT. I HAD A VERY NICE TIME. GET SOME
REST AND I WILL SEE YOU SOON. TAKE CARE!

—YOUR SPECIAL FRIEND TRENT

P.S. MAKING LOVE TO YOU IS GREAT! (JUST
LIKE TONY THE TIGER WOULD SAY IT)

He was the one who brought it up.

“What are we going to do about birth control?”

I made an appointment with my doctor. He could see me quickly, which was a relief. “For how long do you wish to preserve your fertility?” he asked. I told him that at forty-six I was too old to have a baby, even if all the equipment seemed to still work. He wrote out a prescription for the patch and we scheduled an appointment to make getting pregnant impossible.

October 20, 2003

I passed the prescription across the pharmacy counter and left with my brand-new box of contraceptive patches.

On Tuesday morning, after my shower, I took one out of the box, peeled it from its wrapper, and put it on my skin, just inside my right hip bone. I liked the little square patch with the rounded corners. It made me feel sexy. I was having sex!

That same morning, Trent drove to Michigan and then drove back to Chicago to see me. When I saw him that night, we started out on the living room floor, but I couldn't stay there. I was sick.

I pulled myself up from the floor and went to the bedroom, fell onto the bed with my head at the foot of the bed, and pulled my knees to my chest. My belly knotted in pains that made me push my legs out and then pull them back in.

I am naked and I am embarrassed and I am too sick to stand up. Trent appears in the doorway. He looks upside down because I have curled my head back to see him. He is naked and I want him to go away. I don't know what is wrong with me and I hurt. He doesn't go away. He comes and sits beside me. He cups his hand to feel my forehead. I can see in his eyes that he is not angry or disgusted or even disappointed. He is worried. He asks if I have a robe he can get for me. He is a naked man who doesn't even know me well enough to know if I have a robe, and he is getting it for me.

After some time of lying in the robe, curled up on the bed with my head in his lap and telling him, "No, I don't want to go to the emergency room," I decided the cause of the pain was the little flesh-colored square that didn't match the flesh it stuck to. The contractions that pulled at my belly and drew up my legs were familiar. They were stronger, painfully stronger, but I knew the source. I went to the bathroom and pulled off the patch, then went back to bed. I don't know what Trent did.

I woke up exhausted and still nauseous, but at least the contractions that had folded me in half had stopped. In the bathroom, the stuck-together patch was lying in a little puddle of water on the sink. I threw it into the trash. I went to work and came home. Trent had been waiting for me. We tried to fit ourselves together the way we wanted to, but couldn't. My body wanted to be alone. My body wanted rest.

We made love the following night and the morning after that, but not the next night because Trent had left. He had left and gone to Jane's.

Late October 2003

We were lying on our backs in bed in the Chicago house, trying to get to know each other better and asking each other questions. I asked Trent about growing up.

He asked me, "How many vehicles have you owned?"

I mentally counted. "Five. Why? What about you?"

Trent worked through the fingers on his left hand, then his right, then back to his left. Then he wiggled a couple of fingers on his right hand.

"About twenty."

"Twenty?"

"I crashed a few."

"So you don't know exactly how many cars you've had?"

"Sometimes it's hard to know how to count."

"What do you mean?"

"If I crashed a car I was going to buy but hadn't bought yet, should I count it?"

When Trent was seventeen, he had taken his uncle Bernie's Land Cruiser—which Trent called a Land Cruncher—out on the road, one of the few times he drove the speed limit. He had just come over the crest of a hill to find a car stopped right in front of him. He swerved around it and then back to avoid an oncoming car, rolling over and ending up in a field. The Land Cruncher was totaled. His plan had been to walk back to his uncle's house, but a state police officer pulled up and stopped him.

"You need to go to the hospital, son."

"I do not."

"Your lip's bleeding."

"I happen to know they won't stitch that up."

"Maybe not, but your shoulder's dislocated."

"Is not."

"Take a look."

The police officer reached down, picked up the broken-off side mirror, and held it up so Trent could see himself. Trent saw his left shoulder hanging down about mid-chest level. The next day, lying in the hospital bed, a different police officer came to the doorway.

"Are you Trent Price?"

Trent thought about lying, but decided it would be pretty hard to pull off, given the situation. He steeled himself for whatever the officer had to say next.

"Son, you're a hell of a driver."

The officer explained that he had set up cones where the stopped car had been, then driven his car down the road at the speed Trent had been going, then swerved to avoid the cones. He tried three times, and, even knowing that the cones were there, could never avoid hitting them.

"I'm a good driver, Sweet Baby. I can climb trees."

Trent's shoulder healed, but a large, bony knot formed on the top of his left shoulder, like a walnut slipped under the skin. He didn't like it. I loved everything about it. It was my rosary, my proof that Trent could survive anything.

Early November 2003

The medical profession refers to all invasive actions it performs on the human body as a “procedure.” It doesn’t matter whether the loss is small—a wart—or massive—a lung. All actions are described under the generic, protective, and sometimes misleading term “procedure.”

Mine was scheduled for a Monday, and I was looking forward to it. The human body and medical advances fascinate me. I had been happy to learn that, as with many other procedures, scalpels were used less and less, even for this one.

The Friday before the procedure, a nurse called to make sure I knew when to stop eating and when to stop drinking. She also told me I needed to have someone drive me; I absolutely could not drive myself home. This was not a reminder; this was news—and it was a problem.

The hospital was in Downers Grove, a western suburb, twenty-six miles from my Lincoln Square two-flat. Trent was in Michigan. My good friends were all in the suburbs. I called Trent. He said he needed to stay in Michigan. I hung up, unhappy and angry. Why was I doing this for a man who wouldn’t even drive me? Was I once again giving myself over to someone who would treat me poorly? Should I go through with it? I was being irrational and knew it. I wasn’t doing this for Trent—I was doing it for me.

I ended up calling the only friend I had in the city, David.* He had moved there about the same time I did. I drove us to the hospital and David drove us back. When I got home, I went to bed and cried for the babies I always thought I would have, but never did and never would.

The next morning I went to Boston. On the plane and all through the seven days I was in Boston and Providence, I thought about Trent.

When I came back, a vase of flowers stood outside my door. Trent had asked earlier whether I liked roses. I had told him I liked roses but not red ones because they remind me of funerals. I didn't tell him red roses remind me of my best friend's funeral, when she was twenty-five and I was twenty-four. The vase held no red roses.

4. A Calendar

November 2003

Halfway through October, I started keeping a calendar because I was so surprised by my life that I wanted something to help me remember that it had really happened. I recorded everything important that happened with Trent. Sometimes I added locations.

My calendar tells me that on the morning after our first night, I caught a flight to Dallas for work. I have no memory of the trip. It tells me that Trent and I got together throughout October, that we had sex often, and that toward the end of the month, I got sick.

I wrote in two colors. The blue notations were the dates I got to be with Trent. The black notations began in late November, added when I realized the times Trent wasn't with me, he was with Jane.

When we had talked that first Friday evening and he had proposed Sunday night for our sex date, he had not proposed Saturday because he knew he would be with her. He was with

Jane until he told her he was going back to Michigan, but he came to my house instead.

I recorded the days Trent was most likely with Jane because I wanted to be honest about this relationship. I was in a triangle.

Before the first time I slept with him, I reminded myself I was the one who stepped into this triangle. To stay there, I told myself whatever I told myself because it felt so good to be with Trent, to feel his arms around me, to lie next to him with our elbows and our calves and the sides of our feet touching, to slide my hand into the warm fur of his chest, to sleep with my hand resting cradled by his, to wake up with my hand still in his.

The bed we slept in was the one I had gotten after my divorce, when I walked away from the man in the purple suspenders and the black bed with dark-purple sheets. I had spotted the bed in an antique store near my apartment, the tall golden oak headboard and slightly lower footboard leaning against a wall. There was no price. The owner responded curtly.

"It's not for sale yet."

Several months later, the bed was mine. Before he rang up the sale, the owner pointed out the carefully crafted split grain and warned me to never move the bed by dragging it on a carpet. The bed must be lifted.

A loud *crack* one night moved us to the guest bedroom. The next morning when I came home from work, Trent had an update.

"I checked the bed. It can be glued back together."

He drank some of his beer, adding, "I can glue it, but I'm not a finish carpenter. I can put it back together, but it might not be perfect."

"I'd rather you put it back together than someone else."

He nodded. "I'm going to need four six-foot C-clamps to do it."

"Okay."

"They cost about thirty bucks apiece."

Now I understood. Trent was asking me for \$120 to buy C-clamps.

Until then, I had thought Trent was a successful general contractor. I knew he "rehabbed houses in Chicago" but that was all. Now I knew he didn't have a spare \$120 to buy tools.

One evening when I came home, Trent was sitting on the kitchen floor, which was strange. He looked strange. He wasn't supposed to be at my house, he was supposed to be at Jane's. I said that she was expecting him and he should go.

"Just because it doesn't bother you doesn't mean it doesn't bother me," he shot back.

"I never said it doesn't bother me. It bothers me every time I watch your back go out that door. But I know what I signed up for."

Not too long after that, Jane called me to plan a breakfast together, one of those things we always said we were going to do but never did. We went to a small and noisy restaurant, packed because they have thick bacon and real corn bread. Neither of us mentioned Trent, but we knew he was the only reason we were sitting across from each other at a tiny table in a pink room eating food but not tasting it.

I wanted to hurt Jane for lying to me about Trent. I lied to her then, and we both knew I was lying.

"It sure would be nice to go out on a date."

Jane didn't react, so I pushed it. I wanted to put the knife in and twist it.

"I really miss having sex."

When the server came by to refill our mugs, I asked if I could buy mine. I wanted a souvenir.

One night, on the heels of Trent going out the back door to go to Jane's, I yanked my breakfast-with-Jane-souvenir-coffee-mug from the cupboard. I wanted to smash it. I swung my arm over my head and threw the mug down as hard as I could. It hit the yellow maple floor, bounced up, hit the wall, then fell and rolled across the floor. It left a mug-sized hole in the wall, but the mug was fine. Not even a chip. I threw it in the trash.

Later, Trent and I were holding each other, standing in the kitchen. He looked down at the hole in the wall.

"What happened?"

"A coffee mug hit it."

He looked at me. "How?"

"I threw it."

"You threw a mug at the wall?"

"No, I threw a mug at the floor and it bounced up and hit the wall."

"Why?"

"I threw it when you went to Jane's. I wanted to break it. But it didn't break."

"Pretty tough mug."

We both laughed.

The next day I came home from work and there was a white circle of fresh spackle on the wall, filling and concealing the hole. I looked at Trent.

“What happened?”

“I figured since I was part of causing it, I might as well be part of fixing it.”

November 2003

“I love you.”

It came out, unexpected and unwanted, during sex. Trent said it and we both looked away.

The next morning, he was gone. He left a note behind, a small square green Post-it. I know what the note said because I still have it. It is in the blue wooden box with all the notes he left me that I saved, and all the notes I left him that he saved. He wrote in all capital letters:

JULE,

I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID THAT WORD THAT
STARTS WITH AN L AND ENDS WITH AN E BUT
THAT'S JUST THE WAY I FEEL.

TRENT

That night, I called him and asked him to come over. We stood in the kitchen and held each other, with this fresh knowing floating between us. There were no words, only holding and breathing. Then I spoke.

“Are we going to be all right?”

“As long as we keep loving each other and telling each other the truth, we're going to be fine.”

I thought about that, weighing both halves of Trent's equation. I tested it by talking it through.

"The truth is important."

"It is. If you don't have the truth, you don't have anything. It's all pretend."

"Love is important, too."

"Baby, love is stronger than anything. Even titanium."

5. Scars

November 2003

Somehow, in the thrill of having a naked man in my bedroom, I had failed to notice his scars.

This time, when he walked into the bedroom, I didn't meet his eyes. Instead, I looked at the large, shiny marks crisscrossing the lower half of his torso. There were more than ten, maybe twenty of them. The largest ones were more than an inch wide and ran the full width of his abdomen. The smaller ones were maybe two-thirds as long and thinner. There was one very short, thick one—maybe only three inches long but two inches wide—in the middle. The scars rested at various angles, as if Trent had lain on a floor and someone had dropped flesh-colored pickup sticks that had melted and hardened in a bizarre metamorphosis. All the scars were blunt at one end and pointed at the other. He saw me looking and said nothing. He lifted the covers, moved beside me, and made me forget the scars.

A few nights later, as he sat on the bed and I sat beside him, I looked more closely. We were silent until I spoke.

"Those aren't from a machine."

He said nothing. I wanted to know how those scars got there, and was trying to imagine what kind of circumstance would make those marks.

"They're not from an accident."

I waited, but still he said nothing. I ventured out farther onto the thin ice of the shiny, wrinkled flesh.

"A human did this."

At this, Trent took his eyes to the ceiling, pulled in and let out a long breath, then brought his head back to level before he spoke.

"Yes."

I didn't know what else to say and he said no more, so I tilted him back, laid him down on the bed, and began to kiss the scars. I was determined to kiss each one for its entire length. It took a long time and I got confused at the middle where there was so much crisscrossing. Before I could finish, Trent rolled me over and started kissing me. We made love slowly, looking into each other's eyes, never looking away.

We slept until something hurt me. It was Trent and he was kicking. Me. Hard. He was facing away from me and his heels were slamming into my shins on the recoil, his legs flailing off the bed in the forward extension. I yelled. He woke. Trent stopped kicking and flipped to face me.

"Why did you yell?"

"Because you were kicking me."

"I'm sorry."

"Why were you kicking?"

"A bad dream."

"About what?"

"I was at Ralston's and couldn't get out."

“What’s Ralston’s?”

“Where I used to work.”

These dreams and this kicking happened many, many times. I learned Trent had gone to Ralston Foods when he graduated from high school (or more accurately, was graduated so the school could be done with him). He worked in the factory, doing shift work. Ralston would call him in or tell him to stay home on a schedule that seemed nothing more than a whim. He would work a night shift and go home and try to sleep. Ralston would get him out of bed and tell him to come back in. He would be asked to hold a weekend for work and then never get called. He knew that if he ever balked, there were many more men and women who would readily step in and take his place and his paycheck.

Trent started out eager in his work, but after two days the more senior guys told him to slow down, or else. He didn’t slow down, so the guys backed him against a wall and told him again. This time, he understood and obeyed.

Trent slept under the scale during the night shift, and during the day shift when he had worked the previous night. He opened forty-pound boxes of raisins with his elbows and dumped them into a huge vat of cereal, for ten hours at a time. When Sam’s Club wanted extra raisins in their raisin bran and Ralston did it, the cereal boxes broke apart from the added weight and moisture. When the workers struck, Trent struck with them. When the strike ended, it was Trent’s photo on the cover of the Battle Creek newspaper, taking down the plywood “STRIKE!” sign from the chain-link fence. When Trent went back to work, he was laid off. He’d worked at Ralston for fifteen years.

At first I thought the nightmares and the kicking were about Ralston, but I realized later that they were about Trent's father. It was his father who had worked at and retired from Ralston, and it was his father who had encouraged Trent to "get a good factory job." But that wasn't why Trent kicked.

I don't know when the beatings started. I do know they didn't stop until the last one, when Trent was seventeen.

In a small, square photograph, Trent and his sister stand in front of a Christmas tree. The outside border is still white, but the inside colors are washed with yellow. Judging by Trent's size and his sister's unsteadiness on her feet, I'm guessing Trent is about four years old. I had wondered what he looked like as a little boy. This photo, instead of giving me pleasure, made me sad. *It's already started*, I thought. *He's already been hurt*. You could see it in his eyes and the way he stood, pushing out his chest, trying to make himself look bigger than he really was.

When Trent was maybe eight or nine, he began intervening when his father beat his mother, Jean. Trent was successful in his distraction and replacement, substituting his body for hers.

When he was older, his father—Herb—went after Trent directly. Trent was big and, at fifteen or sixteen, was already bigger than his father. But Trent never hit his father back. Instead, he offered himself as a living punching bag. His father was careful to never hit Trent's face. Until the last time.

The last time, his father first choked him and then hit him in the face. Something about being struck in the face broke something or brought something to life in Trent. He hit back. Both father and son wound up bloody. The father went to the

emergency room. Trent did not. Instead, he ran to his girlfriend's house. When her parents saw him bleeding and bloody, they wouldn't let him in. Trent never said where he slept that night.

When Trent went home the next day, his mother met him at the door. He thought she would say she was sorry about what had happened. Instead, she told him that sons don't hit their fathers. She said he couldn't live there anymore. His mother closed the door.

I believed Trent when he told me these things because of the details. He described how, when his father had his hands around Trent's neck, Trent could see his father's tongue between his square teeth, the teeth pressing into his tongue, with blood coming out of the indentations where his teeth bit.

Trent cried when he told me this. He pounded his arms on the mattress and said, "I shouldn't have hit him. I should have let him beat me." I screamed, "No!" and cried, too. Throwing my leg over him, I wrapped my arms around him and held him as tightly as I could. "No, no, no, no, no. Please. No."

When I came home from work, Trent was not there, which was a surprise. He had left me a letter. I took it to the living room and sat on the couch. Whatever it said, I wanted to be sitting.

It was long, three pages of blue-lined white paper, each covered in Trent's block print. The first page was neat, but the handwriting got sloppier as it went on. The paper was wrinkled, especially the last page, but the themes were clear:

I am a drunk.

I am \$17,000 in debt.

I have a bad temper.

I love you and I should go away.

I read it, read it again, and then once more. It surprised me that I wasn't surprised. It didn't make me want to tell him to go away, and that scared me. Had I reverted to the woman I had been when I was married to the man in the purple suspenders? I called my friend Elaine, who is also my therapist, and asked how quickly I could see her.

I loved this man, but I would not if it meant that loving him was not loving myself. I couldn't go back there. I couldn't go back to that gray place where I cried every day and didn't even know why I was crying.

6. Therapy

1986, Graduate School, Minneapolis, Minnesota

To understand why my first reaction to getting Trent's letter was to call Elaine, I need to go backward and tell you about her. And to tell you about her, I need to go further back and tell you about my history with therapy.

"If you haven't been through therapy, you should. Every one of you. If you intend to do this work, you need to work through your own issues first."

The man speaking was Dr. Gary McLean, professor of organizational development at the University of Minnesota, and my major professor. He had a slow physical manner that belied a quick mind. He would pause, appear to be finished with that portion of the lecture, and walk back to his notes. Then he would stop, turn, and ask a question that quieted the room. He was an academic Columbo.

Dr. McLean's office was at the end of a long narrow hall and filled with papers and books. He was in a newer portion of the building, so instead of thick limestone walls and small windows, he had a large window behind his desk trimmed with a narrow band of metal. The stacks of papers and books along the walls seemed to be his attempt at thickening them. He beckoned me to come in.

I didn't sit. I stood and blurted my question. "What therapist should I see?"

"What?"

"In class, you said that if we want to work in organizational development, we should make sure we have our own heads on straight. I've never seen a therapist, so I need to know which one I should see."

"Ah, yes. Excellent."

"Do you know any?"

"Yes, I do."

He looked at me and thought. I imagined photos of various therapists flashing next to me in his mind. He picked one.

"Mary Ursu. See Mary."

Ever the obedient student, I called Mary Ursu and scheduled my appointment. Her office was in a stretch of Minneapolis that had once been residential, with neat rows of brick four-square homes built in the 1920s. The city had breathed in, grown larger, and her block was now a light business district. Wooden signs with elegant lettering stood erect in well-kept front lawns. They described the occupants of each house—dentists and lawyers and chiropractors. With a sense of dread, I climbed the cement steps to Mary Ursu's office.

At the end of my obligatory session, I prepared to close both the conversation and my relationship with Mary Ursu.

"So, we're done."

"Yes, for today."

"Oh. Am I supposed to come back?"

"I think that would be good."

I assumed the return appointment would be at a dentist's or a doctor's interval—six months for a dentist, twelve for a doctor.

"When should I come back?"

"Can you come next week?"

"Next week?"

"Yes. Can you come next week?"

"So we're not done?"

"I think we have more to talk about."

"But what will we talk about?"

"I think we'll start with your father and then we'll talk about your mother."

"Why would we talk about them?"

And then Mary repeated two sentences that had seemed rational when I had spoken them, but sounded totally absurd coming from her mouth. I saw Mary Ursu weekly for several months until graduation. Every session ended with me walking down her concrete steps with a crushing headache. I learned to pack aspirin for the trip. Moments of our conversation I still remember decades later. One of her questions was "What similarities do you see between your family growing up and the church you are in now?"

Mary Ursu was a smart woman and a good therapist. When I first came to the University of Minnesota, I felt lost, so I went

to the New Student Activities Fair. There, I signed up for two student groups—an outdoor adventuring group and a religious group. The people in the outdoor group never called me, but the religious group did. They were friendly and seemed quite nice. The group may have been a cult.

A cult? You can decide. The church had rules: they expected service six days a week, required all members to live together, kept track of each member's tithing, forbade dating, forbade listening to any music other than religious music, and required all marriage proposals to be approved by the elders. Its members shunned me when I left.

Even now I can feel what that felt like, to travel back for a wedding and have people turn away from me. To sit in a long pew in a crowded church and have only one person share the pew with me, a former roommate who they also shunned.

I was in that church for ten years, starting when I transferred to the university and ending when I escaped to a new job in Illinois, which I got by going back to school to get my master's degree. Dr. McLean was my adviser, which is what led me to see a therapist. Mary Ursu helped me see how my church replicated my family.

1988, Internship, St. Charles, Illinois

A few weeks after leaving the church for my job in the suburbs of Chicago, I met a man at work wearing a purple tie and purple suspenders. He was charming and entertaining, and he asked me out. After six dates, I had sex with him because I had spent the last ten years in a church where sex was prohibited unless you were married. I had obeyed the rules, I was about to turn thirty-one, and I didn't want to obey the rules anymore.

1993, Marriage, Naperville, Illinois

After we had lived together for two years and been married for three, the man in the purple suspenders said I didn't seem happy. He said there was something wrong with me. He said I should see a therapist and get some medication.

The counselor's name was Carole. I liked Mary better—Mary's style was more comforting and compassionate, and she had a PhD. But employee health insurance covered Carole, so I saw her instead.

After a few sessions, Carole said, "Don't you find it interesting how your family, your former church, and your marriage are all essentially the same?"

Her question had implications I wasn't ready to deal with. After one more session, so I could pretend her question wasn't the reason, I stopped seeing Carole.

1997

Four years later, I couldn't breathe. Literally. My asthma started when the man in the purple suspenders and I got cats. He had worn me down after months of protests that I am allergic to cats. I had read that over time, the body adjusts and the symptoms should ease, but that never happened. My asthma got worse. I had inhalers everywhere—the nightstand, kitchen drawer, glove compartment, briefcase. It didn't matter how many inhalers I had and how often I used them. I was gasping for air.

I switched doctors and my new internist was appalled at my answer to how frequently I was using a rescue inhaler: about twenty times a day. He wrote a prescription for a corti-

costeroid, saying that it would make me less dependent on the rescue inhaler.

My mother is a sensible woman, eminently practical. Once, in college when I got sick, I complained to her, "My body is betraying me." Her response was simple: "You're betraying your body." She taught me that my body will always tell me what it needs. It's up to me to listen.

I needed to find out what my body was trying to tell me. A colleague gave me the name of her naprapath, an alternative medicine practitioner. The naprapath asked me more questions during her exam than anyone had ever asked in my previous ten years of annual exams with regular doctors. She asked about bodily functions and excretions, diet and disease, sleeping and waking. For the first half hour, I answered her questions. For the second half hour, I cried through my answers to her questions. She made notes and I waited for her diagnosis.

"Basically, you're healthier than most people I see, but something is making you very sad. You need to figure out what that is."

"Oh."

And then I cried some more.

Later, my friend Rose said, "Elaine is wonderful. Call Elaine." Rose was my best source for the name of a therapist, a good one, who could help me figure out what was making me so sad. On my second visit, I sat on the edge of Elaine's green couch, my feet firmly on the carpet, my arms upraised for emphasis.

"But I am happy!"

Tears streamed down my face. The little voice inside my head, the one I hadn't listened to for so long, said, *You've just lied to a therapist.* And what was worse was that I realized I was also lying to myself. I walked down the wooden steps from Elaine's second-floor office and left my pretense behind. I took an inventory of my life.

"I have a good job, I live in a nice house, and I am not happy." I was surprised.

For my third visit to Elaine, I crafted a question. If I didn't like her answer, I wouldn't be back.

Sitting forward on her couch, I asked, "What is your philosophy of therapy?"

"You know, I was just thinking about that recently."

"So, how would you describe it?"

"To create a safe place for the client—"

Her arms, in their soft lime-green sweater and sparkly bracelet, went out and made a large circle.

"A place," she continued, "where all of the client is heard and honored—the clean parts, the dirty parts, the angry parts, the nice parts, the afraid parts... I want to create a safe space where the whole of the individual is respected and honored."

Her answer was more than enough. It was perfect.

September 1997

On my fourth visit, I waited anxiously for the previous client to wrap up so I could tell Elaine my news.

"I left him on Saturday."

"Your husband?"

"Uh-huh."

"What happened?"

"I wanted to go on a bicycle ride and he forbade me."

"He forbade you?"

"That's what I said to him. 'Since when do we forbid each other to do something? I don't forbid you from going to strip clubs, and all I want to do is go on a bicycle ride.' He didn't want me to go."

"What kind of bicycle ride was it? One of those three-day things or—"

"No. It was just a ride along Lake Michigan with friends, Anne* and Denise and Jane. I was going to take Friday afternoon off for the ride, stay over at Jane's on Friday night, and come back Saturday morning. It was just a bicycle ride. What kind of marriage is it where you can't even go on an afternoon bicycle ride?"

"What happened?"

"We fought about it all week. Every night I would come home from work, he would bring it up, and we would fight about it again. One night we were up until one in the morning."

"Why didn't you just tell him you were going on the ride and then go to bed, rather than stay up, fighting?"

"Oh. I guess I didn't think about that as a possibility."

"Did you end up going or not?"

"Oh, I went!"

"Wonderful. How was it?"

"It was great. The weather was perfect, the lake was gorgeous—we had a great time."

"So you didn't spend the bike ride thinking about him?"

"No. I called him right before I left work, but he still didn't want me to go. I didn't think about him again until after the

ride, at dinner. They all knew he didn't want me to come and asked if I wanted to call him now that we were back. It was so nice to be out on the patio, having a good meal and laughing with friends. I said no, I didn't want to call him, I didn't feel like it."

"So you go on the ride, you have dinner, you have a great time, then what?"

"I don't call him. I stay over at Jane's and then the next morning, instead of going home, I go into the office."

"You didn't want to go home?"

"No, he would just yell at me. Besides, we had a big deadline at work. My part was done, but one of my colleagues had a nervous breakdown and we all had to divvy up her part and get it done by Tuesday."

"So it's Saturday and you're at work. Then what?"

"About eleven in the morning, I called him because I felt bad about us fighting. We started fighting again and then he told me something and I knew I was never going home again."

The words tumbled out of me.

"When we started fighting again I thought, *Forget it, I can't talk to this guy*, and I told him I was going to hang up. Just as I'm putting the phone down, I can hear him say, 'Wait! I have something to tell you. It's important.' I brought the phone back to my ear. 'What?' And he said, 'Your Aunt Olga died.' And I said, 'When did she die?' And he said, 'Wednesday.' I said, 'When did you find out?' And he said, 'Thursday, before you came home from work.' I said, 'Why didn't you tell me on Thursday?' And he said, 'Because I want us to focus on what is most important, and our marriage is most important.' And I said, 'You didn't tell me when you saw me on Thursday, you

didn't tell me when we talked on Friday, and the only reason you're telling me now is to keep me from hanging up. I have to go now.' I hung up the phone and stared at it, wondering what kind of person was on the other end. That's when I knew. I was never going home again."

"What did you do?"

"I left work and went to a hotel close by. I'm still there, but I need to leave because it's getting too expensive."

"Where can you go?"

"I suppose I could call Anne and see if I can stay with her and Dean.* Other people have done that when they've been in trouble." I slumped into the couch and sighed, "I lied to him. I told him I'm still working on the project but I'm not. I haven't told him I'm not coming back."

Elaine paused before asking her next question. "Do you want to try couple's therapy?"

The air left my lungs as I imagined sitting next to him on Elaine's couch. I barely had enough air to speak.

"No. I don't. When I think about it, it feels like trying to push a boulder up a huge mountain. It feels too big."

I slumped forward, chest caved toward my lap, barely able to hold myself upright. I wanted to lie down. Instead, I put my fist under my chin to hold my head up. I just sat there. I wasn't even crying. I was too tired.

Elaine spoke. "What do you want to do?"

"I suppose I should tell him. I should tell him I'm leaving."

"How do you think that will go?"

"Badly. If he didn't even want me to go on a bicycle ride..." I slumped further. Not even my fist could hold me up.

Elaine spoke again. "Normally I don't say things like this to clients, but I'm concerned about your safety. Based on what you've told me about him, I believe that you're right, he won't take the news well. I'm concerned that he may retaliate and hurt you."

"What should I do?"

"First, do you think you can stay with Anne and Dean?"

"Yeah. They have fighting couples—I mean, half of the couple—stay with them all the time."

"Can you call him from their house?"

"I don't want to talk to him. I want to write it down. Then I don't have to talk to him."

At work, I composed the letter. At lunch, I went home and put the letter on the kitchen counter. The next day, over lunch, I went back to grab some work clothes I should have thought to take the day before. I saw a lawyer who advised me that if there was anything in the house I wanted, I should go get it, saying, "Possession is nine-tenths of the law." Other than lunchtime reconnaissance missions to get more of my clothes, some important books, my jewelry, and my grandmother's quilt, I never went home again.

Elaine was right. He did retaliate, just not right away. A year later, after I moved out of my third-floor apartment and into my tiny Naperville house, he acted. He stalked me—methodically, consistently, and persistently. The police were involved, then a detective, then a private investigator. It lasted for half a year, until he made a mistake and it stopped. When we were married, he had frequently said, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

7. The Letter

November 2003

Sometimes, after leaving the man in the purple suspenders, I wondered. If I had been more steady on my feet after leaving Minnesota, if I hadn't been so freshly out of the church and recently ending therapy, if I had been stronger, if I had been more grounded and more sure of myself, would I have married him? And that is why, after I read Trent's three-page, tear-stained letter, I called Elaine.

I wanted Elaine to help me figure out whether Trent was a good man or another man in purple suspenders who would cage me and frighten me. I thought Trent was a good man, but wanted a second opinion from a professional.

Just as I had moved closer to the heart of Chicago, so had Elaine. Instead of walking upstairs to her office, I walked downstairs to her garden-level office, windows set high in the wall. Her green couch was gone, replaced by a soft butter-colored leather one. Paintings covered the walls.

Elaine put on her half-glasses to read the letter. When she finished, she took them off and looked at me.

"How long have you been seeing Trent?"

"A month—a little more."

"What do you think of what he wrote?"

"I don't know. There's so much there. I just... I feel like I should be scared, but I'm not."

"You're not scared of any of it?"

"Well, the \$17,000 is pretty frightening but... I don't know."

"So the debt scares you."

"It does. I mean, I grew up with 'debt is bad.' The only good debt is on an appreciating asset. \$17,000 is a lot of money."

"It is. And it's not as much as some people owe."

"Really?"

"Really. There was a man here the other day who is \$60,000 in debt. It's more common than you think."

"Oh."

"Does the drinking scare you?"

"No, and it probably should. But I grew up with that. That one I understand."

"Have you ever seen Trent drunk?"

"I think so. There was one night when I came home. He was sitting on the kitchen floor. I think he was drunk then."

"How was that?"

"It was sad. Not scary."

"What about the temper?"

"I've never seen it."

Elaine went silent. So I asked a question, hoping for an answer I wanted to hear: "What do you think?"

"I actually think this letter is good news. You've been seeing each other for roughly a month and he's just let you know everything he feels bad about, everything he's ashamed of."

She held up a wrinkled page. "This is from tears, yes?"

"I think so. And the handwriting just falls apart toward the end."

"He's ashamed of these things. He feels bad. He tells you about himself, and then he asks you to tell him to go away."

"I think it's a cry for help."

"I do, too. Do you want to tell him to go away?"

"No. I don't. And I'm scared."

Elaine and I agreed I would take things, as the AA people say, one day at a time. I would make sure I felt safe and that I would let either Trent or Elaine know when I didn't. Elaine also offered to see Trent and me together, if that was something I wanted.

As soon as I got home, I called him. Trent was close by, at the bar up the street, so got to my place quickly. We stood in the kitchen and held each other. I don't remember much talking. I do remember reminding him of his words: "As long as we keep loving each other and telling each other the truth, we're going to be okay."

I asked him, "How can you tell if someone loves you?" and waited through a long pause for his answer.

"By the way they hold you."

His arms were strong around me, firm, not crushing. His fingertips touched me lightly, as if he were trying to read me through my skin. His chest didn't feel hard or soft; it felt good. I wasn't contorting to fit myself to his form. It all felt good. He felt good.

About a year after Trent and I were established, I was at work and sitting in our weekly staff meeting. The icebreaker question that week was "What is one of your favorite places in the world?" The answers were "Disneyland," "the islands of the Caribbean," "Napa Valley," and so on. My answer was "In Trent's arms."

Meanwhile, the kicking got worse. We learned to sleep back-to-back so Trent wouldn't hurt me. It meant that we couldn't hold hands all night anymore, but I felt safer. One morning, the alarm went off and I looked over at Trent. He was

already awake, flat on his back, eyes wide. Something was wrong.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

I looked at him, not harshly. I wanted him to know that I really wanted to know what was wrong. Whatever the truth was, I wanted to know it. Maybe he decided I was ready to hear it. Maybe he just couldn't hold it in anymore.

"I want to kill myself."

"How do you want to do it?"

For some reason, I thought if I knew the method, I could take away the tool. If by hanging, take the rope. If by sedation, take the pills.

"With a gun."

I sighed and searched for an alternative.

"Well, will you at least promise not to kill yourself even if you feel like it?"

"That's what I'm doing."

One night, as I sat up in bed, propped against pillows and reading, Trent looked at me and asked, "Sweet Baby, why do you like books so much?"

"It's like a book takes me to another place, someplace I didn't even know existed. It's like every book is a door to a whole new world to explore."

This is how I started reading to Trent at night, in bed, before we went to sleep. For the first book, I wanted one he could relate to, something with a normal-seeming father who was really not normal. A dangerous father. A story with a happy ending, or as happy as it could be.

We started with *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, a nice fat book that took a long time to get through. At the end, Trent wanted to know if it was a true story or not. Yes, it was based on true events, but no, it was fiction. Next was *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, because I wanted a story about someone who overcame adversity. Trent wanted to know whether it was true.

“Sweet Baby, can we read a true story next time?”

This is how we came to *Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage*, the first book we read together that was new to both of us. It became Trent’s favorite book.

November 2003

Trent came in through the back door carrying something in a big white bag. He didn’t carry it by the bag’s handles; he carried it by the handle of whatever was in the bag. Trent set it on the kitchen counter.

“What’s this?”

“Open it.”

The white bag had big black Crate & Barrel lettering on the side and was crumpled around the handle where Trent had held it. There was a substantial silver handle sticking out. I grabbed the handle with one hand and pulled the bag away with the other. It was a very large non-stick frying pan.

“Is this for me?”

“It’s for here because I can’t cook dippin’ eggs in any of your pans.”

A frying pan! Trent wanted to cook in my house!

“What are dippin’ eggs?”

“Eggs over easy. It’s what Jenna called them when she was little. I make them on Saturday mornings.”

He wants to cook eggs here on Saturday mornings! He wants to be here on Saturdays! Not at Jane’s.

I smiled and hugged him, and who knows, we might have made love right there on the kitchen floor. All I remember is the frying pan and what I hoped it stood for.

Saturday came and Trent made dippin’ eggs. They were good. Then he told me he needed to go to Jane’s. He left and I washed the pan, wondering how long I could do this, how long he could.

8. Mud Lake

November 2003

I had a headache. When I reached for the little white bottle of aspirin in my medicine chest, the weight of it and the rattling sound meant it was almost empty. This was odd—I don’t run out of aspirin, because I hardly ever have headaches. I throw nearly full bottles away when the expiration date has passed, then buy another bottle that will be just as full when it gets thrown away.

This bottle was bought recently. Was Trent using up the aspirin? Why?

Trent was at Jane’s. I comforted myself with the anticipation of going to his house the next weekend. He had invited me to spend it with him in Michigan. I would drive out Friday after work, stay there Friday night and Saturday, and drive back on Sunday.

He planned it for the weekend of November 21 through 23. The weekend after was no good because it was Thanksgiving and Trent would spend it with Jenna. The weekend before was no good because it was opening day of deer-hunting season. At the time, that meant nothing to me, but I now know that opening day of gun hunting is a holiday in Michigan. It's true—even schools are closed. It's a holiday so that men (and some women) can put on warm clothes, sit outside for hours, come inside, drink beer, and eat whatever there is to eat. Sometimes they eat deer; most of the time they simply talk about the ones that got away.

I didn't know this then but I know it now: Trent didn't like to kill deer.

Trent would kill a deer, but hated it. He would kill a deer so his cousins, who had little money for food, had a decent meal to eat. What Trent liked was being outside and watching nature. He liked the smell of the air and waiting to see what he would see. He liked coming inside and getting warm, putting wood in the woodstove, and putting something to eat on top of the woodstove to cook. He liked turning up his music (classic rock) and telling stories that made people laugh.

After Trent died, I went through the box of deer-hunting photos he kept high on a shelf in the garage he called the "Lil' Barn." Many of the photos are beautiful large black-and-whites, taken and developed by Trent's cousin Steven, who makes his living from his photography. A few were standard-sized color photos. One of those is proof that Trent liked the hunting but not the killing. Trent is holding up a dead deer by its antlers. There are a lot of points on the horns, and if I were a hunter, I would have counted them. The horns are bloody

and Trent's hands are bloody and he has blood on the front of his camouflage coat. His mouth is tight and pulled to one side, his eyes are shiny and sad. He looks as if he's going to cry. I would lay money down that Trent got drunk that night, probably very drunk.

But I didn't know these things as I looked forward to my first visit. All I knew was the house was on Mud Lake Road, well outside of Battle Creek. The house had a barn and stood on eighty acres. A creek ran through the property. Trent said to get off I-94 at exit 92, and then follow his carefully written block print directions. I told myself that even if Trent was at Jane's, I was going to his house. I was the one he was bringing home.

November 21, 2003

My hands were tight on the wheel, tense in the snowstorm. My dog Charlie was asleep in the back seat. Trent's directions said to look for a white ranch with a chain-link fence around the front. But before I got that far, I had to pull over to the side of the road to brush the snow from a street sign, so I could see whether that was the street I was supposed to turn left on or not. The snow was fluffy and sticky, and I hadn't thought to put my gloves on before I got out of the car. My hands were red and wet on the steering wheel as I made the turn. The next right was easy and then it was just a matter of looking for a white house in a white snowstorm. I drove past it, then put the car in reverse.

Trent had left the wide front gate open. The house was a 1950s ranch with limestone on part of the front. Trent came out through the garage, and that's the way I went in. He carried

my bag as Charlie and I followed him past a blue bathroom and through a blue kitchen with pine cabinets and a floor of white tile with black grout. He put my bag down on the worn plywood floor of the dining room, from which the carpet had been pulled up long ago. Under the table was a brownish oriental-looking rug. The green carpet in the living room was discolored, but intact. The dining room table was round with four captain's chairs around it. A large window looked out over the swamp, which stretched for a mile or more. Later, I learned that sitting at that table and looking out over the swamp was the only part of the house Trent liked.

Trent took us out to the barn—a long, low-slung red one with a finished front part and an unfinished back part that held canoes and so much other stuff I couldn't tell what everything was. The biggest item was a large motorboat. Other than the canoes, most things looked like they had been in place for a long time, even the motorboat.

An antique woodstove squatted in the pine-paneled front of the barn, and Trent encouraged me to warm my hands by the fire. I held them by the little window, then realized the warmest place was above the window, where the black metal radiated heat. I stretched my fingers, felt the warmth wrap my skin, then move inward and upward, to my wrists, my arms, my shoulders. My neck relaxed enough to look around.

There was a long, high stack of cut firewood against the wall that divided the finished front from the unfinished back, and a massive workbench against the front wall. The end wall was taken up mostly with tools. The barn wasn't plain—Trent had decorated it. Various objects hung from the walls and the rafters. Giant cross-sections from a cypress tree hung high on

a wall, and a colorful kite with a streaming tail dipped among the rafters. A large, bright-orange canvas sign, courtesy of Budweiser, proclaimed “Deer Hunters Welcome” below a flaking white wooden sign with peeling red letters that read “C&C Ranchero.” A large framed aerial map of the property held a place of honor on the wall with the firewood. Eighties rock played from a boom box high on the wall of tools.

Trent, who had by this time learned that I don’t drink beer, offered me a glass of wine. He had remembered the bottle but not a corkscrew, so he found a large screw and a pair of pliers and used those instead. His resourcefulness impressed me.

On Saturday morning, we went hunting on the creek that ran through the property, Trent in the bow of his wide brown canoe and me in the back, trying to paddle silently. It had stopped snowing but was cold enough that if the sky let loose again, it would be snow. Paddling silently was hard work, and sometimes I accidentally (and loudly) hit the handle of my paddle on the metal edge of the canoe. I thought, *He is testing me. This is a fucking test.* I wasn’t sure whether I was angry. When we got back, Trent asked if I’d seen the deer.

“What deer?”

He described where the deer had been—a place where I remember the reeds moving. I asked why he hadn’t shot at it. “Killing a deer is a lot of work,” he told me. “You have to haul it back, you have to hang it. I didn’t want to take up the rest of our day with that.”

On Saturday afternoon, I wanted to take a shower to get warm and clean, but didn’t want to be naked in that bathroom. There was a piece of thick black garbage bag duct-taped to the pink-tiled wall, partially covering a hole above the tub. A fist-

sized hole? But too low to be from a punch? The tape had peeled and the bag had slipped, exposing dark green mold creeping out of the hole, reaching onto the pink tile around it, stretching into the grout lines. I took a bath and leaned away from the hole.

On Sunday morning, I left early. The house scared me. I didn't like being in it. I wanted to get home and take a shower. I wanted to ask Elaine, "What kind of man lives in a house like that?"

November 2003

By this time, I had told Elaine everything I knew about Trent—about the kicking at night and how his father had beaten him and how he held me so gently.

Sometimes Elaine pauses a bit before she answers a question. She may be waiting for me to settle down so I can hear what she has to say.

"People replicate how they feel about themselves in their surroundings."

I looked at her blankly.

"We already know he doesn't feel good about himself by the letter he wrote. The house is his way of showing his internal misery."

"But he can fix anything. Why doesn't he fix the mold in the bathroom?"

"Because he doesn't think he deserves better."

I don't remember how the conversation went from there. I do remember wondering whether I was up for this, for being with a man whose insides must be moldy if that was what he was expressing in his outsides.

I decided to stay until I decided to leave.

The house at Mud Lake and Trent's father both made me feel the same way. They gave me the creeps. Something about them under the surface, a violence, waiting to spring or already sprung.

I'm not weak. Not squeamish. When I was a dental hygienist at Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis, one-third of my patients were Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, one-third were people too ill or too contagious to be treated in a typical dental office, and one-third were inmates at the Hennepin County Jail.

Most of those prisoners were just like any patient in a typical dental office, but with a few of them I was wary, my escape plan at the ready. My hands have been in the mouths of violent men. I was on guard with them and with Trent's father. I was the same way with Trent's house.

It shouldn't have been that frightening. It was nothing more than a dated ranch, worn with time, losing its fight against the Mud Lake mud, mud with particles so fine they permanently stain everything they touch. I confessed this to Trent—that his house (not his barn, never his barn) made me feel uneasy. He blew me off. I thought he was dismissing me, but I think he was waiting to be sure I was ready to hear the story.

It was months before he let me go down into the basement and then only because he needed help. The basement had flooded. I noticed the mold growing up the 2×4s and the rusted high-water marks on the washing machine and dryer—indications of previous battles lost.

Trent worked the wet-vac while I managed the giant squeegee, angling the rubber blade to push water Trent's way. When we came back upstairs, wet and exhausted and disheartened, I told Trent being in the basement bothered me and that it had little to do with the water. He got a beer, poured me a glass of wine, and settled back in one of the captain's chairs to tell the story. Even when a story was unpleasant, Trent enjoyed the telling.

In the 1960s and 1970s, the people who owned the house boarded wounded Vietnam veterans in the basement—four of them. The owners got money from the government for housing the veterans. They also ran a pig farm, and that's what Trent figured the vets ate—a lot of pork.

I imagined it and pictured wounded vets in the basement in wheelchairs. There was no evidence of a wheelchair-accessible exit.

"How did they get outside?"

Trent took a pull on his beer before he answered.

"I don't think they did."

I learned this in 2005. In 2006, to sell the house, Trent stripped the basement bare, pulling out every piece of moldy wallboard and every 2×4. He tore an old poster off the wall—a poster that had always looked out of place. When it was gone, I realized it was there not because of what it showed but because of what it hid. Behind it was an elaborate portrait of a man drawn in blue ball-point pen. The man had muscled and tattooed arms crossed over his chest, long dark hair that rested on his shoulders, a firmly set mouth, and eyes that looked as if they were screaming.

When Trent painted the basement, he painted over the portrait, but it kept leaching through. Trent said he had put four or five coats over it, but it still wouldn't cover. He asked if I knew of anything that would work. I told him that on a fine line of ink I had used clear fingernail polish, and it had worked. Trent wasn't about to fingernail-polish over the portrait. He finally got it covered up, after "enough paint to suffocate the motherfucker."

December 5, 2003

I was going back to Trent's for the weekend, but was smarter this time. I brought bottled water because the water at Mud Lake smelled like rotten eggs. I brought old shoes for mud that surrounded the house, and rags to wipe Charlie's paws. I brought a corkscrew.

Sitting on the toilet, I looked around the room. Horrible pink tile everywhere. Window to my left with dead flies in the screen. Clean mirror. Tube of toothpaste on the counter. One adult and one child-sized toothbrush nearby. Wastepaper basket filled with rounded white balls by my feet.

After I got into bed next to Trent, I wondered how to phrase my question. Decided to leap in.

"When did Jenna get her period?"

Trent spun his head toward me.

"She doesn't have her period. She's only ten years old."

The next question caught in my throat.

"So what woman was here?"

Trent paused before he answered.

"Jane."

With a hole in my stomach, I realized the odd smell I had been smelling, at first in the background but now in the foreground, was Jane's perfume on the pillow. I went weak inside.

"When?"

"Thanksgiving."

"When did she leave?"

"Yesterday."

"Did she sleep here?"

"Yes."

"On this bed?"

"Yes."

"On these sheets?"

Before he could finish his "Yes," I was out of the bed, wearing my T-shirt and nothing else. Trent tried to reassure me.

"She slept on the sheets but I slept on top."

"I don't care! I won't sleep on these sheets. I won't!"

By this time, I was crunching against the far wall, pulling down the bottom of my T-shirt, trying to un-naked myself. I was crying.

I didn't help him change the sheets, didn't move until he had put back the green wool blanket. He asked me to lie down next to him and I did, only because it was late and I wasn't sure I could get myself home safely and didn't know where else to go. I lay down stiffly, and for the first time didn't want to be next to him. Early the next morning, I left.

9. Notes

November–December 2003

There must have been some apology. I do remember that we slipped into a routine. On alternating weekends, Trent and I were in Michigan. On weekdays, we were in Chicago, Trent maintaining or fixing something important in the two-flat that was untended by the previous owners because it hadn't been urgent.

When I left for work, I often left a note for Trent. When I came home, he often left one for me. Usually they were light-hearted, but not always. Trent took one note I had written him on the blank side of an index card, turned it over, and wrote on the lines.

THINGS I APPRECIATE ABOUT JULE:

- 1) SHE IS HONEST WITH ME.
- 2) SHE DOESN'T QUESTION ME ABOUT THE WAY I DO THINGS BUT GIVES ME SUPPORT.
- 3) SHE KEEPS HERSELF CLEAN, NEAT AND ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL.
- 4) SHE IS A GOOD COOK!
- 5) SHE IS STRONG ENOUGH TO HANG WITH ME ON THE CREEK.
- 6) THE LOVE I FEEL EVERY TIME SHE TOUCHES ME.

7) SHE HAS GIVEN ME A CHANCE TO BE PART
OF HER LIFE.

I brought up number five to Trent many months later.

“You were testing me! When you took me canoeing in the snow and the ice-cold water—that was a test!”

“You gotta be strong if you want to hang with Trent Price.”

Somewhere during this time, Persephone asked how it was going with Trent. I said I liked him a lot but... I hesitated. “His grammar isn’t very good.”

Persephone was aghast. “Are you serious? You have doubts about a relationship because of grammar?”

December 13, 2003

It was a Saturday morning and we were at Mud Lake. Trent was making pancakes as I sat and watched. I’d never really paid much attention to men’s butts before—shoulders and backs were where my eyes lingered. But Trent’s backside was particularly eye-catching: powerful legs rising to rounded and firm buttocks thinly covered in white boxer briefs.

I thought back to the night before, watching the top of Trent’s head.

As he tended the pancakes, I decided it would be fun to return the favor. Getting a pillow from the living room, I dropped it at his feet. He said nothing for a while, but then, suddenly, “Watch the pancakes.”

With that, he fell to the floor.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I got dizzy. I’ll be all right.”

“No, I don’t think this is normal. We should go to a doctor.”

“No.”

Trent won that time. But I won the next. Being dizzy wasn't normal, I told him. Most people don't have headaches every day. He explained that he'd had them as long as he could remember. His first memory was when he was three years old. He had taken a belt and cinched it around his head to make the pain go away. His parents had taken him to a doctor, but nobody could figure out what was wrong or how to fix it.

I dragged him out to Naperville. Because Trent's blood pressure was 150/94, the doctor prescribed anti-hypertensives. He also did a brain scan to see if there was an anatomical reason for the headaches. The scan didn't give any clues. Trent was good about taking the medication, and his face no longer looked pinkish all the time. But he still had headaches almost every day.

December 19, 2003

When I got home from work Friday night, the man standing in the kitchen looked like Trent, but not exactly. He was redder, his arms made wild gestures when he talked, and he moved clumsily. He leaned against the counter so the counter could hold him up.

I accessed my mental breathalyzer—the one I depended on while growing up. Was Dad drunk on beer, or martinis, or—the worst—Jack Daniel's? What was Trent drunk on? Beer, yes. But more—something that made him angry, reactive, like a cornered wild dog. Whatever it was, it was the Jack Daniel's equivalent, and I needed to be careful. I wouldn't get any closer than his arm length plus six inches. I wasn't afraid he

would hit me. I was afraid he would fall on me. A softly spoken question seemed to be a place to start.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're acting different. You don't seem like you."

"This is me. This is all me."

"You seem really drunk."

"I'm not drunk."

"Really? You expect me to believe that? You can hardly stand up."

"I'm fine."

"Well, whatever version of fine this is, I don't like it."

"Fine by me."

"Whatever."

I'm not sure where the conversation would have gone from there. It went nowhere because Trent fell down. I didn't see him fall because I had turned to walk away. When I heard the sound, I looked back.

He was slumped against the cabinets. Crying.

"I don't want to go." He spoke it as a quiet wail.

"Go where?"

"To Jane's. I don't want to."

"So don't. Stay here. Don't go."

"I can't. I have to go."

"What do you mean 'have to'? You don't have to go anywhere."

"She's expecting me."

"So what? Don't go. Break up with her."

"I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"I can't."

"You're a grown man. Don't tell me you can't."

"I can't."

I pulled my legs under me to get up and walk away when he said, "I can't because of Jenna."

That brought me back.

"What do you mean—you can't because of Jenna?"

"Jane is taking Jenna and me to New York for New Year's, and if I break up with her, she won't take us. I can't do that to Jenna. She wants to go so bad."

I slumped beside him, both of us needing the cabinets to stay upright. I held him. We sat there. Trent called Jane and told her he was too drunk to drive. When the floor and the cabinets got too uncomfortable, I made him stand up and walked him to bed.

The next morning, when Trent left to go to Jane's, I pretended to be asleep. After he was gone, I saw the note he left on the counter. He wrote it on the back of a Jewel-Osco receipt for 750 ml of holiday eggnog and a thirty-pack of Icehouse.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU'RE IN LOVE?
HOLD THEM TOUCH THEM, LET THEM KNOW
HOW YOU FEEL. BE WITH THEM. DON'T
OVERDO IT. IF THEY LOVE YOU TOO YOU WILL
KNOW. IF YOU HAVE ONE LOVE IN YOUR LIFE
YOU ARE THE LUCKIEST FUCKER THAT EVER
LIVED.

December 2003

Before Trent left to go to New York, I gave him a coin to keep in his jeans pocket. It was the golden Sacagawea one-dollar coin. It could stay in his pocket and he could reach in and feel it to remind himself that he was making the trip for Jenna. Just like Sacagawea took care of her baby, he was taking care of Jenna.

They left on December 30. On that day, from Kalamazoo, Trent put a birthday card in the mail for me. It arrived on my birthday, January 3, when Trent and Jane and Jenna were in New York. It was a Mickey Mouse card that made me smile, but then I cried.

January 2004

I didn't talk to Trent when he was in New York. It was as if he disappeared into one black hole and I disappeared into another. They flew back on January 8.

When he came in through the back door, we just looked at each other. I don't know what I looked like. He looked a way I'd never seen him look before. It was as if someone had turned his volume down from eleven to almost zero. He didn't grab a beer from the fridge. I couldn't read him.

"How did it go?"

"I didn't have sex with her."

I didn't know what else to say or ask. It felt as if any potential step could touch a landmine, so I said nothing.

"She grabbed me when I was taking a shower. I didn't do anything and she said, 'What's wrong with you? What the fuck is wrong with you?'"

I had expected Trent to break up with Jane after New York, but he didn't. I thought about telling him I couldn't take it anymore and telling him he had to choose, but I didn't.

One of the rules I made for myself when I learned about Jane was that I wouldn't force him to choose. I was the late entrant into the triangle. I was the one who knew what I was getting into. I was the one who would wait. There would be a rainbow at the end of the ledge. But there wasn't. There was just more ledge.

10. Crowded

January 2004

Because of the nightmares and the kicking and the headaches and waking up every morning wanting to kill himself, I tried to get Trent to see Elaine. I was looking for something or someone that could make him feel better. He had refused.

But one day, as I was walking out the door for my appointment, I joked he was welcome to come with me if he wanted. Trent said he would. We sat stiffly on the couch opposite Elaine. He was stiff because he was wary. I was stiff because I wanted the session to go well.

Trent said almost nothing, so Elaine turned her attention to me.

When we left, I asked him what he thought. "She's all over it" was all he said. I had never heard him say that before, so I wasn't sure what he meant. I thought it was a positive reaction, but maybe not. Now I know it was his highest form of praise.

Just before my next appointment, Trent said he would like to come along. My heart lifted. *He wants help! He wants to not*

want to kill himself! Sitting on the small loveseat in Elaine's tiny waiting room, our feet nearly touching the table with the tea and coffee against the opposite wall, Trent surprised me again by asking if he could go in first and speak with Elaine alone. I was elated.

After a long time, Elaine opened the door and beckoned me in. I expected to once again sit next to Trent, but he stood up and left the room. Elaine closed the door behind him before she and I both sat down. She spoke first.

"Trent has something he wants you to know, and he doesn't feel comfortable telling you himself."

I wondered—would this be about the headaches? Or about wanting to kill himself? I waited for Elaine to continue.

"There is something Trent would like you not to do anymore."

What? This was going to be about me? My stomach tightened as I prepared for difficult news.

"There are times, after you and Trent make love, that you make reference to your former husband. Trent would like you not to do that anymore."

"But I didn't... It was just that Trent made me feel so different, so good... I was only—"

I wanted to crawl into the couch, disappear into the gap between the seat back and the cushions. I had never been embarrassed in front of Elaine before, but I was now. Despite my protests, I had gotten her point and I wanted her to stop. She didn't stop; she made sure I understood what I had been doing, and she cut me off to continue her lesson.

"A couple's bedroom should be a special place, a private place, just for the two of them. Whenever you talk about

another person, whoever that person is, you bring that person into your bedroom with you. Do you really want to bring your ex-husband into the bed with you and Trent?"

"No."

"You'll want to think about this, not just regarding your ex-husband, but anyone. If a couple isn't careful, their bed can become very crowded."

Trent and I said nothing to each other as we left the building. When we got out to the parking lot, I thanked him for letting me know and said I was sorry. He said nothing, but he reached over and squeezed my hand.

11. Girlfriend

Early February 2004

Trent told me he would like me to meet Jenna and wanted to introduce me to her as his girlfriend. He said I was the only woman he had ever introduced to Jenna as his girlfriend.

"What about Jane?"

"Nope."

"So what does Jenna think Jane is?"

"A friend."

I was dubious. Kids know what's going on. They always do. They are students of the people they depend on to stay alive. But I let it go.

We were going to meet in two Saturdays, on February 14. Trent had Jenna for Valentine's Day that year. Although I wasn't looking forward to spending Valentine's in a house with a moldy bathroom, I was looking forward to meeting his daughter.

The only photo I'd ever seen of Jenna was the worn one on Trent's keychain. I tried to picture her, then remembered that she was five years older than the photo. What would she be like—more like Trent or more like her mother? Would she like me? Would I like her? What do you do with a ten-year-old?

I had no frame of reference because I didn't have children and had never babysat anyone that age, just infants to about six or seven. After that, who knows? I would just have to figure it out. And I wondered if Jenna was wondering similar things about me.

February 14, 2004

Charlie and I stayed at Mud Lake while Trent left to get Jenna. I sat in the living room on the green couch and looked out the big window and waited.

Trent drove Ol' Betsy—his big faded-blue 1980s Chevy Silverado. Ol' Betsy had done the honor of hauling the float that held Jenna's Girl Scout troop in a Battle Creek parade, for which the organizers awarded Trent two of the commemorative T-shirts. The shirts, originally inked with bright primary colors, were soft and faded by the time I met them. Initially, I thought Trent wore the shirts so often because he liked the colors, or because they were soft with age. Later, I realized they were reminders of a good day with Jenna, and maybe totems of more good days to come.

Jenna and Trent both loved Ol' Betsy and so did I. She was the hardworking truck that had pulled down the fence, weakened the telephone pole, and hauled the dirt out of my backyard. She hauled the old wood fence to the dump. She hauled the lumber to build the new fence. She hauled the bags of

concrete. Ol' Betsy was a tough truck, didn't complain, and wasn't ashamed of her looks. Trent had replaced her engine with something newer and more powerful. Ol' Betsy and Trent both knew what she could do.

The truck pulled into the driveway and Trent and Jenna got out, dashing against the cold. They came right in the front door (why the front door rather than the garage door we typically used?) and Trent introduced us. He looked happy when he said the word "girlfriend" but mostly he looked happy just to be with Jenna.

I did what I always do when I meet kids—I bent down so we could be eye-to-eye and said hello. I think I reached out my hand and we shook. Jenna had straight brown hair parted in the middle, Trent's broad forehead, wide-set brown eyes ringed with thick lashes, and a sprinkling of freckles across her nose. I had expected her to be tall, but she wasn't.

Molly was there, too. Molly was Jenna's border collie, and she was getting to know Charlie. Molly was smaller than Charlie by about half, but had already established her dominance. She was bred to herd sheep, and it looked as if Molly was looking forward to herding Charlie. Charlie looked happy to have a friend.

Jenna suggested we go outside and play in the snow. We pulled on our jackets, mittens, and hats. My hat was a fleece windblocker that came to a point at the top. Jenna's was a black knit hat with cat's ears.

It was freezing that day. It had been warmer the day before, which had softened the snow, which now had a thick, hard crust. Jenna and I used our mittened fingers to cut shapes in the crust. Sometimes our mittens would mash the shapes, so

we fine-tuned the process by getting two large bolts from the barn to use as cutting tools, sawing as if we were cutting a fishing hole through ice. I cut circles. Jenna cut squares but wasn't happy that the corners kept breaking off.

"You do it better than I do."

"What?"

"Yours don't break like mine."

"That's because I'm doing circles. No corners to break. Circles are a lot easier."

Jenna then did a circle and held it up for me to see. It didn't break. Then I did a heart and held it up for her. It didn't break, either.

After a while, Trent came outside and joined us. Charlie spun from one of us to the other while Molly circled her flock. The humans, with encouragement from two wagging tails, built a snow fort.

Jenna and I used our hands to pack the snow and build the walls. Watching our meager progress, Trent left and came back with a big shovel. He shoveled snow to us and we packed it down to build up the walls. We got them pretty tall, almost as tall as Jenna. It was a good fort and had two round openings for entrance and exit. Jenna and the dogs had a blast going in one opening and out the other.

As the sun set and we got cold, we went inside the house. Jenna made a cootie catcher, and she and I played with it. Trent said we were having chicken, green beans, and mashed potatoes for dinner. "My favorite!" cried Jenna.

The next morning, Trent made his dippin' eggs, bacon, and toast. I watched him cook for us and thought he had never looked happier. I liked Jenna, and I enjoyed watching Trent

with her. You could tell they had spent a lot of time together. Sometime that weekend, we watched *The Blair Witch Project*—not the real movie but a reenactment they had made, starring Jenna and one of her friends, with Trent as the bad guy.

In the movie, Trent chased the girls around the tree out front and the girls screamed. They shot the video during twilight so it was dark and grainy and might even have been scary, except that after every scream, the girls laughed.

12. Disbelief

February 18, 2004

When I got home from work, Trent was unsteady, leaning on the kitchen counter. This time, I recognized it. I didn't like the look on his face and I was on guard. He was ready with his accusation.

"You're just going to go back to him."

"What?"

"Don't act like you don't know. You know what I'm talking about."

"No. I don't."

"You're just going to leave me and go back to your ex-husband."

That question needed a plain answer to make my utter de-
testation of that idea completely clear to a drunk man.

"I'd rather be homeless than go back to him."

"Bullshit."

How could he not believe me? I didn't know what else to say. At some point in this ridiculous conversation, I sat down on the kitchen floor.

"I could have him killed," Trent said.

"What?"

"Your ex-husband. I could have him killed."

"Are you being serious?"

"Absolutely. I know people who could do it."

Trent knew all kinds of people and I decided that, yes, he probably did know people who could do it.

"No. Please don't do that."

"You don't want me to do it because you still love him."

"No, I don't. I just don't want you to go to jail."

"I wouldn't go to jail. I could have him killed and no one would know I was behind it."

"Please. Just forget about this."

"You want me to forget about it because you still love him."

"I do not. And I don't want you to go to jail."

"I told you. I wouldn't go to jail."

"I don't believe you."

"You don't believe me because you don't want him dead."

"I don't care one way or the other if he's dead or not."

"Really? You don't care if he's dead? You want me to have him killed?"

"No, I don't want you to have him killed. I want to stay with you and have everything be fine."

"If he's dead, everything would be fine."

"This is hopeless."

"Tell me you want him killed or I'll know you still love him."

I weighed my options. I hoped these were the ravings of a drunk man and would be forgotten by morning, when the

alcohol had worn off. I pictured myself on the witness stand saying, "But he was so drunk, I didn't think he really meant it."

"You're telling me no one could trace it to you?"

"No one."

"Then go ahead. Have him killed."

Trent gave me a long look. I hoped I had judged correctly.

The next night, Trent brought it up again, but he wasn't as drunk this time. "You're just going to leave me and go back to him." I told him that this was his idea, not mine, that he was still thinking about my ex and I wasn't. I told him I would bring him something tomorrow so he would have proof that I would never leave him and go back to the man in the purple suspenders.

The next day when I got to work, it was the first thing I did. I wrote it quickly and guarded the printer as two copies printed out. I brought them home to Trent, and we each signed and dated both copies. It was a contract.

I, Jule Kucera, being of sound mind and body, do hereby solemnly swear that I will not go back to the man with whom I was formerly involved.

I will not go back because Trent Allen Price has shown me how it is supposed to be when a man loves a woman. He has shown me this by his integrity, his goodness, his kindness, his passion, and his tenderness, and by the way he holds me.

Trent never again brought up the subject. I don't know what happened to my copy, but I found Trent's when cleaning out his top dresser drawer. It was folded to a size that would

fit in a back jeans pocket and looked like he had handled it more than once.

13. More Ledge

March 1, 2004

Trent told me he needed to go to Jane's.

"Why don't you just break up with her?" I had forgotten he was rehabbing her bathroom.

"I can't."

"Can't? Still can't?"

"Her birthday is coming. I won't do that to her."

"You weren't here for my birthday."

"I did that for Jenna and you know it."

The next morning, Trent came back from Jane's with a big smear of white first aid cream on his forehead. He had hit his head on the open rear window of his truck topper.

"Who put that there?"

"Jane."

I washed it off and put on Neosporin instead. I wasn't rough, but I wasn't careful about being gentle.

March 2004

I was in the kitchen, washing my dinner dishes. Trent had said he would be back for dinner but hadn't shown up. He was at Jane's that day, working on her bathroom, either still working or... not. It was dark when he came up the back stairs, his steps heavy but quick. One glance at his face told me he was angry. He said something negative about Jane.

"Sounds just like your mother," I blurted.

I spun back to the soapy water. He didn't respond. Maybe he was considering the truth (or not) of what I had just said.

I don't know what he was thinking. I was thinking, if this is true, if there is some parallel between Jane and his mother, then breaking up with Jane isn't just about Jane, it's also about Jean. I decided I might need to extend my time frame until the hoped-for breakup to indefinite.

I believe that first husbands and first wives and sometimes even the ones after that are people we select specifically and unconsciously because we are trying to work out some relationship issue with one of our parents. We are trying to make up for something that never was, win the love we never had, fix the thing that was broken, prove that we are good enough. But it is an old wound that the husband or wife or girlfriend or boyfriend cannot heal because it is too old and too deep. It can only be healed, or at least treated, from the inside.

I remember nothing else about that night. I don't remember whether Trent got a beer out of the fridge (probably) or ate dinner (probably not), whether we talked (probably) or had sex (probably not). All I remember is keeping my head down and washing the dishes.

During this time of the triangle, it was the notes that Trent left that kept me staying. He started it, writing that first note after our first night, on the inside of the Schlage box that held the lock for the new fence. I wrote him notes, too, but mine were more restrained. I waited.

April 2004

It was late, and it felt like the rerun of a show I hadn't particularly enjoyed the first time. I was at the kitchen sink, washing

dishes before going to bed. I like to do dishes—it relaxes me, especially when I am fretting about something. Trent was at Jane's. Once again I heard Trent's boots come up the back steps, heavy. I called a "Hello" when he came through the door but turned back to the dishes when I saw his face. He was angry again.

I know how to live like this—reading moods and deciding what action to take. I learned this growing up, on those nights when my father came home. I had lived like this again with the man in the purple suspenders.

It was like a card game with more than quarters at stake. The other person played a card and then, based on their card, I played mine. In this case, I chose the "I'm not speaking until spoken to" card. Instead of speaking, I was thinking. I didn't like this role, this careful orbit around someone else. I didn't like how easily I slipped into it or how frequently I was playing it with Trent. It might be time to end the triangle, time for me to walk away.

Trent spoke. "I broke up with Jane."

I turned from the dishes. "How did it go?"

"Not good."

He looked more than angry. He looked sad. I didn't know what to say, so I just waited. After a few minutes and a little beer, he spoke again.

"She said mean things."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. She made me promise I wouldn't tell you what she said."

I thought back to a conversation I had with Elaine related to this. We talked about the wedge driven between a couple

when someone else asks one of the two not to tell something to the other. It's a request that builds a wall.

Elaine and I had been talking about Jenna because Jenna wanted to share some secrets with me she didn't want her father to know. I told Jenna, "If there's anything you don't want your father to know, then don't tell me, because your dad and I have an agreement to always tell each other the truth." Jenna wasn't happy with my answer, but it felt right to me.

I offered Trent the only solution I could think of. "Would you like to talk with Elaine about it?"

He thought about it. His answer may have surprised us both.

"Yeah."

April 2004

The immediate result of Trent's breaking up with Jane was that the muscle spasm in his back went away. I took that as good news and as an indicator that other areas of difficulty in Trent's life would ease as well. I was wrong. The night kicking got even worse.

At Elaine's, we repeated the process we had used last time, when Trent went in first and alone. With only ten minutes left, I decided this was going to be a solo session. But then the door opened, Trent came out, and I went in.

Elaine said that if I ever had any moments of doubt, if I ever wondered if Trent should have stayed with Jane and broken up with me, I could banish those doubts.

"I can tell you without question Trent is better off with you."

"He is?"

"Yes."

"He said that Jane said mean things."

"She did."

And that was as much as either Elaine or Trent told me about the breakup.

When I had anticipated the end of the triangle, I had expected that there would be some drama involving me. But all that remained was a faint mist, a chill on flesh, and the wobbliness of one leg of a stool suddenly gone. As pervasive as Jane had been, she was now, and would remain, completely absent.

Summer to Fall 2004

That summer, we got a turtle. His name was Ernest, Ernest T. Shackleton, named for Trent's favorite adventurer, but with Turtle as a middle name to distinguish him from Ernest Henry Shackleton, the polar explorer.

Trent found Ernest on the day he hatched at Mud Lake, when Ernest's drive for water mistakenly took him into the garage rather than the swamp behind the house. Ernest was so new he was rubbery. He was so small you could put him on a quarter with room to spare. Trent said he was a painted turtle, and that he would have bright-orange stripes along his head and neck when he was older.

Trent grabbed a big white roasting pan and put some water in it. He set the pan on the dining room table and slid some papers under one end to create a baby-turtle-sized swimming pool, with deep water at one end of the roaster and a white enamel beach at the other.

When Trent drove to Chicago to visit me, he would bring Ernest with him. Ernest rode shotgun in his white enamel car seat. He was a good traveler, Trent said, which was to be expected since we named him after an explorer.

After Ernest got a little bigger, Trent got him an aquarium and set it up in the living room in Chicago. One day, I thought it would be nice if Ernest had a little freedom, so I let him crawl on the floor. After a few minutes, though, he started crawling oddly. I picked him up and let him lie in my palm.

Something—the floor cleaner?—had poisoned Ernest. He was lying in my hand, not trying to crawl off as he normally would, staying in the center of my palm and twitching, all of his legs and his tail. I held him for a long time and whispered over and over, “Please Ernest, don’t die.” He didn’t, but as he grew, his tail marked his age at the trauma with a sharp bend to the left.

Trent and I settled into a routine where we were in Chicago during the week and then in Michigan on the weekends. Every other weekend he had Jenna, and when he did, it would be the three of us.

Except for Saturday mornings, when Jenna did not like to get out of bed, the visits went smoothly. Trent got tickets to an overnight event at the Field Museum of Natural History. The sun shone as we walked to the ‘L’ with our arms full of sleeping bags and pillows, fallen dry leaves swirling around our feet. I felt light, and suddenly exclaimed, “We’re having a family outing!” But then, because none of us had ever used the word “*family*” when talking about us, I added, “Well, not a real family. But we’re having an outing!” At that, Trent and Jenna simultaneously and emphatically said, “We *are* a real family.”

I took those words, grabbed them from the air like falling leaves, and hugged them into my pillow and my sleeping bag all the way to the museum, all the way to the cold, hard marble floor where we laid out our sleeping bags in the spot that Jenna and Trent picked—in front of the tigers—all the way to lying down with Trent in the middle and Jenna and me on either side, all the way to the lights going out and listening to the breathing of my new real family.

14. Family Photo

October 2004

Not too long after the Field Museum excursion, my father and his girlfriend, Kaye, came to Chicago to visit on a weekend when Jenna was there. I like Kaye, now. I hadn't when they first started dating, when my father was sixty, I was thirty, and Kaye was twenty-eight. But they had been together almost twenty years, and I finally saw that my father had a much healthier relationship with Kaye than he did with my mother.

Jenna made little place cards for the big table in the dining room to show where we should sit and what we were going to eat. After dinner, at Kaye's suggestion, Trent, Jenna, and I banded together on one side of the table and my father took our picture. Kaye then took the camera and inspected the result. Declaring "It's not very good," she took several more.

About a week after my father and Kaye left, an envelope arrived with three color copies and three black-and-white copies of the best photos—a set for each of us. I appreciated Kaye had thought to send the photos in triplicate. She under-

stood the difficult practicalities of families who don't live together.

That photograph is the only picture ever taken of the three of us.

It's a nice one. Trent and I are sitting at the dinner table, and Jenna is standing behind us, her head rising between ours, wearing the sweatshirt of a band that she loved then but can't stand now. Our faces are close together, and we are all smiling big smiles.

15. Bad Baby & the Prince

November 2004

Trent's night kicking was bad again. The stories of the nightmares varied but they were all the same at the core. Trent would tell me about the nightmare, and when I said it seemed related to how helpless he felt as a child, he would tell me he was to blame for how his parents treated him. I couldn't talk him out of this belief, even when I used Jenna as evidence.

"Is Jenna responsible for how you treat her?"

"Course not."

"If she was bad, really really bad, would she deserve to be beaten?"

"No! I would never hit her."

"So why is it different with you? Why are you to blame for your father hitting you?"

"I was a bad baby. I had headaches and cried all the time."

There was no reasoning with Trent on this, so I decided to write a story for him. It would be a story that showed it wasn't the baby's fault.

To write the story, I would gather up the few bits he had told me and weave them together: the rocks in his parents' backyard, his father's hatred, the recent wound that left the faint T-shaped scar on his forehead, and the day he and his high school girlfriend, Connie Sue, ran to her parents' house. I would also weave in things Trent loved: eagles and water and sunshine and love itself. The idea for the names came from *Tatsinda*, my favorite story as a child. I don't remember writing it; it came out quickly. I put it aside for the right moment.

It was the next story we read after *Endurance*. Trent listened quietly. At the end he said, "That's a good story, Sweet Baby."

After we read it a few more times, he asked, "Would it be okay to change something in the story?"

"What would you like to change?"

"Bulgar shouldn't use a bow and arrow."

"Sure, Sweet Baby, we can change that."

Trent then specified the weapon, the site of the wound, and the word I should use to describe the hit. I went back and made the changes, then printed the story and reread it to Trent. He was right. It was better. It was also prophetic.

PRINCE TARKTEN

Once upon a time, there was a faraway land with many provinces. Every province was a realm, and every realm was ruled by a king and queen.

King Tandor and Queen Talara ruled the realm of Trillium, which was one of the finest in the land. It had hills and streams and woods and many animals, and in the valleys, many farms. King Tandor and Queen

Talara's castle stood partway up one of the highest hills, with woods at the back, and wildflowers at the front that blew in the soft wind and ended in the valley, at the banks of the wide river that ran the length of Trillium.

The castle was the finest building in the realm. When the sun rose each morning, it caused the spires to sparkle like diamonds and the walls like sapphires. The royal flag with the royal crest flew from each spire; it was blue and gold and held aloft by the gentle breezes. The castle had four gates, one to the north, one to the south, one to the east, and one to the west. A pair of royal guards in their royal uniforms stood tall and proud on either side of each gate.

On this day, at this time, King Tandor and Queen Talara were playing with their son, Prince Tarkten. They had married ten summers earlier and had waited eight summers for a child. When the prince was born, the king, the queen, and all the kingdom rejoiced. And on some mornings, such as this one, the king and queen delayed their royal duties to play with their son, and the sound of their laughter rolled down the hill and spread into the valley and prompted the birds to sing.

All who heard their laughter smiled, except for Salmar. The king would not recognize Salmar, but she would recognize him, from the cold day five years earlier when he had ordered the death of her husband for beating his wife, as an example to all the husbands in the kingdom. Although Salmar had hated her husband,

she also missed him. And on this day, she hated the king for taking her husband from her.

Salmar stewed in her hatred, her thoughts twisting in her mind. She stewed and stewed until her soul grew small and cold and twisted her in circles. She twisted and twisted until she became a spinning wind, and she began to blow through the valley.

Salmar blew herself across the valley, and the birds took shelter deep in the trees and wrapped their talons tightly around the branches. She blew herself up the hill toward the castle. She blew herself up the castle walls. She blew herself through the open window of the prince's room.

There was no laughter as the spinning wind lifted Prince Tarkten. He was blown out the window, blown down the hill, and blown into the river. Queen Talara screamed, "My son!" and King Tandor called for the royal guards.

They set out immediately, the king and the head guards on horses rushed from the royal stables, the rest on foot. They galloped and ran down the hill to the river.

But Salmar spun her wind, and blew sand and dust into the eyes of the men and the horses. As they struggled to find their way, the swiftly moving river carried the prince farther from them.

As Salmar spun and spun, she saw everything. She saw Prince Tarkten float away, and she saw the king struggle to get to the river, and she saw the queen cry. And then Salmar began to cry because she saw what

she had done. She felt so horrible that she changed from wind to water, and she became tears that fell into the river. Prince Tarkten was carried away by the river and Salmar's tears.

The king and the guards searched the river desperately. They broke into three groups: one to search the north bank, one to search the south bank, and one to dredge the river. They walked for miles and miles. They walked through weeds taller than a man and bushes and brambles and thorns. Mud pulled at the boots on their feet; thorns cut their hands. They did not stop and they would not stop. The guards looked for the king's son as if searching for their own, for that was their level of devotion to their king and that was their love for their sons.

The king and his soldiers would have searched until they fell from exhaustion, but the river stopped them. They heard it first—the sound of a rushing waterfall, falling farther than four times as high as the highest spire of the castle. As they looked over the edge, they saw it churn and foam. No man, let alone a small child, could have survived the fall. When the king saw it, he wept and rent his robes in mourning.

Now, no child could have survived that fall, but this was no ordinary child. This was Prince Tarkten, and sometimes special things happen to princes. What happened to this prince was very special.

Just as Prince Tarkten tumbled over the edge of the waterfall, an eagle spotted him. The eagle dove and

then leveled himself, spread his wings, and caught the falling prince. But the prince was much heavier than the eagle. The eagle held on as long as he could, until he saw a soft spot of grass at the riverbank, where he gently dropped the prince onto the fluffy mound.

But the weight of the prince dislodged the grass mound, and once again he floated down the river. He floated for three days, tended to by the eagle, who splashed river water on his face, so he had something to drink, and dropped berries into his mouth, so he had something to eat, and flew over him, to shield him from the sun.

Trillium was not at war, but it had an army, and one troop was performing field practice. After a hard morning made harder by Captain Bulgar, they took a break. Some men were in the river gathering water in canteens and cooking pots; some were downstream from them, washing off the dust of the field. Captain Bulgar separated himself from the men and went up the riverbank, upstream. As he relieved himself in the river, he noticed something float toward him. When the mound of grass got closer, Captain Bulgar played a game, and he hit the grass with his yellow stream. A cry came from the grass mound.

The river carried Prince Tarkten right to the edge of the riverbank where Captain Bulgar stood. He looked and contemplated the child. Bulgar considered pushing it back with the toe of his boot, but then remembered his wife, Phillify. She had bothered him for some time

about wanting a baby. He knew that would not happen because he did not desire his wife. This child could solve that problem. Captain Bulgar reached down and grabbed Prince Tarkten from the grass. And for the second time, Prince Tarkten cried.

The eagle was hovering overhead, and hearing the prince's cry, he rushed to his defense. The eagle slapped his wings at the captain's head and scratched his face with his talons. But the captain simply drew his sword and pierced the eagle's heart. And so it was that the captain walked away from the riverbank with a crying child under one arm, and a dead eagle hanging from the other.

When Captain Bulgar gave the child to his wife, Phillify took it and smiled, but she was not happy. Although this was a son, it was not her son. She did not love him and never would. But she took care of the child, not because she wanted to, but because of her fear of Bulgar.

That is how Prince Tarkten came to live in a cold house with Phillify and Bulgar, and they named him Rud. Over time, Rud grew, and he grew big and strong.

As Bulgar watched Rud grow, he hated him. He hated the way he laughed. He hated how easily he could do things and build things. He hated his intelligence. But he found him useful. Bulgar used Rud to feel better about himself.

There are many sad stories that could be told, but we will tell only the last, for to hear more than one is too difficult to bear.

When Rud was almost thirteen, Bulgar decided he needed a bigger house. Since he had been stealing goods from the army and selling them, he could afford it. Bulgar planned to build a large room onto the house he had. Phillify asked for the room to be built on the south side of the house, where it would be sunny and warm, but Bulgar only laughed. Bulgar wanted the room on the north side, where it was more visible and would impress the people of the town. But there was one problem—there were three huge rocks on the north side.

Bulgar hired a man to remove the rocks. The man hitched ten horses to the rocks. But the rocks did not move, and the man failed.

So Bulgar hired a second man to remove the rocks. The second man used timbers and levers, but the rocks did not move, and the second man failed.

So Bulgar hired a third man to remove the rocks. The third man used special explosive powder. A piece smaller than a loaf of bread broke off one rock, but the rocks did not move, and the third man failed.

Rud had watched the first man and the second man and the third man. And Rud said to Bulgar, “I will remove those rocks for three gold coins, one for each rock.” Bulgar snickered and agreed because he knew Rud

could not remove the rocks and because Bulgar took pleasure from watching Rud fail.

Rud planned to do his work at night because he knew that if Bulgar saw him, it would make him angry. That evening, Rud went to bed but got up in the middle of the night and thrust a shovel into the ground. He dug a great hole next to the largest rock. When it was big enough, he rolled the rock into the hole, covered it with dirt, and laid the grass back on top of it. Then Rud went to bed.

The next morning, as Bulgar stood at the kitchen window eating a fried egg, he blinked. Two rocks. There were only two rocks. He stormed from the house.

The next night, Rud dug another hole, and the next morning there was only one rock.

On the last night, Rud rolled the last rock into the last hole, and covered it with the last piece of grass. He lay down on the spot and smiled. He had done it. He had removed the rocks after three men had failed. A small piece of his heart hoped that Bulgar would be proud of him. Then Rud fell asleep on top of the grass, on top of the dirt, on top of the rocks.

But the next morning, Bulgar was not proud. He was angry, for he felt Rud had made a fool of him. And as he looked out the window and saw Rud sleeping, he was angrier. Bulgar walked outside and kicked Rud awake. Then he threw the three gold coins hard at Rud's face.

Now, something happened when the coins hit the prince's face, and he told Bulgar not to do that. But

Bulgar could not be stopped. He clenched his fist and hit the prince's face over and over and over. Then the prince hit him back.

Perhaps if the prince were sixteen or seventeen, he would have won. But he was just barely thirteen, and even though he was big and strong, he wasn't big and strong enough. The prince lay sprawled at Bulgar's feet.

The second to last thing Bulgar did was pick up the piece of rock smaller than a loaf of bread (for it was not buried with the others), and drop it on Rud's forehead. The last thing Bulgar did was laugh. He left the prince bleeding and bruised on top of the grass, on top of the dirt, on top of the rocks.

Phillify had seen all this from her bedroom window, but she did not move to help Rud. She knew what a beating from Bulgar felt like and didn't want one. She didn't want anything she had, she didn't want to be where she was, so she pretended to be somewhere else. Phillify closed her eyes and disappeared into her own mind.

But someone else had been watching. Nesula lived with her parents across the way from Rud and Bulgar and Phillify. She had seen everything, and she had seen it for a long time. She waited until Bulgar walked away up over the hill and then she ran to Rud, for she loved him. And she did not know it, but Rud loved her.

Nesula helped Rud stand up, bore him to his house, and laid him on his couch. She washed his wounds with cool water and put a soft feather pillow under his head.

When she had done everything she could think of and she could think of nothing else, Nesula lay down beside Rud and wrapped her arms around him. As they slept, they both had sweet dreams.

When Bulgar came home and found them sleeping together, his blood grew hot and his eyes grew angry. He grabbed Nesula and threw her off Rud. Her head hit the wall, and she slid to the floor. Rud awoke to the feel of Bulgar's coarse hands around his neck. Bulgar was trying to choke him. Bulgar was trying to kill him. Rud fought back, but he wasn't big enough, he wasn't strong enough.

Nesula opened her eyes and saw what was happening. Bulgar, in his anger, never saw her. He never saw her pick up the heavy frying pan. When the pan struck the back of Bulgar's head, it was his turn to slide to the floor.

Nesula and Rud ran. They ran out of Bulgar's house and ran to Nesula's house for safety. Nesula's parents were at the door, and they swept Nesula into their arms. But when they saw Rud covered with bruises and blood seeping from his forehead, they forbade him to enter. So Rud did the only thing he could. He ran.

He ran through fields and woods and brambles and thorns, and he ached and bled and cried and fell exhausted at the river.

Once again, the birds tended to the prince. They splashed river water on him to cleanse his wounds, to cool his fever, and to drink. They gently placed berries

into his bruised mouth for him to eat. And at night, when the sun fell and the air cooled, they covered him with their wings.

During the time that the prince was lost and believed dead, the king and queen never forgot him. The queen shed three tears for him every morning, and the king and queen together said a prayer for his soul every night.

On the third night that the prince was sleeping and healing by the river, the queen had a dream. She dreamed of a glorious cobalt river, the sound of which was like the sound of many violins. A great bird arose from the river and spoke to her. "Your son is not dead. He is sleeping. He is sleeping the sleep of one who does not know who he is. You will find him by the river, where the eagles fly." And in her dream the queen responded, "But how will I know him? It has been eleven years, and he was very small. I can hardly remember him." A tear slipped from her closed eye and rolled down her cheek. The great bird answered, "Only royalty is permitted a name that begins with a *T*. His name has been lost, he does not know it, but a *T* marks his forehead. Go to him."

The dream woke the queen, and the queen woke the king, and at first light the search party departed, heading for the river, lifting their eyes to look for eagles.

Seven eagles led them to Prince Tarkten. They found him facedown, and all held their breath as they

turned him over. A T marked his forehead. It was left by the piece of rock smaller than a loaf of bread.

King Tandor and Queen Talara wept when they saw their son. The royal doctor examined him and ordered attendants to dress his wounds with rosemary oil and lay him on a bed of lavender. The king and queen never left his side. They touched him and held him and stroked his hair.

When he was well enough, Prince Tarkten sat up. When the king and queen told him who he was, he did not believe them, and he laughed. But over time, the prince came to believe, and over time, he answered their questions about what had happened to him.

It outraged the king to learn what Bulgar had done to the prince. The law of the kingdom declares that anyone who strikes royalty shall be put to death. But when the king demanded that Bulgar be found and killed, Prince Tarkten said, "No. Keep him in the army, but strip him of his rank. Set him in the scullery where he will learn to serve." So that is what they did.

Later, when Bulgar's former soldiers saw him in the mess hall, wrapped in a soiled apron and scrubbing pots, they laughed.

One night at the castle, after a tasty meal of fruits from the fields, Prince Tarkten thought about how much his life had changed. He wondered how good it could get, how wide he could open his arms to receive good things. It was then that Queen Talara said, "Dear Tarkten, is there anything else you desire, anything else

that would make you even happier?” The prince smiled, his eyes sparkled, and he said, “I would like to find Nesula.”

On the day they married, Prince Tarkten wore a robe of royal blue velvet and a crown of gold with diamonds and sapphires. Princess Nesula’s robe was the color of the sky at dawn, her crown was gold, and diamonds and sapphires were woven into her hair.

After they said their vows, they kissed, and the birds of Trillium sang their pleasure. Then two white doves flew into the gathering, carrying a gold ribbon. Prince Tarkten and Princess Nesula followed the ribbon through the valley, through the woods, and into a clearing. It led them to their new home, their nest built for them by all the birds of Trillium. It had woods at the back and wildflowers at the front and gentle breezes that carried the sounds of their joy.

Prince Tarkten took Princess Nesula into his arms and carried her over the threshold. They held each other and loved each other and told each other the truth. And Prince Tarkten and Princess Nesula lived happily ever after.

The End.

16. Trouble with a Capital T

Thanksgiving 2004

Trent made me promise to behave myself at his parents' house. I don't like either of them. He knew that and asked me to be polite, the way he was polite to my parents. He asked me not to say anything that would make them mad, not for his sake, but for Jenna's. Trent wanted Jenna to have a good relationship with her grandparents.

Trent's father is Herb, his mother is Jean, and Jean's twin sister is either Joan or Joanne, depending on who is saying it. Her son Steven calls her Joan. Trent called her Joanne. Jean and Joanne call each other by the same name, Louie. Trent and Steven refer to them as The Twins. It's confusing.

As part of the Thanksgiving visit, Jean and Joanne took Jenna and me over to Joanne's house. They wanted me to see it. There were lots of black-and-white photos on the wall—of Joanne and her husband when they were a young couple, of Gary and Steven, their two boys. I looked closely at the boys, trying to see the man that Steven had become and trying to tell what Gary was like, because he had been Trent's best friend, and because he had died at twenty-nine. Joanne pulled out some old photos of Trent when he was a little boy and showed them to me.

Jean glanced at the photos and uttered, "Trent was a handful of a son. Always getting into trouble. Trouble with a capital T."

She smiled when she said it, but her tone was biting. Jean had been saying unflattering things about Trent throughout the visit, and she continued with an unflattering story. I waited

until she finished. I could stand it for Trent and I could stand it for myself, but I could not stand it for Jenna. So I spoke.

"Jean, I'd like to hear a nice story about Trent."

"What?"

"All afternoon you've been telling us negative stories about Trent. I'd like to hear something positive."

Her jaw fell and her open mouth was an O that someone had colored in with a dull crayon.

Joanne helped her twin out. "He did get himself caught in a tree one time, when he was climbing it, and he hung upside down."

At the time, I thought Jean didn't like Trent because he was a messy boy, always playing in the dirt, shirt coming untucked, pant knees stained with grass as he investigated all the things he saw crawling or growing. Now I think what she didn't like was that he was a boy.

It was a festering wound and I was exploring it, trying to find the source of the infection so it could be cured and Trent could feel better. I probed into Trent's parents' history to understand.

Herb was the youngest of six boys. Most of them were dead. One lived in Colorado. That was Joel, the one Trent wanted to visit. Trent wanted to see if Joel could explain why Herb was the way he was.

My theory is that Herb's father beat him, because beaters are typically beaten themselves. Also, I've learned that the more male babies a woman has, the more likely each successive male is to be gay. I wonder whether Herb was gay and hated that about himself. This is all my conjecture, not Trent's.

As for Jean, Trent told me what he knew about The Twins. When Jean and Joanne were born, their mother died. In their father's eyes, the twins had killed their mother. Their father took their three older siblings and remarried. He left the twins behind with his parents.

When Jean and Joanne were growing up, if they wanted to see their father, their grandmother would take them to town. They would stand outside the town bar so the twins could look through the window and see him there, sitting at the bar. Their grandmother didn't take them often because she didn't think it was good for them.

All this is why I believe Trent's mother hates men, and why she married Trent's father, because he hates himself, and why, when they had a little boy, the father beat the little boy and the mother let him know he was a handful, he was trouble with a capital *T*, and whatever he tried to do or be would never be enough.

17. Moving Forward

February 2005

Trent and I had been talking about finding somewhere new to live together, since I couldn't stand Battle Creek and he liked the events Chicago hosted, but not the city. We had gone out with an agent to look at land in southwest Michigan, near the southern edge of Lake Michigan. The agent was incompetent; the expedition was miserable. We tried again, this time on our own. We saw a property that bordered the Black River, most of it on a rise above the river, but part sloped steeply down to the water.

Trent was stomping through the snow to get a sense of the land as I picked my way down the steep embankment. "Be careful," he hollered, as I held on to thin tree trunks to slow my descent.

I stood on the frozen bank, shoved my cold, unmittened hands into my coat pockets, and listened to the gentle rippling sounds of the river. A sudden loud crack told me I wasn't standing on the bank but on ice over the water. The ice broke off, and I landed on a ledge in water up to my ankles.

Just as I breathed a sigh of relief, there was a louder crack. This time the ice went out from under me and I went down. I was on my back, arms splayed on the ice, my body up to my waist in the ice-cold river. The water was moving fast and pulling at me. I told myself to lie still or the ice under my upper back might give way. If the river pulled me off the ice ledge and under the water, I would die, from cold or suffocation.

The odd part was I knew Trent would come get me. Either I cried out when I went down or he heard the crack of the ice. Just as my wool coat was getting heavy with water and pulling me down, I felt something grab my shoulders and drag me out of the river and onto the snow. I thought my coat had pulled me out, but it was Trent.

Earlier, we had commented on the temperature because it was cold for southern Michigan, 18°F. Trent stood me up and yelled to run up the hill. I did, and he ran behind me. He shouted that if I didn't run, my clothes would freeze and I would have trouble moving.

On the way up the hill, he hollered, "When we get to the car, we have to get all your clothes off." The urgency in his voice had nothing to do with desire and everything to do with

danger. Two very good things were working in my favor. First, he had left the car running and the heat on. Second, the back seat held a basketful of clean, dry laundry.

My clothes were already stiffening as we yanked them off. I pulled on Trent's briefs, a T-shirt, his jeans (which left my ankles exposed because although Trent was taller, I'm all legs), and his sweatshirt. I got in the car and pulled on his thick Red-head socks as Trent turned the heater to full blast. I put my throbbing red hands in front of the vents. Trent pulled the car onto the road and sped to town. Just as we got there, the car lost its power steering and brakes. He coasted the car to an auto repair shop that was closing for the night. Trent slipped the mechanic some cash, and the mechanic stayed to fix the car.

On the way back to Mud Lake, we talked about how lucky we were. Lucky that I hadn't slipped all the way into the river. Lucky that Trent had heard me fall. Lucky that the car had broken down in town and not in the woods. We had been lucky, but I was apprehensive about future property-hunting expeditions with Trent.

Spring 2005

Spring is the best and worst season at Mud Lake. It is the best because the swamp comes to life. It is the worst because the ground thaws and the mud comes to life, too.

Houses on either side of the road from Trent's varied considerably. Some were well kept with mowed lawns; others had a slab of plywood nailed over the front door and a dirt circle where the dog permanently chained to the tree had tramped the earth bare.

The house across the street had a yard filled with lawn decor: cars in various states of repair or disrepair, garbage piled high by the end of the driveway because they rarely had the money to have it hauled away, and a target deer that had been shot so many times the head was blown off, leaving a neck spouting beige foam. I always wanted to cover that deer's neck with a blanket.

Trent's house had trees and a mowed lawn, but the front entrance looked off. You realized what was wrong when you used it—the concrete steps had sunk, so from the top step you had to lift your leg uncomfortably high to get in the front door. Almost everyone used the garage entrance instead.

If you walked between the house and the barn in the spring, you got taller. The mud adhered to the soles of your shoes, and they became platforms. You would stop walking to find a thick stick to scrape the mud from your shoes so you wouldn't fall off them.

If you fell, even if you fell in the grass, you would have a mud stain on your jeans that would not come out, no matter how many times you washed them. You would remember to never again wear your good jeans to Mud Lake.

Trent kept two types of underwear: the good ones, which were white boxer briefs, and the bad ones, which were formerly white briefs with mud stains. If you fell or sat and got Mud Lake mud on your jeans, it would seep through the cloth and stain your underwear. You could wash your underwear a hundred times with bleach, and it wouldn't matter. Mud Lake mud will not come out.

When I first started going to Mud Lake, I brought good clothes and bad clothes, but eventually learned to bring only

the bad ones. I followed Trent's lead and stopped packing a suitcase. I brought my clothes clean in a laundry basket and took them home dirty the same way. At first it seemed strange to pack my worst clothes, but I got used to it.

There was only one place in the house at Mud Lake I liked, the same place Trent did—sitting at the dining room table, looking out the big window that overlooked the swamp.

The property was called a "typical eighty," meaning an 80-acre rectangle, 1,320 feet wide and 2,640 feet deep. The short edge was along the road. Stretching back into the swamp, the property crossed a narrow, twisting creek. You could see farther than the land Trent owned—you could see across 320 acres, about two miles.

If you were outside, the swamp would feel damp on your skin, even in August. It had its own smell that didn't change much with the seasons; it just got a little less pungent over winter. It smelled of wet and decay and grass and smoke and scrambled eggs. It smelled like the moment between death and life.

In the fall, in the morning, when the cool air hit the warm earth, steam rose and lay across the swamp in indolent layers that curled away as you walked through them. The swamp steam mingled with the smoke that came from the woodstove in Trent's barn, mixing and thickening until the logs burned down and the fire burned out. What remained was a stale, smoky smell that melded with hair the way Mud Lake mud melded with cloth.

Trent walked every part of the swamp he could walk and canoed every part he couldn't. You had to be wary in the swamp. It opened up a hole that Trent fell into up to his chest,

stopped only by leveling his shotgun to bridge the hole. It sucked Gary's handgun from Trent's holster, the gun Trent was given after Gary's death. Trent searched the swamp for days but never found the gun. Even though it played tricks on him, Trent loved the swamp. When I asked why, he said, "Sweet Baby, the swamp is where life begins!"

Trent applied for a home equity loan so he would have cash to fix up the Mud Lake house to sell it. I knew he was applying for a loan but, having once processed university student short-term loans, didn't expect him to be approved, so I didn't worry about it.

We were at Mud Lake when Trent came inside, grinning. "Sweet Baby, I got a loan and I don't even have a job!"

My heart sank.

18. Encounter

Summer 2005

It was dusk. I was at Mud Lake and decided to take a walk outside. Trent loved the swamp, but I didn't. One part of Trent's property was higher, safely elevated from the mud. This small rise grew big oaks and small dogwoods that bloomed in the spring. I liked walking there.

Going out the back door, I headed down the slope toward the swamp and the woods. At the edge of the swap, where the trimmed lawn met the tall grass, the wind picked up. In seconds, it was blowing hard. Trent believed—partly because of something his accountant, also a psychic, told him—that an Indian spirit lived on the land and protected him. I figured the wind was the spirit sending me a message, so I spoke to him.

"Is that you?"

A fat gust of wind hit me hard, like a blast that can pull a car door from your hand. I figured the Indian was answering my question and that he wasn't happy with me, because Trent and I had been talking about selling the house at Mud Lake and moving in together.

I stood and faced where I thought the Indian was, and yelled back. "Go ahead and blow. I know you love him. I love him, too. And you can blow all you want, but I am not going to stop. I love Trent Price and I am not going to stop."

At that, the wind stopped blowing, which made me afraid. I turned and ran back up the slope into the house.

I told Trent about what happened, or what I thought had happened. Trent didn't say anything, and I wondered what he thought. But there was more to tell, so I kept going.

"Trent, the Indian wasn't alone."

"He wasn't?"

"No. I got the sense he had an animal with him."

"What kind of animal?"

"Like a wolf, but not a wolf, because it was his animal, his partner. It was like a combination of a wolf and a dog."

Now Trent looked at me more closely. "How big was it?"

"Big. As big as the biggest dog I've ever seen. But it wasn't a dog. It was a wolf-dog."

"What color was it?"

"Dark. Not gray like a wolf but darker. Almost black, but not shiny black. He was big and dark."

"What was the animal doing?"

"Nothing. He was just standing by the Indian. By his right side."

Trent then told me that the description matched Otis, Trent's dog who was part Akita, part German shepherd, who would sometimes stand with his front paws on Trent's shoulders, his head above Trent's. Otis was buried behind the barn.

Otis

"Tell me about Otis."

"What's to tell?"

"Well, if that's Otis hanging out in your backyard, I think I should know something about him."

Trent's face looked dark, and I couldn't read it. Was he angry? Was he sad? I waited, but Trent said nothing.

"How did you get Otis?"

"At a fair. Not a fair with rides. An exotic animal fair. Snakes and lizards and other unusual animals."

"And that's where Otis was?"

"Yeah."

"Was he a puppy?"

"Not a little puppy but young, still small."

"What made you decide to get him?"

"I could tell he would be a good dog, good out here."

Trent didn't say more, so I found another question. "How did you pick Otis for his name?"

Trent smiled briefly at the memory. "I was at work, taking the elevator up, and I looked down and it said 'Otis.' Seemed like a good name."

That was all Trent offered, so I skipped to the ending. I asked it as gently as I could, "How did he die?"

Something changed... The pressure of Trent's fingers on his Icehouse can increased, or the flesh around his eyes tightened. Something told me this was going to be a hard story.

"Otis was a big dog. He used to hang out at the end of the driveway and stand with his paws on the fence. Standing like that, he was a head taller than me. An asshole neighbor decided he was going to play tough with Otis, and Otis bit him."

Trent took a pull on his beer. "In Michigan, a dog is allowed one bite. If the dog bites a person a second time, the dog has to be put down."

Trent paused and I waited, a long time, while Trent opened the door to the story and prepared himself to go inside.

"We were having a party for Danielle [Jenna's half-sister] with some of her little friends. They were playing with dolls and stuff. Otis was chained up out back so he would be away from them. I told them, 'Stay away from the dog.' I was clear. 'Don't go near the dog.'"

His eyes moved back, and I could tell he was seeing that day.

"It started snowing, and I went out to the barn to get the woodstove going. One of those little girls looked out the window and saw Otis getting snowed on, and she felt sorry for him. She walked down to Otis, took off her sweater, and put it over his shoulders. She didn't want it to come off, so she tied the sleeves around his neck, and that's when he bit her. The police came and said Otis had to be put down. They didn't want to say it, but that's the law. Otis had to be killed."

Trent took a long pull on his beer. He was finished.

"Oh baby," I said, as I crawled into his lap and wrapped my arms around him. "I'm sorry," I said as I held him.

We stayed that way a long time. I was measuring, measuring just how many sad things one life can take, how much loss one heart can hold. In the balance of easy and difficult, love and hate, pain and pleasure, how long can a person stand on the side of difficult and hate and pain? I was measuring and I was trying to put some weight on the other side of the balance.

Framing O.T.

I asked Trent whether, for his birthday present, we could reframe the two photographs of O.T. that hung on the living room wall in the Mud Lake house. He liked the idea. O.T. had been Trent's great-uncle, Jean's uncle. As a child, Trent and his two cousins had stayed with O.T. every Sunday. For lunch, O.T. gave them a sandwich and, on the side, a round scoop of cottage cheese on a lettuce leaf with two cherries for eyes and part of a pineapple slice for a mouth. O.T. loved to hunt, but I think he was a hunter like Trent who didn't enjoy killing. O.T. did not wear camouflage when he hunted. Instead, he wore a red-and-black-plaid Woolrich hunting coat. I'd given Trent a coat like that for Christmas.

We went to my favorite framing store in Chicago, and I showed Trent the display on the wall where the same picture had been framed ten ways, each frame changing the picture, either a little or a lot. We took our time walking along the two walls displaying frames—wood and metal, wide to narrow, dull to brightly colored. Our first decision was easy: wood, not metal. At a large table, an assistant carefully removed the photos of O.T. from their thin black metal frames and wide white mats. She then pulled out several different frames so we could compare options. As she slipped each one over a corner of the

photo, I could tell by Trent's expression that none of them looked right to him. Trent said he wanted to take another walk along the walls of frames. I followed.

He walked slowly along the back wall, turned the corner, then lifted his hand to a frame. "What about this one?"

It was narrow, with a vine carved into it, more delicate than what I thought Trent would pick. The narrower molding would require a narrower mat. The newly framed photos would be much smaller than they had been. We walked back over to the table. The assistant drew out a soft gray mat and placed it against the photo, then laid the vine frame next to it. Trent nodded, then turned to me for my opinion.

"It's perfect."

19. Sleepless

Late Summer 2005

I couldn't sleep.

We were at Mud Lake, the phone had rung and rung the day before until Trent angrily unplugged it, and earlier in the week I had made Trent's most recent mortgage payment.

It was about six in the morning. I went to the dining room and found something to write on, one of Trent's many white legal tablets with the thick blue lines. Digging through the overstuffed pen cup, after several rejects, I finally found a functioning writing implement, a dull number 2 pencil with a hard eraser.

I drew a line down the middle of the page to list monthly expenses on the left and income on the right. On the left, I wrote the mortgage payment, which used to be about \$700,

but with Trent's home equity loan was now double that. Everything else I estimated: electricity, fuel oil, phone, gas, food, and child support. Then I tallied. I had a rough idea of what he was making from the work renovating an electrician's house and put that number on the right. I couldn't think of any other income. The number on the right wasn't big enough.

Trent found me staring at the numbers. He sat in the captain's chair beside me.

"What are you doing, Sweet Baby?"

"Figuring out why I couldn't sleep."

"Why couldn't you sleep?"

"Because of the numbers."

I showed Trent the paper. He corrected the amount for child support.

"And you don't even have beer on there."

"How much is that?"

"A thirty-pack is \$12.99. So thirteen times ten or twelve for a month."

I had no idea he drank that much. It seemed we were accounting in several areas. I did the math and added \$150 to the expenses and revised the total. The number on the right was now \$700 too small.

"Trent, this is a hole."

"No shit."

"You were breaking even before the home equity loan, but now... You can't cover this."

"Tell me something I don't know."

He stared at me, and I stared back. He was trying to tell me something, but he wasn't going to say it. I thought for a while, and then it hit me.

"You knew you wouldn't be able to cover it."

He didn't say a word, a clue that I was on track.

"Why would you take out a loan you knew you couldn't repay?"

He stared hard at me and I knew I'd have to figure out this one, too. Again, the answer came. This answer felt worse.

"You took out the loan because you didn't think you'd have to repay it."

Trent looked down. I was right. But I was still the only one talking.

"What were you going to do when they came to foreclose on the house?"

Trent lifted his head and his eyes met mine.

"Go down to the basement with two tanks of propane, take a seat by the fuel tank, and light a match."

He wasn't kidding.

Foreclosure

Most people who want advice regarding imminent foreclosure would see their accountant or lawyer. I saw Elaine. She and I talked about debt and the strain and the need for me not to sink my own boat while trying to get Trent to dry land. I used Elaine as a checkpoint: was Trent, with these problems, worth it? Or was I once again sinking myself into not just a losing proposition, but a loss of myself?

I thought he was worth it and she agreed. As she pointed out, this time I was with a man who loved me, who would give up the world for me.

My plan was to sell the Mud Lake house quickly, have Trent move into the Chicago two-flat with me, live there for a

couple of years and save money, then find a house in Michigan and move there.

When Trent and I saw Elaine together and Elaine asked Trent about living in Chicago, his whole body slumped. The way he spoke changed. The suffocation he felt when he was in the city was all over his face and his answer. I made an appointment to see Elaine by myself.

I was barely seated on her yellow leather couch when the words tumbled out of me.

“He can’t do it. He can’t live in the city.”

“Anytime Trent is in a confined space, he feels vulnerable. It brings back all those feelings from his childhood when he was in real, physical danger.”

“My plan was for us to live here for two years, but that’s not going to work. He won’t make it.”

Elaine said nothing and I just sat there, heavy. Then the realization hit me.

“I have to sell my house.”

The Loan

Trent’s plan had been to use the home equity loan to totally rehab the Mud Lake house, put it on the market, and get top dollar. When it became clear the investment needed exceeded his available funds, he scaled back his renovation plans.

Trent went to the hardware store and came home with two new toilet seats and three new doorknobs. I thought the doorknobs and toilet seats were pointless, given the moldy fist-sized hole in the pink bathroom tile, the worn pine cabinets in the kitchen, and the plywood floor in the dining room that

showed well-worn tracks to the kitchen and living room, but I bit my tongue.

We decided that as soon as Trent had eradicated the mold from the bathroom and the basement, he would put the house on the market. Instead of coming to Chicago during the week, Trent stayed at Mud Lake and spent his days in the basement removing damp, moldy paneling, hauling it outside, and burning it. Then he scrubbed everything with bleach, several times.

When I visited over the weekend, the basement walls looked better after being scrubbed and painted, but the telltale high-water mark of rust on the washer and dryer remained. I doubted a quick sale.

Trent worked with an agent and put the house on the market for less than he had planned but for more than I thought it was worth. The value was in the land, he said. I hoped he was right. I wasn't sure how many people wanted eighty acres when most of it was wet.

Trent came to Chicago and stayed. He didn't want to be at Mud Lake with the house on the market. We went back one weekend and when we walked in through the front door, the back door was wide open. Trent growled something about fucking real estate agents as I shut the back door. As I closed it, something seemed not right. I looked at the lock, opened the door, and then looked at the lock from the outside.

"You put the lock on backwards."

"What?"

"The lock. The key side is on the inside, not the outside. It doesn't lock people out of the house, it locks people in the house out of the swamp."

Trent swore again and I almost cried. The lock was the physical equivalent of a Freudian slip. How would this man ever willingly leave this land?

A Ticket

Just after Trent finished clearing out and painting the basement, it rained hard and the sump pump failed. We got to the Mud Lake house late Friday night to find the basement flooded, knee-deep.

We spent most of the weekend in the basement, Trent again with the wet/dry Shop-Vac and me again with the massive squeegee. Blisters bloomed on my hands, and I was glad to leave on Sunday. Trent stayed behind in case it rained again, because an open house was scheduled for Tuesday.

The turnout disappointed the agent. I can't remember if only one or two people showed up, or no one did. Word had already gotten out. The house or the land wasn't worth the drive to see it.

Later that week Trent called, sounding worse than he had after the open house.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You don't sound like it."

"I got a fucking ticket."

"A ticket? For what?"

"Illegal lane usage.' Fuck that. That's how you get your mail out in the country. You drive up to the box, no matter what side of the road it's on."

"You got a ticket for driving on the wrong side of the road to get your mail?"

"It's not the wrong side. It's how you do it in the country. It's how everybody does it. Fucking cop."

"'Illegal lane usage' doesn't sound that bad."

"Wouldn't have been if that's all it was."

"What else?"

"DUI."

It felt as if the hole we were trying to claw our way out of was growing, that the basement was filling with swamp sludge, dragging us down, pulling at our legs and arms as we struggled to get out. We would wear out, sucked into the muck, foul silt filling our mouths and lungs. The mud would cover us and we would disappear.

I was afraid Trent was taking me down with him.

20. Sad Eyes

Fall 2005

Over the summer, my dog Charlie, the elderly standard poodle, had begun to fail. At first he merely stumbled going down stairs. But the stumble became a full-on slide down the steps as I pulled on the leash to keep him from crashing to the bottom. When he ran full-bore into a closed door, I wondered if he was blind. This was confirmed when we took walks and he hit his head on things along the way—a fire hydrant, a garbage can out of place.

His mind followed. I think he was flashing back to his early life in Texas, when he had been caged and starved. Charlie was rescued at thirty-five pounds, weighed forty-five when I adopted him, and quickly reached his healthy weight of fifty-five. Now, I would come home to see that he had eaten any-

thing he could get his mouth on, odd things, food and not food, like a can of beans. He chewed through the can to get to the beans.

I watched my next-door neighbor carry his aged golden retrievers up the two flights of stairs to his upper level two-flat. I couldn't do that. Not with a fifty-five-pound dog. I could keep Charlie from sliding down the stairs but couldn't carry him back up. I couldn't keep him from hurting himself when he attacked things during his "freak-out times," when his eyes went wild and he spun in circles and crashed into something and then attacked it.

Trent and I had a long talk—was it time to put down Charlie? All that matters is that Trent offered and I took him up on it.

We decided to do it at Mud Lake and bury him in the swamp. The plan was to dig the hole, put Charlie in it, shoot him, and then bury him. Trent paid the teenager across the street \$20 to help dig the hole. It took them a long time because it's hard to stand in the rain and dig mud that clings to your shoes and your shovel. I stayed in the house.

When Trent came inside to get his gun, I offered to do it instead.

"He's my dog. I should do it."

"Have you ever taken a life?"

"No."

"You don't know what it's like. I'll do it."

I heard the shot. Then a second shot. That was all.

When Trent came inside he went right to bed and I lay down beside him and held him. He was crying.

"He knew what I was going to do. I could see it in his eyes."

"I'm sorry."

"He just kept looking at me. His eyes were so sad."

I said nothing. I just held Trent and felt guilty.

No Offers

People came to look at the house at Mud Lake but there were no offers. Jenna said her classmates said it was because the price was too high.

Trent decided to sell his beloved antique tractor. He was asking \$5,000. He was offered \$3,000. The stakes were high. The \$5,000 would cover past due loan payments and keep the house at Mud Lake out of foreclosure, but \$3,000 wouldn't. Trent demanded \$5,000 from the potential buyer and got it—the night before the day the bank would have foreclosed on the house.

It was a tough time for Jenna. She wrote Trent a letter about how bad I was, making him sell his truck (which I did not do) and their home (which I was encouraging him to do). One night they screamed at each other for so long I went outside, took a long walk down Mud Lake Road, and came back only because I got too cold. When I opened the door, they were still yelling. I walked straight to the bedroom, closed the door, and pulled a pillow over my head.

It wasn't all hard. We still had banana pancake mornings, and I still woke up to hear Trent tell me he loved me. Most of the time, though, it was hard. I stopped making mortgage payments for him. It was a question of which would come first—an offer or foreclosure. There were no more antique tractors to sell. Trent dropped the price.

The Piebald

Trent was in Michigan and I was in Chicago. When we spoke on the phone one night, Trent sounded especially happy, and I asked him about it.

“Are you... happy?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad. How come?”

“I danced with the piebald.”

“You what?”

“The piebald. I danced with the piebald today.”

The piebald was a deer Trent had been seeing at Mud Lake. I had never heard of a piebald deer until he explained. A piebald has white on its body, not just the tail and underbelly. They can be all white or splotched with white. The white is caused by a recessive gene rather than parasites or disease. Piebalds usually have brown heads and white splotches on their body, but the one Trent had been seeing had a white head and shoulders, and a brown body. Piebalds are rare, and this coloration was rarer still.

The deer-hunting community has two schools of thought regarding piebalds. One believes they should be killed to preserve the genetic purity of brown deer. The other considers them special, but differs on how to treat that specialness.

Most think the specialness would make a great trophy hanging on the wall. The minority think the specialness should be protected. Trent was in the minority. More than that, Trent thought the piebald was a sacred being honoring his land by choosing to live there.

“How did you dance?”

"He was by the pine tree, the little one by the driveway. We just kind of looked at each other. Then I stepped toward him and he went around the tree. Then I turned around and he went the other way. It was like we were dancing together around the tree."

"Cool. Then what?"

"We stopped and looked at each other. Then he ran back into the brush toward the woods."

Thanksgiving

A few weeks before Thanksgiving, Trent told his mother that he and Jenna wouldn't be coming to her house for Thanksgiving dinner. He said he was forty-three years old and was going to have his own Thanksgiving in his own house. His parents were invited to come to his house, but he wouldn't be going to theirs.

Trent's mother told him he was being selfish. She said he was ruining the family tradition. She made her case, and Trent held to his.

It was looking as if Thanksgiving was just going to be Trent, Jenna, and me, but the day before the holiday, Jean called with news. She told Trent she and her husband Herb would be coming, along with Trent's sister, brother-in-law Kris, aunt Joanne, cousin Steven, and maybe Steven's girlfriend. We borrowed a long folding plastic table and folding chairs from a neighbor. I bought extra milk. We spread out the tablecloth that Trent's mother brought and covered the table with Trent's deep-fried turkey, my oyster stuffing and cranberry salad, and many, many more side dishes they all made and brought. It was a table full of glorious food.

Jean had known I was making stuffing, but brought a huge pan of her own. "We have this every Thanksgiving," she announced. The part of me that is small and mean was irritated.

I don't remember what we talked about over dinner. I do remember how good it felt to have everyone laughing around the long table in Trent's living room. I also remember my stuffing disappeared and Jean's didn't, and I was spitefully glad about that.

After the meal was over and the guests had left, Trent was smiling.

"Baby, I did it! I had a meal where my whole family was together and everyone was happy!"

Hunting Season

Every year, Trent assembled his friends to hunt together. This year, most of the usuals appeared: his cousin Steven, his nephews, and a few friends. Out in the barn, pulling on their waders and their hunting coats, Trent told them, "Do not shoot the piebald."

I hadn't gone to Mud Lake that weekend. I like opening day of deer season, when everyone is happy just to be outside and then to come back inside to eat together. Usually nobody shoots anything. But as the season wears on, the mood shifts. It becomes all about the kill. I called Trent after sundown, when the legal hunters come back inside. Trent sounded far away.

"What's wrong?"

"Mike* shot the piebald."

"What?"

"The piebald. He fuckin' shot the piebald."

"But didn't you tell—"

"Hell, yes, I told him. I told them all."

"Oh, Sweet Baby, I'm so sorry."

We were both quiet for a while.

"What did Mike say?"

"He said he couldn't tell it was the piebald, which is bullshit. If you can't tell what you're shooting at..."

"Did he at least say he was sorry or something?"

"He said he would have it mounted for me."

A few weeks later, when Trent was hauling the barn's giant trash can to the road, something caught his eye. He shifted the garbage to get a better look and saw what he suspected and did not want to see. Shoved to the bottom was the white head of the piebald.

21. Looking

December 2005

Trent and I looked for a place for us to live. His house wasn't selling and mine wasn't yet on the market. Looking wasn't logical—it was an act of faith.

We drove up to northern Michigan to see a small cabin on a river. It was so far out of the way the real estate agent refused to meet us there. The cabin was red, cute, and tidy. We could see the inside because the front door had a snap lock and Trent had a debit card. The house was fine, but the real draw was the clear, cold river that ran along the front of the property. You could sit in the living room and throw a rock into it. Trent and I stood on the riverbank, listened to the water, and said little.

Driving back, we agreed Trent could live there, but I couldn't—it was too isolated. The restaurant, the bar, the gas station, and the grocery store were all one business in one building. Too many residents were missing too many front teeth. Even though I attributed the tooth loss to well water and a lack of fluoride more than a lack of dental hygiene, it bothered me.

As we drove, we developed our criteria for where we would live. It had to be within two hours of Jenna. It had to be on a river or close to one. It had to be near a town that was big enough to have a library. The house had to be well built.

I napped while Trent took a different route back to Mud Lake. He woke me up as we drove through Newaygo, an old brick town on the Muskegon River. Trent said he had driven through the town as a kid on trips coming back home from being up north and he had always liked it. I liked it, too.

When I got back to Chicago, I went online and looked for real estate near Newaygo. There was one house that looked promising but seemed too good to be true. There had to be something majorly wrong with it. Maybe it was in a swamp. I pulled out my detailed Michigan map and tried to figure out the defect. I couldn't tell, and the Google satellite map was at too small a scale to give any clue. I couldn't even see the house—only the little red Google marker in a sea of green trees.

When I told Trent about the house, he said we should go check it out.

December 23, 2005

Christmas 2005 was shaping up to be a hard one. Until this point, Trent and his ex-wife, Doreen,* had made their own adjustments to their custody agreement. The official agreement gave Trent only twenty-four hours on either Christmas Day or Thanksgiving day in alternating years. But Doreen and Trent had always split the holiday in half. If Jenna's school was off for twelve days, Trent and Doreen would each have her for six.

According to the agreement, Trent got Jenna on Thanksgiving Day in odd years and Christmas Day in even years. This year, an odd year, Doreen decided Jenna would not be with Trent at all over Christmas break, but he could see his daughter during the Christmas gathering at his parents' house. It was custody blackmail.

There was no question we were going. Trent would sit in hell for six hours if it meant he could see Jenna.

We drove to Mud Lake on Friday night, speaking little. When we got to the house, there was a piece of paper taped to the front door. "NOTICE" in large type and underneath that, "FORECLOSURE." It was as if we were living a movie script and the director had picked the precise lowest point to bring the hero to his knees.

Neither of us wanted to stay in the foreclosed house on Saturday and simply wait for Sunday, Christmas Day, and Jenna. I don't know if it was Trent or if it was me, but one of us proposed driving up to Newaygo on Saturday to "go look at that house."

Christmas Eve 2005

We left late Saturday morning and headed north. The farther north we went, the more snow there was. I had five listings and Trent's detailed Michigan Counties map, so I navigated and Trent drove.

We got to Newaygo and checked out the listings, working from west to east. I ordered the listings in the same way I order the food on my plate—saving what looked like the best for last.

The first four houses were all the same: flimsy double-wide ranch houses with aluminum siding. Trent didn't like them, either. We saw a "For Sale by Owner" sign, not one of the listings, and turned down a road to check it out.

In a small town like Newaygo, not every road gets plowed in the winter. Some do, right away, like M-82. Some get plowed later, and some not at all. Those that don't get plowed are classified as seasonal roads.

The road we turned down had been plowed, but the arrow on the next sign directed us to another road that hadn't. The snow wasn't deep but it was packed hard, icy.

Trent cried out, "Boys, them roads are a glare of ice!"—something a father of one of his friends used to say—and eased the car onto it. We got stuck and then unstuck. Whatever house was back there wasn't worth seeing. If trying to see it once was hard, living there through the winter would be impossible. Trent turned the car around.

We found 76th Street. It had been plowed, up to a point. We drove to where the plowing stopped, at the crest of a tall hill. Just ahead, we could see the "For Sale" sign at the end of a driveway, peeking out between pine trees. We were at eye level with the sign, a steep decline followed by a steep incline

between us. Trent and I debated how well the Sable would handle the ice. The narrow road, at its lowest point, ran between a frozen pond to the left and a ditch to the right. If the car went off the road on either side, there would be no getting out without a tow truck.

“What do you think?” said Trent.

“It doesn’t look so bad. What do you think?”

“Might as well find out.”

Trent led the car down and maintained enough speed to make it up the incline, then eased into the plowed driveway. It curved between pine trees, then the house came into full view. It was a brown wood house, two stories, with a deep porch. It looked like the kind of house you might see on a Christmas card, set deep in a forest with snow on the roof.

Trent got out of the car and knocked on the front door. He told the man who answered that we were interested in the house and asked the man if he minded if we walked the property. The man said yes, he did mind, and suggested that Trent get the phone number of the real estate agent from the sign at the bottom of the driveway.

Trent called the agent from the gas station. He said he would be happy to show us the house but, because this was Christmas Eve, he wouldn’t be able to show it until Tuesday. Tuesday would be fine, we said.

December 25–26, 2005

Doreen changed her mind about Jenna. After the present-opening at Trent’s parents’ house, she said we could have Jenna that night and the next day. Neither Trent nor I wanted to go back to Mud Lake and the foreclosure notice, so instead

we went to a bed-and-breakfast in Marshall, Michigan. It was a grand old Victorian decorated with evergreens and lights for the holiday.

Because we were the only guests, we took over one end of the long dining room table to play a Monopoly game that spanned two days. The bed-and-breakfast sold branded glass Christmas ornaments, and Trent bought one to remind us of what a good time we had.

December 27, 2005

We stood on the wide front porch of the brown house in the woods. As Trent knocked on the door, I appraised the construction: rough-cut cedar board-and-batten siding and, judging by the depth of the window sills, 2×6 frame walls. It looked well made.

The agent opened the door. He was a large man with a big belly, wearing a blazer for the occasion. We were careful to stamp the snow off our boots before going inside. I was relieved to see that knotty pine was reserved for the east and west walls. North and south walls were drywall, painted white.

Even though the black bear hanging on the fieldstone fireplace vied for my attention, I focused on the house, not the decor. I ignored the aquamarine sculpted carpet and overstuffed floral-print couch and matching armchair.

The house was well designed, with a two-story great room. The kitchen was open to the dining area and looked back into the woods. The wide porch that ran across the front of the house turned the corner and ran along the side and back as well.

The glass doors in the dining room opened onto the back porch, the backyard, and the woods. At this time of year, the view was mostly white with vertical stripes of brown and green. I could smell pine in the cold air.

I watched Trent stare at the porch and knew what he was doing. He was counting, calculating the width. He told me later that the porch was eight feet wide and, given that it wrapped three sides of the house, about a hundred feet long. He said the eight hundred square feet of porch increased the living space by half.

One bedroom and bath were downstairs, with another pair upstairs. The upstairs loft looked out over the great room and the massive stone fireplace that rose all the way to the peaked ceiling.

We went down to the basement. The walls had no cracks. It didn't feel damp, and we could see no sign that it had ever been wet. Trent commented on this, and the agent explained that it was almost impossible to have a damp basement in this part of Newaygo. The soil is so sandy the water runs right through it. Trent and I exchanged a quick glance of relief.

In the Mud Lake house, you can drink the tap water only if you hold your nose. I solved the problem by bringing in bottled water. Trent solved it by drinking beer.

We asked about the water, and the agent said the house had a deep well with a four-inch-diameter pipe for a good supply. Trent then asked about water quality. The agent explained that the Ice Mountain bottling plant was just up the road—the water that came out of the faucet was good enough to bottle and sell.

The agent drew water from the tap and handed the glass to Trent, who took a swallow and passed it to me. The crystal clear water was cold and fresh. It was and still is the best water I have ever tasted.

We took a walk out back along a narrow path that snaked through the trees. The agent led the way until he ran out of breath and I took over. The snow was deep and the land sloped upward. The agent opted to rest while Trent and I explored.

We turned back after fifteen or twenty minutes because we had learned what we wanted to know: only one other house was visible from the property and you could hardly see it. When the trees had leaves, you wouldn't be able to see it at all.

The agent then showed us another listing, a white house, similar in price and style but twice as big and poorly built. We stood in the drafty living room and told the agent we had seen as much as we wanted to.

We said we'd think about the first house, the brown one. In the car, we determined that it and the detached oversized garage would be perfect. Yes, the garage needed insulation, but Trent could do that even though he hated working with fiberglass. We didn't like the kitchen's Formica countertops, but those would be easy enough to change out. The thick pine cabinets were well made, and maybe handmade.

We both liked the place so much we stopped talking about it. We didn't want to get our hopes up. Trent's house still needed to sell. Mine wasn't even on the market yet. We drove the rest of the way back to Mud Lake in silence.

22. Balance Sheet

December 29, 2005

Trent came into the house at Mud Lake to find me sitting at the dining room table with a white legal pad in front of me. I had completed my math exercise and was pleased with the result. Trent was wary. He remembered what happened the last time he saw me at this table with a legal pad and a list of numbers. He waited for me to speak.

"I've been doing some figuring."

"I can see that."

"Well, you know how we've been thinking that we need to sell your house or my house before we can buy a house for us?"

"Yep."

"I don't think we have to."

"What do you mean?"

"I think I can get another mortgage without selling my house first. Like people do when they buy a vacation house."

Trent didn't say anything so I kept going.

"We could do it backward. I could buy the second house and then sell the first house."

Trent still didn't say anything so I said what I hadn't been saying.

"I think we can buy the brown house."

Trent paused.

"You sure?"

"I have to talk to my mortgage guy to be sure, but I think so."

Trent thought for a moment, looking down. When his face came back up his eyes were bright.

“Well, hell, what are we waiting for!”

December 30, 2005

I called my lender, John Johnson. He had done the mortgage on my little six-hundred-square-foot house in Naperville and on the Chicago two-flat. We talked it through and came up with a strategy. Even though I could carry both mortgages, I didn't want to. I wanted to sell the Chicago two-flat quickly.

I wasn't that worried about selling the two-flat because by this point I had bought and sold two houses on my own—the Naperville house and one in Minnesota. I'd sold two more houses if you count the two with the man in the purple suspenders, but I'd rather forget about those.

My Minnesota house had sold in one day, at list. The Naperville house sold in a week for 97 percent of list. The secret to selling a house quickly is accurate pricing, good staging, and perfectly clean bathrooms. If you mix up pricing with how you feel about your home, you will price it too high and waste time. If you really want to move, then price it to sell. I know how to sell a house fast. And for some reason, I felt a powerful sense of urgency.

I told Trent that John Johnson said the deal would work. Trent called the real estate agent to schedule time for us to go back and see the brown house again, just to be sure. The agent was booked on Saturday but said we could see it Sunday, New Year's Day.

Trent called Jenna to see whether she wanted to see it. She did.

January 1, 2006

We liked the brown house even more the second time. We did notice, however, that despite the listing saying it had three bedrooms, it had only two. I figured they were counting the loft but since it didn't have a door or a closet, they shouldn't have.

Jenna wanted to know which bedroom would be hers when she visited. Trent told her it would be the downstairs one. We both tried not to react to the idea of Jenna visiting. She had come to Mud Lake or Chicago every other weekend in 2004, but that had pretty much stopped in 2005, when Jenna said she didn't want to see her father anymore and Doreen said she didn't have to. I had wasted my time drawing up visitation schedules and giving them to Trent to give to Doreen. Trent had wasted his time at the lawyer's office.

The lawyer told Trent that since Jenna was almost thirteen, if she didn't want to see her father, she didn't have to. Trent pushed his case with Doreen, but all she said was "Jenna doesn't want to see you, and I'm not going to make her." So, as we walked around the brown house with Jenna, Trent tried not to get his hopes up.

We had agreed we would look only at the brown house with Jenna. Trent surprised me when he asked her if she wanted to see the white house down the road. I thought this was unwise but said nothing. I didn't understand then, but all he wanted was more time. More time with his daughter. More seconds, more minutes, more of a chance. Other than the Thanksgiving dinner and the two days at Christmas, Trent hadn't seen Jenna in more than six months. He wasn't ready to start the drive back to Battle Creek. Not yet.

Jenna liked the white house better. She didn't see the poor construction. She saw soaring ceilings and four bedrooms. Maybe she saw parties with her friends. Trent explained that the white house would use more propane in one month than the brown house would use in three. Jenna was unmoved. In the car, Jenna started pleading to buy the white house instead. I said nothing for several minutes. Then I spoke up, wondering if I would regret it later.

"Trent, does Jenna have a vote?"

"What?"

"In the decision about which house we buy, does Jenna have a vote?"

"No. She doesn't. You and I have a vote."

"Then why did you even bring me up here?" Jenna wailed.

"I wanted you to see where we're going to live."

Jenna put in her earbuds, tucked her head down, and listened to her music. Trent and I were quiet for a while and then started talking softly about the brown house.

January 2-3, 2006

On Monday, we made an offer. Trent is a better negotiator than I am, but in this case, neither of us was very good. The problem was that we weren't willing to walk away, and if you're not willing to walk, you've given away your negotiating power. On Tuesday we agreed to a price—only \$1,000 less than list.

We wandered around looking at snack food and soda bottles in a convenience store, waiting for the faxed confirmation to come through. When it did, Trent turned to me.

"Congratulations, Sweet Baby, you just bought a house for your birthday!"

He was right. It was my birthday. I had almost forgotten.

We went back to Mud Lake and celebrated the brown house in Newaygo and me.

23. I Did It

January–February 2006

After I signed the contract but before we moved in, Trent's night kicking got worse. It had subsided over the last year, but suddenly it and the nightmares were back every night. One night in Chicago, he hit me hard in the shin. I moved to the bed in the other room. He woke me another night. But this time, instead of being on his side with his back to me and kicking off the bed, he was on his back and kicking both legs up toward the ceiling. And he was talking.

"I did it. I did it. I did it. I did it."

At first I thought he was talking in his sleep, which he had done sometimes when he had nightmares. But he was awake, with his eyes squeezed shut and tears coming out the corners.

"You did what?"

"I did it."

"What did you do?"

"I did it."

"What?"

Trent clenched his right fist and drew it, thumb down, across his abdomen. I could imagine the long-bladed knife he had held years earlier.

"You cut yourself?"

"I did it."

"With a knife?"

"Yeah."

"Because you wanted your parents to come and tell you they were wrong and they loved you."

"Yeah."

"But they didn't come. And you knew they weren't going to."

"No... They wouldn't."

"What happened?"

"I drove myself to the hospital. The doctors knew I did it. They said, 'You did this,' but I said, 'No, I was in a fight. A bar fight.' They knew I was lying, but I wasn't going to tell them. They would just put me away. They knew, but I didn't tell them. They stitched me up and let me go."

I held him, and we both cried. We cried for a long time.

A Bullet

It was a Saturday morning and we were at Mud Lake. I was sitting at the dining room table, having cereal for breakfast. Trent was outside, saying goodbye to Mike, who had visited the day before and stayed the night.

Even before he killed the piebald, I had never liked Mike, at first because he borrowed Trent's things and returned them broken, without apology or offer of compensation. After Trent told me a few more stories about him, I liked him even less.

The dining room table was lit up with sunlight through the window and I was feeling happy. Mike was leaving, which was good. Trent and I had found the brown house in Newaygo,

which was also good. It seemed we would soon be living in the same place, which would be very good.

I finished my cereal and relaxed in the captain's chair. My heart lifted and mingled with the sunlight in the room. Resting my head on the back of the chair, a smile stretched across my face. And then something on the ceiling—a glint—caught my eye. My mouth went dry, my skin felt cold. I stood and looked at the glint but wasn't positive it was what I thought it might be. I climbed on the chair to get a closer look.

It was sunk into the drywall, with enough of the butt showing to identify it. A bullet. It wasn't a big bullet like you see on television or in the movies. It was small and golden, almost elegant.

I fell into the chair and my heart kept falling. My stomach rolled. I thought about Trent's headaches and nightmares and the kicking, which had been bad ever since we found the brown house. I thought about a man who treated me so sweetly but who had so little regard for himself.

Trent came inside and with a "Good morning, Sweet Baby" sat down in the chair I had just stood on. I had my question ready but wasn't ready for wherever it might take us.

"How did the bullet get in the ceiling?"

My words wiped the smile from his face. He looked at me, weighing either my ability to hear what he had to say or his ability to say it.

"A gun put it there."

"How did a gun put it there?"

"I shot it there."

"Why did you shoot the ceiling?"

"Because Mike convinced me to shoot the ceiling instead."

My stomach turned.

“What were you going to shoot?”

Trent didn’t answer right away. I waited.

“Last night, Mike and I were sitting here. I said that I didn’t know if God wanted me alive or dead. So I put a bullet in the gun, spun the chamber, and put the gun to my head. I said that if I shot the gun and I was still alive, then God wanted me alive. But if I shot the gun and I died, then God wanted me dead. Mike said I didn’t have to die to find out if God wanted me dead. Mike said I could just shoot the gun and if it fired a bullet, I would know God wanted me dead.”

Trent looked up at the ceiling.

“There’s the bullet. God wants me dead.”

He looked stricken as he said it.

I countered, “Or you could say God put Mike here to convince you to shoot the ceiling instead, and God wants you alive.”

“There’s a bullet in the ceiling. Proof. God wants me dead.”

“That’s not how I see it. If God wanted you dead, you’d be dead already. As long as you’re living, God wants you alive.”

Trent said nothing more. I didn’t know what else to say. I got up from my chair, fit myself into his lap, wrapped my arms around him, and wondered if we would make it to Newygo.

Split Open

I don’t know how someone takes an eight-inch knife to his own abdomen and stabs himself fifteen or twenty times. I do, however, have a pretty good idea of what it would look like.

The man in the purple suspenders ate pasta almost every night. His favorite was linguini with clams in a garlicky butter

sauce. He was an excellent cook. One night, the man had bad stomach pains. He looked yellow. I said I should take him to the hospital. He said no, he was going to be fine.

I thought about not taking him and letting him die, because I was pretty sure something was very wrong with him, not because of the pains but because of the yellow. All of him looked yellow—even the whites of his eyes were yellow. Because I didn't want to feel guilty if he died, I took him to the emergency room.

"Pasta is Elmer's glue for the intestines," said the doctor. The man in the purple suspenders' intestines had gotten stuck together. The food he ate couldn't pass through. It jammed until his intestines burst. That made him yellow. The doctor said if I hadn't brought the man to the ER, he would have been dead in four hours.

The doctor said the yellow man needed surgery, but the man wanted to wait until morning. "No," said the doctor. "We have to do it now," and he called for the surgeon.

My job was going to be wound care, so right away the nurses started teaching me how to change the dressing. Eight pieces of gauze had to be soaked in saline, drained, and then placed in the man's wound. His belly looked like a giant cantaloupe with a slice missing. The nurses told me I would need less gauze as the wound healed.

When the nurses were gone, the man in the purple suspenders asked me what it looked like, this slash in his body. I told him that just under the skin was a thick layer of yellow fat that looked like chicken fat, only not as shiny. At the bottom, where the two sides of the missing slice came together, stitches held his abdominal muscles together.

The day he was to be discharged, the man in the purple suspenders told me I was wrong, that there wasn't yellow fat under his skin, it was pink flesh. I held my tongue.

I wanted to say, "You stupid idiot. It's fat, and the reason it looks pink rather than yellow is because your body has already started vascularizing it so it can heal. You can thank me for changing your dressing, and you can thank me for taking you to the ER, because I was tempted to let you die."

This is what I thought about as I held Trent. I thought about how his abdominal muscles would have contracted as he stabbed himself. The blade would have sliced through his skin and his fat but wouldn't have gone very deep into his muscle.

I wondered what his abdomen must have looked like, crisscrossed with stab wounds. I wondered how many stitches it had taken to sew all those slashes back together. I wondered about the places where his scars joined and made triangles, and if the stitches were the only thing that kept those pieces from falling out.

24. Coming Home

March 24, 2006

In February, my Chicago two-flat went on the market and sold in two days at list price, for 9.7 percent more than I paid three years earlier. Then we closed on the brown house in Newaygo and set the move-in date for March 1. Because of work, I would stay in the two-flat until March 25, keeping just what I needed and sleeping on an air mattress borrowed from Trent's camping supplies. Trent moved into the Newaygo house immedi-

ately after the closing. The Mud Lake house was in a dual status: for sale and scheduled for auction.

Finally, it was time for me to follow Trent to Newaygo. The last thing I did before leaving work was call him to say I would be there around eleven that night. Trent reminded me about the dip in the road being blocked with flooding and said he would leave a canoe out so I could get across. He told me to be sure to have my flashlight handy and to remember how dark the country is at night. I had forgotten about the flooding.

That winter had been strange in Newaygo. It had stormed a few days earlier. What normally would have been snow had been ten to twelve inches of rain. Because the ground was frozen, the rain had nowhere to go. It filled the low parts in the land to make lakes that rose and spilled over roads and kept rising.

Earlier that day, Trent had paddled the new lake that straddled the road, checking it out. He had dipped his four-foot paddle into the water but couldn't touch bottom.

Only five homes are on the dirt road to the house in Newaygo, and all are on the south side of the road. As you drive 76th Street, they pass by on your right: the manufactured home, the tilted trailer, the ranch house with the straight driveway, the big house with the curved driveway, and finally the brown house (now ours). The road runs level until you get to the driveway for the big house, where it takes a sharp dip. Then it comes back up again to get to our driveway. The big dip between the neighbor's house and ours was where the rain had made a lake that was over four feet deep.

On the drive to Newaygo, the roads started out wet but switched to white packed snow on 76th Street. It wasn't too

slippery. At the crest of the hill by the neighbor's house, I slowed, not sure where the lake would begin.

It was close. The road was narrow, so I pulled my car as far off the road as I could, tilting up on the embankment that rose to the right. The canoe was waiting, shiny silver in my headlights. I grabbed my flashlight and pulled the key from the ignition. The headlights went out, the world went black. I couldn't see the lake or the canoe or even the switch on my flashlight. I opened the car door to trigger the dome light, turned on the flashlight, and got out of the car. The air was damp and cold.

The dome light went off when I closed the car door. Dark covered everything. Turning my back on the car filled with things from my former life, I pointed the flashlight at the lake.

The idea of paddling across the water in a canoe in the dark was not appealing. If I fell out, it would be cold, and if I couldn't touch the bottom, my clothes would make it hard to swim across. I thought about walking around the lake, but it was big and I would be walking through woods in the dark. Paddling across was the better of two lousy options.

After moving the front of the canoe into the water, I took the paddle out from under the seat, got into the canoe, and pushed off. It was quiet and cold and dark. I couldn't see the car I had left and could barely see the light from our house through the trees. I spoke aloud, to myself.

"Jule, what have you done?"

I don't remember any more of that night, only waking up the next morning. Trent was looking at me, smiling. Because he didn't speak, I did.

"Good morning, Sweet Baby."

Trent's smile stretched even further. "You're here. You're really here."

"You didn't think I would come?"

"Unh-uh."

It made me sad because he was telling the truth—Trent really thought I wouldn't come. That realization made me understand why, once he had moved in, he never left, never once came to Chicago or went to Mud Lake. He was using himself as bait.

"I'm here, Sweet Baby, I'm really here."

Trent laughed and grabbed me and hugged me.

"If you wanted to leave, you'd have to paddle your way out!"

Trent explained his theory of why the road to our house had flooded. Paving the road that led to 76th Street had changed the drainage. He told me how he had walked the woods to track where the water had come from. He followed a newborn stream through the woods until he came out the other side, at a farm, where the flow of water had uprooted the frozen cornstalks.

We stayed in bed a long time, talking and smiling. We were together and we were home.

TOGETHER

25. Newaygo Mantra

April 2006

It was in our bedroom in Newaygo where Trent and I started saying two sentences that became our mantra.

We said it only when we were in bed, lying on our backs, Trent with his hands either behind his head or one arm down by his side. If his right hand was down by his side, then my left hand rested in his cupped palm. My left little, fourth, and middle toes touched the top rounded part of Trent's ankle.

"We're going to love each other forever," Trent would say.

And I would respond, "Sometimes I think we got born just so we could touch each other."

I don't know if you can really love someone forever or if you can be born just to touch someone. But I don't know that you can't.

We both experienced some culture shock when we first got to Newaygo. Trent's was at the RadioShack, where he had gone to figure out why we were getting only one television channel.

"What's it take to get TV reception around here?"

"An antenna!"

"I got one. But I'm only getting one channel."

"Huh. You should be getting two."

When Trent got back home, he realized we were indeed getting both channels—it was just hard to tell because they were showing the same programming.

My culture shock came at the bank, the second time I walked in. All three tellers greeted me by name. I had been banking at Citibank for twenty years and not one person there knew me. Trent and I would have no secrets at the bank in Newaygo.

We started keeping notes of the things we found amusing, frustrating, or just plain weird.

Getting directions: "Excuse me, do you know where the library is?"

"Yep, right across from where the hotel burned down."

"Oh no. When did it burn?"

"1962."

At the courthouse, from a fellow citizen: "My neighbor owe me 500 dollar because his dawg ate my goat but he ain' payin' it and the judge said my goat's worth 500 dollar. He got to pay me my 500 dollar."

At the courthouse, from a police officer (regarding someone they had put in jail the night before): "Couldn't put him in the car. Too big. Had to go get the van and put him in back."

On a sign in a front yard:

BUNNIES FOR SALE

\$8 Living, \$10 Dead

On a paper plate tacked to a cork board (in a store that sold beer, pizza, gas, ammo, ice cream, and bait):

KAR 4 SALE IT RUN GOOD WHEN YOU JUMP IT

We had gotten ourselves to Newaygo, a strange and wonderful place. But we couldn't rest yet. We still had to sell the house in Mud Lake or watch it slip away into foreclosure. The wheels were turning on both at the same time.

26. Ashes

April–May 2006

The house at Mud Lake went up for foreclosure auction. There were no bidders. The next day, Trent's real estate agent called. Someone had made an offer on the house.

Trent initially wanted to turn it down because he thought it was too low. Elaine had warned me about this. She said a part of Trent believed he didn't deserve good. He would prefer familiar misery to unfamiliar ease.

I pointed out that it was the only offer, that the house was in foreclosure, that the offer would cover the mortgage and then some. Trent's choice was to accept the offer and take the money, or decline it and walk away with nothing but a debt. I reminded him that whether he accepted the offer or not, either way, he was losing the house.

The closing was set for Friday, May 5. The requirement to close was that the house and barn be clean and empty by noon, Saturday, May 6.

When Trent and Doreen bought the house in 1991, it had been full. Trent called the previous owners pack rats. Now we call them hoarders. Trent cleaned out the front third of the barn, where the cement floor was, but never entirely emptied the back two-thirds.

Both of us knew how difficult it would be to meet the closing condition. I no longer thought of the house at Mud Lake as a building of wood and concrete. It was a spiteful ex-lover who would rather have us dead than gone.

Trent got to work. He spent April at Mud Lake, not Newaygo. I came on the weekends except for the last week, when I came on Wednesday. Trent was on the phone with Mike.

"I told you years ago to get your boat out of my barn. Get it now or I'm selling it."

This was Mike's 28-foot motorboat. He kept it in Trent's barn because it was free storage. Mike came and got it. As Trent and I worked, we sorted things into three piles: Newaygo, garage sale, or trash. Most things went to garage sale or trash, but sometimes I found something worthy of the Newaygo pile. When I discovered four wool blankets, folded and musty on an old wooden table at the back of the barn, I asked Trent where they had come from. When he said they were O.T.'s, they went right past the Newaygo pile into the safety of my car.

The garage sale went well because Trent had the right attitude and strategy—price it to sell it. We both knew that anything unsold would have to be trashed. The fiberglass ice-fishing house with the canvas cover went for \$100.

The trash items that would burn went into the burn pile, a hole in the ground the size of a quarter of a football field. For days, we carried things out of the barn to the burn pile until the hole was filled. Then it became a hill.

May 5, 2006

On Friday afternoon, May 5, we went to the closing, filthy. When we got back to Mud Lake, Trent poured gasoline on the burn pile. Then we went back to work, hauling more dusty things out of the barn. That night, Trent shoved pieces of cardboard into the pile in strategic locations and lit them. He said that usually when he lit a burn pile, he did it with flaming arrows, but the bows were already in Newaygo. The fire started slowly. Small flames licked up from the cardboard, like orange lights on a poorly lit Christmas tree.

"What will we do if it doesn't burn?"

Trent kept his eyes on the spots of flame. "It'll burn."

We watched it for a few minutes. Not much seemed to happen. A couple spots of flame looked a little bigger, maybe. Suddenly, the entire pile burst into flame. It was so bright and so hot we had to step back. It got even hotter, and the flames stretched even higher into the night sky. I looked at the fire and then at the barn, maybe twenty yards away.

"Will the barn be okay?"

"Should be. She's done this before."

I went back inside the house to finish cleaning the kitchen. Even though it was going to be gutted, I didn't want the buyers to have any reason to walk away when they did their closing inspection. Trent came back inside the house.

"Sweet Baby, you've never seen me ride. I want you to see how I can climb trees."

I went outside and stood on the back stoop.

Trees lined the border between the backyard grass and the swamp. The moon must have been full because I could see the trees as dark sentries in the gray smoke. The bright-white

headlight of the three-wheeler came out of the barn. Trent was a black shadow, backlit by smoke and fire.

He drove the three-wheeler up the trunk of a tree until he was about four or five feet off the ground, then rolled back to tackle another. It was a beautiful melding of man and machine, and for the first time, I understood why Trent loved it. He wasn't just climbing trees. He was dancing. I watched him until the headlight turned away and he disappeared into the swamp.

After finishing scrubbing the kitchen, spending too much time on the worn pine cabinets, I ran a sponge over both bathrooms, then fell into bed. When I woke up in the night, the red numbers of the digital clock showed it was just after three o'clock. Trent was not beside me.

Wandering out to the dining room, I could see Trent on the other side of the glass, tending to a fire. He wasn't tending the burn pile. That one had burned quickly, leaving only black ash. This was a different one. It wasn't back by the barn but in the backyard, on the grass. The fire was small, about the size of a keg of beer. Trent rested on a long pole, then lifted it to stir the fire.

The outside air was cooler than it had been earlier. I stood next to Trent and felt him wobble from exhaustion.

"Let me do this for a while."

"I got it."

"You look like you're ready to fall over. I've at least had some sleep. I'll do it."

He leaned the long pole toward me and I took it. He said, "Keep turning it, so it burns," then walked to the house. I watched until he was safely inside, then turned to the fire.

It was a quiet night. The fog had cleared and thin lines of smoke curled toward the stars. A car stopped on the road in front of the house. I didn't know if it was a police car or a curious neighbor. I ran the pole through the fire and stood tall, as if I knew what I was doing. Minutes later, when I looked back toward the road, the car was still there. Many more minutes later, it was gone.

I stirred the fire until the sky turned pale and there was nothing left but ashes.

May 6, 2006

My car and Trent's truck were loaded with whatever we were taking to Newaygo. Everything else had been taken, sold, or burned.

I wanted to leave and get to Newaygo, but Trent wanted to stay and hand the keys to the new owners. I was too tired to argue. They were either tardy or allowed extra time to be sure we were gone when they got there. Instead of noon, they came at one fifteen.

The buyers were a young couple, with both sets of parents accompanying them. Trent offered the group a beer. The young couple, to be polite, accepted. The parents declined, then one of the fathers changed his mind and said he'd have one. The arm that distributed the beers was dirty, as was the rest of him. Both of us, our clothes and our skins, were blotched with sweat and soot. Trent's hair looked brown.

A few swigs of beer were drunk and Trent handed over the keys. Then one of the fathers, the one without the beer, spoke.

"You can go now."

Trent laughed and the father said it again. "You can go now."

I took Trent's arm and walked us to our vehicles.

When we got to Newaygo, Trent took the downstairs shower and I took the one upstairs, making the pleasant discovery that the hot water heater could handle both at once.

It was midafternoon but we went straight to bed and slept the dead sleep of the exhausted. I slept for twenty-one hours, Trent for twenty-four.

27. Tamarack Creek

May 2006

At the closing for the Mud Lake house, one of the line items to be paid by the seller was a fee to the mortgage company to remove the house from foreclosure. This fee was in addition to the back payments owed that were also to be paid by the seller. The fees reduced what Trent walked away with by half.

After we woke, Trent said he wanted to go shopping. He wanted to buy kayaks. I understood. I had done something similar, after some stock my grandmother had given me fell until what had been worth several thousand dollars was worth three hundred. I sold the stock and bought a guitar. Trent bought four beige kayaks (two for us, two for other people we might go kayaking with), four life vests, four paddles, and two wetbags.

At the store, Trent told the salesperson we had been kayaking on the Muskegon and wanted to try something new—what about Tamarack Creek? She said she had never kayaked Tamarack but others had, there should be enough

water this time of year, and it would be cold if we fell out but we should be fine.

She was wrong.

Alarms have gone off in my head about situations and people and places, but I have trained myself to ignore them. I tell myself everything is fine, I am fine, everything will be okay.

I stayed on Tamarack Creek even though the alarms were wailing.

The plan was to get to the creek by eight in the morning, because Trent and the person at the kayak store calculated the trip would take eight hours. We were late. We had bought a Jeep to replace the Sable, and this was our first time putting the Yakima rack on the Jeep, and putting the kayaks on the rack, and gathering all our gear. Trent had taught me previously to “always put your ID and twenty bucks in your life vest,” and I was pleased I had remembered without his prompt. But the process was slow, and we didn’t pull off M-82 onto the dirt road that led to the put-in point until about nine in the morning.

Whenever I go on adventures, I keep a dual-column account in my head, a list of things working for or against me. Today, being an hour late was a checkmark on the negative side. But the day was sunny and warm and we were both feeling good. I put a checkmark on the positive side and figured we were even.

Trent and I each had canoeing experience. Mine was minor, a few backpacking and canoe trips in the Boundary Waters of Minnesota and Canada. Trent’s was extensive, canoeing the Kalamazoo and all over Mud Lake and the

streams that run in and out of it. We had both kayaked only twice.

I had lobbied with Trent that our first trip in our new kayaks not be on water we'd never been on before, but didn't push it. Trent wanted a fresh experience on the Tamarack, and I went along. I figured the worst that could happen was we would get wet.

Of the four kayaks we had bought, two were long (14 feet) and two were short (11 feet). We decided we'd use the longs on the Muskegon and the shorts on smaller rivers where we'd need better maneuverability. We brought the shorts to the Tamarack.

We put on our life vests—mine was bright yellow; Trent's was khaki colored. As we slid the kayaks into the water, Trent reminded me that kayaks are unsteady and to be sure to step into the middle of the boat. The narrow creek ran between steep wooded banks. The previous winter had seen lots of snow, which was followed that spring by a lot of rain. The water was high and fast and cold.

I got into my kayak ungracefully but successfully and was pleased. The first hurdle had been cleared. Waiting for Trent to get into his kayak, I held on to a branch on the bank so the current wouldn't carry me downstream. Something behind me made a splash, and I turned carefully to see Trent hauling his kayak back up the bank to a different put-in spot. He was wet. That was a mark in the negative column. The tally was no longer even.

We kayaked the short distance from the put-in point to under the overpass for M-82. The flat bare earth under the overpass was a popular place to fish, but no one was fishing

that morning. The sun came through the leaves in dappled light. The air was fresh.

Deadfalls

A deadfall is a tree that has died and fallen across the water, partially or completely obstructing progress down the river. We soon came to our first deadfall, a large leafless tree stretching from one bank to the other, with too little clearance to kayak beneath. We angled our kayaks to the bank on one side of the creek, pulled them out, hauled them past the deadfall, and put them back in the water.

Each of the kayaks weighed fifty-one pounds, the paddles were two pounds or so, the wetbags a few more pounds. Water in a kayak added eight pounds per gallon. Hauling the kayaks around a deadfall was hard physical labor.

The creek makes sharp turns as it flows to Croton Dam Pond, lurching from right to left like a drunk in a narrow alley. The turns meant we could never see farther ahead than ten yards, twenty if we were lucky. We came around a turn to see a huge deadfall, but with enough clearance to pass underneath on one side. We paddled to the clearance, folded ourselves forward in our kayaks, and let the water carry us under the trunk and beyond the deadfall. The next one came fast. Trent paddled quickly to get ahead of me. He said we could clear it underneath, but not by folding forward, because our backs would get scratched, maybe hung up in the tree. He said we needed to scooch down in our kayaks, face up like a kid in a bathtub. I scooched as low as I could and watched the bark pass inches from my face.

Sitting up, we both saw the creek straighten out, leading to a series of deadfalls. We exchanged discouraged but resolute glances. These deadfalls were smaller trees with lots of branches that denied passage. The right bank was steep rock, so we paddled to the left. Again we pulled our kayaks out of the water, hauled them through the brush, and put them back in the creek.

My accounting was recording more checkmarks in the negative column, one for every deadfall. But I awarded us one in the positive column for getting so good at getting our kayaks out of the water and back in again.

We paddled through an open stretch of water and saw a man standing in the trees of his backyard. He had probably come down to the creek to see what was making all the noise. He called out to us.

"Where you headed?"

"Croton Pond."

"Oh."

"Think it's about eight hours?"

"Maybe... twelve."

Four check marks in the negative, one for every extra hour. I looked ahead, saw more deadfalls, and decided it was time to stop the accounting. This trip wasn't fun. It was work and I needed to concentrate.

Slammed

I was feeling pretty good about how well we were moving our kayaks. Some of the deadfalls came only part way into the narrow creek, and we could paddle around them. Some had enough clearance for us to go under. The rest we portaged

around. Besides the deadfalls, I was worried about three things: water, exhaustion, and darkness. We were expending a lot of energy paddling and portaging to get around deadfalls.

We would need food, which we had enough of, and water, which we didn't. Since our trip length had increased by fifty percent, I wasn't sure we were physically up to the challenge. And since the trip would take twelve hours and it was about ten o'clock in the morning, we would be kayaking the last four hours in the dark. I didn't know if that was even possible.

The world became tiny. It included a creek, a steep bank on one side with woods all around, two people in two kayaks, and at least one of whom didn't know what to do. I decided to think about what to do after the next deadfall, which was coming up fast.

The tree was larger than some but not huge. The trunk was maybe the size of a telephone pole and lay along the surface of the water, dipping into it on the left side. It looked as if there was enough room between where it went under the water and the bank to paddle around it on the left. Angling my kayak to the open space, I dug my paddle into the water and pulled. But the water swirling around the deadfall and the rocks beneath made strange eddies that grabbed the back end of my kayak and turned me ninety degrees. I couldn't get the kayak back in line, even though I paddled as hard as I could. My kayak was being pulled sideways into the deadfall.

The kayak hit the side of the tree hard, but it and I were both okay. When you're kayaking downstream, you don't realize how quickly the water is moving. When you're stopped and the water is punching your kayak against a deadfall, you realize it's a lot faster than you thought. I was stuck.

If I tried to get out of the kayak on the high side, where the water was coming from, the water would slam me into the kayak. The only option was to climb out onto the tree. I got my arms curled around the top of the tree, but as I pulled myself out, the reduced weight in the boat allowed the water to grab my kayak and flip it. The top half of my body was curled around the tree, the bottom half was in the water, the rushing creek pounding my kayak into my back and pulling at my legs.

It took everything I had just to hang on to the tree, to not let the water suck me under. I've always had strong legs but weaker upper body strength. I tried to pull myself up onto the tree, but it was like trying to do a pull-up with a weightlifter hanging from my legs. Somehow, the water swept the kayak away, and I saw my little beige boat slip ahead of me and get caught in the next deadfall. It felt good not to have the kayak pounding my back anymore, but I still had a problem.

I wasn't going to be able to pull myself up. I would have to let go of the tree, push myself down into the water, let the water take me under, and then swim up to the surface. If I waited too long to let go, I would be too exhausted to execute the move. If I didn't push down hard enough, the life vest would keep me afloat and the river would pummel my head into the tree trunk. I hoped there weren't any branches under the tree that might hang me up and keep me under longer than I could stay there. I was getting ready to let go when Trent spoke.

"Stay there."

He was on the rock ledge to my right, stepping out onto the tree. I didn't watch, partly because it was too hard to turn my head, and mainly because I didn't want to think about how

the tree trunk was just barely wider than his boot and what would happen if he fell off. I hung on until I felt Trent's hands grab my shoulders, pull me up, and drag me back to the rock ledge. We stood there, backs flat against the rock, catching our breath, looking at the water. We both now knew that getting wet wasn't the worst that could happen.

Under

Other people, more psychologically healthy people, would have called it quits. I was wet, I was cold, I was tired. My arms ached from hanging on to the tree, my back hurt from being pummeled by the kayak. But I didn't want to be the reason we stopped the adventure. I didn't want to be the weak link.

We picked our way down the rock and into the water, on the other side of the deadfall that had nearly done me in. Our kayaks were trapped against the next deadfall, and we swam to them. As I got close, I noticed my wetbag was missing from the front of the kayak. The four buckles were still there, locked into their rigging clips, but the bag was gone. The water had ripped it away.

Back in our kayaks, we approached another deadfall with whitewater swirling around it. This time I was determined not to get slammed into a tree. As the creek grabbed the back of my kayak and spun it around, I readied myself. When the kayak got within a few feet of the deadfall, I slipped out of the boat and into the swirling water. I dove under, swam a few strokes, then popped out on the other side of the deadfall. I called back to Trent.

"Go under. It's easier."

Trent slid out of his boat and went under the water. I waited for him to pop up, but he didn't. It seemed to take longer than it should have. He finally came up, close to me. His face was red with blood and he couldn't see. I grabbed his arm and led him to the bank, pulling him toward a small ledge. I left him there and rescued our kayaks. When I got back, dragging the boats, Trent had taken off his T-shirt and was wiping his face with it. Luckily, the gash was across his eyebrow and not anyplace worse. He sat on the ledge and I stood, surveying our situation. The banks on both sides of the creek were steep rock—we wouldn't be able to climb out. There was no option but to go back onto the water.

Out

We paddled around a couple of small deadfalls, then spotted a patch of grass on a low rise of earth. It was the landing point for a beautiful house with a backyard that sloped gently to the creek. We had been paddling in deep shade from the trees, but this was a sunny clearing. It was a perfect spot to get out.

I landed my kayak, stretched my legs, enjoyed the sun on my face, and waited for Trent to join me. He pulled up alongside the bank but didn't get out of his kayak.

"I think we should get out here," I said.

"Why?"

"Because you're bleeding."

"I'm fine."

"You might be fine, but I'm not. I want to stop."

"But we're going to Croton."

I looked at the blood coming through the T-shirt tied around his head and realized the wound may have damaged more than just flesh.

"We're not going to Croton. We're not going to make it."

"We can make it."

"It going to get dark, Trent. It's already after twelve and we're not even halfway there."

"I think we can make it."

"If you go, you're going alone. I'm getting out here."

This was the first time he appeared to consider my proposal.

"But we don't know where we are."

"We don't. But we know that M-82 is south of here and south is that way."

I gestured toward the sun, then reached down and pulled my kayak to the higher ground of the mown grass of the backyard. Trent followed. We dragged our kayaks through their backyard, leaving a marked trail in the grass. When we got to the front yard and dropped the kayaks by the mailbox, my arm sang with relief. Now our trail was marked by wet rubber sandals on asphalt. It was strange to be walking through a neighborhood of neat homes when we had been fighting for our lives only a few yards away. We came to a house with a sign advertising child care. I knocked on the door and begged a ride back to the Jeep, which turned out to be only about a mile away.

Money is hard to come by in Newaygo. I gave the woman a wet twenty-dollar bill for her trouble and for gas. When I drove back to Trent, he was wandering in the street, still with the bloody T-shirt around his head. In the emergency room,

they took an X-ray and cleaned and stitched his wound. The doctor said everybody thinks river water is clean, but it isn't. Looking straight at me, he said that if something like this ever happened again, I should immediately rinse the wound with clean water. He must have sensed Trent was prone to injury.

We never again kayaked on Tamarack Creek, and every time we drove on M-82 where the bridge crosses the creek, Trent would say, "Tamar-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak-ak."

28. Mother's Day

May 14, 2006

Trent and I had gone to bed and were lying quietly side by side when Trent noticed I was crying.

"What's wrong, Sweet Baby?"

"I never had any babies."

A long pause.

"Do you want us to have a baby, Sweet Baby?"

"No, I'm too old. But just because I don't want one doesn't mean I can't be sad that I never had one."

Trent laid his arm across my chest. A few more tears came out the corners of my eyes.

"I think I would have been a good mom."

"You're a great mom, Sweet Baby! You're a mom to Jenna."

"I'm not her real mom."

"You're as real as the one she's got."

Ginger

Trent came into the house, palm open. At first I thought he might have cut himself, but it wasn't blood in his palm, it was

a small turtle. This one was bigger than Ernest was when he had crawled into the Mud Lake garage, but not by much, and it didn't have Ernest's bright-orange stripes but was all dark green. We had a brief debate about putting it in the tank with Ernest. Trent said the tank wasn't any more dangerous than the outside world, opened the top, and lowered his palm into the green water. The turtle swam off immediately. Ernest plopped off his rock to swim over and check out his new neighbor, then swam away. We named her Ginger, and I took this new life in a hard shell as a good omen.

Construction

Trent spent May improving the garage, which he called the Lil' Barn. He added insulation to make the garage warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer. Then he put OSB sheathing, an engineered particleboard that is stronger than plywood, on top of the insulation, to stiffen the walls and make the garage sturdier.

In June, Trent built me an office in part of the basement. When he sketched the plans, he asked if I was going to be okay working in a room without windows. I laughed and explained that I had spent my entire career working without windows, that only twice did I have an office with a window near my desk. He was aghast.

Trent decided to put in a stained-glass window, not on the wall with the door but on the wall to my left as I sat at the desk, the wall that would separate the office from the twin beds for guests on the other side.

October 2006

In July, I had started a corporate training consulting business and had been subcontracting for Robin, another consultant. After completing a few small projects for her, she graduated me to a larger one. It was an important project for an important client, and it would take both of us working full time for several months to complete.

One day, which was quickly turning into night, something had gone wrong. Either Robin had miscommunicated with me or I had misunderstood her. Either way, the document I sent her that morning had fallen far short of expectations, and I was reworking it. It was due to the client the following day, and Robin had to review it first. She needed to see it by eight a.m. the next morning.

At about six in the evening, Trent brought me dinner, and at about nine or ten he brought me a little plate of cheese and crackers. He had made a smiley face on each cracker with little bits of vegetables. At about eleven, he asked whether I would be coming to bed soon, and that's when I realized I wouldn't. I had seriously underestimated how much time the rework would take. When I told him I needed several more hours, we were both disappointed.

I thought Trent would just go to bed, but I heard some noise on the other side of the wall. After a few minutes of clanking, sudden brightness. The stained-glass window was lit as if it were above ground, with the sun shining through.

Trent poked his head through the office door. "You might have to be up all night, but it doesn't have to feel like it."

He had taken his 500-watt construction lamp and set it up between the twin beds, facing the stained glass, shining into

the office. He was right. I worked all night but it didn't feel like it. Just before seven the next morning, I sent the document to Robin. She liked what I sent, and I went to bed, happy.

Maybe Trent couldn't rotate the Earth, but he could make it seem that he could.

29. Christmas in Newaygo

Christmas Eve 2006

In 2006, we were scheduled to have Jenna for Christmas. I told Trent that he could go see his parents if he wanted, but I wasn't leaving our house. He said he wasn't either, that we were going to have a family Christmas. If his parents wanted to see us, they could come to Newaygo.

When Trent told his mother our plans, she was angry and again accused him of being selfish and breaking the family tradition. He said it was time for new traditions and that she could come here. He was old enough to have his own Christmas in his own house.

On Christmas Eve day, after picking up Jenna at the rendezvous point, we stopped at a tree farm. Jenna was wearing slippers and the snow was deep, so I gave her the big boots I kept in the Jeep. She and Trent picked out the biggest, widest tree that would fit in the spot we had planned for it—up in the loft, outside our bedroom, overlooking the living room.

Late that afternoon, I made a raspberry pie, Trent's favorite. I asked Jenna whether she wanted to design the top, which she did. The top crust needed at least a few holes to vent the steam.

Jenna picked up the paring knife and bent over the naked crust. She carved a large heart with “JTJ” in the middle. I asked her what the letters stood for.

“Jenna, Trent, Jule. JTJ.” She smiled.

We usually opened gifts on Christmas Day, but Trent wanted us to open a few small ones on Christmas Eve. Trent had one for each of us, including Ernest and Ginger. Inside the packages were flat wooden ornaments. Each had a different animal laser carved into it (Trent’s was a deer), and each had our names carved into the top.

Trent gave me one more package. It was an ornament, not wooden but acrylic—a photograph of our house, with “HOME SWEET HOME” etched across the top. My heart felt like it would burst.

After we hung the ornaments in the tree, Jenna showed us how to form a star with our fingers by each person making a V with their index and middle fingers, and then putting our fingertips together. The star required the V from both of Jenna’s hands and both of Trent’s, but only one of mine, because it was a five-pointed star. With my free hand, I took a photo of our hand-star, the lights from the tree shining through it.

Christmas Day 2006

On Christmas morning, we opened presents and Trent made banana pancakes. I don’t remember any of the presents except the fleece socks I got for all of us—extra-large camouflage for Trent, large blue with snowflakes for me, and medium pink and orange paisley for Jenna.

We lay in front of the fireplace and propped our feet on the hearth and took pictures of our newly socked feet. Trent's feet were in the middle, Jenna's and mine were on either side, just like the letters on the pie crust. Then we interwove our feet and took more pictures.

At two in the afternoon, Doreen called. She wanted to come get Jenna because Jenna's sister was going to be proposed to that evening and she wanted Jenna to be there. Doreen said she would be in Newaygo to pick Jenna up at four. Trent and Doreen's conversation escalated. Trent's main point was that it was Christmas Day and that, according to the custody agreement, he had Jenna for all of it.

Rather than stand there and feel helpless, I went upstairs to the file cabinet and pulled out the Jenna file, fat with letters and legal papers. The custody agreement was on top. It was only three pages, and according to it, Trent had Jenna until midnight.

When I came downstairs, Trent was off the phone but still shouting. This time, it was Trent and Jenna. Jenna said he was ruining her Christmas by not letting her go watch her sister get engaged. Trent argued it was her mother who had ruined things. The conversation ended when Jenna stormed to her room and slammed the door, Trent yelling, "I have you until midnight" behind her.

Trent and I went to bed but we didn't sleep. We didn't even talk.

At five minutes after midnight, we heard the crunch of gravel as a car pulled into the driveway and came to a stop. Trent said, "If she wants her, she can come get her." He stayed in bed. I got up.

I didn't have to walk downstairs to Jenna's room to wake her. She had relocated to the big red chair in the loft, right outside our bedroom door, across from the Christmas tree. Seeing her folded up in the chair with the comforter from her bed pulled up around her shoulders, I wanted to hug her and I wanted to cry. Instead, I touched Jenna's shoulder, woke her, and walked her down the stairs. She went out the front door with her pink travel bag bumping behind her. Doreen was waiting in the car. I closed the front door.

When I got back to bed, I didn't say anything. I lay down next to the man who wanted so little and got even less. Whenever he got a taste, just a little one, it was snatched away. He had watched too many doors close; he had seen too many taillights shrink until they were gone.

We had talked about this when we drove back and forth between Michigan and Chicago, taking turns to see each other. We agreed it was better to be the one leaving than the one left, and that it's better not to watch the taillights.

I had closed the front door quickly because I didn't want to see them. But both of us heard the fading sound of the crunch of tires on gravel. Jenna was gone again. Christmas was over.

30. Almost Legal

March 2007

I don't remember how it unfolded. We would get married, but it wouldn't be legal. Trent distrusted authority; I didn't want to unite my finances with his. We would write our own vows, but say them in front of someone else to make it more real, and we would have rings to prove we had done it. The rings would be

titanium. The someone else would be Elaine. The place would be her office in Chicago.

I called Elaine to schedule an appointment and tell her what we wanted to do. She thought it was a wonderful idea. We picked a date—May 5. I went online to order the rings. I had expected they had a stock of rings and they simply sent what you ordered, but no. The rings were made to order. Ours weren't too complicated and could be made on time. They would come from Canada.

May 2007

Trent hadn't told Jenna what we were planning. Instead, he asked her if she wanted to spend the weekend with us in Chicago. She said no. We were leaving on Friday. On Thursday, a FedEx envelope arrived from Canada, from the titanium-ring maker.

We took the envelope and ran upstairs, lay on the bed, and opened it. Each ring was in a sheer blue fabric bag, closed with a matching blue ribbon. The rings were snug but would work. Then we swapped rings so we could examine each other's. Trent's ring fit on my thumb, and I twirled it around. When I gave it back, he put both rings in his palm, then lifted my ring and set it inside his. It fit perfectly, the smaller circle snug against the larger one.

I had booked us a room at the Orrington, an historic hotel in Evanston, not too far from Elaine's office. The room was large because I had reserved one big enough to include Jenna, who wasn't there. Robin, who had led the project for which Trent had set up his construction lamp at midnight, and her husband, Keith, sent an enormous vase of stargazer lilies. The

flowers flung themselves open and filled the room with a heavy, heady scent.

We lay back on the bed and I turned to Trent.

"Have you written anything you want to say for our vows?"

"No. Have you?"

"No."

"We'll just say what is in our heart, and those words will be perfect, Sweet Baby."

May 5, 2007

I drove to Elaine's, not just because I usually drove in Chicago, but because Trent was sick. He reclined the passenger seat, grimacing, eyes closed. He said his stomach hurt and we had to stop at Walgreens. I felt bad. I knew Trent was sick, literally, at the thought of making us in any way official. It had to do with good and not believing he deserved good and believing that if something good happened, then something bad will follow, most likely soon. I had wanted to be driven to my own wedding, even though it was unlike a wedding in every way that didn't matter to Trent or me.

Trent was wearing his boots, jeans, and a sky blue "Life Is Good" T-shirt, the one that matched his eyes. I was wearing a new shirt I had bought for the occasion that was also blue, jeans, and clogs.

That morning, I decided I wanted flowers and a cake, so I walked to Whole Foods Market and picked up white lilies and a chocolate cake with white icing. But now, the concern was Trent, who was clutching his shirt over his stomach. We pulled into a Walgreens, and he chugged half a bottle of Pepto-Bismol.

By the time we got to Elaine's, Trent had stopped grimacing. I grabbed the bags with the flowers and cake. We went inside and sat on the loveseat in the waiting room. Trent turned to me. "We're gonna get married, Sweet Baby Lover!"

After a few minutes, Elaine popped out, squealed, "You're here!" and hugged us both.

Trent wanted to say his vows first. He talked for a long time and I wish I could remember exactly what he said. It was poetry that made my heart sing. What I do remember is that he cried and I cried and he promised to love me forever. Then it was my turn. I wanted what I said to Trent to be as beautiful and as meaningful as what he said to me. I made the best promise I could.

We hugged and kissed, then Elaine stood and we all hugged. After we ate the cake, I asked Elaine to keep the flowers.

Back in the parking lot, we decided to go to Salvage One, a store I liked a lot that Trent had never seen. We walked around the three floors of rescued architectural elements, sometimes together, sometimes separately, when something caught the attention of one of us. We wound up together looking at a section of flooring. Trent said he would put it in the house he would someday build for us. We hugged again and laughed that we were having our honeymoon at Salvage One.

31. Dog with a Bone

June 2007

I am one of those people who can ponder things for a long time, mulling the possibilities, rolling them around, feeling one then another, like grapes rolled in a mouth.

But after that, after feeling and tasting and weighing and considering, I decide. Most of the time, I can articulate my rationale, but not always. All I know is I have decided, and having decided, I act. If it is something I want, I want it now. I am like a dog with a bone. Or a dog that doesn't have a bone but sees one and smells one and wants one.

In July I asked Trent, "What do you think about us getting a dog?"

It was a good idea, he said, when the time was right.

The next Saturday, we were in the Jeep, headed south, driving to Ohio to look at labradoodle puppies. Trent was wearing his new glasses. Now that he was driving roads he hadn't driven his whole life, he needed them.

The directions took us to a working farm that bred puppies for side cash. We followed the arrow on the driveway sign that pointed us to the back. Sitting in the cool of the chilled air in the Jeep, Trent and I saw two rows of wire cages baking in the sun. Each cage held a limp dog. We looked at the dogs, then at each other. We didn't need to speak.

Trent and I didn't like anything about this, but we'd been in the car so long we needed to stretch our legs. My hair matted to my head as we walked along the cages, seeing the dogs pant, noticing some water bowls held no water.

“Those are just the breeders,” said the owner. She took us into the barn, where some young puppies played on a blanket spread over a pile of fresh straw, shaded by the high roof of the barn, plenty of water nearby. She asked which one we liked. We said we’d have to think about it.

In the Jeep on the way home, we discussed reporting the breeder. We decided against it. No one would think the mistreatment was bad enough to require intervention. Trent pointed out that half the dogs in Michigan were chained up in someone’s front yard. The same was probably true in Ohio.

July 7, 2007

“Hand me up one of them pups.”

Trent rarely issued commands, so I knew he had a motive. But I didn’t know what it was.

We were standing on the clean vinyl floor of a labradoodle breeder’s kennel. A circular temporary pen was set up in the middle of the floor, with eight squirming three-week-old labradoodle pups inside the circle. They were a mix of white and black. Trent was on one side of the pen, I was opposite him, and the breeder was between us.

I looked back at the puppy that had caught my eye—the biggest, the squirmiest. I tried to tell which one, if any, had caught Trent’s eye, but couldn’t. With his gaze averted, he was intentionally noncommittal. So I went for my favorite, the big one.

I reached down to the soft white ball of fur, surprised at how warm it was, and handed the pup to Trent. The pup pushed his head into Trent’s chest, then smelled his neck, then nibbled his beard, which made Trent toss his head back and

laugh. Pulling the pup down from climbing any higher, Trent passed him to me. The pup licked my cheek, and I wanted to take him home right then.

After we had cycled through the rest of the pups, we met their mother, their grandfather, and a few of the other dogs, all well cared for. After that, there didn't seem to be anything else to do, so we left, telling the breeder we would think about it.

Back in the privacy of the Jeep, we first talked about how nice the place had been, how clean it was, and how healthy and happy the dogs looked, both the pups and the other dogs. The breeder had an assistant who wore a lab coat with their logo on it. It was a world away from the breeder in Ohio.

Trent moved on to the more critical topic. "What did you think of the pups?"

"I liked them."

"Any in particular?"

"The same one you liked."

"Which one did I like?"

"The big white one. The first one. Why did you ask me to hand you a pup?"

"I wanted to know which one you liked."

"Was it the one you wanted to see?"

"Yep."

As soon as we got home, we called the breeder and said we were interested in the white pup with the orange collar. She said she didn't let any of them go until they were eight weeks old. That was fine.

Names

I walked out to the barn specifically to talk with Trent about a big white puppy with an orange collar. It turned out he wanted to discuss the same thing. Trent launched the conversation.

"He's going to need a name."

"I've been thinking about that."

"Any names you like?"

"Moses."

"Moses?"

"Yeah, Moses. Moses was wise and he had a white beard."

"Do you think people might think it's..."

"Disrespectful? Well, maybe. Were there any names you thought of?"

"Not a name, but I want it to have something to do with water."

"Water?"

"We want to take him kayaking. I want it to be a name that likes water."

"Oh. Like Nemo or something."

"That would be good."

"What would?"

"Nemo."

"Oh. I like that."

"You just said it."

"I did?"

"Yep. Nemo."

We both let the name settle in.

During his chewing stage, when Nemo pulled split firewood from the woodpile and turn the logs to mulch, Trent

called him Neminator and Shredrick, but the rest of the time he was, and still is, Nemo.

July 19, 2007

We decided one visit was not enough of a basis to select a dog who would live with us for at least a decade, so three weeks later we drove back to see the pups again. They were no longer in the circular pen, having outgrown it. Instead, they were in a larger kennel in the back. The assistant would bring us two pups at a time. Even though the breeder updated her website weekly with fresh photos, I was shocked at how big the puppies had gotten.

We held the first two pups the assistant brought, but they weren't Nemo and we weren't interested. We then asked if one of the next two could be the white one with the orange collar.

"Oh. The big one."

She came back with a black dog in one arm and a white dog twice his size in the other. Nemo. Trent held him and told him his name. I held him and buried my nose in his soft fur.

The assistant offered to bring out the next pair. We told her not to bother.

After the required number of weeks, on August 11, we went back to the breeder, picked up Nemo, and brought him home. When we got there, we set him on the grass. The first thing he did was piddle. The second thing he did was curl up on his back, tuck his paws across his belly, and fall asleep.

August 12, 2007

The Newygo night is black as tar when the moon goes missing. If I had turned toward Trent—we were in bed and Nemo

was in his crate downstairs—I wouldn't have been able to see him, so I didn't bother.

We were both flat on our backs. My eyes were open, I didn't know about Trent's. My words blurted without thinking.

"Jenna's going to move in with us."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of Nemo. Now she knows she can count on us staying together. We're a family."

"We were a family before. We have a house."

"A house is just a house. A dog is a family."

Trent didn't say more, and I knew why—he didn't want to get his hopes up.

32. Negotiations

November 2007

Things hadn't been going well between Jenna and her mom. In a moment of anger and exasperation, Doreen threatened to send Jenna to live with her father. Whether rising to the challenge or calling her bluff, Jenna retorted, "Fine!"

Trent and Doreen had several conversations, and Jenna acted out a few more times. Negotiations were testy on both sides. The challenge Trent had was the same one we had for the Newaygo house—the inability to walk away.

Trent missed his daughter, he wanted her with him, and he could not let his ex-wife know. Doreen would willingly suffer through Jenna's acting out for the pleasure of withholding from Trent that which he wanted most.

I watched Trent on the phone with Doreen, talking tough, making demands, saying he wasn't sure he wanted Jenna,

given the way she had been acting. Every call ended with him angrily flipping his phone shut. Then he would stand there, head down, chewing a fingernail, hoping he had played his cards correctly. He chewed his thumbs until they bled.

The agreement was forged with guidance from legal counsel on both sides. Jenna was coming to live with us. She would arrive in time for the start of the second term at school, where she would be a high school sophomore. Trent insisted Jenna arrive on Saturday. He was laying his cards. The game was still on.

On Friday night, Doreen called. Jenna had done something that made her mother furious and would have made Trent furious if it had happened in our house.

Trent and I were quiet as we lay in bed that night. I knew what was going through his mind. He was treasuring the hope that tomorrow his daughter would come to live with us, and preparing himself for the possibility that she would not. He was afraid Jenna was going to be brought close, only to be taken from him once again. He was also worried about her.

I stayed quiet until he spoke.

"I don't know, Sweet Baby."

"Don't know what?"

"Don't know what kind of shape Jenna's going to be in when she gets here."

"I'm not worried."

"You're not?" He said it accusingly, as if I were missing an important parental gene. But I wasn't worried and I told him why.

"Jenna is just making sure her mother doesn't change her mind at the last minute. She wants to live with us."

Trent didn't say anything. Rolling over on my side, away from him, I hoped he wouldn't ask me to substantiate my statement. I couldn't.

We lay in bed, both awake but not speaking. My back was to him, the soles of my feet on his fuzzy right calf. His arms were behind his head. We were both wondering and hoping—was Jenna coming to live with us tomorrow?

December 1, 2007

Saturday was one of those days where you do small things to fill the time while you wait for the big thing, but your mind is not on the small things you are doing. Your mind is on the big thing you're waiting for. We were waiting for Jenna.

I don't know what Trent was thinking about because we weren't talking. We didn't want to do or say anything that might disturb all those carefully played cards.

I was thinking about all those nights I had held him in bed, when Trent would lie on his back and tears ran from his eyes to his ears and he pleaded, "Why can't I have you both?"

I always answered with the same words. "You can, Sweet Baby. Just not right now."

Jenna and her mom were supposed to arrive by noon, and that was pretty much when they got there. That had been one of Trent's cards—he needed a set time because he wasn't sure he would be home. Based on what had been happening at Doreen's house, I expected a loud, angry, and quick separation. That wasn't what happened.

When we heard them pull into the driveway, we went out onto the porch, ready to catch, embrace, or wrangle Jenna, depending on what the situation required. Jenna and Doreen got

out of the car and hugged each other for a long time. After several minutes Trent said, "I'm not going to stand here and watch them make out." We went back inside.

We sat silently at the small teak dining room table and waited. Then, suddenly, Jenna came through the front door, long brown hair flying behind her, pink gym bag hanging from her bent elbow, bulging white plastic grocery bags in both hands. Somehow, even with her load, Jenna managed to slam the front door. She marched past us into her room and slammed that door, too. Hard. A piece of molding fell off the door.

Trent hollered, "You break it, you fix it."

Then Trent and I stood and hugged each other, Trent swallowing me up in his arms. I could feel his joy wrapped all around me, and I thought of something he had written once, on a note he left in the Chicago kitchen: "My heart is so happy we could both dance around inside it." It felt as though if there were just a touch more pressure from his arms, I would pass through his skin and into his heart, where we would dance. When we looked at each other again, Trent's eyes were wet. Then he pulled me into his chest.

"I have you both. I have you both. I have you both."

The next morning, Trent showed Jenna how to repair the molding. Jenna hammered the nails carefully and cleanly, and Trent was proud of her.

December 3, 2007

Trent took Jenna to school on her first day. She was a transfer student, starting the winter quarter. Jenna and her dad were both a little nervous.

As Trent walked Jenna into the building, two girls came running up to her. "You must be Jenna!" They had met on the school's Facebook page and told Jenna Friday was Silly Hat Day. On Friday, Jenna wore her silly hat—a long stocking cap—and looked adorable.

I had been uncertain how to refer to Jenna.

"Jenna, what should I call you? Neither of us likes step-daughter."

"Call me your EP."

"EP?"

"Yeah. EP. Extra Package. That's what my friend and her stepmom call each other."

"Hmm. I like the extra part. That sounds like a bonus, an extra benefit. But I'm not sure about the package part."

Jenna looked at me with her big brown eyes and thick lashes, silent.

"It could be nice, but it could also be a burden—like a heavy package."

Jenna continued to say nothing.

"What about present? Extra Present. That sounds like a good thing. What do you think?"

"Yeah, that's okay."

That was all she was going to say. My goal then became to talk until I got a reaction.

"Okay, so EP. is Extra Present. Or it could be... Extraordinary Person. That's not bad, either."

Still no reaction.

"Or maybe Exquisite Princess. That's good, too."

Jenna's eyes rolled and she buried her face in the couch pillow.

Score!

Later in the term, Trent and I went to the parent-teacher conference. We had been tracking Jenna's grades on the school's website and Jenna was doing well, with one exception. After meeting all her teachers, we understood why.

As Trent said when we left the teacher's classroom, "What a dick."

The great thing about a small school is you can do any extracurricular activity you want because the school doesn't have enough students to field a team or fill the slots. Want to be a cheerleader? Fine. Want to be in the band? Fine. Want to run track? Fine.

Jenna debated between track and softball. Even though she was better at track, she chose softball because she would be part of a team. She batted .000, but if she was walked to first base, she could steal her way home. Jenna was smart and fast.

April-May 2008

Trent noticed it first but didn't say anything until I noticed it. He waited until he found me bent over the aquarium, focused on Ginger's shell.

"Do you see it?"

"I do. Is that a hole?"

"Looks like it."

"How long has it been there?"

"Maybe a couple weeks."

"Has it gotten bigger?"

"Seems like it."

Neither of us thought a hole in Ginger's shell was a good thing, but neither of us was inclined to take her to a vet. One

morning a few weeks later, we found Ernest on his big rock under the heat lamp, stretched out on top of Ginger. It didn't seem that he was trying to crush her. It seemed he was trying to comfort her. When Trent lifted Ernest off Ginger, she didn't move. Trent touched her legs. They didn't move.

Trent didn't want to bury her. He said Ginger came from water and should return to water. So he cut a thin, broad piece of pine that would serve as a funeral raft, and we went down to the Muskegon. After saying a few words, Trent laid Ginger on her raft and set it on the surface of the water. The current swept the raft downstream, and after just a few minutes, a little wave at the edge of the bank licked Ginger off the raft.

"Did you see that, Sweet Baby! The river took her!"

I thought back to a news report we had seen on television a few weeks earlier, where a badly wounded bird was found and nursed back to life. Trent was displeased.

"Shouldn't they have saved the bird?" I asked.

"Just took a good meal from a healthy animal that needs to eat."

I looked at him, surprised at his heartlessness.

"Everything you eat had to die for you to eat it. Death is part of life, Sweet Baby."

June 2008

A boy asked Jenna to the prom, and Trent went on the alert.

"With who?"

"Warbly.*"

"What kind of name is Warbly?"

"It's his name, Dad. Anyway, I'm going."

"What year is he?"

"Senior."

"You're not going."

"Why not?"

"Because he's a senior and you're a sophomore."

"Mom says it's fine."

"It's not fine and I say you can't go and you're living with me."

"I am too going."

"You're not going."

"Why not?"

"You know why not."

"You're just saying that because you were like that."

"Yes I was. All boys are like that."

"He's not."

"You don't know him."

"He loves me."

"Loves you? You for sure are not going. He doesn't love you."

"You don't know him."

"I know him."

"I know what you're thinking. Say it."

"I don't need to say it."

"You think he wants to have sex with me."

"I know he wants to have sex with you."

"He does not and I'm going. Mom says it's fine."

"Fine. If she thinks it's fine, I will drive you to your mother's house and he can pick you up from there. He is not getting you from this house."

"No, Dad, you can't do that!"

"The hell I can't. He loves you? If he loves you, he'll come get you."

"He will come get me. He loves me!"

"He doesn't love you and he's not coming to get you. He going to take someone else and he's going to have sex with her."

"You're wrong!"

Jenna fled to her bedroom and slammed the door. She had previously done a good job of nailing on the molding and it didn't fall off. But Trent was right. Warbly didn't drive to Battle Creek and get Jenna. He took someone else to the prom.

33. Empty Nest

June 7, 2008

At the end of the school year, Jenna demanded to move back in with her mother. I didn't understand. She seemed happy. She'd had a sleepover with lots of friends for whom Trent had made pancakes at one in the morning. We'd painted the walls of her bedroom the vivid yellow Jenna wanted, and she had covered them with photos and posters. She appeared settled and satisfied.

Trent said Jenna wanted to go back to Battle Creek so there wouldn't be an adult watching over her. When school let out for the summer, he drove her back to her mother's. In July, Trent and Jenna met once for lunch, to talk about where she would live in the fall, where she would go to school.

"How are you going to make it worth my while to move back in with you?" she asked.

“We’ll love you, we’ll feed you, you’ll have a place to sleep, but you’ll still have to do the dishes.”

Doing the dishes was something we all did together, one of my favorite times. Jenna declined the offer.

Trent was angry and sad when he got home. He said he couldn’t let his daughter call the shots, but saying what he’d said and not giving in was the hardest thing he’d ever done. Trent went out to the barn, and I left him alone with his grief.

June 29, 2008

Trent stood over the aquarium, watching Ernest.

“We need to let Ernest go.”

Trent said Ernest was big enough to survive in the wild, but if we kept him any longer, he would lose the ability to fend for himself.

I thought about all the time we’d spent with Ernest, from when he was the size of a quarter in the white enamel roaster, to the fish tank in Chicago, to the bigger fish tank in Newaygo. We kept the tank next to the dining room table. I liked watching Ernest swim or bask under the heat lamp.

Trent got a five-gallon white bucket, put some greenish water from the tank in it, and added Ernest. We got on the three-wheeler and I held the bucket as Trent drove.

At the edge of the swamp, we said our goodbyes. I wondered how Ernest would feel about swimming through water that had seeds and leaves and who knew what else. Trent scooped up Ernest, then lowered his hand to the water. Ernest jumped right in and went under. We never saw him resurface, even though we waited. As I climbed back on the three-

wheeler, I thought about how we had spent so much time with Ernest, and how we would probably never see him again.

July 26, 2008

Since that first expedition on Tamarack Creek, Trent and I had become good kayakers. We practiced on the Muskegon, then ventured out onto smaller, faster rivers. We kayaked before the leaves came out on the trees and after they were long gone. If the river wasn't completely frozen, we were on it.

For his birthday that summer, Trent wanted to go to the Sturgeon River, near Wolverine, Michigan. We went up on a Thursday and stayed at Malone's because Trent loved the four tiny hand-built cabins, log pine walls thickly varnished, aged with time. He kayaked every day, and I did every other day. For his birthday, I gave Trent a waterproof camera. On the days he soloed, he brought back countless pictures of what he had seen, some from above water and some from below. He was especially fascinated by a large hornets nest, hanging ominously from a tree limb, low over the water.

We knew we were good kayakers. The section of the Sturgeon River we traveled dumps three of every four kayakers, but it didn't dump me and it dumped Trent only once, when he was helping someone whose kayak was caught in the rocks.

Trent preferred pie to cake, and in the tiny cabin kitchen on his birthday, I made his favorite—raspberry—with berries he had gotten from his favorite berry growers near the house at Mud Lake. In the top crust, I used the tip of a knife to carve a picture of Trent kayaking. He cut two slices carefully, preserving most of the drawing.

We drove back to Newaygo on Sunday afternoon because I needed to be in Chicago for work on Monday. When I returned to Newaygo on Wednesday night, the pie was still in the refrigerator, with the same two pieces gone. When I asked Trent why he hadn't eaten any more of the pie, he said he hadn't felt like it.

August 5, 2008

Trent was in Newaygo and I was again in Chicago for client work. It was night. One of us called the other, I don't remember who. From the way he sounded, Trent was in a bad place.

He didn't sound angry or sad. He sounded despondent. His voice was flat, his words hopeless. Helpless. He mentioned in an offhand way that it might be a good time to die. Jenna had gone back to live with her mother, I was in Chicago, he was alone. He was technically sitting in the garage as we spoke, but his mind was in a bleak hole.

I tried to get Trent to think about something in the future he could look forward to, but to no avail. Anything I proposed was dismissed. My coming home was two days and too far away. Instead, I focused on the present and suggested he think of all the people and things he loved, write each one on a piece of paper, and put them in a glass jar. Trent had some beautiful antique minnow jars made of old, watery glass. They were large—the size of a prize watermelon—and fragile. Whenever I carried one, I used both hands. I encouraged Trent to find one and start filling it. He liked the idea.

When I got home later that week, Trent was still there. He had made it.

August 16, 2008

I woke up, propped myself on an elbow, and looked over at Trent. He looked troubled, his arms behind his head, his eyes staring at the ceiling. I hadn't asked in a long time but it seemed relevant, so I asked as gently as I could.

"Sweet Baby, do you want to kill yourself?"

His eyes darted toward the window behind his shoulder. He brought them back before answering.

"No."

He was lying.

"Okay," I said, more a sigh than a word, as I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling. What was going to happen to us? Trent had said, "As long as we keep loving each other and telling each other the truth, we're going to be all right." Did this mean we weren't going to be all right anymore?

For the first time, I felt alone in our bed.

August 18, 2008

It was morning and I was sitting in bed, frustrated because I wanted to look out the window and see sky, at least a piece of it, but all I could see were pine trees. I went outside, determined to identify which trees were blocking my view of some blue sky.

Later that day, I explained to Trent what I wanted, and showed him the four trees I thought needed to come down. He looked from the trees to our bedroom window and said it might take more than four. That week, when I was in Chicago again, Trent and I spoke every night. One night he said he and the two teenaged neighbor boys who worked with him sometimes, Justin and Jeremy, had taken down the trees—eleven of

them. He was happy about the work they had done, happy about being with the boys. They hadn't just cut down the trees, they had pulled out the roots, then laid them along the entrance to the path through the woods. They stacked the trunks further back in a cleared space, future logs for the cabin Trent planned to build.

When I got home, Trent took me upstairs to our bedroom. When I looked out the window, I saw stars.

COMING
APART

34. Shifting

August 2008

The way we were living wasn't sustainable, given how often I was in Chicago for client work, so I started searching for alternative income sources. I joined Triiibes.com, an online community, to figure out how to make money in the woods of Newyago. I signed up for an online marketing program.

The marketing program assigned each of us to a small group of six. For our first virtual meeting, there was only one other person who showed up. Her business was giving tarot card readings. I wasn't sure how I felt about the tarot, and whether I could help someone with their business if I didn't believe in it. I told her my reservations and she offered to give me a reading over the phone, to help me decide.

"There's been a betrayal" were the first words out of her mouth, which shocked me, because earlier that day one of my fellow freelancers had said, "I feel as if I've been betrayed." I hadn't heard the word *betrayal* in years, and now I'd heard it twice in one day. My attitude toward her tarot business shifted from dismissive to neutral, with a generous measure of salt.

Newspaper

Trent sat at the dining room table in Newaygo with an open newspaper. He read aloud—an obituary of a man in his forties who had died of a heart attack. He then told me about a friend who had a heart attack at age forty-two, but lived. Trent's pre-occupation made me uncomfortable, but I didn't say anything. I hoped it would pass.

Time Together

I had been working long hours for months, living in the basement office. One evening, after a long workday, I spent a little time in Triiibes to decompress and find some mental escape. When I came upstairs, I told Trent a joke I'd read that I thought was funny. He didn't laugh.

"Where did you hear that?"

"On Triiibes."

"This is what you were doing when we could have been spending time together?"

Another River

Toward the end of August, we headed north to White Cloud, to a river that Trent had been on but I hadn't. Trent explained to the outfitter that we didn't need equipment—we had our own—but we needed transportation back to our vehicle from the exit point.

The outfitter described the options. A variety of entrance and exit points allowed for different trip lengths—two, three, six, or nine hours.

"So, which one do you want? How many hours?" The outfitter needed to know where to drop us and where to pick us up.

I checked my watch. It was just after eight in the morning, so I expected Trent to choose the six-hour trip. It was a nice day and the river was wide and easy.

Normally Trent would check with me before responding, to make sure we agreed. This time he didn't.

"Three."

I looked at him, one eyebrow raised.

"We'll take it slow," he said.

This was the first time I thought something was wrong with Trent and that he knew it.

We took it slow. We stopped to look at flowers, and Trent took many pictures of a hornets' nest with the camera I'd given him. I scavenged small stones, and Trent asked to see them. I passed him a black stone shaped like the image from *The Little Prince*, the one with the snake who has swallowed an elephant. Trent held it in the broad palm of his hand and rubbed his finger across the smooth surface. "Sweet Baby, you always find the best rocks."

Him Again

It was late and I was tired. I was sitting in bed, waiting for Trent to finish brushing his teeth. But instead of getting in bed, he paced across the bedroom. I watched him go back and forth, trying to decide what to say, but he spoke first.

"You're just going to go back to him."

"What?"

"You heard me. You're just going to go back to him."

“To who?”

“Your old husband. When I’m not here, you’re just going to go back to him.”

I fell back on the bed and sighed. “You still don’t know me at all.”

Trent went to the window and looked out at the stars. The argument was in his head, and I could say or do nothing to fight it. Eventually, Trent came to bed. I put my hand in the center of his chest, nestled it there, and curled up against him.

Tarot Reading

In early September, I asked the woman in the online marketing class for another tarot reading. I was looking to any source for answers, for a way out of my being gone so much and Trent being so unhappy. We did it over the phone. The only sound was the soft *click* of each card hitting the table and then a lengthy pause. She muttered, “No, this can’t be right,” and I heard cards being shuffled again, then the *click, click, click* of cards placed on the table.

She started talking to herself again, then to me. “This can’t be... No, this isn’t you, this is Trent. This is about Trent. Trent is sick. Trent is sick and... and he knows it. Something is very wrong with him. You need to get him to a doctor. He won’t want to go, but he knows something is wrong.”

That night, I studied Trent. He was laughing as he made dinner, moving the heavy cast-iron skillet as if it were a paper plate. I didn’t take what the tarot woman said with a grain of salt; I blew it right off the table. If she had ever met Trent, ever seen him, she would know he was big and strong and had a laugh that could shake walls. He had also just had a physical

two months earlier. Other than his hypertension, which was being well controlled with meds, he was fine. The tarot woman was wrong.

Taking Nemo

When I woke up, Trent was already awake, standing at the bedroom window in his boxer briefs, looking out toward the barn. He didn't turn to me as he spoke.

"When I'm gone and we don't live here anymore, you can't take Nemo with you. He can't live his life on a leash."

"What are you talking about?"

"Promise me that when I'm gone and you move back to Chicago, you won't take Nemo with you."

"I'm not going to promise you. That dog is going to be long dead before we don't live here anymore."

"Promise me."

"This is stupid."

"Promise me!"

So I did, in a very snotty voice because I thought he was being ridiculous.

"I promise you that when you're gone and we don't live here anymore that I won't take Nemo with me because he can't live his life on a leash."

"Good."

I fell back on the pillows, worried. Trent was overly preoccupied with his own death, but it felt different from when he talked about suicide. I thought about asking him about it, why he was talking this way, whether he was worried, but I was afraid, so I didn't.

September Weekend

I was in Chicago for work and would be there for a week and a half. Trent had followed, taking the Amtrak from Grand Rapids to Chicago, so we could spend the weekend in the city. We had never done this before.

The trains were delayed six hours. When Trent finally lumbered off, stiff and cranky, I asked him if he'd like a pedicure, told him it would make him feel better. There was a nail salon right at the station. Trent said he'd rather have a beer. But after the beer he surprised me. "I'll do that feet thing now."

We had a great time in Chicago. One night we saw the play *Wicked* and sat in the first row of the balcony. At the climactic end of act 1, I looked over at Trent. He was sitting forward in his seat, watching and listening, not just with his eyes and ears, but with his whole body. At the end of the show he said about the Wicked Witch of the West, "She was green because of her father." I didn't understand. Trent explained. "Her father made her mother drink the green liquid, and that's what made her green."

After the show, we visited Trent's cousin Steven and his new wife, and spent the night there. Lying on their sofa bed, Trent and I made love slowly and quietly, one of those times when we locked eyes and never looked away.

Late Sunday afternoon, I dropped Trent off at Union Station so he could catch the train back to Michigan. His blond head and Carhartt sweatshirt-covered shoulders disappeared into the gray crowd, a river flowing toward the station doors.

Trent called Sunday night, not from Newaygo but from a friend's house in the western suburbs of Chicago. The Amtrak hadn't been running because of a flood in Indiana. Trent knew

I had a big day on Monday, so he visited the friend rather than coming back to our hotel room. The trains weren't running again Monday, so Trent took the bus back to Michigan, an eight-hour ordeal.

On Tuesday in Newaygo, the electrician came to install a ceiling light in the entry foyer. Trent told me about this, told me I was going to like it, and added that the excavator would come on Wednesday. Trent wanted to make some changes to the driveway by the front of the house. The excavator would sculpt the area where Trent and I would plant hydrangeas (on the shady side, for me) and grasses (on the sunny side, for Trent).

35. Blue

Wednesday, September 17, 2008

I called Trent when I left Chicago. Usually I leave around five thirty, or four thirty if I'm lucky. This time I was leaving early, about two thirty. I had met with a client who was normally out in the suburbs, but for this meeting, she was downtown. We met in the morning, I stayed for lunch, then I left.

Traffic looked bad, so I called Trent to tell him I wasn't sure exactly how long it would take to get home. At I-94, exit 27, I picked up a sandwich from Panera and paid for it with a gift card plus two pennies. Just outside of Grand Rapids, I called Trent again to let him know I was forty-five minutes away. It was a few minutes before six o'clock.

I told him about the gift card and the two cents and he laughed—he loved a good deal. Trent told me about the excavation and said I was going to think it was beautiful. I wanted

to tell him I had changed my mind about something we had disagreed on, that he was right, but he seemed in a hurry to hang up. I would tell him when I got home.

When I pulled into the driveway, there was the familiar crunch of gravel. As I came through the trees, I could see the excavation work. Trent was right. It was beautiful.

As the car moved forward, I was looking back at the area we were going to plant when I caught something in my peripheral vision. It was Justin, one of the teenage neighbors who helped us from time to time. He was running, his blond hair flapping, his eyes big. I hit the switch to lower the window as he ran up to the Jeep.

"Trent's down! He's down. He's blue!"

I threw open the door and ran. Trent's legs were on the concrete pad in front of the garage; his torso and head were on the gravel. He was face up, facing the garage, and the house was off to his right. His right knee was up, his left leg straight, and his foot turned outward. He was wearing his boots, thick socks, jean shorts, and the Battle Creek T-shirt from the parade with Jenna. His wire-rimmed glasses were on the gravel, by his right hand.

Justin was right. Trent was a cornflower blue, as if someone had painted his face with watercolor, from the inside. Because his head was blue but the rest of him looked normal, it looked as if someone had snapped his head off at the neck and snapped on a blue replacement. I wondered if he had broken his neck. If he had been up on the roof, I was going to be really mad at him. Justin interrupted my thoughts and probably snapped me back into reality.

"I called 9-1-1."

I kneeled on the gravel and leaned over Trent's face to feel his breath on my cheek. There was none. I put my finger on his neck to feel for a pulse, but couldn't find one. I poked at his arm to see whether it was soft or stiff. It was soft and warm, so I did what I remembered of CPR, from when I was a hospital dental hygienist. I think Justin was moving behind me because I kept hearing the crunch of gravel.

On one compression, as I pressed the heel of my clasped hands into Trent's chest, I heard a little crack and knew I had just broken off his xiphoid process, the little spur of bone that sticks down from the bottom of the sternum. That meant with every subsequent compression I would be lacerating his diaphragm.

Trent's mouth and lips were flaccid. It was easier to get a good seal on him than on the hard plastic lips of the Resusci Annie from CPR class. When I blew in, I saw his chest rise. On the exhalation, I smelled the beer he had been drinking. I took deep breaths before I blew—he must have had big lungs because they needed a lot of air.

A man in a bright yellow jacket came with a little yellow plastic box, put his hands on Trent's chest, and took over the compressions. I stayed with the breathing. Justin said again, "I called 9-1-1." The man said they would be here soon. We didn't say more. We were busy pressing and breathing.

On one exhale, a little drool or spit-up came out of Trent's mouth and I thought he was coming back to life, but it was only spit-up. Another time, on the rest between breaths, when the man was pressing on Trent's chest, I screamed. On another rest, I spoke into Trent's ear, "You can come back or you can go, but if you're coming back, you're coming back all the way.

I can't live with you in a bed all the time." When I said that, the man doing the compressions jerked.

I heard the siren of an ambulance getting louder. Good. The man with the yellow box kept pressing and I kept blowing. I was glad he was there. CPR is much easier with two people. On one breath, with my head down, I could hear the siren growing fainter. *They're turning away. They're lost!* I kept blowing into Trent's lungs. I didn't know what to do to make the ambulance come back.

Then the sirens got louder again. The man and I kept working. Just when they got as loud as they had been before, they started growing fainter again. They were lost.

I wanted to tell Justin to go down to the end of the driveway, to signal the ambulance, but all I could do was count the presses the man made and be ready to breathe into Trent again.

36. Leaving

I looked into Trent's eyes to see if I could tell whether he was still there. His eyes were blank, but I had a feeling he could see me, or at least hear me. On a rest between breaths, I said, "You don't need to stay. Jenna and I will be okay. And you'll be able to watch over both of us. You can have us both."

Then the ambulance was there. The man and I kept pressing and breathing while other people in yellow jackets started laying things on the ground around Trent. Then they told us they would take over, and they did. This was my first good look at the man who had been doing the compressions. He was young, maybe twenty-five, and he looked scared.

Nemo had been sitting quietly by Trent's head the whole time. The man had been to Trent's right, by his chest, doing the compressions. I had been to Trent's left, by his head, doing the breaths. Nemo was opposite me, watching. He never moved, never barked. He had been sitting by Trent's head when I ran up from the Jeep, but I wasn't noticing him.

When the ambulance people started laying bags and equipment by Trent's body, Nemo grabbed a bag and ran with it. One of the EMTs yelled, "Get that dog out of here!"

I got Nemo and don't know how I did that—I could never catch him at full stride, so he must have slowed or stopped. I grabbed his collar and took him into the house. Justin's mother told me later that Nemo stayed at the front window the whole time, watching.

The emergency people were all around Trent when I got back, but there was a little room by Trent's left arm, so I went there.

"Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to step away."

"I'm not leaving him."

"You're interfering with his care."

I was not. I wasn't in anybody's way.

"Have you ever given CPR to your husband?" I snapped back.

"No, but I've given it to my daughter."

"I'm not leaving."

She walked away and moved to Trent's other side.

"Was alcohol a factor?" she asked, of no one in particular.

Sniffing the air as if she were Sherlock Holmes, she announced, "Yes! Alcohol was a factor!"

I ignored her. I got up, maybe because Justin was handing me a phone, maybe to talk to his mother. When I turned back to Trent, the space where I had been was filled. I leaned over his head and looked down at his face, into his open eyes. Trent wasn't there anymore.

"He's gone."

One of the emergency men looked up and said, "No, ma'am, there's still hope."

I leaned over, smiled at Trent and said, "Hear that, Sweet Baby? There's still hope."

But I felt stupid after I said it because I knew he was already gone. I had told him it was okay for him to go, but I wasn't ready for him to leave.

Shock

As the EMTs continued to work on Trent, I suddenly remembered the warning from the tarot card woman. She was right—this is what she had been talking about. Oddly, the knowledge gave me some peace.

The emergency technicians had a little yellow and black box—was it the same yellow box the man had brought? The box was connected to Trent and it told the emergency people—literally, aloud—what to do, in a flat robotic voice.

"Shock indicated."

The EMTs applied shock.

"Testing vital signs."

The box waited a bit.

"Shock indicated."

They shocked him again.

"Testing vital signs."

I waited.

“Shock not indicated.”

I have fainted from time to time in my life—always when I am donating blood, so I know the warning signs.

“I’m going down,” I announced.

This prompted the woman I’d disagreed with earlier to get behind me and attempt to hold me up, her shins against my back, her hands under my armpits. Apparently, she and I had more to disagree about.

“Let me down.”

“I’m trying to keep you from hitting your head.”

“I’m not going to hit my head. But if you don’t let me go down I’ll faint and then I will hit my head.”

She slowly released me, and I slid down her shins, then leaned back to rest my head on the gravel. It felt good to be lying down. I could hear the little box talking, testing vital signs.

“Shock not indicated.”

Some people were now around me instead of Trent, but I don’t know who they were. One may have been Justin. A different emergency woman came over. She wasn’t wearing a yellow jacket like the others. She had brown hair and wore a white shirt and black pants that made me assume she was in charge. She started to say something and then stopped.

“I’ll wait until you’re feeling better.”

“Tell me now.”

She hesitated.

“If you wait until I’m better and standing up, I might go down again. I’m in the perfect position. Tell me now.”

My arms and legs were splayed on the gravel. The woman I didn't like was standing off to my left. Trent was lying to my right. I looked up at the woman in the white shirt, framed by a dusky blue sky. A section of her hair blew in the light breeze, and she tucked it behind her ear.

"He has expired. I'm sorry."

Saying Goodbye

I stood up and walked the few steps over to Trent. His knee was down—one of the EMT workers must have straightened his leg, or else it just went to the ground with all the effort. His T-shirt had come up and his belly was sticking up—his stomach bloated with air from the CPR. I pulled his shirt down but it wouldn't cover his belly and I felt bad for him, lying there so exposed.

The EMTs told me the medical examiner would be there in about forty-five minutes. Because it was an unwitnessed death, the examiner had to come.

One of my best friends had died in an accident when we were in our twenties, so I knew how little time Trent and I had left, and I knew how I wanted to spend it.

Moving to Trent's side, I lay down next to him, putting my left hand in his cupped right hand and my right hand in the center of his chest, just as I would have if we were upstairs in our bed. His chest still felt strong. His neck smelled like shaving cream. He must have shaved for me. I looked at the little hairs that grew out of the mole by his ear, the short spikes that he kept so neatly trimmed. I rubbed the tip of my nose on his soft T-shirt.

The emergency people had a few questions, so I stood up, reluctantly. They asked about Trent's family. I wanted to go see Jenna, to tell her, I said.

"You can't."

"No?"

"It's two hours away and you just fainted. You're not capable of driving that far."

They were right. I thought about calling her but decided to wait.

When I went back to lie down next to Trent, his face was less blue. *He's coming back!* Then I realized what it was—the *blood draining out of his face to the back of his head*. I lay down where I had been. The side of his tongue stuck out between his teeth. It bothered me. I tried to push it back, but couldn't, so I looked away. I put my right hand back on his chest and lay there for a long time. The sky got darker and the air cooled.

The skin of Trent's chest seemed to grow warm under my hand and I wondered whether it might be him, trying to physically connect with me one last time, or simply my own body heat radiating back to me.

"The medical examiner is here." That was Justin's voice. I stood.

The examiner walked me into the garage and asked a lot of questions about Trent's health and his family. I answered as honestly as I could. The examiner said that because Trent and I weren't married, I would have no say in what happened to his body. He explained that Trent's daughter would have no say either, because she was not yet eighteen. His parents were the only ones who would decide whether or not there would

be an autopsy. The examiner asked, just to know my preference, if I wanted one.

"Yes."

I wanted to know what happened to Trent.

37. Slow Motion

The medical examiner left the garage to do his work. Trent's phone was lying on the workbench, and I used it to call Jenna. When she answered, I asked if I could speak to her mother and told Jenna to put on some comfortable clothes. When Doreen got on the phone, I told her I had something important to tell Jenna, but didn't know whether it was better if I told her over the phone, or if I told Doreen, and Doreen told Jenna in person.

"Tell me, and I'll decide."

"Trent is dead."

"What?"

"Trent is dead."

"How?"

"I don't know. When I came home, he was lying in the driveway. His face was blue."

She said nothing.

I filled the space. "It might have been a heart attack."

Doreen paused, then decided. "You can tell her that."

"Okay."

I didn't know whether this was a good idea, and I knew I was in no condition to have an opinion. I waited for Jenna.

"Yeah?"

"I have something... difficult to tell you."

Her response was soft, wary. "Yeah?"

"Jenna, your dad died."

"He did?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" It came back as a wail.

"No. When I came home, he was lying in the driveway and his face was blue."

"But you don't know?"

"We won't know for sure what happened unless they do an autopsy, and it's up to your grandparents whether that happens."

"It hurts so bad, it hurts so bad, it hurts so bad, it hurts so bad!"

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to hold her, but she wasn't there.

"It does. I'm sorry."

"Where is he?"

"He's gone. They took his body away."

The wail came back into her voice. "Where is it?"

"I don't know. They took it away in the ambulance."

"I have to go now."

She hung up.

Justin and Kim, Justin's mother, were the only people still at the house. I hugged Justin goodbye and told him I was glad he had called 9-1-1, that I wasn't sure I could have done it. Kim offered to stay at our house for the night, or I could stay at theirs. I thanked her but declined. I just needed to be alone, to lie down. If Trent was gone, I didn't want anyone else.

My car was over by the house, parked on the grass, not where I left it. My things from the Chicago trip were still in it. I grabbed the laptop bag and left everything else. When the car dome light went off, the night was pitch black. What they say about the rural night true—if you hold your arm straight out in front of you, you can't see your hand. I shuffled across the grass, found the stairs, and went inside. When I flipped the switch on the newly installed foyer light, the glare made me cringe.

In the kitchen, I grabbed onto the edge of the sink and wailed. It was a strange, plaintive, moaning, howling sound, like what Trent and I heard one night in bed when a band of coyotes killed a deer.

Donation

A woman from the organ and tissue donation program called and asked if it was an okay time to answer a few questions about Trent. I was sitting at the dining room table and turned my hand over to look at my watch. Eleven twenty, not quite midnight. I said it was fine. She said it was a good time for a lot of people.

The donation woman asked about Trent's health and his medications. She asked if Trent had ever traveled abroad. I started to cry. He had always wanted to see the Amazon rain forest but never had.

The woman said nothing. She just waited. I made a mental note to be silent when grieving people are crying.

After the call, I went to bed, but not to our bed upstairs. I went to Jenna's bed, the one I'd bought after my divorce, the one that made me feel safe, the bed Trent had repaired with

the C-clamps. As I got into bed, I screamed and got back out. My knees. They were dark red, dented, and swollen. Bruised. It took me a while to figure out why. Then I wondered which was worse—kneeling on gravel or concrete, and I wondered about the knees of the man with the little yellow box.

In the middle of the night I woke up, dizzy, and held on to the sides of the bed so I wouldn't fall out.

September 18, 2008

In the morning, I woke with relief. I'd had a terrible nightmare that Trent was dead. Then, with a horror that came at me from the front and pulled me out the back, like an ocean riptide, I remembered and howled. I was the deer being killed by coyotes, and my cry ended the same way, muffled and whimpering.

Sometime later, I went to the kitchen. On the counter was a white bag of apples. Trent must have gone to the grocery store on his last day. In the fridge were grapefruit juice, milk, a roast, and five pounds of bacon. He was going to cook us a roast. He was going to make bacon and eggs.

I walked upstairs to look at our bed. It was made, but the pillows weren't the way Trent would have placed them. He hadn't made the bed. The woman who sometimes cleaned our house must have been there. He was making sure the house was clean for me when I got home. Outside, the grass was freshly cut. That would have been Justin's work. That's why Justin was there.

The garage loomed, and I forced myself to go inside. Trent's bar-height captain's chair was pulled up to his workbench. There was a half-full can of beer, with a photograph

lying next to it. It was the one of Trent and Jenna and me. The only one. It made me cry, so I turned to the stack of papers instead.

There was an envelope addressed to Trent from Baker College, the one that had caught my eye a week earlier. Trent started at Baker when he wanted to learn how to use a computer, but ended up a pre-college student, with two classes each semester. When I had asked him about the envelope, he said something like "It's not yours." His words felt harsh, but he was right. It was his mail, not mine.

The envelope contained a letter that said the college had received Trent's request to reinstate his academic eligibility. It included a copy of Trent's explanation for his failed term after having been on the Dean's List the term before. I liked the way he wrote it, plainly. Trent said his daughter had moved out, and that had been hard for him. I cried some more.

Next to the stack of papers was a little jar I had never seen before, with strips of paper in it. When I saw the strips had Trent's handwriting on them, I cried again. He hadn't used one of his big minnow jars; he had used a baby food jar. The jar would never be easy to deal with. I unscrewed the cap and laid the thin strips on the workbench.

OTIS

F DRIVE SOUTH

MUD LK ROAD

O.T. JOHNSON

THE GOOD YEARS AT RALSTON'S

MY VISION

TIME WITH JENNA

GARY RAPP

TOYOTA LAND CRUNCHER

It was a list of not just what Trent loved, but what he had loved and lost. His dog, the house on F Drive where he had thrown a massive Super Bowl party in the great red barn, his beloved swamp, and people he loved, including his best friend, Steven's brother, who died when his car hit a tree. As Trent explained, "Gary Rapp never hit anything with a car he didn't want to hit."

I picked up the can of beer, went back into the house, and put the can in the freezer because I couldn't throw it away and I couldn't leave it there and it was evidence that Trent had been there and he had been alive.

About half past six, I went outside again, wanting to see what Trent saw right before he died. A bit of dark red blood on the gravel must have come from a needle put into Trent's arm by one of the EMTs. The sun was setting as I lay down on the concrete and gravel. The tallest pine tree, the one Trent called Big Pine, was lit golden against the blue sky. It was beautiful. It made me happy that on his way out, Trent got to see his favorite tree looking glorious.

38. Autopsy

September 19, 2008

The medical examiner called at a little after nine the next morning. Trent's parents had approved the autopsy, he said, and he would have the results later in the afternoon.

"This afternoon?"

"Yes."

I sat in a chair and Nemo sat beside me. I had remembered to feed him, but he didn't eat. When I called two clients to explain what happened and to request a deadline extension, they were kind. I didn't know it, but they started a phone tree and called everyone they could think of who would care. I called my parents, who both cried. My dad sounded shaken.

The medical examiner called a little after one o'clock.

"I have the results of the autopsy."

I sat down. "You do?"

"Yes. And I can tell you that sometimes when we do an autopsy, the cause of death is inconclusive. But most of the time it's obvious, and this was one of those times."

"Okay."

"He had a dissection of the aorta. A dissection is simply a fancy word for a tear. The aorta is—"

"I know what the aorta is."

"So he had a weak spot in his heart, and it tore. And when it tore, the pericardium, the sac that surrounds the heart, filled up with blood. The pressure of the blood on the heart made it impossible for his heart to beat."

I put his words together in my head, going back to anatomy class and the plastic model of the heart, and imagining a tear on the inside.

"You're telling me he died of a broken heart."

"Yes! Precisely. That is exactly what we say!"

He sounded happy to have been understood. But I had questions.

"Did it hurt him?"

"Well, he... He probably felt some initial discomfort, but any pain wouldn't have lasted long. He would have died quickly. His circulation was entirely shut down."

"I'm glad it didn't hurt."

"I can also tell you it didn't matter what he was doing. He could have been chopping wood or sleeping in bed, it wouldn't have mattered. When the wall of the heart tears like that, it goes in its own time. It has nothing to do with exertion."

"Oh. That's interesting."

"Also, it wouldn't have mattered where it happened. Even if it had happened in the ER, nobody could have saved him—there is no way to make the blood circulate, and without circulation, there's no oxygen being delivered to the body."

"That's good to know. Thank you."

"You couldn't have saved him."

"Thank you."

I would need to tell Justin this.

Jenna and I spoke twice that day. The first time, Doreen called and said Jenna couldn't remember everything. She wanted me to walk her through it again, which I did. The second time, I called Jenna to tell her about the autopsy results.

Trent's father called that afternoon and asked me to talk with Jean, because she was having a hard time believing her only son was dead. When she got on the phone, her "Hello" sounded woozy, but I forged ahead.

"Hello, Jean."

"Is Trent really dead?"

"Yes, Jean, Trent is dead."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. When I got home, he was lying in the driveway and his face was blue. The emergency people came and tried to help him, but they couldn't, and they took his body away in the ambulance."

"Are you sure it was him?"

"Yes. I did CPR on him. I'm sure."

"Oh. Okay. Goodbye."

I guess no mother wants to believe her son is dead. I guess believing it was some other body in our driveway was easier.

39. Arrangements

September 19, 2008

Steven became the go-between for the funeral arrangements. He was technically Trent's cousin, but since Steven's mother and Trent's mother are twins, Trent, Steven, and Steven's older brother Gary spent a lot of time together growing up. They were more like brothers. Steven may have taken on the role because of what I said on the phone call, when Jean said goodbye and Herb got back on.

"Thank you. Maybe that will help. We're both just so lost without Trent."

"I know what you did, Herb."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know how you hurt him."

"Everybody got hurt."

Steven coordinated the arrangements. Herb and Jean would plan and pay for the funeral. I agreed because I couldn't give Trent what he wanted. What Trent wanted, what he had told me he wanted, was to have his body shot out of a cannon

over the swamp at Mud Lake. I told Steven the only thing I wanted at the funeral was to speak.

Because the death was unwitnessed, state law required the body be held by the medical examiner for forty-eight hours. The funeral would be on Monday, September 22.

When Trent and I moved to Newaygo, his life became a mystery to his friends. I wanted to clear it up. I wanted them to know how he had lived and how he died. I wanted to set the record straight. If I could do nothing else for Trent, at least I could speak on his behalf.

September 21, 2008

Thank goodness for Denise, one of my friends from the bicycle ride that led me to leave the man in the purple suspenders. Denise is wise, wise about family dynamics and, unfortunately, wise about the politics of funerals. Denise carried me.

On Sunday, I drove to the cottage she and her husband had bought about fifteen years earlier. They had spent years replacing windows, insulating walls, and building a second floor that looked over the small lake. The air was cool. Denise ferried me around the lake on their pontoon boat. The sun sank into the trees. It got even cooler. We didn't talk much.

In the house, Denise hugged me when I cried and was quiet most of the time. I couldn't think about the funeral, but that was okay because Denise thought for me, strategizing on my behalf.

"Do you want to see Trent's body?"

"What?"

"You might want to decide in advance whether you want to see Trent's body or not. That way, when we get to the

church, I can take you to your seat in a way that, depending on what you want, will allow you to see him or avoid it.”

“Oh. Good idea.”

Denise waited but I didn’t speak.

“Do you know what you want?”

I thought back to Lee’s funeral. Lee was my high school friend and post-college roommate who died when she was twenty-five and I was twenty-four. She had been riding her bicycle, late for work, trying to catch the tail end of a yellow light. Lee came head-to-grill with a delivery truck making a left-hand turn. The driver of the truck was seventeen.

Lee had been in the hospital, in a coma, for a week before her parents gave their permission to take her off life support. We had seen the X-ray—the blood flow went no higher than the shallows of her brain at the top of her neck. When they turned off the machine, there were no more breaths.

Lee had two funerals. The first was in Minnesota, where we lived. The second was in New Jersey, where we were from. The first service was open casket, which was a mistake.

Lee was wearing a blue dress I had never seen her in—she wore only blue jeans or plaid skirts. The day of the accident she was wearing a long, pleated plaid skirt, and because she was late for work, she hadn’t ironed it. I can still see her there, in our living room, moving quickly to gather her things in her wrinkled skirt, and me disapproving.

In the casket, to go with her dress, she wore two blue scarves. One was to hide her shaved head, the other was around her neck, to hide the hole from the tracheotomy. The scarves looked all right, maybe a pattern Lee would have liked. I was glad, because Lee’s mother had sent me to buy them.

As I looked at Lee, her father took my elbow and walked me to the pew. He must have done that because I must have been standing there a long time. I was looking at her face, trying to see the Lee I had known.

Lee's face had swollen from the injury and the fluids pumped into her. When the wires and tubes and pumps were removed, her face shrank like a deflated balloon, wrinkling and collapsing onto her bones. She could have passed for eighty.

They kept the casket closed in New Jersey.

Denise waited patiently as I thought about these things, as I calculated my answer—did I want to see Trent?

"No, I don't."

September 22, 2008

Although I didn't want to see Trent's body, I did want to go by the casket to put something in it. Denise and I had talked about the politics of where I would sit and with whom I would ride to the burial. I wanted to go with her, but Denise said I would be expected to go with someone from the family. Steven called and suggested I sit with him and his wife at the funeral and ride with them to the burial. He said that Herb and Jean had also said I was welcome to ride with them.

"I don't want to go with them. I want to go with you."

Denise drove me, on the back roads because she thought it would be prettier, to the church in Marshall, Michigan. She was right, it was prettier. The wheat fields were tall and golden in the early morning sunlight.

Denise and I moved through the crowd to take me to the casket. We shuffled slowly, as if moving through a concert

gate. As I got near Trent's casket but looked away from him, someone said, loudly, "She should see the body. It would be good for her." I didn't see who spoke and didn't want to know. Instead, I answered, just as loudly, "I saw him dead when he died."

Alongside the gleaming wood of the casket, I slipped the envelope inside. I could tell Trent was in a green shirt, but didn't look any closer than that. Wanting to touch him one last time, I put my hand on his chest. A mistake. Underneath the soft velour of the new shirt was a hard box. They must have put something in him to hold his chest up after the autopsy.

Whatever was in that box wasn't Trent.

Someone pulled me aside for a brief prayer with the family. We stood in a circle and held hands. I didn't want to be there. When the prayer was over, we hugged each other. I didn't want to do that, either.

40. Eulogy

September 22, 2008

I was in the second pew between Steven and his wife. They were newlyweds, and I was grateful they had separated themselves to surround me. Their kindness meant a great deal.

The pastor stood and went to the podium. I remembered him from the last funeral Trent and I had attended at this church, when Trent told me he felt sorry for the deceased woman's father who loved her, but not for her husband, who did not. The pastor was wearing a long, shiny green robe, and I wondered how they decide what color robe to wear.

The pastor paused and looked out at the crowd. Most were packed tight in the pews, but some were in chairs hastily added at the back. The pastor began his remarks.

"Trent Allen Price was a difficult child. He was a handful. He was trouble with a capital T." A few people chuckled. I didn't. I pressed my palms into the wooden bench to stop from screaming. Even now. Even at his funeral they could not honor their son.

As he spoke, I wasn't sure who he was talking about or even who was talking. Sometimes he sounded like a pastor; sometimes he sounded like Jean. Listening would only make me angry, so I stopped. I sat until his mouth stopped moving.

He then looked out over the crowd and asked whether anyone would like to speak. I stood up, holding my paper bag that held my props and my words, and walked to the front of the church. As I stepped over a wooden guardrail, I heard a few laughs and wondered whether I had just committed some sort of sacrilege. Oh well.

When I got to the podium, I turned to the pastor, who stood a few steps away.

"You might want to sit down," I told him. "This is going to take a while."

He chuckled and gave me a kind look. I looked at him with level eyes.

"I'm not kidding."

I took my things out of the bag, placed them on the podium, and looked up to see people in all kinds of clothing. Some were in suits, the bikers were in leathers, hunters were in camo, others were in their best jeans. I wore a white turtle-neck, a new red hoodie Trent had said I looked cute in, and my

most comfortable jeans. I was dressed for Trent and for me and for no one else.

Because I tend to speak too softly when addressing a large group, I reminded myself to speak up. I unfolded my paper and looked at the words. They had come either the morning before or the morning before that, and I wrote them as they came. It was almost like taking notes while someone else was talking. I typed them up and practiced saying them a few times. That was enough.

Because my hands were shaking, which was a surprise, I laid the notes on the podium and pressed my palms down on either side of the paper, careful not to cover any words. Then I began.

Trent Price hated funerals. He hated dressing up, so he bought a pair of black jeans that he wore to funerals and to weddings. At funerals, he hated that people talked about the person who had died as if they were perfect. So I will do my best to be even-handed.

After Trent moved to Newaygo, I think most people don't know what happened to him, so that's what I'm going to talk about. Let's start with how he died.

The medical examiner said Trent had a thin spot in the wall of his heart, in his aorta. The wall tore apart. For those of you in construction, it's like instead of a 2x4, somebody slipped in a piece of lath. It was weak and it broke. The blood flowed into the sac surrounding his heart and his heart couldn't beat. It wouldn't have mattered what he was doing—he could have been chopping wood or sleeping and it still would have happened when it happened. It didn't matter where he was—he could

have been in the woods or in the ER. There was nothing anybody could have done to save him.

I looked at Justin when I said that part. I wanted Justin to know.

Now let's fill in the blanks after he moved from Mud Lake to Newaygo.

One of the first things that happened was that he got glasses. Now that Trent was driving roads he hadn't been driving his whole life, we both realized he couldn't read the street signs. It turned out that he needed bifocals, and he took very good care of them.

I took out my first prop, Trent's glasses. If Trent's mother was having trouble believing Trent was dead, the glasses would help. When I said the part about Trent taking very good care of the glasses, I held them up for everyone to see—most of the mangled glasses in one hand and a broken-off bow in the other. People laughed because they thought Trent had broken them. He hadn't.

When Trent died, his glasses either fell off or he had already taken them off. They got stepped on by the emergency people and they broke. Trent was walking out of the barn and he just fell over, face up, facing the barn. The last thing he saw was the sky and the trees. At that time of day, his favorite tree, Big Pine, was lit up and glowing.

I seem to have reverted to how he died; let's go back to how he spent his time.

Trent took care of the house. He did a lot of building and fixing up. He insulated and sheathed the walls in the barn.

He replaced the propane tank with one that was refurbished, so it was better than new and cheaper than new, which was Trent's favorite kind of deal. He sealed the deck, rebuilt the bathroom floor, and together we painted Jenna's bedroom. He built me an office. He cut down seventeen trees to make a drive around the barn.

Trent's last outside project was for me. I told him I wanted to see blue sky out the bedroom window and I thought four trees would need to be removed. The four trees turned into eleven. Trent didn't just cut the trees down, he pulled the stumps out, and you can see them do it on Jeremy's Myspace page. When I was in Chicago, Trent had the area excavated. He told me over the telephone that when I got home, I would see how beautiful it was.

The day he died, Trent had picked up Justin to get some work done, had the house cleaned, had done some shopping—he bought a roast and bacon from the meat market, and milk, apples, and orange juice from the grocery store. He had Justin mow the lawn. I think Trent was getting ready to leave because, as Steven reminded me recently, “Trent always did like to have the grass cut before he went out of town.”

What else did Trent do since moving to Newaygo? He was a student at Baker College. He did okay in math and got a B-. In algebra he fought with his teacher when she said that a 20-foot ladder leaning against a wall was 23.3 feet up the wall. He said that was impossible. The teacher did the problem twice and came up with the same wrong

answer both times. Trent swore, left the room, and that was pretty much the end of algebra for him.

In English, he got an A. His teacher went to a conference and chose one of his papers to read as a sample of her students' work. Here's the surprise: Trent loved school. He liked learning, and his face lit up when he talked about it. He loved it.

Trent also started making friends in Newaygo. Ed was first. Trent called him "Ed Mowin" because Ed makes his living from mowing lawns. Ed took Trent with his buddies when they went kayaking.

Trent met Gene when Gene plowed the driveway. Gene reminded Trent of his uncle O.T., and sometimes after visiting Gene, Trent would cry because Gene is old and has cancer.

Most recently, Trent spent time with Justin and Jeremy. He called them the twins even though they aren't. They survived Trent's summer jobs program and became very close. The four of us went kayaking on the Muskegon a few weeks ago and had a nice time.

It was Justin who found Trent. Justin had been splitting wood, came to the front for a drink, and found Trent face up and blue in the driveway. Justin had the presence of mind to call 9-1-1 and then start CPR. Justin and his mom stayed until after all the medical people had left. I was glad they were there.

So Trent kayaked, he built things, he went to school. The best thing that happened in Newaygo was when Jenna moved in.

Trent loved cooking Jenna dippin' eggs on Saturdays and banana pancakes on Sundays. We played Sorry! and Rummikub. Jenna won most of the time and it wasn't because we let her. Trent and Jenna had a few big fights, and a couple of times he swore at her.

Once I asked Trent what he wanted most for Jenna. "I want her to be strong, to be able to take care of herself," he told me. I said, "Baby, you can quit now, because you got that."

I looked at Jenna when I said that, hoping the words made her feel stronger.

We read together. Trent didn't read well; the words got jumbled up in his head, and it was hard for him to follow what was happening. I thought he might have dyslexia, but he refused to get it checked. So we read together in bed at night. His favorite book of all time was *Endurance*—the story of the explorer Ernest Shackleton.

I held up the book so people could see it.

There was a box delivered when I was in Chicago, and Trent left it for me to open. It held the next two books we were planning to read.

Trent didn't read well, but he was a poet. One time he wrote, "Our bones and our flesh will be gone and we'll still be loving each other." That's what I think Trent is doing right now. I think he's loving us.

After I sat in the pew, Jenna stood and went to the podium. She spoke from notes, and I was impressed with what she said and how she said it. Trent had wanted her to be strong. Here was proof.

Jenna then showed a video she had made, for the wake and for the funeral. It had photos of her dad set to music, with words interspersed. Other people told me one of their favorite photos was of Jenna as a baby, lying on Trent's chest, all curled up and small in his arms.

I have two favorite photos from the video. One is of Jenna and Trent when Jenna was eight. They are in their bathing suits, standing in front of the used pop-up trailer Trent bought for the summer, so he and Jenna could swim in lakes and have a convenient and cheap place to stay. They are standing side by side, shoulders back, bellies out, tanned and a bit sun-burned, huge grins stretched across their faces.

The other picture isn't of Trent, but of his feet. Or rather, of the imprint his bare feet made in the snow on the back deck. In the video, Jenna left the photo up long enough for most people to figure out what Trent was doing when his feet made those footprints. They laughed.

So many people were at the church that the line for food snaked around the outer edges of the room and into the hallway. Someone told me it would be okay if I cut in front, so I did, which was a good thing because the church ran out of food and chairs.

A Chicago friend was there with her two children, who thought Trent must have really liked Jell-O because there was so much of it, in so many colors. They were too young to understand the economics of feeding a crowd.

Because my friend's daughter was young enough not to know you are supposed to be sad at funerals, she jumped into my arms when she saw me. It felt so good to be holding this happy, small person. I didn't want to put her back down.

Later, when Herb and Jean were greeting people, Herb reached out to hug me. I stiffened.

"I already hugged you once. I'm not doing it again."

The pallbearers loaded the body into the hearse. Mike was one of them. I wanted to scream. Mike had killed the piebald. I wanted to pull him from the casket and say "You have no right!" but I just stood there.

Cemetery

At the cemetery, Trent's cousin Jimo* came over to talk, and Steven came with him. Jimo is odd, with a hair-trigger temper. Jimo told me now that Trent was gone, I would need a tall fence and a security system. He said he would be happy to install it, out of respect for Trent. I didn't want a fence or a security system, but had to be careful with how I told Jimo.

Steven gave me a look that said, *If you want, I'll lead him away from here.* But I knew what to say. The best way to talk to a person who thinks differently is to talk the way they think.

"I know you want me to be safe, Jimo, and I want to be safe, too. But you don't have to worry about installing a security system or a fence, because the spirits of the Indians that lived on our land will protect me. They'll keep me safe."

Jimo nodded and turned away. Steven gave me a wink over how well my approach had worked.

What Steven didn't know was I believed in the Indians. One night in Newaygo, as I was drifting off to sleep, I heard

drumming. Not the slow *dum-da-dum-dum* that you hear in the movies, but much faster. I asked Trent whether he heard the drums. He had.

Meanwhile, Denise was trying to help me remember the location of Trent's plot. She pointed out trees and buildings beyond the cemetery's wrought-iron fence as navigation aids. I tried to remember, but there were too many trees and they all looked the same.

After the burial, different people walked up to say they were sorry. The number of people shrank until there was only one person left. As we spoke, I noticed one more person, an older man a little distance away. He wasn't talking to any of the family, wasn't talking to anyone. He stood like a statue, regal. By the cut of his navy blazer and the way the cloth of his gray slacks ruffled in the light wind, I knew he wasn't family from Battle Creek. He was a well-to-do stranger, and he was waiting for me.

Ending my conversation, I went toward the man and he came toward me. He had a firm jaw and graying at the temples, which made him look distinguished. When we got close, he extended his hand.

"Hi, I'm Joel—"

Joel! This was Trent's uncle, his father's brother, the one who had moved to Colorado, the one Trent talked about going to visit. Trent thought Joel could help him understand his father, that he had an important story to tell. All this came to mind before Joel finished his introduction.

"—and I'm the black sheep of the family."

"Not to me, you're not."

My arms wrapped around Joel and pulled him into a hug. He was built powerfully, like Trent, not wiry like his brother. He was taller than Herb, but not as tall as Trent. As we embraced, Joel spoke, his breath soft on my ear.

"I'm afraid of my brother."

I looked over his shoulder, across the grass and the headstones and the trees, my arms around this older man in his elegant blazer, and spoke the only words that came to mind.

"For good reason."

41. Coming to Terms

Telling Ernest

I wanted to tell Ernest that Trent was dead, so I walked down the two-track toward the swamp. It cut through the woods and bottomed out in the sandy grass at the edge of the greenish water. I didn't even know whether Ernest was still alive, but if he was, he deserved to know.

"Ernest."

It was stupid to think Ernest would be there or that he would hear me. Or that he would know who I was. But I called out again, anyway.

"Ernest."

The orange-striped head of a painted turtle popped out of the water. My feet were in the grass, inches from the edge, and Ernest was inches away.

We looked at each other for a minute or two. I just wanted to look at him, I was so happy to see him again. Then I told him.

"Trent's dead."

Ernest looked at me for a few seconds. His reaction was just like everybody else's. He didn't believe it at first. He blinked and looked at me, but I wasn't going to say it again, the way I did with people. People always said "What?" and I told them again and then they said "What?" again. Most people had to be told three times.

Ernest needed to hear it only once. He blinked a few more times, then went back under the water. I waited for a while but he didn't come back up.

Dancing

I was facing my regrets. One was that I had never danced with Trent. He had asked me once, and I had declined. It seemed the kind thing to do because Trent had told me he didn't enjoy dancing and definitely not in public. Instead, I'd danced with the man celebrating his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary and learned the man was lecher. Trent was so angry he left the room.

After Trent died and the lecherous man came by to comfort me, I stood at the door and sent him away. Then he sent his wife over. We sat on the couch, and I told her she was welcome anytime, but her husband was not. Trent said the lecherous man was cruel to his wife. As she left, she hung her head like a beaten dog. She had failed in her mission, and I wondered if, when she got home, he would beat her again.

Feeling regret and loss, one night in bed, I spoke words into the air and hoped Trent could hear them. I told him I was sorry I hadn't danced with him and asked if we could dance in my dreams.

Nothing happened. The next night I asked again and again nothing happened. The third night I asked again, saying that I would never ask again and could I please dance with him in my dreams, just this once.

We danced that night but in a different way. We danced through the solar system, dancing up and over and around stars and planets, flying through a black sky. We moved quickly but easily and gracefully.

Because we didn't really have bodies, our clothes weren't like real clothes. They were made of nothing, as if smoke had been pressed together. Trent wore a soft black tuxedo and a dusky blue shirt that matched my dress. If we had been in a room, my dress would have filled it.

We danced and flew for hours, and it was wonderful to be with him in such an amazing way. When I woke up, my teeth were vibrating.

It was my first and last dance with Trent, and it was wonderful.

Overdraft

The pump at the gas station wouldn't authorize my debit card, and I was pretty sure what the problem was. I had stopped paying attention to my checkbook. When Trent first told me that Doreen wouldn't let him near their checkbook, I decided he and I would balance ours together, and we did. Now, I didn't want to do it without him.

I gathered a paper bag full of receipts and took them to the bank. The clerk, who knew what happened because the whole town knew what happened, asked, "Do you have any checks to deposit?" I went home and found five checks from clients.

Arm Sweater

A couple of weeks after Trent died, I realized my arms didn't feel the same. The left arm felt as if it were wearing a sweater—not on the whole arm, just on the top of the arm, from my wrist to just shy of my shoulder.

It was odd, but I thought back to a night earlier, when I had asked Trent for a way to know he was still here. Trent had slept to my left. When we lay side by side, the curly warm hairs of his right arm bathed my left, and it felt as if the top of my arm was wearing a sweater.

The arm sweater feeling stayed in place until the afternoon I picked up Nemo from Joe's house, where Nemo stayed while I was in Chicago. Trent would have been glad that Joe's huskies had taught Nemo to pee like a boy. I was on M-82, happy to be back in Newaygo and happy to be with Nemo. Then, suddenly, the arm sweater disappeared.

I screamed, "I can't feel you anymore!"

As the last word left my mouth, the car—Trent's Altima rather than my Jeep—lost power, dropping from 60 to 20.

"Okay," I said aloud. "You're still here. Please don't let the car die and please get me home."

I drove the remaining six miles at 30 miles an hour, glad to be rolling, glad to be at 30 rather than 20, and really glad when I pulled into my driveway.

Justin took the Altima up to 80 as he drove it to the mechanic, who could find nothing wrong. The car was fine, but the arm sweater was permanently gone.

A few months after that, Nemo was also permanently gone. My friends knew the condition Trent had so emphatically set and were determined to help me honor it. My friend

Debbi found a home for Nemo with her nephew and his wife, in a nice house with a big fenced yard and two kids who wrap their arms around him like a giant teddy bear.

42. Belongings

October–November 2008

"I want everything that was O.T.'s."

Trent's mother was throwing me for a loop again. On the phone this time, instead of being hazy and struggling to believe her son was dead, she was present and pugnacious. She didn't start with "Hello." She started with what she wanted.

"Anything that was O.T.'s, I want it."

"I understand, Jean."

"He was my uncle. He was my uncle O.T."

"Yes. Trent told me."

"I want Steven to have his guns."

"Okay."

"All his guns. I want Steven to have all O.T.'s guns."

I wondered how many guns there were. "Yes, Steven gets all O.T.'s guns."

Jean kept on. "Steven gets all O.T.'s guns, but I want everything else."

"I'll pull out everything I know was O.T.'s and put it all together so it's easy to find."

"Good."

"What about the photographs?"

"What?"

"The two photos of O.T. that Steven took. One's a close-up. In the other he's sitting in a rocking chair, holding a shotgun."

"I don't want those. Steven already gave me those."

"What about Trent's clothes? Do you want any of those?"

"What would I want those for?"

We discussed when they were coming. It would be on a Saturday. Jean and Herb were coming with Jenna and Trent's sister. Steven and his wife were coming, too. As I imagined who all would be there, I pushed back.

"Jean, I want Jenna to go first."

"What?"

"When you go through the house for what you want, I want Jenna to go first. Alone."

"I'm his mother."

"Yes. And Jenna is his daughter. Don't you think Trent would want his daughter to have what she wanted of his?"

Jean gave in more easily than expected, but it didn't matter. I knew what Trent would have wanted, and I was going to fight for it if I had to. My plan was simple. I called Jenna to explain.

"Jenna, when you get here on Saturday, you're going into the house first. I'm going to give you blue tape and you get to put the blue tape on everything you want. That way, when other people come in after you, they'll know what you want and leave it alone."

"Can I have the bed?"

"Oh, Jenna, I should have said anything you want that was your dad's. The bed was mine, and I want to sleep in it again."

"Yeah, I knew it was. Okay."

I didn't tell her that although I spoke in the future tense, the truth was past tense. After the ambulance left, I never slept in the upstairs bed again.

Jenna and I talked some more. It was hard for me not to feel sorry for her. I remembered what had happened in my grandmother's house after she died, and I had a pretty good idea this would be worse.

First Dibs

Later, I called Jenna again to adjust the plan. I wanted to be sure she got the things she wanted. I could put blue tape on things before they got here.

Jenna wanted the big clock, and the old-fashioned cabinet that held the stereo and the television, and the picnic table. She wanted the three framed black-and-white photographs Steven had taken of Trent and Jenna, when Jenna was eight. She wanted one of the three-wheelers.

Then I asked whether she wanted any of Trent's clothes. "I want his sweatshirt." Trent had several sweatshirts, but when she spoke in the singular, I knew exactly which one she meant—the camouflage one. It was his favorite. He wore it almost daily in cooler weather, the layer that went between his T-shirt and his khaki Carhartt vest. It was the sweatshirt he had worn when he pulled two cold beers from the kangaroo pocket the night we navigated the note I had left him.

"Can you make me a pillow out of his T-shirts?" she asked. "A great big pillow with a big red heart on one side?"

If she and I had been talking face to face, I would have scooped her up and hugged her and told her I was sorry.

"Yes, Jenna, I can make you a great big pillow."

Hiding

Elaine and my close friends all said the same thing: "Hide what you want."

It didn't seem right. It seemed deceitful. But I thought about Elaine's perspective, which she shared back when I confessed I had lied to get away from the man in the purple suspenders. The Nazis would have killed Elaine's mother with the rest of her family if Elaine's grandparents had not lied. Elaine never would have been born. This need for deception has shaped her perspective. Elaine's philosophy is that people must earn your truth. I thought about Trent's parents and asked myself whether they had earned my truth. They had not.

I grabbed things for Jenna, following the same rule for myself that I gave to Jean: "Jenna gets what she wants first."

Suddenly, I had a plan. I had three heavy Chiquita banana boxes and would fill them for Jenna. The day before she and the others came to pick up Trent's things, I put the heavy boxes in my office and locked the door.

For myself, I took

one of the four wool blankets that had belonged to O.T., all of which I had rescued from the back of the barn and cleaned (this violated Jean's request and I didn't care)

his Carhartt sweatshirt

his bow and the smaller bow Trent said was mine

the carp target

five pieces of pottery he made in the pottery class we took together

a wooden letter holder he made in high school shop
class

three wooden fish

his kayaking paddle and mine

his life vest and mine

three of his four books (cooking wild game, finding
edible mushrooms, and shooting carp), leaving
behind the history of Barry County, Michigan

The upstairs loft had a small door that opened to a small space beneath the eaves. The door was hidden behind the bookcase Trent had built for me from a tree trunk sliced lengthwise. I put all these things in the space under the eaves. Because I didn't want them to be too far away, our wedding rings went in the back corner of my underwear drawer.

Last, I took Trent's duffel bag and packed it for Steven. Inside went the red plaid hunting coat and an old wooden hunting knife with a compass at the end of the carved handle. The knife probably had belonged to O.T., but I didn't know and didn't care. Jean wasn't getting that, either.

When I finished, I was exhausted and a little paranoid and very fragile.

A Test

The items in the three banana boxes in the downstairs office, and upstairs under the eaves, and in the duffel bag in the back of the Jeep began to bother me. It seemed wrong to hide them. Doubts scratched. I wrestled with this conflict until an idea came. It would confirm whether it had been right or unneces-

sary to hide things. It would be a lagging rather than a leading indicator, but it would be true.

The two photographs of O.T. hung in our living room in Newaygo, the close-up near the fireplace and the one with the shotgun next to the kitchen. We kept a framed photo of Trent's parents, a 2005 Christmas gift, in the hall closet where it would be ready for a visit from them. We needed to take it out of the closet only once.

I took my favorite photo of O.T., the one with the gun, and put it in the little attic space. The photo of Trent's parents went on the nail where the photo of O.T. had been. Jean had said she didn't want the photos of O.T. because she already had them.

Time would tell.

Reinforcements

"Justin, can you and Jeremy work this Saturday?"

"No problem. What d'you want done?"

"The coop. The siding needs to be finished."

"Yep."

Justin had adopted Trent's way of saying *yep*. They both said it as a two-syllable word, *yeah-up*. Hearing Justin say it that way made me happy and sad at the same time.

"Justin, it's more than just the coop. Trent's parents are coming to get his stuff, and I don't want to be alone."

"Uh-huh."

"I want you guys to use the chop saw and whatever other tools you'll need to finish the job so they don't take them."

"No problem."

"Justin?"

"Yeah?"

"This won't be fun."

"No problem."

"I'll pick you and Jeremy up at eight."

"K."

"Trent's parents are coming at nine. Jenna's coming, too."

"Jenna's coming?"

"Yes, she is."

Justin paused. Whatever it was he was wondering, his next question was tactical.

"How long you think they'll be there?"

"I don't know. But however long it is, you guys are getting paid for a whole day. You'll have earned it."

"No problem."

"Justin?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"No problem."

43. Armada

November 8, 2008

Justin and Jeremy came out the side door of their house, jeans and jackets loose on their lanky bodies, arms moving as if connected with marionette strings. They took their standard places in the Jeep—Justin up front and Jeremy in the back, behind Justin. Justin looked like he had been crying but I wasn't sure. Jeremy was tapping on his cell phone, his soft, straight blond hair shielding his face. I couldn't see his eyes. They spoke in turns.

"I've got Trent's socks on."

"Me too."

"They're the warmest socks I've ever had."

"Yeah, we both wear them all the time."

When I had gone through Trent's dresser, I was disappointed to find my gift to him—three pairs of his favorite thick wool socks—unopened in their packaging. I gave them to Justin, not sure whether he or his brother would want them. As usual, I had underestimated their level of need.

The boys quickly set up the equipment to work on the coop. It wasn't long before sawdust spewed from the table saw. I couldn't think of anything for me to do, so I went inside.

At nine o'clock, a truck pulled into the driveway. I had imagined an average-size U-Haul. This one looked like a semi. The top of the truck hit the pine branches that spanned the driveway and broke off a few. It pulled through the circular extension Trent had built, stopping behind the garage. A car I didn't recognize followed and stopped in front of the garage. Another car was behind it. People got out of all the vehicles at the same time. There were more people than I expected.

Trent's parents and Trent's sister I had expected, but not her husband, Kris. Steven I was glad for, but his wife was not there. I could understand why she would stay away, but I missed her. Jean's sister was there. I hadn't expected her, which was stupid, because the twins attended all important events together. I didn't see Jenna and panicked until suddenly she appeared.

Blue Tape

Jenna and I did not hug. I rarely hugged her in front of other people because I didn't know whether it would bother them, whether they would tell Doreen, and whether it would bother her. Probably not, but I wanted to be safe. As Jenna and I walked across the grass to the front steps, I asked God, or the universe, or whatever was out there to help us both. Handing Jenna the blue tape, I reminded her the plan was to put it on anything of her dad's she wanted.

As we walked through the front door, Jenna turned to me, eyes wide.

"There's already blue tape on things!"

"It's okay, Jenna. I taped the things you said you wanted."

"You did?"

"Yeah. But we can pull it off if there's anything I taped you don't want."

"Oh. Okay."

Jenna stood in the living room and looked around. There was tape on the tall wooden wind-up clock, the stereo cabinet, and the television. The television was especially important because this was where Trent and Jenna watched the videos they made together. *The Blair Witch Project*, made at Mud Lake, was the first. A more complex murder mystery followed, for which I allowed ketchup to be smeared across the back of my shirt. Trent's friend Jimmy was the killer, so Trent could focus on filming. We had given Jimmy a large butcher knife as a prop, but Jimmy wasn't very scary because during the scene where he sneaks in the back door, the first thing Jimmy did was wipe his shoes several times on the mat. Trent named it *The Case of the Courteous Killer*.

The last video was simple, Jenna and Trent dancing to Chris Brown's "Kiss Kiss." They take turns stealing a straw cowboy hat from each other and then dancing a hat-ownership victory dance. This was the video Trent wanted to watch a couple of weeks before he died, but the camera battery was dead. I had searched Jenna's room several times but couldn't find the adapter. It turned up later under a stack of clothes and stuffed animals in the back corner of Jenna's closet, in a place I had checked at least twice but somehow missed. When I found it, I cried.

Jenna took the roll of blue tape and began marking what she wanted. She wasn't greedy. She was thoughtful and precise. We studied every room in the house until we were both sure she had what she wanted.

As we left and walked to the garage, I was pleased with how well our time in the house had gone. Neither of us had cried. Jenna had asked a few questions and marked what she wanted. She had worked carefully and efficiently.

We opened the garage door to chaos. The first thing I noticed was my gardening tools were no longer hanging on the wall. Jenna turned to me, eyes wide, pained.

"I need my blue tape!"

"We'll get it. It's going to be okay."

I yelled to the crowd, "Where are my gardening tools?"

"They're in the truck." This was Jean.

"But they're mine."

"They're already in the truck. In the front, behind other things."

"We'll get them," Steven said. "We didn't know they were yours."

Jenna wailed. "I need my blue tape!"

Steven managed to pause the action. I thought that the family would wait patiently while Jenna and I were in the house. I was wrong.

We agreed that someone would find and unload my gardening tools. I had told the family that I only wanted the things the boys and I would need to maintain the house until it sold—the saws, the snow blower—but it never occurred to me they would assume everything in the garage was Trent's. Steven asked me to point out what was mine.

We decided the family would go into the house while Jenna stayed in the garage and marked what she wanted with blue tape. She taped Trent's tall captain's chair, the Winchester stool, and the orange Budweiser sign that said "Hunters Welcome." I don't know what else she marked because I went back into the house to see how things were going there.

All I remember is that I felt naked, as if the life Trent and I—and for a little while, Jenna—had lived was being fingered and appraised, taken or not.

When I went down to the basement, my sewing kit lay open on the floor, bobbins spewed across the concrete, their skinny thread tails marking their path. Jean pointed to a white crocheted bedspread in a clear vinyl case and asked if I wanted it. "That was my grandmother's," I snapped.

I floated between the house and the garage, not knowing where to be, wanting to be everywhere and nowhere. Everything felt wrong, but I couldn't figure out exactly what was wrong. Jean had passed me a basket of flowers when they first arrived. It was the arrangement Anne and Dean had sent to Trent's funeral six weeks earlier. The basket and pinecones

were in fine shape, but the flowers had stiffened and blackened.

"This is for you," Jean said as she handed it to me. "I was going to give it to you when you came to our house after the funeral, but you never showed up."

Something wasn't right about those dead black flowers, but I couldn't figure out what. I left the basket outside on the porch. I couldn't or wouldn't bring it into the house. That was the only thing I was sure of. That and blue tape.

Shell Shocked

"Do you want one of Trent's guns? To protect yourself?"

Steven was asking, and it was hard to answer.

"I don't like guns. But I think Trent would want me to have one out here."

"I think so, too."

I looked around at all the trees and wondered about danger, about who or what might come out of the woods now that Trent wasn't there. We stood on the porch. I didn't know what words should come next. I didn't want a gun. I wanted wings. I wanted to fly, to float, to forget.

"There's a smaller handgun you'll be able to handle."

"A handgun?"

What flashed in my mind was the big handgun, the one with the curved wooden handle, the one that looked like the one Clint Eastwood used in *Dirty Harry*, the one that came out when Trent was looking for a way out.

"It's light. Small. You'll be okay with it."

I watched Steven's mouth move. His words hit my ears, but I was interested in his eyes. I wanted to see something that

would tell me everything would be okay. His eyes showed care and gentleness, but no assurances.

"We won't leave until you know how to use it."

"Okay."

"Kris will teach you. He was in the military."

"Okay."

We moved to the side porch and Kris, Trent's sister's husband, a man I hardly knew, showed me how to load the clip with bullets, how to put the clip in the gun, how to take the safety off, how to shoot it, how to unload it. When I had worked the bullets and the clip and the shooting enough to satisfy Kris, he said that was enough for today, but I had to keep practicing and I should practice again tomorrow.

It was ending. Before they got back in the cars and truck and drove away, we stood in the yard and talked about Jenna coming back with her mother to pick up the Altima, and Trent's parents coming back with a vehicle with a hitch, to take the trailer with the kayaks and the canoes.

We talked about three-wheelers and the pig roaster at Jimo's they didn't know about. I think I hugged Jenna goodbye because I needed to. I may have hugged other people as well, but I don't remember because I had left my body by then.

I was floating.

Vindication

When they were gone, when I knew it was safe, I came back into my body. I was standing in the front yard, on the patchy grass that never grew well in the sandy soil. Brown oak leaves and yellow and orange maple leaves lay on the ground by my

feet. The oak leaves were both pointy (red oak) and rounded (white oak). It was fall.

I didn't hear the saws anymore, so I walked into the garage. Jeremy was coiling an extension cord. Justin was sweeping the concrete floor with the push broom.

It looked strange. So much was gone but so much was left. Trent saved everything.

Justin would never tell you how he felt, but you could tell by watching him. His face was red, his head down, and he slapped the floor with every stroke of the broom.

"You okay?"

"Yeah."

"You don't look okay. You look angry."

Justin continued to sweep but the dam broke and his words poured out hot and fast.

"They treated it—they acted like this was a fucking garage sale and everything was free."

"They did."

"And they fucked you over."

"Is that what you think? You think they fucked me over?"

"They did. They fucked you over." He spat the words, and I came back fast at him with mine. "So tell me—where is Trent's paddle? Or mine? Where is his life vest? You see them anywhere? Where is his bow—do they have that?"

Justin stopped slapping the floor with the broom and looked at me, his fine blond hair falling into his damp eyes. What I saw in them was not anger, but hurt.

"Justin, they didn't get a thing I didn't want them to have."

He looked at me but said nothing. I don't know if he believed it. But I did. Even though I was damaged, I did. I

thought back to that moment, just before they left, as I stood on the front lawn and Jean came down the steps of my house. She had something in her right hand and she held it up so I could see. It was the framed picture of O.T.

"Honey, do you mind if I take this?"

The smile started slowly from the corners of my mouth and grew strong, a smile not of joy but of vindication.

"Not at all, Jean. Go ahead. Take it."

Following Kris's instruction, I practiced shooting. I took a tall metal chair and put it in the backyard, then put the framed photo of Herb and Jean on the chair. I shot without emotion, but after shooting a few rounds, there was a strange pleasure in seeing where the bullets had left their holes.

The End of Stuff

At some point, Trent's parents came back and took the trailer with the load it carried—two canoes and five kayaks. When I pulled into the driveway one day, they were gone.

His parents came another day to see if they wanted anything else. This time I was on the porch and Jean was below me, on the grass. She skipped the usual "Hello."

"Where are Trent's saws?"

"Steven has them."

"Those boys were using them when we were here before."

"Yes, but Steven has them now."

"Did Steven come back to get them?"

"Yes, he did."

"Oh. Well, where is Trent's bow? Where's that?"

"I sent it to Shannon."

"Glenn said he wanted it."

"Trent would want Shannon to have it."

"But Glenn told me he wanted it. He and Trent used to go carp shooting together all the time."

"Glenn and Trent weren't exactly on speaking terms when Trent died."

"Oh. I didn't know that."

Later on, because Trent loved garage sales, I held a garage sale to get rid of the rest of it. Justin said to schedule the sale to coincide with income tax refunds. The sale would be one day only because I couldn't hold myself together for more than that.

Friday, April 17 was a beautiful, sunny day, the first really warm day of the year. I took that as a gift from Trent. Even though we lived at the end of a gravel road in a hard-to-find spot, the driveway filled with cars as neighbors discovered great deals and called their friends.

"How much is this?" a man asked about an item on one of the metal shelves from Ralston.

"Oh, that's the ten-dollar shelf."

"You mean each of these things is ten dollars?"

"No, I mean everything on the shelf is ten dollars."

Because I wasn't clear or he didn't believe me, I repeated myself.

"You can have that whole shelf, everything on it, for ten dollars."

Moments like that were fun. Others weren't, like when the woman asked if I thought the airbed that Trent and I had slept on when we went camping would work as a pool float. Justin had to run an extension cord so the woman could inflate the bed to be sure it didn't have any leaks. The bed looked wrong

inflated on the concrete in front of the garage. It belonged in a tent, or in the back of Trent's van. It belonged in the woods of northern Michigan, not in somebody's swimming pool.

When the garage sale was over, I hid the money in a stuffed animal, saving a few bills. Then I walked to Linda's Hit the Road Joe, a coffee shop a mile away that also sold artwork, and bought myself a wooden angel.

44. Interlude

2008–2010

In November of 2008, I put money down on a to-be-built condo in the suburbs of Chicago. In the spring of 2009, I put our Newaygo house up for sale. When Trent and I first moved in, I had told him, "This house is no good for me without you." Even so, I briefly thought about keeping it, until the Friday night when I came back from being in Chicago and saw that someone had stolen our firewood. The next morning I walked the property to see whether anything else was missing.

Trent had saved the largest pine trees he had cut down because he wanted to build a cabin from them. He'd trimmed the branches, leaving a dozen large logs. They were stacked like telephone poles a little way back in the woods, near where the cabin was to be built. The logs were gone. It would have been easy to think they had never been there, except for a few small pyramids of fresh sawdust on the earth. I picked up a handful. It smelled like pine and motor oil. The thieves must have been there for days.

I had to sell the house, and I did, for much less than I paid for it, because it was 2009, housing prices had plummeted, and that's what it took to sell it. I understand sunk costs.

I moved into an apartment, taking a month-to-month lease until the condo was ready, which was expected to be in June 2009. More than a year later, in August 2010, I walked away from the unfinished condo and my down payment.

I was still living in the apartment. And I was sad.

45. Clinging

August 17, 2010

I have been clinging to grief. I have been clinging to grief in a perverse way of feeling better. If I hurt this much, I must have really loved him. If I hurt this much, he must have really loved me.

What caused me to realize this was a blog post. The solution came from a movie. I would prefer to say I reached this enlightenment through meditation or contemplation of spiritual writings, but I take my lessons where they come.

The idea that I have willingly been choosing to walk into grief came from one of Seth Godin's blog posts.

Occasionally we encounter emotions at random. More often, we have no choice, because there's something that needs to be done, or an event that impinges itself on us. But most often, we seek emotions out, find refuge in them, just as we walk into the living room or the den.

Stop for a second and reread that sentence, because it's certainly controversial. I'm arguing that more often than not, we encounter fear or aggra-

vation or delight because we seek it out, not because it's thrust on us.

Seth was right. In this situation, in this life of mine, I was choosing to walk into the grief room. I was like a six-year-old who has lost a tooth and probes the hole with her tongue, in doing so expanding the pain, and because of the innervation of the tongue, expanding the apparent size of the hole, and when continuing to probe the hole in a protracted manner, expanding the time it takes to heal. I have been that six-year-old, probing my wound, running my tongue over the edges of my grief. I have taken perverse pleasure from the pain of feeling the hole.

Last weekend, I drove to the eastern shores of Lake Michigan to go to the party of a woman I had met at a conference. The event was the opening of the movie *Eat Pray Love*, a perfect chick flick. We wore bindis to the movie and smiled back at the people who smiled at us. Actually, we smiled at everyone.

When I read the book, I was ambivalent about Elizabeth Gilbert's husband, but in the movie I did not like him at all. *Let go*, I thought. *Why won't you let go of her?* And then I realized he was me and the person I would not let go of, running after him, dangling from his angel wings, was Trent.

"But I still love you."

"So love me."

"But I miss you."

"So miss me. Send me love and light every time you think of me, then drop it."

I took Elizabeth Gilbert's advice. I will still love Trent. I will still miss him. And every time I think of Trent, I will send him light and love, then drop it.

46. Letting Go

January 16, 2011

Last Sunday, I took Trent's small handgun to the local police station. I went on a Sunday morning because although I have never been to a police station, I figured it would be a slow time. A woman wearing thick glasses was helping a man ahead of me. When he left, she beckoned me forward and smiled in a friendly way that surprised me.

"I want to turn in a gun."

She picked up a phone and called someone who, judging from her reactions, told her to call someone else, which she did. Then she told me to take a seat, that an officer would be out to see me in a few minutes.

The officer was a young man with smooth skin, shorter than me. He took me into a small room and we sat. I set the gun case on the table in front of me. Children who grow up in homes where the actions of their parents are hurtful, random, and arbitrary learn to be wary of authority. So even though this young, undersized police officer seemed nice, I was wary.

"The clerk said you would like to turn in a gun."

"Yes."

"Is this it?"

"Yes."

"Where did you get it?"

"It was my boyfriend's. He died two years ago."

“You don’t want to keep it?”

“No. I haven’t shot it in a long time, and it’s dangerous for me to have it. I don’t want it.”

Walking out of the police station, I cried. Not over the gun. It had meant nothing to Trent and therefore nothing to me. I was crying over a different gun and a bullet in a ceiling and wounds that don’t heal.

June 30, 2011

“Suicidal.” Elaine used the word not the last time I saw her, but the time before that. She was referring to Trent. She had never used that word before, and the label hit me hard. It was a professional diagnosis. A clinical category. A code on an intake form.

I had always said, “Trent wanted to kill himself,” as if describing it in those words put it in the same category as “Trent wanted to take a walk” or some other innocuous activity. Trent had been dead for almost three years when I told Elaine he had wanted to kill himself. It was a secret I could no longer carry alone. I was surprised that she wasn’t surprised. She already knew. Trent had told her.

I had wondered, a little, what Trent and Elaine talked about when he saw her alone. We would do that, sometimes. One of us would go in first for some alone time with Elaine. I always thought they talked about Jenna. I’m sure they did that. But they also talked about death and wanting death. When Elaine used the word, she was explaining to me how in some ways, it got worse for Trent in Newaygo. Yes, he was happy to be with me and happy to be living there, but he still carried relentless pain. What was so difficult for him was that even

though he had gotten, in a way, to heaven, the hell he had known all his life was still there. What made him suicidal was knowing the pain would never go away. He would hurt forever.

When Elaine spoke about this, she curled her left arm by her ribs and curled her hand inward, as if she were carrying something, like a football, but she contracted and twisted her hand as if in pain. She was trying to help me understand the physicality of Trent's suffering, as if it were a growth from a wound in his side, heavy and malignant.

November 26, 2011

In the waiting room of Elaine's office, between the big basket of chocolates and the water jug that dispenses cold and hot water, is a tall bookshelf crammed with books in no particular order. There are books on infertility and loss and body image. There are the poems of Rilke and Neruda. Elaine's doctoral dissertation is on the bottom shelf. It is a thick, black leather-bound book, and I read most of it, back when I first started seeing Elaine and was trying to determine whether she was a good therapist or a mediocre one. Her dissertation told me Elaine is very smart.

Sometimes when I look at Elaine's bookshelf, there will be a book that seems to stick out a bit from the rest and say, "Hey! Look here!" This happened when I saw Elaine last time. The book was *No Death, No Fear*, by Thich Nhat Hanh. I sat in the waiting room and quickly flipped to the chapter titled "Transforming Grief and Fear." It said this:

On a beautiful sunny day, you look up into the sky
and see a nice, puffy cloud floating through. You

admire its shape, the way the light falls upon its many folds and the shadow it casts on the green field. You fall in love with this cloud. You want it to stay with you and keep you happy. But then the shape and color change. More clouds join with it, the sky becomes dark, and it begins to rain. The cloud is no longer apparent to you. It has become rain. You begin to cry for the return of your beloved cloud.

You would not cry if you knew that by looking deeply into the rain you would still see the cloud.

When I walked into Elaine's office for my appointment, I brought the book with me. We talked about where I can see Trent now that he no longer is what he was. I believe this. I believe we do not die. I believe this not because of a religious upbringing (which I did not have) but because of eighth grade science class, where we learned energy cannot be created or destroyed.

Here is my logic from eighth grade, which I still hold:

People are energy. Proof: if you sit in a chair recently vacated by someone else, the chair will feel hot. If people make their own heat, they must have their own energy.

If you put a dead person in a chair, the dead body will not make the chair hot. But, when the dead body was alive, it would have made the chair hot. Therefore, the energy must have gone somewhere, since it can be neither created nor destroyed.

Because energy cannot be destroyed, Trent's energy must be somewhere. If he is no longer the cloud, he is the rain. If he

is no longer the beating heart, he is the sun. If he is no longer the hand that holds mine, he is the stars.

January 24, 2012

When I saw Elaine last Saturday, before sitting on her soft leather couch, I picked up the big cotton quilt from her rocking chair. It might be Mexican, but I don't know. The colors are bright. We both sat on the couch, each at one end, and angled toward the other. At some point, as we talked through the list I had brought, Elaine set a box of Kleenex next to me. Never mind that there was a box on the table right behind me.

We were close to finished, but there was still time left in the hour. I drew the quilt up under my chin, remembering something I had wanted to talk about.

"I don't know how long I could have lasted, in Newaygo with Trent."

"I so honor you for saying that."

"I know we loved each other, and that was wonderful... but sometimes it was really hard."

"I'm sure."

"Especially after Jenna left. He would go out into the woods with his gun..."

"Even though you loved each other, you had this beautiful love, you still had to be watching all the time, alert for something going wrong."

Sometimes a tear will come out one eye and then the other. This time they were coming out both eyes, fast. The lump in my throat kept me from speaking.

Elaine continued. "Trent experienced joy with you, for one of the few times in his life, being with you and being with you

in Newaygo. But there was a part of him that could not be healed. His parents—rightly he had anger toward his parents, toward his father for the physical brutality, but in some ways, what his mother did was much worse. Trent was never able to direct that anger at the people who deserved it. Instead, he took it inside and directed it at himself.”

I held on to the quilt and listened to Elaine with wet eyes.

“Even though you created this space to love each other, there was still for Trent this pain. If he had asked me when it was going to stop, I would have told him, ‘Never. It’s never going to stop. You are going to need to learn to live around the pain.’”

As she said this, Elaine made a fist with one hand and the other flew in the air around it.

I swallowed the lump and asked, “Do you think he died because he knew I was wearing out?”

“No. Oh, no. He had hoped that when he got to Newaygo, it would get better. But it never got better. I believe there are some traumas that are so great, healing is not possible.”

I agreed with her and said so, that if it is true in the medical world that sometimes a physical body goes past the point of recovery, it makes sense that it would be true of the psychological body as well.

Elaine and I always hug each other at the beginning and end of a session. At the beginning, I had hugged her strongly and almost lifted her off the ground. Now I gave a good hug but a weak hug because I was spent. I had told Elaine my secret.

I don’t know how long I would have lasted in Newaygo with Trent.

Perfect Time

The lease on the Newaygo storage locker that holds items marked with blue tape is up in November. Jenna has fallen in love and moved with her boyfriend to another state. I don't think she'll come back for whatever is still in there, so I'm planning on making one last trip, probably in April, when the Muskegon River is high and fast.

I miss kayaking, and there are times, still, when I miss Trent. We had our mantra in Newaygo, and I have my mantra for my life now. "He died at the perfect time" is what I say to myself whenever I start to think he should still be with me, still beside me, his blue eyes looking back at me when I wake up in the morning. "He died at the perfect time" is the short version. The long version is "I don't know what good things may happen because of this. I don't know everything there is to know about this. I do know that he doesn't have headaches anymore. I do know that he loves me." He told me this. He told me he would love me forever.

He died at the perfect time.

47. Update

October 30, 2022

Trent's mother died this past May. Cancer overtook her body after dementia took her mind. Her husband, Trent's father, died not quite three weeks later, the day before Jenna's birthday.

I remember how Trent and I used to wonder who would die first, his father or his cousin who struggled with drug

addiction. We never would have guessed it would be Trent, and that he would die fourteen years before his father.

Jenna has now lived more of her life with her father off the planet than on it. On Father's Day this year, she posted that she has three fathers: Trent, her uncle Kris, and her grandfather. She wrote that her grandfather was the "greatest man who ever lived." It hurt me, for Trent, but then I remembered it's what he wanted. Trent wanted Jenna to have a good relationship with her grandparents.

Yesterday, Jenna got married, in South Carolina. Not to the boyfriend mentioned here, but to a man in Michigan, where they live. Jenna is a wedding and family photographer specializing in non-traditional families. In her photographs, she captures love.

I haven't seen Jenna since 2011, when she was eighteen and I gave her my Jeep. Because of the wedding, I recently had an interaction with the family that made it clear they don't want me involved. On those rare occasions when I miss Jenna, I am doing with her what I did with Trent. I am sending her light and love, then dropping it.

As for Trent, he's gone, but he isn't. I'm convinced there are times he sends reminders that he still loves me. There is a hawk that lives on the field I tend in Kentucky, who flies close and circles overhead when I first walk the tall grass. I say hello to the hawk and ask him to say hello to Trent for me. I do this because people die, but love doesn't.

Love never dies.

SWEET BABY, I JUST TALKED TO YOU. I LOVE YOU SO MUCH. BABY, THE LOVE I HAVE FOR YOU IS SO HUGE YOU CAN'T SEE IT IN ONE DAY. SO I'M GOING TO SHOW YOU A LITTLE PIECE OF IT EVERY DAY FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE AND THERE'S GOING TO BE SO MUCH LEFT THAT YOU'LL SEE IT FOR ETERNITY. I LOVE YOU.

—TRENT PRICE

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Deb Freuh, Laurie Anderson, and Linda Rasins, the three other women of LLDJ, who, when I told them I wanted to start a blog about adult learning said, “No. Write about Trent. It will help you process your grief. When you’re done with Trent, then write about adult learning.”

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2023 innards: Trent Price, who I believe was behind a technical glitch that caused me to ask, "Is Trent the reason this is jamming up? Is there something here he wants changed?" As a result, I reread Chapter 33 and added 74 words. If it was Trent, he liked the changes, because the glitch that I struggled with for two days vanished.

2023 cover: Damonza, who made a cover that fits the genre and that I love, and my sprint writing buddies, who suggested tweaks that made it even better.

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APE: Author, Publisher, Entrepreneur, by Guy Kawasaki.

The Naked Truth About Self-Publishing, by Jana DeLeon, Tina Folsom, Colleen Gleason and Jane Graves.

The Non-Designer's Design Book, by Robin Williams.

Butterick's Practical Typography, by Matthew Butterick.

Joel Friedlander's blog at www.thebookdesigner.com

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Manoj and Natu, who take me to and from the airport and who are exemplars of customer service. When I apologize to Manoj for needing to pick me up at 3:45 a.m., he brushes it aside with "You are my personal customer." And when I text Natu, asking if he can pick me up, his response is always "Yes. I will take care of you." They do.

David Lipman of Home Alone Pet Care and the fine folks at Morton Grove Animal Hospital who watch over Leda when I am out of town and who allow me to relax, knowing she is in good hands.

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My parents, those first shapers of who I am, who each taught me important and different lessons. Special thanks to my mother, who read to me every night for years, which led to my love of books. Thank you also for standing up to my first-grade teacher who thought I shouldn't cry when listening to a story. Mom asked the teacher, "Do you think it's sad when Bambi's mother dies?"

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Trent Allen Price, who adored me and who said, "True stories are the best kind." I love you, I miss you, and I'm looking forward to seeing you... but not yet.

SWEET BABY LOVER

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE*

1. At what point did the book hook you, or did you never get into it? If you stopped reading, where did you stop?
2. How would you describe Trent? Jule?
3. What choices did they make that were similar to ones you would have made, and when did they make a different choice?
4. Did you ever want to “slap upside the head” one or both of them? When?
5. Were there any parts of the story that surprised you? Frightened you? Made you uncomfortable?
6. Which scene most resonated with you in a positive or negative way?
7. What does the book say about Love? Family? Mental health? Death?

8. Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not?

9. Is there anyone in your life that if they died suddenly, you would feel you left something unsaid? What keeps you from saying it now?

10. The book description asks, "Is it better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all?" How would you answer that question?

11. Jule's father wrote, "You must realize that when we cry at reading your words, we cry for ourselves...." Do you agree or disagree?

12. If you could ask Jule or Trent a question, what would you ask?

* If you'd like Jule to virtually join your book club conversation, that would be fun! Please reach out to jule@julekucera.com.



Jule Kucera, May 2013

Jule Kucera writes to explore the wild and noble territory of the human heart, and to leave behind a brave and honest map. Connect with her on Instagram @jule.kucera, sign up for her weekly email reflections on life at julekucera.com, or listen wherever you get your podcasts. Jule currently lives solo in Cincinnati, at the southwest corner of Ohio. Colorful art covers the walls of her home and twinkle lights decorate her desk. She is grateful for her broad community of dear friends and one local lovely little library. This is her first book.