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University of Nevada, Reno

**If We Could Only See Us Then: A Memoir**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English—Writing and the Honors Program

by

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## **Abstract**

“If We Could Only See Us Then: A Memoir” is a personal essay collection of my college experience that utilizes components of creative nonfiction. First, I use narrative prose with dialogue, setting, action, and enhanced characters to advance simple telling of events to a more complex level. Secondly, through segmentation, I use white space to delineate separate narratives or to illustrate themes by transitioning in time. Thirdly, I incorporate a thorough search for meaning, including the question of my authority to take authorship. Through these creative nonfiction techniques, I am taking memoir from recollections to creative art. Furthermore, as my personal essays progress, so does my persona, rising from a college freshman newly exposed to the world to a college senior engaged to be married and unafraid to act. Therefore, “If We Could Only See Us Then: A Memoir” displays the creative nonfiction genre by offering an explorative journey through a college student’s experiences.

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## Impetus

At the age of twenty, I read a memoir for the first time. In the hot summer months, I picked up a copy of *Through Painted Deserts* by Donald Miller. This memoir discussed Miller's cross-country road trip from Houston, Texas, to Oregon with his Christian friend Paul. Originally titled *Prayer and the Art of Volkswagen Maintenance*, Miller's pages are a journey of faith, life, beauty, and perspectives. These elements are explored through the conversations between Miller and Paul, Miller's inner thoughts and ponderings, their actions at various pit stops like at the Grand Canyon, and their interactions with others they encounter along the way.

Miller's memoir is a narrative-driven work that is targeted toward what is known as the "seeker" crowd. In other words, the story has been written for an audience that is seeking to learn more about God, specifically the Judeo-Christian God, without being preached at. Miller's memoir is an explorative journey. His road trip expands beyond covering physical distance as he drives across the states to tackle the distance between him and his understanding of God.

Miller uses real-life experience to search for and to elucidate greater meaning. Therefore, the first memoir that I read provided me with an excellent introduction to a new genre: creative nonfiction.

Now nonfiction is a genre that I had never paid much attention to previously. After all, nonfiction was the genre of famous, deceased people. Therefore, I spent the majority of college career studying the art of fiction. However, through my exposure to creative nonfiction in my junior year, I discovered that fiction and nonfiction could collide through a genre known as creative nonfiction. As implied by its name, creative

nonfiction is a creative work based in nonfiction events and people. However, the nonfiction story is told in a captivating way, with the narrative arc of a fluid beginning, middle, and end, like in a fiction story. Furthermore, the reality of events and people can achieve breath and life on the page by becoming plot and characters. With this realization, I began to read as many books as I could that were designated creative nonfiction.

This genre includes subgenres, including memoir and even the personal essay. The latter, the personal essay, is appropriately named as an essay-length memoir that can present more focus than a larger work of creative nonfiction. Essentially, personal essays explore, explain, and illustrate one's personal life experiences through an essay.

I was introduced to the concept of the personal essay a little over one year ago in my Advanced Nonfiction course at the University of Nevada, Reno. In this class, the professor encouraged us to write our own life experiences in personal essays to be read in front of classmates. As I thought about my middle-class, college student, life experiences, I thought, *Who really cares what I've done or who I am?* When I voiced these concerns to my professor, he said, "You'd be surprised what you have to say." So I wrote my first personal essay. Sure enough, my professor had been right.

In many modern writing courses, students are encouraged to find their voice and to use it. Well, what is voice anyway? I believe to exhibit voice is to vocalize on paper the issues that you deem worthy of bringing to the light (for the benefit of the self and of your audience), and to do so with a literary style that comes to characterize your work as a nonfiction author.

Unfortunately, many writers are copying others' voices and reprinting material that has already hit the bookshelves. With the popularity of memoir, the current market is inundated with authors who have decided to share their story, and "we don't realize how many of us are doing approximately the same thing" (Monson, 22). In writing classes, I've been told it's nearly impossible to find original ideas. But this doesn't mean we must quit writing. Rather we just need to find a way to differentiate our work from past published works and the current influx of similar stories.

In response to this question of differentiating one's work, personal essayist Ander Monson addresses his audience in "The Guilty *I*: A Pronoun Goes on Trial" in *Believer*, stating:

"I want [the personal essay] to be art.... The action of telling is fine: kudos to you and your confession, your therapy, your bravery in releasing your story to the public.... I guess I want awareness, a sense that the writer has reckoned with the self, the material, as well as what it means to reveal it, and how secrets are revealed, how stories are told, that it's not just being *simply* told" (Monson, 21).

After reading this article by Monson, I knew that my own personal essays could not focus on telling my stories for my own sake. Rather, an author of creative nonfiction needs to become passionate about "finding, creating, or uncovering *another subject*—something else to rely on and parse beyond the self" (Monson, 21). With my discovery of this writing wisdom, I began to notice how well unearthing another subject worked in the published personal essays I admired. I saw the presence of a greater theme with E.B. White's juxtaposition of youth and aging in "Once More to the Lake," with Piri Thomas' vivid culture clashes in "Alien Turf," and with David Sedaris' condemnation of

postmodern artists in “Twelve Moments in the Life of the Artist.” All these personal essays sought deeper meaning.

The more personal essays I read, the more increasingly aware I became of one of the goals of creative nonfiction. As Philip Lopate, the editor of *The Art of the Personal Essay*, states in his introduction, an author in this genre must understand “that one is not important, except insofar as one’s example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish” (Lopate, *xxxii*). To write successful creative nonfiction, I realized the importance of relating my personal struggles to greater themes, to the human condition, which could allow readers to connect to the narrative as participants instead of spectators.

Perhaps the most effective demonstration of this concept that I came across was Scott Russell Sanders’ “Under the Influence.” In this personal essay, he discussed his father’s alcohol addiction and abuse. Using frightening personal recollections, poetry by Theodore Roethke, Biblical allusions, a reference to Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis*, synonyms for *drunk*, and even identifying the degenerate lives of his hometown’s drunks, Sanders used his own past to show that his “private grief” is actually a “public scourge” (Sanders, 733). Therefore, Sanders’ personal essay not only allows him to reckon with the self, as Monson recommends, but it also puts Lopate’s advice into practice, as he uses his example to expose a human trait and lets readers with similar backgrounds to feel a little less lonely and freakish. Therefore, he has sought meaning through his essay, and by its conclusion, both author and reader has learned more about themselves and their world.

The core of creative nonfiction is “to search for meaning in a world without coherence” (Augenbraum and Stavans, *xxix*). The search for meaning is one of the three

techniques I have chosen to utilize in writing my thesis. In order to connect to the audience, to parse with the self, and to extract deeper meaning, I ask “Who am I to \_\_\_\_\_?” at the conclusion of each of my personal essays. The contemplation of this question, which has the blank filled in differently for each personal essay, is my method of directly addressing the information, or the details of my life, that I give throughout the essay. Through this method, I strive to search for meaning as established by renowned essayists in the creative nonfiction genre while doing so in my own creative way.

In addition to the search for meaning, I incorporate two additional techniques of creative nonfiction: narrative prose and segmentation. These components of style are designed to propel personal anecdotes to a literary level.

Narrative prose is the incorporation of plot, developed characters, dialogue, setting, and additional literary qualities. The inclusion of these qualities add to the overall narrative arc of a story and aim to engage the reader. Rather than me, the author, telling the reader a situation exactly (i.e. it was cold; the students were bored), I would prefer to set the scene and allow the readers to view the situation for themselves (i.e. the air conditioning whirred incessantly, and a girl in the back row yawned as she slumped in her plastic chair). This method encourages the reader to make judgments based on the information provided, which lessens the need for reader’s suspense of belief and also establishes more credibility for the author who is not afraid to let the readers think for themselves.

The third technique is segmentation, which is the use of a # symbol and white space on a page “as a fundamental element of design and expression” (Root, 1). A segmented essay is intended to present material thematically. Therefore, the # symbol can

literally break the essay into multiple narratives, as delineated by separate segments (a.k.a. paragraph chunks following the same story line), within one piece to illustrate a theme without following chronological order. Another benefit of segmented essays is the ability to move forward in time without traditional transitions. As Robert Root states in “This is What the Spaces Say,” “the most significant change in the nature of nonfiction in our time [is] the use of space as an element of composition” (Root, 1). Therefore, this technique allows creativity of physical space, time, and theme for the writer to pen and the reader to enjoy.

With these techniques, I thought it would be appropriate to return to my beginnings (with Donald Miller’s *Through Painted Deserts*) in creative nonfiction. Therefore, I decided to write a memoir for my senior thesis. Within this memoir, I chose to present a collection of personal essays to further apply my research of the field of creative nonfiction. Finally, I chose to write about my experiences during the past four years of college at UNR. While I debated writing about my journey to Nicaragua with a medical team or about my activism on behalf of East African children, I decided that it would be best to start with where it all began. I became aware of myself and my place in the world when I arrived on the University of Nevada, Reno campus. Therefore, as the time when I began to reckon with self as well as to experience issues that others struggle with, which show more widespread human traits, I thought this time period would be a good starting point to apply the writing wisdom of Monson, Lopate, Root, and other personal essayists.

More of my own stories will come later. And the essays I have included in this thesis will likely undergo more editing and expanding as I pursue my writing career. But

this is where my story starts. And to tell the beginnings of this story, I take the genre beyond theory to apply the techniques of creative nonfiction that captivated me as a writer. Together, this is my memoir, my personal essay collection, and my personal experience within creative nonfiction.

### **Introduction: Who Am I?**

The sun was shining. The birds were chirping. The leaves were changing colors. And the freshmen were shell-shocked. Mouths agape, paper schedules in hand, and adorned in an excessive amount of UNR gear, the freshmen stood immobile amidst the moving collegiate crowd. On the grass lawn of the quad. In front of the library. Just beyond the dormitory doors. Freshmen are easy to spot.

On the morning of my first day at the University of Nevada, Reno, I left my dorm room twenty minutes early. After hurrying across the crowded campus past booths advertising Greek Life and past propane-tank grills with student government leaders preparing pancakes for college newbies, I arrived at the elusive Edmund J. Cain Hall. I navigated my way down stairwells and twisted hallways until I collided with a mass of students loitering in the basement outside the door to Psychology 101. I shifted my phone out of my back pocket and checked the time. 8:52 a.m.—plenty of time to spare.

Against the stone, I slouched under the weight of my backpack and waited for the professor to unlock the classroom door. I had yet to realize the perk of living on campus allows one to return to one's room after every class, as opposed to high school's all-day ventures. Where were the lockers, after all? And where was this professor? He was late to the first day of school. Great, I had a slacker teacher. Just like those high school football coaches who get paid to teach U.S. History.

The minutes ticked by. There must have been eighty kids crowding the hallway. I glanced at the guy next to me. Should I engage the stranger in conversation? Tall, dark curly hair—hmm, potential. Stubble, wire-rimmed glasses, frown—never mind. Yes, just to clarify, I was judging.

I stared at my black Converse shoes with their dirty white laces. Maybe he was thinking the same thing about me. Maybe he was thinking something along the lines of: Should I engage this stranger girl next to me in conversation? Medium-height, straight-brown hair—very girl next door. Black shirt, black hat, black mascara, big backpack, One Ring keychain, staring at her feet, looks about age 15—yeah, keep your mouth shut, buddy.

I reached my hand to my jeans pocket and slid my phone out to check the time. The digital numbers glowed back at me. 9:06 a.m. I scanned the crowd, wondering which one of them would be good to speak with. I needed to befriend somebody.

#

At midnight the previous evening, I sat at my desk in plaid pajama shorts and a cartoon monkey T-shirt, hoping one of my friends back home in Las Vegas would decide to log on to Instant Messenger. My randomly-assigned roommate Charlotte burst into the room, holding the door open for a boy wearing a UNR Wolf Pack baseball cap. As he walked into our room, I jumped out of my chair and scrambled for a sweatshirt. I hadn't been seen in my PJs by a boy since my parents decided that my childhood guy friend and I were too old, at age seven, to sleep in the same room.

“Do you want to come with us to Gabe's room?” Charlotte smiled at me, placed her hands on her voluptuous hips, and threw her weight to one side. I watched Gabe's gaze drop. I didn't like the way he eyed her. But, maybe, I should go along anyway. At least, I could have some bonding time with my roommate.

“Uhh, sure, let me sign off here, and give me just a minute to change.” I logged off the internet as fast as the high-speed connection would allow. Then, I grabbed a pair

of jeans from the dresser and bolted for the bathroom. Sure enough, one minute later, I walked down the hallway to the elevator with the two of them.

Gabe punched the down-arrow button to call the elevator. “Dude, are you excited for the UNR-UNLV football game?”

“Hell yeah!” Charlotte danced, moving her feet, her hands, her hips. Dang, she was confident.

If I was going to make friends, I needed to speak up more. Yeah, that’s it. Don’t be afraid. Add your two cents. I opened my mouth—“Yeah, I hope Vegas wins!”—and inserted my foot.

“What’s your problem?” Gabe said. “You’re in Wolf Pack territory now.”

Congratulations, self. You’re not in Las Vegas anymore. You’re in Reno now. How could I have been so treacherous as to go against my own university after only a mere day, in favor of supporting my hometown of eighteen years?

In Gabe’s room, he passed around red plastic cups of beer. Three other guys had already drunk enough alcohol that the whole dorm room reeked of it. Charlotte grabbed her cup, tilted her head back, and chugged. Gabe offered me a cup, and I declined.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Gabe turned from me and looked at Charlotte. “What kind of goody-two-shoes did you end up with?”

Gabe’s roommate told me to forget about him. He plopped down in a chair beside me and asked me if I liked books. Well, sure, I guess.

“You ever read *The Catcher in the Rye*?” The roommate looked down at his drink, moving his hand as he watched the bronze liquid swirl at the bottom of the cup. “That’s my favorite.”

Unfortunately, I had not read the J.D. Salinger classic. I had nothing to contribute to the conversation. That was okay. Because this roommate guy was toasted. As a result, he was able to talk for quite a long time and quite repetitively about how much Holden Caulfield and he shared life struggles. Since he was so moved by the book, I determined that it was my duty as a teenager to read this great commiseration with American youth as soon as possible.

#

Note: One year later, I did read *The Catcher in the Rye*. However, the book's angst was lost to me, and I was fed up with Holden 100 pages into the novel. I never finished it. My friend Barry, who was the kind of kid who read Nietzsche for fun and ordered grilled sandwiches from the cafeteria under the name J.D. Salinger as a joke, informed me that had I read the book at age sixteen, I would have seen the story for the masterpiece it was. But I had missed that phase. So *The Catcher in the Rye* would always be nothing more than a collective of f-bombs and opportunities for the main character to get over himself.

#

Back in the hallway outside my Psychology class, I glanced at my phone. 9:17 a.m. *Hey, professor, what's your problem?*

As if on cue, the door to the classroom opened from the inside. Several students, clutching notebooks and carrying messenger bags, filtered out into the hallway. Then, a thin man with wispy hair and a hoop earring grasped the edge of the door and glanced out into the packed hallway.

“Next time, don’t be late to my class.” He held up a thick stack of papers. “Here. Take a syllabus and go.”

A skinny guy with peach fuzz threw his hands in the air. “You were in there the whole time?”

“Yep.” The professor passed out syllabi to students standing near him. “You should’ve checked the door, instead of just following the crowd.” The professor grinned. He placed a paper syllabus into my outstretched hand. I sighed. Welcome to college.

Gripping the syllabus tightly in my hand, I turned and left that hallway. I stomped up the stairs. I wanted to make a dramatic exit, but in this bunker known as Cain Hall, I took too many wrong turns. By the time I found my way out, I limply pushed the door and stumbled into the sunlight.

I trudged across campus, trying to find my way to the dormitories. *Stupid psychology class. Stupid psychology professor. Stupid psychological mind games. I tripped as the cement pathway gave way to grass. Stupid cement. Stupid grass. Stupid trees. Pancakes! I smell pancakes!*

My stomach growled, demanding to be fed more than the pop-tart I’d eaten before class. I spotted a short line of students winding through the grass. A big blue sign advertising student government stretched behind a grill, where two guys in navy polos and jeans flipped pancakes. This was it—the key to happiness! I stepped in line and quickly made my way to the grill. Smiling, I snagged a paper plate and received two burnt pancakes. I moved to the condiments table. With satisfaction, I squeezed syrup from a plastic bottle, watching the burnished goo glow as it drizzled onto my second breakfast. *Screw psychology.*

I strutted across the lawn to an empty table. But as I sat down, I noticed a table nearby with a lone girl eating pancakes. Blonde hair, big burgundy backpack, head down. Freshman. I stood slowly, taking my paper plate of pancakes. I walked to her table.

“Hi. Um, do you mind if I sit with you?”

She looked up, her round face beaming. “Yeah, yeah, you can sit here.”

I dropped my backpack onto the grass and introduced myself. Then, I slid onto the bench and placed my plate on the beige table.

“I’m Shannon.” She smiled. “I think I’ve seen you around.” Her hands hovered above her plate, holding her white, plastic fork and knife.

I shrugged, unable to place her. “So what classes are you taking?” I took a bite of my breakfast.

She cut herself a piece of pancake. “I had Psych 100 this morning. But that turned into a freaking lame situation.”

I choked on syrup. “Are you in Woodson’s class?”

Shannon’s green eyes widened. “Mhmm.” She swallowed quickly. “You too?”

“Yeah! Weird professor, huh?”

“Hella weird professor.”

I laughed. So did Shannon. Yeah, screw psychology. We’re eating pancakes.

#

College has a weird way of pushing people together. Within a few days, many judgments are made of ourselves and others as we, as college students, attempt to paste our identities together and establish ourselves amidst the masses on campus. You judge and you’re judged. But isn’t that the way life works?

In the following chapters, I am placing my life before you. This is my story. You are the reader. Therefore, you are my judge. You will think about me in a way I may not view myself. I will present you the facts. But every story has multiple sides. Whether or not you take mine is up to you.

Who am I to tell you what happened? Who I am to tell you who I am? Who am I to take authorship of the situations that occurred over the past four years?

I am a student. I am a Christian. I am a journalist. I am a person who thinks too much. I am a worrier. I am a victim. I am an opposition. I am young. I am going to let you down. I am human. I am slow to make decisions. I am prone to act. I am one to take things for granted. I am a lover. I am a believer in things not seen. I am me. I am writing this story down. And, now, I am presenting it to you.

This is a study of the journey. This is an exploration of results still forming. This is my story. If we could only see us then—in retrospect, with distance—would we view ourselves the same way now as we did then? If we could only see us then. Well, now we can.

### They're Saying It Was Suicide

Some skinny kid in glasses and long dark shirt and black jeans stopped by my table in the cafeteria and asked: "Have you heard any of the legendary ghost stories of the UNR campus?"

I'd seen this boy making his way from table to table, asking a question, getting a quick answer, then moving along. "They say some Indian haunts the eighth floor of Nye Hall, and there's a baby in a wall of Manzanita, and apparently some kid killed himself in Lincoln last year and his ghost pops out near his room sometimes." The kid smirked, waving his hands in the air as he talked. "I'm doing a project for a class, and I'm taking a poll. I want to know if you think any of those ghosts are real."

I played with my pasta, pushing it around my plate with my fork. "I used to know one of them." I didn't want to sound like a psychic, but I didn't know how else to phrase it.

"Whoa!" The kid put his hands to his head, shoving his hair off his forehead. "You serious?"

"Yep." I stabbed a tomato, trying not to fault this kid's enthusiasm. But I felt something inside me flare up at the callous mention of Ken's death. *Some kid killed himself in Lincoln last year.*

"Well, are you gonna leave me hanging or what?"

#

During my first year of college, I rarely heard from my high school buddies, even though some of us attended the same university. Although we'd graduated together only months before, a summer apart and a whole slew of new college friends changed my old

group's dynamics. But, on the night of October 17, Matt called me. His voice was strained, too high. Even though I had never heard Matt cry before, I could tell instantly that he was weeping now.

“Matt, what’s wrong?”

“Just go to White Pine. Somebody will meet you there.” He choked on his words.

“Okay, man. I’m on my way.”

At White Pine Residence Hall, a resident assistant (or R.A., as we called them) met me at the front desk.

“Are you from Centennial?” the R.A. said, referring to my high school.

“Yeah, I’m supposed to meet Matt about something.” I shifted my jacket aside to reach for my ID, for the mandatory night-time check-in.

“You don’t need to worry about checking in right now,” the R.A. said. “Just follow me.”

“But it’s after 6:00.”

“Don’t worry about it.” The R.A. waved me toward him. “This is important.” He held a door open for me.

I tried to match his long strides as we hurried down a long hallway. I sensed the tension as we moved. Apparently, he did too. The R.A. looked over at me and broke the silence. “You doing okay?”

“Honestly, I don’t even know what’s going on.”

The R.A. stepped closer to me. His voice was hushed. “It’s Ken Kingsley. He passed.” The R.A. studied my face. Maybe he was waiting for the news to sink in. I stared back. The R.A. looked as confused as I felt.

“Did you know him?”

“No.” I tried to figure out why Matt had called me and asked me to come with such urgency.

“Well, just try to be there for these guys, okay?” The R.A. took a step back from me. “They really wanted you here.”

We walked in silence down the remainder of the hallway.

I followed the R.A. beyond the pastel door at the end of the hall into a common room. My arms hung limp at my sides as I glanced around the room. Several students lounged morosely on chairs situated in a haphazard circle. Bloodshot eyes. Tear-stained cheeks. Boxes of tissue scattered around the room.

I spied Matt across the room. He rocked in his seat while he hugged himself with his thick arms. Sean was there too: another casual high school buddy of mine. Bent over in his plastic chair, he held his clean-shaven chin in his hands. His long, damp curls hung around his face. But despite the covering his hair gave him, I could see his eyes. He wasn't crying.

I lowered myself into a plastic, navy-colored chair beside Sean. I waited for him to notice me, nervous about disrupting the stillness.

Sean glanced at me. “Do you know what happened?”

“All I heard was somebody died.” I was blunt. I didn't know how else to say it.

“Ken Kang,” Sean said.

“Ken Kang!” I shot upright in my chair. “Ken Kang? *Our* Ken Kang?”

I couldn't wrap my mind around it. There was no way it was him. Not our Ken Kang. Ken Kang, who'd sat next to me in high school English and who I'd gone to government class with. Not that Ken Kang. Somebody else's.

"Yeah," Sean nodded, his eyes getting misty. "They found him dead in his room."

I stared at Sean. My muscles tensed; my back became rigid.

Sean leaned back in his chair, folding his arms across his chest, eyes going blank. "He overdosed on prescription drugs. They're not sure yet, but they're saying it was suicide."

My throat tightened up. I doubled over, feeling like I was going to throw up. I heaved, but nothing came up. This queasy feeling gripped my stomach, like an iron hand squeezing my insides.

*Hold it in. Hold it in.* I pressed my fists to my forehead and reeled forward, my head between my knees. Why did I think it was necessary to refuse to let the grief out? Maybe because I didn't feel like I had the right to grieve. Maybe because our society praises the strong and condemns the weak. I don't know who decided that refusing to cry, especially in the midst of tragedy, is considered strength. It only hurts.

*Hold it in. Hold it in.* But I couldn't. The tears brimming overflowed. And I started sobbing. I couldn't help myself.

I won't pretend to have been Ken's best friend. I wasn't. But I cried and cried and cried. Matt put his arm around my shoulders; it didn't make me feel better. He couldn't drive away the guilt I now felt. We weren't there when Ken needed us. All alone in his room, what drove him to swallow a bottle of pills?

#

Vulnerability: I'm a Christian; Ken was not. If I truly believe what I believe, you know where that puts Ken when he died? Oh my God. I grieve for his soul. I pray that he made his peace with God, somehow, in those last moments. As a Christian who believes in heaven and hell, I mean well. I really do. God is just. Jesus grants grace—but only through belief and repentance. What happens if you die before that second step?

How do you deal with death when you're the one left to live? How do you cope with suicide? How do you let go when you didn't get a chance to say all you wanted to say? This isn't a lesson they teach in Sunday School.

If I really believe people can go to hell, then why the hell didn't I tell Ken how he could know God?

#

We do that a lot, don't we? If only I wouldn't have done this... If only I would have said that... If we would have only had lunch last Tuesday... If I would have told him about God... If only... If only... If only....

If only we wouldn't blame ourselves anymore for events that were completely beyond our control.

#

After Ken Kang died, I never wanted to talk to Becky Guillermo again.

Becky was my closest girlfriend during my senior year at Centennial High School. Every night, we talked on the phones about boys, church, fake classmates, teenage angst, the Spanish language, and the idiocy of government projects. I gave her the ideas for the essays she wrote that got her into the undergraduate program at Pepperdine. She gave me advice that broke me up with the first guy who ever told me I

was pretty. Becky played the ditz while she was secretly very smart. Becky sang opera. Becky loved food. Becky hated Ken.

I didn't know that. I talked with Matt and Sean, and we decided it would be best to wait until the weekend for me to call Becky to tell her the news. Ken's passing was screwing with our abilities to function properly. It would be best to wait for the weekend, once classes concluded for a couple days. But Becky called me earlier than any of us expected.

Becky read about Ken's passing online on Sean's MySpace profile. She called me to confirm. Phone pressed to my ear, I explained the situation while pacing back and forth on a span of dead grass near the Humanities building on campus.

"I don't get it, Becky. How did we miss this? I knew he smoked cigarettes, but drugs? I had no idea." I pressed my hand to my forehead. "He was such a happy guy, you know."

"Yeah. How did you miss this?" Becky's terse tone echoed into my ear. "Ken wasn't happy. He was always depressed. He was always screwing up our Government A.P. group because he wanted to talk about his feelings. But I'm sorry, we had things we needed to get done."

I stopped pacing. "You knew about this?"

"Listen, Ken was a mess." Her words rolled together, a trait I had come to recognize when she ate while speaking. "Why do you think I complained to Ms. Mull all the time about him? He always wanted to hang out, and all he ever did was hold up our group. I couldn't stand it." The food rolled over in her mouth, spinning her words into the

receiver. “This kind of thing is totally normal coming from someone like him. I don’t see why you’re so upset.”

“How can you not be upset over this?” I wished a chair would magically appear, right there on the lawn, so I could collapse into it right then and there. “Becky! Ken Kang just died!”

“I know.” I heard her swallow. “I’m just saying, it was coming.”

“Take it back!”

“What? You know it’s true.”

“Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I think we both know what I’m talking about.”

“I have to go to class.”

“Fine. Talk to you later.”

“Whatever. Bye.”

Becky called me several weeks later. My roommate Charlotte had her close girl friends over in our dorm room. Two boys from across the hall had also stopped by. They were lounged across the floor rug, cracking jokes that none of the girls paid any attention. Instead, Charlotte’s girlfriends giggled as they recounted the previous night’s escapades at the Eldorado Casino club they snuck into with their fake IDs.

I stared blankly at my computer screen, bored of checking Facebook status updates. I started to type an e-mail to a friend back home in Vegas. The boys behind me on the floor mocked me, laughing as my nails clacked against the keyboard. I stopped typing and stared out the window at the downtown city lights.

My phone rang. Looking for a distraction, I immediately answered.

On the other end, I heard a smacking sound. Becky started to talk. “I’ve decided that I want to get invited to one of the yacht parties down on the pier.”

Instantly, I wanted an excuse to hang up the phone. Charlotte’s friends were laughing uproariously behind me. I watched their reflections in the window. They were passing around a bag of chips and making plans to hit up some bar called The Wal.

I held my phone away from my face a bit. I wanted Becky to hear the ruckus in the room. I laughed out loud, knowing that no one else in my dorm room would glance my way. But Becky wouldn’t know that.

“Sorry, Becky, we have some people over. It’s getting pretty crazy over here. I’ll have to talk to you later.”

I snapped the phone shut. I never wanted to talk to Becky Guillermo again.

I assumed she didn’t care about Ken. She didn’t regret the things she had said after his passing. She just wanted to talk about boys and boat parties. I wanted nothing to do with anyone that disrespectful. Never mind how disrespectful I was to Becky. I didn’t realize that until too much time had passed to remedy the situation. She probably has a new phone number anyway. Not that I would know.

I never called her back.

#

I first met Ken Kang in the eleventh grade. He transferred to my high school mid-semester. He showed up in English class one day. Then the next. And the next. He sat in the row to the right of me, one person back, behind Matt.

I turned around before class one morning and introduced myself. He was wearing a black sweatshirt with a logo for The Killers, a local Vegas band gone platinum. The Killers had recently released their *Hot Fuss* album. I loved that album.

“What’s your favorite Killers song?” I leaned over the back of my chair.

“Smile Like You Mean It.” Ken smiled. He had a sweet smile that made his eyes squint shut. “I love that song.”

Ken really lived that song—“Smile Like You Mean It.” That guy was always smiling. He seemed so happy.

At our high school, Ken had a bit of a reputation for being spacey. His eyes glazed as he contemplated the surface of his desk, probably off in a dream world, I guessed. Sure, maybe that made him a bit of a slacker, but he was in the Advanced Placement program, so he had to be smart, right? Ken probably kept his head in the clouds because he imagined a better world and he liked visiting it often. At the time, I enjoyed reading science-fiction and fantasy books. As a child, I checked the family coat closet for a passageway to Narnia. Essentially, I had no problem with Ken dreaming he was elsewhere. I did it all the time. I just waited until I got home to write fantasy stories, instead of spacing out in class.

The last time I saw Ken was in the university cafeteria. We were beside each other in line for the soft-serve ice cream. Ken told me he had chosen to study philosophy. I thought that was the perfect choice for him. Now he could ponder the world and all its happenings and receive credit for it.

Prior to college, I led a relatively sheltered life. In high school, the idea that Ken might have been spacing out because he was taking drugs never once crossed my mind.

#

“She closed her eyes, forced to relive the memories....”

I’ve seen that line a lot in stories people submit for the fiction workshops I’ve taken as an English major. It’s how amateur writers like to make a transition into characters’ memories—memories of fear, loss, sorrow, maybe death. It’s a pretty classic way to flashback, I suppose. “She closed her eyes, forced to relive the memories....”

Who really closes their eyes? Doing so brings the darkness. Closing your eyes makes memories too real, too vivid. Nobody really wants pain like that.

Keep your eyes open. Distract yourself quickly.

That’s what I use music is for—sanctuary from the darkness. I loved listening to heavy metal through my headphones. To be honest, I rarely understood what the vocalists screamed. But that’s what made this music beautiful to me. I didn’t have to think too hard because there were few discernable lyrics to ponder. Instead, that aggression of sound pored into my skull, numbing everything else.

I couldn’t get enough of it. It’s funny, though. I never used to listen to metal before.

#

I don’t like to admit it, but I lost it the night Ken Kang died. In that common room, where we all bawled our eyes out, some grief counselor came over and tried to calm us down. It didn’t work. We left a collective mess.

For all that encouragement that *we’d get through this*, that *everyone deals with this*, that *in the end everything will be okay*, I couldn’t shake the disquiet of my spirit. That R.A. asked Sean, Matt, and me if there was anything he could do to help. I asked

him to pray for Ken's family. I wanted to pray myself, but there's something about this kind of situation which causes things to not make sense. I could barely form coherent words. The R.A. did pray. That moment was the only time all night that I felt peace.

The grief counselor sat on a chair on the edge of our circle. She told us to talk about Ken. We did. We talked how he came late to first period every day. We remembered that English project on P.B. Shelley's "Ozymandius," when Ken and Sean and I joined together for a group presentation. We remembered how hard it was to stop Ken from drawing cartoons while we researched. We remembered how he came in on the day of the presentation with a stunning poster for our group to use and shocked us all. We remembered how he made the class laugh. We remembered when Sean knocked over Ken's bubble tea one morning, and the liquid spilled across Ken's pants. But Ken just batted his hand in the air, smiled, and said, "It's okay, Seanzy. Don't worry about it." Ken never got mad. He was always so happy. He lived life simply. In my yearbook, he drew a cartoon of the fish Dory from *Finding Nemo* and wrote "Just Keep Swimming."

Why didn't Ken keep swimming? Why did he leave us to swim without him?

I felt responsible. Like I could've helped him, like we all could have, if only we would have spent more time with him. Suicide should never have to cross anyone's mind. I determined that if I ever met someone who was suicidal again, I would make sure I did everything in my power to keep that person swimming. I wouldn't abandon them.

Now, when I look back, this doesn't make sense. Ken made his own decisions. What right do I have to think I could influence him otherwise? I'm not God. I don't make the rules. I don't decide who gets to die and who gets to live and when and where. It's not my fault. By not pouring my time into Ken, I didn't cause his death. None of us did.

Maybe we could've been nicer. Maybe I could have stopped more often when I saw him on the steps of Lincoln Hall, smoking a cigarette. Maybe it would have made a difference.

But maybe it wouldn't. Who am I to know? Why do I blame myself for something that was beyond my control?

#

Two weeks after Ken's passing, I was talking to a college friend who had known Ken in high school before he came to Centennial.

"He was expelled from Cimarron High for taking drugs," she said. "I guess that explains why he showed up at your school in the middle of junior year."

#

I have no idea if Ken Kang had a funeral. I have no idea if a memorial service occurred. I tried to forget he'd died. I didn't like the hurt my thinking about him brought. I didn't like the guilt and the responsibility I felt for not being there.

After we spent time memorializing Ken the night he died, the grief counselor dismissed us. We weren't crying anymore. Her job was done.

But while we weren't crying, we were not ready to be let go on our own. A bunch of eighteen-year-olds who have barely seen death, who have spent a grand total of two months away from mom and dad after a lifetime of supervision, and who have just been told their high school buddy could have committed suicide, should not be released into the night alone. But we were.

In the short walk from White Pine Hall back to our own dorms, I think we all snapped. I felt far too giddy. I couldn't stop laughing. We came to the stairs at the foot of

the Virginia St. bridge. I pumped my fists in the air in true Rocky tradition and raced the boys up the stairs. I gloated at the top, bent over, and laughed like a maniac.

Later that night, I stood in the center of my dorm room. My roommate Charlotte wasn't around. The quiet started to affect me. I couldn't take it. I paced back and forth across my room, trying to keep it together. I ground my teeth. I didn't want to cry again. I'd just spent an hour doing that.

I shoved my finger toward the power button of my stereo. It was almost midnight, and quiet hours in the dorms start at 10:00 p.m. I wanted to blast my eardrums out so I wouldn't be able to hear myself sob. Unfortunately, I was too courteous to my neighbors during quiet hours that night, and I denied myself the favor.

I curled up in a ball on my bed and gripped a stuffed animal leopard that my younger sister had given me when I left for college. I felt like a child, crying and clutching this stuffed animal.

I needed to talk. I tried to think of someone to call. My parents would worry too much if I called them. My younger sister would be at home, sleeping. I'd just left Matt and Sean. Casey was at work. Tara didn't cry much when she found out the news, so maybe she wouldn't understand why I was bawling my eyes out for a classmate.

Yes, let's be honest. Ken Kang was a classmate. Sure, I talked to him at school. He could cross the barrier from random-kid-next-to-me-in-class to buddy. But we weren't good friends. Why was I crying? He wasn't my brother. He wasn't my best friend. He wasn't even somebody I chilled with after school. What right did I have to grieve for Ken Kang?

I tried to be tough. I may have believed it, but I don't think it worked. Every day on the way to English class, I walked past Lincoln Hall, where Ken had passed away in his room. I saw all the fallen leaves, something I hadn't seen much of before. That's what happens when you live in a desert. But here, in Reno, the leaves fell and fell and fell from the trees. I'm told a lot of people find this beautiful. I couldn't see the beauty in it. Those leaves were dead. All dead. Fallen to the ground to be trampled.

The night after Ken's death, I hung out in my good friend Tara's room. The previous night Tara tried to keep it together since the rest of us were falling apart. Tonight, she was just as messed up as the rest of us. Together, we lost it.

Tara named the four walls of her dorm room. They were now to be referred to as Charlie, Albert, Tiny Tim, and Cornelius. We laughed and laughed.

But what about the ceiling? It was like a wall. Didn't it deserve a name?

And so, in a fit of giggles, I founded the Speakers for Ceilings Society. I snatched up two large post-it notes to stick to the ceiling and wrote the following:

“A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE SPEAKERS FOR CEILINGS SOCIETY.

“This is Bob. (Say ‘Hi’ to Bob.)

“Bob's Bio:

“Constructed in part in 1987, Bob was proud to aid residents at UNR by providing a necessary barrier between this very room and the air ventilation shaft above (and who know what else lurks up there). Bob had a relatively normal childhood and enjoyed being with his friends, the Walls. However, his whole world came crashing down on October 18, 2006. The female inhabitants of this hallowed room chose to recognize the Walls by

their true names—Albert, Cornelius, Tim, and Charlie. Alas, poor Bob was neglected! Dismissed, he was merely a ceiling. (SOB!) Now, Bob suffers of mild insecurity and identity issues. Fortunately, the Speakers for Ceilings Society made the girls aware of their error. They are all working toward a peaceful resolution and a happier Bob. ☺ (Wasn't that sweet?)”

To say we went a little insane may be a massive understatement.

#

The grief counselor who spoke to us on the night of Ken's death told us we may have difficulty concentrating on work and school following this tragedy. “Feel free to e-mail your teachers and explain the situation,” she said. “You can take some time off classes if you need to.”

That was the last thing I wanted to do. I couldn't imagine being alone in my room again, trapped with nothing but my thoughts.

I threw myself into my schoolwork. I got an “A” on every assignment that month. I even stopped receiving tutoring for math; I could figure the homework out myself. It would take longer, but that was the point. I wanted to stay busy, all the time.

I started hanging out with people consistently too. I was rarely alone. Often, I wouldn't even sleep alone. If my roommate didn't come home one night, I would sleep on the floor in Tara's room, or I would stay on the couch in the dorm floor lounge while Casey played videogames nearby all night.

These habits stuck.

During my freshman year, I formed a second family in Tara and Casey. One night in Denny's Restaurant, we pledged to live that semester to the fullest. It may sound

childish, but it's what we needed. With the recent death of Ken Kang, we realized that we too were going to die. As humans, it was an inevitable fact. In response, we tried to do everything in our power to become immortal, metaphorically-speaking. We lived life that semester like we wouldn't make it to the next. Even when that meant staying awake for fifty hours straight without caffeine.

When I got a job at the school newspaper, I channeled that energy into work. I was always busy. I didn't have time to hang out with people much anymore. But that was okay. I had a reputation as a "b.a.m.f." at work.

Through my job and class assignments, I worked myself into a permanent numbness. And I liked it that way. It kept the pain at bay. Lost in my work, I never came up for air.

#

Within a month after Ken's passing, we all stopped talking about him. Ken never came up in conversation. We didn't bring him up. What happened, happened. Talking about it wouldn't bring him back. At least, that's what we thought.

#

Months and months passed before I spoke about Ken Kang again. During one spring break, I traveled to California with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a Christian group on campus. I hadn't wanted to go, but one of the leaders volunteered to pay for my trip. I was astonished by such generosity. I agreed to go with them, thinking if nothing else, this would be a good road trip.

#

My first night of this trip, I walked alone into dark wilderness with my hands shoved in the pockets of my hooded sweatshirt. My shoes rolled over rocks, dodging small cacti plants and sagebrush. Far from the campsite, I stopped and gazed up at the sky. “God, are you there?” I whispered. Then, I bit my lower lip lightly.

The stars shone as points of bright light, piercing the darkness. I inhaled deeply, and my eyes begin to water. The myriad of lights gave me hope. They permeated the night, making me believe that sorrow and pain and confusion could be overcome. God must be so big, up there in that sky, looking down on everything. I felt so small. I shivered in the cold air. I pulled my sweatshirt’s hood onto my head.

I felt like crying. It didn’t make sense, but my soul yearned for something deeper. I had to mean for more than the empty life I’d been living. *I am so cold inside. Ever since Ken died, I don’t know how to feel anymore.*

I closed my eyes. In the darkness, I whispered, “God, show me You are listening.”

A subtle breeze began to blow. The wind entered my hood, drawn over my head. The breeze caressed my ears, swirling to make soft sounds like whispers in the darkness.

Perhaps, the breeze was only a coincidence. Standing up straight in the cool night with tears slowly streaking my cheeks, I whispered again. “God, show me You are real.” Then, the wind intensified, and my hood was blown from atop my head. My short hair fluttered in the wind, as if ruffled by an invisible hand. I felt a solid pit deep in my gut dissipate. And to replace it, what warmth I felt within. I can’t fake peace like this. Whether or not you believe that I what I felt was God, those are facts. I chose to believe the whispers in the wind were not a coincidence.

#

Midway through the same spring break trip, I read a story in the Bible within the book of Mark about a woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. She spent all her money on doctors to help her recover from her disease, but her condition grew increasingly worse. When she had heard Jesus arrived in her town one day, she thought, “If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.” Holding to that faith, the bleeding woman crawled through the crowds, came up behind Jesus as He walked, and touched the hem of his garment. At the moment she touched Jesus, she was completely healed. Then, Jesus turned toward the crowd and asked who had touched him, for he felt the power go out of him. The woman came forward and told, as the Bible says, the whole truth. Then, Jesus said, “Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering” (Mark 5:34).

The bleeding woman was healed. She sat before Jesus and told her whole story. He listened to her, and he cared. He set her free from her suffering.

Well, I wasn't bleeding physically like this woman. But I was bleeding on the inside. So I sat with a few people I'd recently met on the trip, and I told them the whole truth. How I hated the thought of losing someone. How I felt guilty for not spending more time with Ken. How I thought we could have stopped it, somehow, someday. How death terrified me.

Later that evening, I sat cross-legged on the floor and told God that I was hurting, on the inside, in my heart. I guess now that I knew He was listening, I could officially call it prayer this time. I wasn't mad at God; I was just confused. What happened with

Ken didn't make any sense. Maybe it wasn't His fault. But still, death sucks. How are we supposed to go on after a friend commits suicide?

It's so difficult to take a transcendent experience with God and to put it on a page for someone else to read. I realize that some people will take my experience of talking about Ken Kang and reduce it to group therapy. But I know that as I talked, as people listened, as God listened, I felt the rock that had taken up permanent residence in my gut dissipate. In its place, I felt a sense of peace flood my soul. The Christians at that camp took time to listen to me. That night, I received a hug for the first time in two years. I needed that. The tangible love from these people who followed God made a difference.

And in the night as I felt rest in my soul, Jesus' words to the bleeding woman echoed in my head: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be free from your suffering."

#

Approximately a year and a half after Ken's death, some skinny kid in glasses and long dark shirt and black jeans stopped by my table in the cafeteria and asked: "Have you heard any of the legendary ghost stories of the UNR campus?"

I stabbed a tomato, trying not to fault this kid's enthusiasm as I felt something inside me flare up at the callous mention of Ken's death. *Some kid killed himself in Lincoln last year.* These days, the grief isn't intense anymore. But even now, every once in a while, it still hurts to think he's gone.

"Well, are you gonna leave me hanging or what?"

I paused my fork mid-twirl. I glanced from my spaghetti to the kid, debating whether I should tell him. Tell him about a buddy of mine in high school who passed

away and deserved to be more than a hyped-up ghost story. Tell him about this guy who never became angry, not even back in A.P. English class when Sean knocked over Ken's tapioca bubble tea and stained Ken's pants. He always wore jeans with his boxers hanging out the back, paired with plaid shirts and worn army-print Chuck Taylors. He loved drawing cartoons, on his shoes or on paper. *Finding Nemo* was inspiration for his motto in life: "Just keep swimming." Irony. Ken's favorite band was The Killers. His favorite song was "Smile Like You Mean It." And Ken did. He smiled all the time.

A grin crossed my face as I remembered Ken in high school, before any of the thoughts of his passing during our freshman year. I invited the kid to sit down at the cafeteria booth.

The kid listened. He asked me questions. And by the end of our conversation that evening, he told he was changing his angle to explore the lives and circumstances that inspired the ghost stories, rather than focusing on whether or not ghosts truly haunted campus.

"Thanks for the stories," he said and shook my hand.

"Thanks for listening."

#

Who am I to tell Ken's story?

I am not his best friend. I am not his sister. I am not his spiritual mentor.

So who am I to tell Ken's story?

I am someone who knew Ken. I am someone who cares about him. I am someone who cried when he died. I am someone who defended him in the cafeteria. I am someone who wants you to know that it's not your fault. You couldn't have prevented your

friend's decision, no more than I could have prevented Ken Kang's. I want you to know it's going to be okay. You don't have to blame yourself. What's done is done. Remember him as he was, not how he went out. He would have wanted that. He would have wanted you to smile like you mean it.

## Streetlights and Syrup Shots

Out of all the crazy things I've done in life, ninety-eight percent of them happened at age nineteen. Now I'm not a math geek, so perhaps my research is skewed. After all, I haven't studied statistics. Besides, everybody knows that ninety-five percent of statistics are derived on the spot anyway.

Although I haven't studied statistics in a classroom, I have had a bit of an informal education in stats though. For example, if I am going forty miles an hour down an asphalt hill, what is the likelihood I'll get injured? Well, I didn't have a definite percentage to weigh then. But the likelihood of having a great time greatly outweighed the odds of not having a great time. That was all the confirmation I needed.

#

My nineteenth year was going to be different. Previously, I'd spent my life buried in books. I had learned a lot, but I hadn't taken time to apply much. I was shy and refused to speak in class. I tried to be nice to everyone since, as a Christian, I thought that was expected of me. Unfortunately, I gained myself a guilt complex. I'd take the last potato in line at the DC cafeteria on campus, and I'd start apologizing to the girl behind me in line for taking the last one, then offer to split it with her. I was tired of being the nice kid. In the last months of my freshman year in college and continuing into my sophomore year, I developed a desire to be "edgy." I couldn't define edgy for you, but I knew what it looked like.

That's why I reveled in the mosh pit when the Dropkick Murphys came to town for St. Paddy's Day; that's why I faux-hawked my hair; that's why eating nothing but ice cream and lemonade for a weekend-long music festival was perfectly acceptable; that's

why getting caught in a dark elevator during a power outage was hilarious; that's why setting off fireworks on the fifth of November seemed like a good idea; that's why I learned to snowboard; that's why I used my bloody shoulder wound to talk a cop out of giving me a hefty fine for skateboarding in a construction zone; that's why I grooved at dance parties until dawn; that's why kayaking the frigid Truckee River rapids following a snowstorm was the greatest adrenaline rush I've ever experienced.

I didn't consciously decide to reinvent myself. Rather, my change was a product of the college lifestyle, as well as an awakening to the fact I was in the loose grips of youth. This was my last chance to do anything and everything I wanted to do. In a year, I'd be twenty, on to the decade of graduation, work, and responsibility. In one year, I would be old. There's something about that last year of adolescence. I didn't know where I was going with my life. That didn't matter. The present was the only time I cared about. This was my life. This was my youth. And I was going to live it up, every single moment.

I'm not advocating for total anarchy. I didn't believe in being stupid. Sure, we were crazy. But we didn't abandon *everything* in the pursuit of self-fulfillment. I still attended school. I passed my classes. I didn't take part in the notorious aspects of the college party scene. But, at age nineteen, I had the time of my life. Through my embrace of life with my friends, all problems seemed to melt away as we dared ourselves to new dimensions and laughed as we did it. Even if the euphoria only lasted for a while, we considered it worth a try.

#

My partners in most my adventures were Tara and Casey. We bonded in the early morning hours, denying ourselves sleep in favor of fun times. Often, at three o'clock in

the morning, the three of us would lounge in a plastic plush booth at the Denny's diner on Wells Street. Grinning, I would swirl my remaining milkshake with a dull gray spoon. Across the table, Casey would chug maple syrup from an inch-high glass he would grip in his fingers. Syrup shots. Beside me, Tara would slide against the wall, giggling like only a sleep-deprived college student can.

#

On my nineteenth birthday, after splurging on a buffet dinner and blowing cash on DVDs, Tara, Casey, and I drove to a hill in Caughlin Ranch. We plugged in Tara's iPod, rolled down the car windows, and blasted Linkin Park's "In the End" from the speakers. Tara and Casey belted the lyrics, and I tapped out the beat on the arm rest of the passenger side door. I didn't sing. I hadn't learned to use my voice yet.

"In the end, it doesn't even matter"—the lyrics infected my thoughts, giving a non-permanence to everything we did, emboldening me. That night, beneath the streetlights, we sat on the roof of Tara's red car on the top of the hill. The place hadn't been developed yet into the housing complex it is today. The fence dividing the road from the wilderness had been trampled by winter's snow. So we disregarded it.

Casey shouted into the night. Why? Because he could. Tara laughed so hard she wheezed like a lady who's been smoking for years. The irony: Tara is asthmatic.

I smiled and stared out at the city. The casino lights blinked brightly downtown. We were a haphazard family—Tara, Casey, and me. But we worked. We were all we had in the world's biggest little city of Reno, Nevada. I looked at Tara and Casey. "You guys make me so happy."

Tara reached out and smothered me in a hug. "Aww, we love you too, hon."

“Damn.” Casey scratched the back of his blonde head. “I could never get away with saying something that corny and still make it sound sweet.”

Tara slid down the hood of her Subaru. She glanced up at us, standing atop her car. “This would make a great picture. Don’t move or you’ll ruin the Kodak moment.” Laughing, she tossed the driver’s side car door open. “Where the hell are your guys’ cameras?”

Tara snapped photos from the ground. I stood on top of the car roof near Casey and pointed to Reno’s city lights.

We knew it was late when we witnessed the green lights of the Silver Legacy casino downtown dim for early morning hours of its inactivity. We, on the other hand, had no inkling of stopping soon. We were sleep-deprived. Intentionally. Everything seemed so funny. Tara lowered the digital camera and ducked back into the car. Casey laughed: “Happy birthday, sis.” He punched me in the arm.

I attempted to shove him back. “You punkface.” But my fit of laughter stopped any force I may have otherwise possessed. My hands barely tapped his shoulders before I doubled over, far too amused.

“That was cute.” Casey laughed.

Tara wheezed between giggles. “Don’t make me come up there, kids.” She slammed the car door shut behind her.

I didn’t say much. I just laughed. This was how life was meant to be. There was no drama, no responsibility. All the things that tried to stop me, well, in the end, it didn’t even matter. I thought about math class. I thought about Ken Kang. I thought about Vince. I didn’t want to worry about it anymore. I didn’t want to deal with the drama. I

wanted to ditch the responsibility of being an adult. I didn't want to care what other people thought. I didn't want to care about what I did. I just wanted to experience life—while I still could, while there was time, before I became old, before I died.

The pinnacle of my nineteenth birthday came late at night. As I stood on top of the car beneath the dark sky, I heard the engine roar to life. Casey shouted as the car suddenly lurched beneath us. I heard Tara's wheezing laugh emanate from inside the vehicle. Slowly, the car started rolling across the top of the hill. Adrenaline pumped through me. "Heck yeah!" I threw my arms out and started to dance. "I'm ghostriding!"

Ghostriding has to be one of the dumbest fads ever to hit the West Coast. Once E-40's music video "Tell Me When to Go" hit YouTube.com, the phenomenon exploded. Online, I saw countless of ghetto-decked, gangsta rappers crank the volume of the stereos, stick the car in neutral, and pop open the car doors. It's like a Chinese Fire Drill on steroids. Once everybody piles out, you get on top of the car (the hood, the roof, whatever) and start dancing to the hip-hop beats blasting from the stereo. Essentially, it's a party on wheels.

Naturally, this seemed like a genius way to celebrate my birthday. Swaying side to side, hips rolling, arms in the air, I kept my eyes focused on the road disappearing beneath the moving Subaru. I just laughed. This is how life is meant to be. No drama, no responsibility. Nothing could touch me.

Casey grabbed my ankle. "Get down!"

I glanced down at him. He laid across the roof of the car, gripping the horizontal bars of the rack. "Shit, girl! You're gonna fall off and fuckin' die!"

The road was disappearing beneath the car. Reality set in. I felt the air rush out my lungs as my body smacked against the red roof. I grasped the rack. I was car surfing!

I hated it.

“Tara, Tara, Tara! Stop the car!” I shouted toward the open driver’s side window, praying she could hear me over the radio music. Tara slowed the car to a crawl.

“Please. Come on, I like my life!” I laughed hysterically as I gripped the roof rack. “I don’t want it to end from me careening onto the pavement on my birthday.” The car came to a stop. The engine hushed. Casey sat up and slid down the windshield. Tara stepped out—“I need an inhaler”—laughing so hard she coughed like a seal.

I still lay on the roof. I couldn’t stop laughing. The rush of adrenaline, the fear that followed, the challenge to defeat that internal terror—it became addictive.

In that moment, I realized I was immortal.

#

Six months after my nineteenth birthday, I had figured out this immortality concept and I reveled in it regularly. One Friday night in September, I raced my guy friends Casey, Seth, and Alex to the campus football stadium. In our hands, we gripped Ripstiks, a new kind of skateboard that we enjoyed then even though these boards never fully had an impact on the skater scene. We prepared for our last ride of the night. Our goal was to ride the steepest, longest hill on campus. We determined to take off from just beyond Lawlor Events Center near the stadium, down through the construction sites for the new library and Joe Crowley Student Union, beyond the Brian J. Whalen Parking Garage, to end in the flat zone in front of our school’s student services building. That

night, in my tank top and jeans in the lingering heat, I stabilized the board beneath me and pushed off behind the boys.

Rather than slaloming from side to side, I directed the board for a straight shot down the hill. My pace increased as the wheels of the board spun against the asphalt. Along the steep grade near Lawlor Events Center, I quickly passed Casey and Alex. That evening, I felt the wind against my body, and I knew that I was traveling faster than ever before on a board. I gritted my teeth and put my weight on my back foot to stable myself.

I dashed into the construction zone near the in-progress student union. I zigzagged around small rocks, and the board bounced beneath me as it connected with rocks I hadn't seen in the darkness. I focused on Seth's back, moving my board to follow in his exact wake. He hadn't fallen yet, so I figured he was doing a pretty good job of dodging rocks and rubble.

I had trouble seeing in the dim light of the moon. The absence of light and the intense scan of the street only added to my adrenaline rush. At this speed, I wasn't capable of focusing on anything but the ride. I felt thrilled and terrified both at the same time.

In the night, I hit a speed bump that I didn't even know existed. My heart pounded in my chest, and my blood pulsed against my temples. I felt the board's wheels leave solid ground for a moment. I threw my arms out to my sides for balance, and I barely missed severely biting my tongue as the wheels collided with the asphalt. But I remained on the board, still speeding.

The hill began to flatten as I careened out of the construction zones. The most difficult part of the ride had been conquered. I approached the Brian J. Whalen Garage,

and the safe distance between Seth and me quickly dissipated. Then, I became aware of the fact I could not slow down. The forward motion had become a force too powerful for me to alter by shifting my weight.

“Look out behind you, Seth!” I shouted, barely giving him enough warning to glance behind before I rocketed past him.

Then, I saw it. *Oh crap!* Directly in my path, the deep grooves of a large covered manhole presented the possibility of a wipe-out. I leaned to the left, willing the board to go around it. *Success!*

As I dodged to the left around the manhole, a street median emerged in my path. I barely registered its existence before it caught the edge of my board.

I vaulted forward off the board. The back of my head crashed against the cement median. I glimpsed the black night sky. Then, my feet appeared, outlined against stars. Instantly, I watched my feet fall as I somersaulted. I felt my skin skid and shred on the asphalt along the left side of my body. My fists clenched. My feet smacked against the pavement. I lay crumpled on the ground, with my cheek pressed to the asphalt.

Casey’s black shoes stepped into my line of vision. I watched him kneel beside me and place his face close to the blacktop. His mouth opened; his lips moved. But I heard nothing. I blinked at him to let him know I was all right.

Abruptly, I regained hearing in my right ear. The volume of Casey’s voice felt like it could pierce my eardrum. Even so, I couldn’t make out his words.

I wanted the boys to know I was okay. I closed my eyes and focused on forming the words. “Just give me a minute, guys. Just give me a minute.”

Casey stopped shouting. I placed my palms under me and then pushed myself into a sitting position. I didn't move for a moment as I attempted to pinpoint what hurt. My shoulder hurt. My palms hurt. My knuckles hurt. My left thigh hurt. My head hurt. I still couldn't hear with my left ear. I sat on the asphalt, trembling. The boys reached under my arms to help me stand.

"That's a gnarly wound." Seth pointed to my shoulder. The skin had been peeled entirely off my left shoulder. Two separate streams of crimson blood trickled from my shoulder to my elbow. I held out my arm in an attempt to spare my favorite tank top from blood stains.

"Shut it, Seth," Casey said.

"Sorry," Seth said. "Her shoulder just looks like it got scalped."

"That doesn't make any sense," Alex said.

The guys lifted me to my feet. My whole body was shaking violently. Casey kept asking if I was okay. Seth kept looking around, bouncing on the balls of his feet. Alex stayed behind them, his brow furrowed and his thumbnail between his front teeth.

"Umm," Seth said, "Hey guys, we might wanna get moving."

I turned around to follow his line of sight. A police car came to a halt near the parking garage exit. We were in plain sight with the boards. Skateboarding was illegal on campus. We knew that. We'd seen the signs posted around campus. But we had chosen to ignore that rule.

That evening, I used my bloody shoulder to talk the cop out of giving us each a \$250 fine. Then, the guys and I spent the remainder of the evening in my dorm room, scraping gravel out my skin with a washcloth soaked in peroxide.

#

Months later, my mother saw my shoulder scar when I returned to Las Vegas for winter break. She cringed. Among the many valid things she mentioned about it, the one hilarious comment that sticks with me is this: “If you ever get married, you’ve ruined your shoulder. How will that scar look with your gown?”

“Whatever, Mom. It’s street cred,” I said. Then, I was so proud of the credibility my scars gave me. I had wanted to board down the longest, steepest hill on campus with a Ripstik. And I did. Sure, I fell. But that’s simply part of the process.

#

At age nineteen, the world was mine. This perspective began atop the hill in Caughlin Ranch on my nineteenth birthday. I wanted to feel like that every night.

Age nineteen would be different. I would live life and love every moment. I wouldn’t be afraid anymore. I wouldn’t feel guilty for issues that weren’t my fault. I wouldn’t be “nice” in a way that gave people the ability to walk all over me. I would try anything that I’d been too previously worried that I’d die to try. I would learn to stand up. I would find my voice.

And I did.

Five months later, at a Denny’s Restaurant in Sparks, Nevada.

Casey had proposed to his girlfriend. He was officially engaged. I had issues with that.

In September of my sophomore year, I sat with Tara at a Denny’s booth over a plate of cheesy fries and milkshakes. I told her that I didn’t like how Casey treated his fiancé. They weren’t right for each other. I worried she wanted more stability than Casey,

adventure boy, would be able to provide. I worried he was too adventurous in too many ways to commit to one woman. She was a great girl; he had better not hurt her. At a booth in that Denny's, I was the most adamant I'd been on any topic in recent memory. I clanked my milkshake tin on the tabletop, punctuating my rant.

Then, Tara ripped off a section of the paper placemat and took a highlighter out of her purse. She drew a gold star. She wrote: "Go Ally. You found your voice. Use it. The world cares about what you have to say." She passed the torn paper across the table, as if giving a fortune cookie message you'd tuck away in your wallet. I have it tucked away in my desk. I guess that's good enough.

#

Not long after the late night rant session with Tara, I shared my sentiments with Casey. One night, as he drove me from his recently acquired house with his fiancé, I spoke above the whir of his jeep's engine. "Casey, you can't keep flirting with me or like half the other girls you meet. You're engaged now, dude."

"I'm not flirting with you," he said.

"Oh yeah right, don't kid yourself."

"I'm serious." He sighed. "I think of you more like a guy than a girl."

"Well, then, I'd hate to see you hitting on a girl you think of like a girl."

He shook his head. "It's not like that."

"No?" I said. "Then, tell me why you just spent most of dinner paying more attention to me than her."

"I did not."

“Man, she just drank herself way beyond tipsy, and you told me not to worry about it because she was just being weird and thinking you were into me. That’s sick. And I’m sorry I didn’t leave earlier. I should have, for her sake.”

“Don’t say that, sis.”

“Better be ‘sis,’ and *only* sis. You have a real woman to look after now, and she deserves a good guy. You can be that guy, bro. But you have to respect her. She’s the only one who matters now, okay?”

“I’m not just going to ditch my friends. I don’t have many left.”

“Well, I got your back. I’m just saying, you have to knock off some of this crap. It’s not right.”

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I’m gonna take care of her. I really do love her, you know. I love her more than anything.”

“That’s awesome, Casey,” I said. “That’s the way it should be.”

#

What I did at nineteen may not be crazy in comparison to most stories you’d hear about college life. While my stories are not crazy compared to most, my actions were exceptionally edgy to me. Skateboarding, car surfing, or even telling someone off—I didn’t *do* that kind of thing.

Who am I to vouch for my own actions? It’s quite plausible that you wouldn’t consider me as credible to speak on this matter. After all, what do I know about what’s edgy? I haven’t participated in the typical college scene. Ghost riding and drinking milkshakes—well, it’s not exactly intense. From a certain point of view, this is certainly a valid concern.

So this is where I'm going to ask you to try to enter my perspective, in order to understand the magnitude of my most carefree, "crazy" time of life. This is where you'll have to trust that I've communicated my perspective honestly and accurately. You'll have to trust me to know that when I entered college, I didn't stand up for myself; I didn't stand up for anything; I didn't stand up to anyone. I could've been stalked on campus, and I wouldn't have told anyone who could do something about it. I would have kept my mouth shut.

I have always been interested in the way the world should be. I knew, when I turned nineteen, the world was not the way it should be. Furthermore, I knew I was not the way I should be. So I stopped caring. I dedicated myself to enjoying my life. No drama; no responsibility. I would do what I wanted and say what I felt. After all, I was immortal.

## **We Ain't Got Anything to Eat**

College is a time when we tend to live for ourselves. It's my education; it's my rights; it's my life. I enjoyed that immensely. While I realize that my pursuit of edgy doesn't come close to that typical of the college scene with its frequent drunkenness and debauchery, the time I spent defying boundaries and definitions of "safe" was personally monumental.

One Sunday morning at Mount Rose, a ski resort near Reno, I plopped down in a snow bank after carving my way down a difficult run. I loosened the straps on my snowboard and pulled my scarf down from my face. My breath puffed out of me in the frigid air. I welcomed the harsh sting of the breeze on my exposed skin, instantly cooling my overheated body. I rested, gazing at the surrounding landscape: vast mountain ranges blanketed in snow. Tall evergreen trees waving in the wind. Blue sky patched with wispy clouds. God really created something beautiful.

*God?* I considered myself a Christian, but I hadn't thought much about God lately. But that didn't change my status as a "believer." What was it that made me a Christian?

By this time, in January of my sophomore year, I believed in God. That was an obvious start. But I figured belief in a higher power probably wasn't the key to Christianity. Even the devil believed in God, and I'd say it's a fair assumption Satan wouldn't qualify as a Christian.

Then, I considered myself a good person. I didn't envy much. I didn't cheat. I didn't swear. I'd never killed anybody. I wasn't in the habit of stealing. And I didn't have a face for poker, so lying was typically out of the question.

But what about those other commandments? Like the first two, where God declares “Have no other gods before Me” and “Do not make for yourself any false idol.” Well, the more I considered these issues personally, the more I became aware that I was definitely guilty of breaking those first two commandments. At the time, my priority list of time well-spent didn’t have Him at the top; instead, I spent a great deal of time in the number one slot. As for the second commandment, I wasn’t off the hook there either. I had plenty of idols, which didn’t have to mean golden calf statues. Maybe money qualified; maybe my dependency on my job at the newspaper that I used to determine my self-worth; maybe my friends; maybe snowboarding or other extreme sports I’d recently started participating in for the sake of the adrenaline rush that reminded me I was alive. I didn’t think God hated that I had these things. I thought it was more of a matter of priorities. Since God wasn’t worth my time as much as other passions, I imagined that must have hurt Him.

This concept makes even more sense to me now, in my senior year, as an engaged woman. I don’t mind that my fiancé Anthony has other interests. But if his video gaming, rock climbing, love of the most recent technology, or late nights at the office always took precedence over me, I would likely be jealous and hurt too.

Fortunately, as soon as my fiancé realizes the priority problem, he remedies the situation. I guess I now view a relationship with God the same way. In addition to believing, the element of “repentance”—as I’d heard this additional concept referred to in my nondenominational church as well as in Scripture—needed to be present for a healthy relationship. One way of thinking that has helped me understand repentance is this: When Anthony hurts me, even unintentionally, he always works to make it right. He apologizes,

and he works to make a one hundred and eighty degree turn in his actions and attitude. Now I know he's human, so I don't expect perfection. It's the fact that he's pursuing my heart, my needs, and our relationship that lets me know he is legitimate. And in return, I work to pursue him, his needs, and our relationship. In recent years, I've discovered a relationship with God works the same way. I now desire to be better not because I have to, but because I want to. Just like with my fiancé Anthony. I love not because I have to, but because I *want* to. And the relationship is mutual.

While I knew about the necessity of "repentance" in Christianity as a freshman and sophomore, I didn't fully understand its importance then. That would come later when I encountered relationships with people who I'd separated myself from, yet who deserved my forgiveness and who I needed to apologize to as well.

After my Sunday trip to Mount Rose, where I'd spent quite a while amidst God's creation, I internally debated if I'd truly grasped the full meaning of being a Christian. I'd always believed in a higher power. But what about repentance? And what about the idea of trusting Him to guide me, instead of solely focusing on what I considered to be best for me? If I did pursue God, what would come of it? Beginning with that day, I decided to pour more into my relationship with God.

#

The following month, I signed up for a weekend in San Francisco with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a club on UNR's campus that I'd joined my freshman year. After classes on a February Friday, I packed up a car loaned to me by one of InterVarsity's leaders, and I picked up my friends Gwen and Andy. Soon, we three were driving toward a community service event called "Jesus, Justice, and Poverty" in San

Francisco. We sped along Highway 395, blasting classic rock music. Once we arrived in town, we dropped off our car in a gated lot and walked down Market Street through the twilight to Promised Land Fellowship, a California church who had agreed to partner with InterVarsity for the weekend event.

At the church, I was assigned with Gwen and Andy to stay at a homeless shelter that evening. During the day, we wouldn't be helping the other volunteers at soup kitchens and thrift shops. We had arrived late, and all those slots had filled. Therefore, we were assigned what they called an "experience walk." Walk the streets of the Tenderloin District, without supervision, and talk to people.

The Tenderloin is known as the "soft underbelly" of the city, gaining its name from the cut of meat with the same characteristics. Puke-stained walls rise from sidewalks littered with lumps in sleeping bags beside filth-filled gutters. Dirty pigeons poke at the trash, competing with human beings, for a bit of burger in abandoned yellow wrappers. Thick, reeking stench of cigarettes, alcohol, pot, and body odor oppress the air. Stifling, but it's a way of life to the thousands of homeless people who sleep in these streets.

#

When I was a kid, my favorite Bible verse was Philippians 4:13. It read: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." These words made me believe that I could do anything, short of jumping off a building and flying, with Jesus. But, on this trip to San Francisco, I read my favorite verse in context. Philippians 4:12-13 read:

"I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or

hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Christ who gives me strength.”

When I arrived in the City Impact homeless shelter that night, I was a long way from being content. I rolled my sleeping bag onto the cold wood floor between Gwen and Andy. The giddiness I had felt on the trip down for our service project dwindled. We weren't going to be helping in the soup kitchens or at the thrift shops. I felt useless, and I let God know it as I monologued to Him that night. I curled up around my backpack in my sleeping bag and tried to become comfortable enough in my sweatshirt, jeans, and Converse tennis shoes to sleep in the cold basement.

#

I'll take a moment to let you know that I could write an entire thesis on my trip to the Tenderloin alone. Recently, I spoke with Gwen about the trip. We looked through photos she and Andy had taken as we walked the streets that Saturday. We remembered the names and stories of the homeless men and women we met on Saturday, February 9. We remembered the places where we had met them. But we didn't have exact addresses. We remember walking until our feet swelled and our bodies ached. But how far had we gone? We wanted to know. So we used Google maps and the photos to find locations we'd walked two years ago.

Gwen and I first found the former Musician's Union building on Jones Street between Eddy and Larkin. Every night, we stayed in the basement of this building, converted into the City Impact homeless shelter, beside the Vixen XXX theater.

On Saturday, February 9, on the corner of Ellis and Taylor, we invited an elderly man with a swollen leg, a floppy hat, a scraggly beard, and an infectious laugh to join us

for breakfast at Happy Donut. His name was Neil. He used to work as a horse ferrier in the Midwest. But a bad motorcycle accident had damaged his body and cost him his living. “But don’t let anybody here tell you we ain’t got anything to eat. The shelters make sure we eat a meal every single day. Isn’t that beautiful—every single day! Sure, we’re a little down on our luck, but at least somebody cares.”

On Geary Street, we met Nate. Dressed in a filthy checkered snowboarding jacket and topped with a grimy fedora, Nate was only twenty-one years old. “I’ll move on soon enough,” he said. “I just got stuck here in this shit-hole city.” As we walked beside him on his way to the library to check his e-mail, he explained he didn’t have any money, didn’t have a phone, spent his evenings on the streets, ate at the shelters, and had the opportunity to live the high life last month by staying in some California girl’s dorm room for a while before she made him leave. “Don’t you fucking feel sorry for me ‘cause I’m doing just fine, huh?”

Outside the Walgreens where Larkin hits Market and turns into Ninth Street, we met a woman named Jamie. She wanted our spare change to help her buy a portable radio with earbuds.

“How much do you need?” Andy asked.

“Only nine dollars.” Jamie was missing teeth. She was rail-skinny. Her hair was pulled up in a ponytail. She looked to be in her late thirties. She didn’t beg. She politely asked if we could spare any change.

“I just want this little radio in that store there.” She jerked her thumb towards the building. “Music just helps me calm my mind. Especially at night, it’ll really help me sleep. You know what I mean?”

Andy nodded. "I'm a guitar player myself. I tell you what. How about we go in and get that radio for you right now?"

Jamie's face lit up, and the two of them went into the store to buy her a key-lime, palm-sized, FM radio.

Meanwhile, I walked toward a man on the sidewalk corner. He held an empty to-go soda cup and a stack of thin newspapers.

"Hello, miss." His yellowed-teeth smile spread across his dark face, and he shoved his sunglasses up with his knuckle. "You wanna buy a *Street Sheet* for a dollar?"

I took my wallet out of my back pocket. I had \$20 in smaller bills on me and an ID card. "Sure, I'll take one."

"It's all the latest news around here. You see, the government of this fine city prints these papers so we've got something to sell. No panhandling allowed in these parts. But it costs \$3.65 to stay at the shelter, and I can't find no job nowhere, so I'm selling these papers."

I gave the man four dollars and thanked him as he handed over a copy of the *Street Sheet*.

On Leavenworth, we watched a shirtless man swarmed by pigeons from across the street. In his hands, he tore a loaf of white bread into chunks and scattered the pieces in front of him. Inspired by his act to feed other beings when he must be starving himself, we crossed the street and approached him. Sores and scabs etched the man's pasty, hairless back. He scratched himself unceasingly under the armpits and around his flabby stomach which stuck out of his ripped, stained jeans.

“Hey,” I said. “We were just wondering, would you want to grab some lunch with us?”

“No. Don’t want food.” The man threw another hunk of bread into the gutter. Pigeons descended on the meal, pecking at the ground and each other to scrounge for the biggest crumbs.

“Can we get you anything at all?”

“You wanna buy me a beer?”

“No, I can’t buy you a beer,” Andy spoke up. “You want a soda or anything?”

“Nope. Just a beer.”

We shrugged. We shook our heads. The man watched us. Then, he rose from the sidewalk and shoved past us. He left behind a motheaten jeans jacket, three pieces of cardboard, two Pepsi bottles filled with urine, and a bread loaf wrapper.

Several blocks east, we met a middle-aged man in a wheelchair named Alex. His long dreadlocks hung across his frail, three-foot-tall body. His long, yellowed nails curved. He pointed us out and asked what we were doing in the area.

“Man, I was telling my friend Sleepy, ‘These must be some college kids or some shit.’” He laughed and slapped the arm of his wheelchair. Alex smiled and pointed to the lanky, pale guy beside him. “This is my man Sleepy. He’s a real cool cat. We call him that though because he’s always passing out on me. But talk to him. You’ll like him.”

An emaciated, young man sauntered up to us. His body twitched, and his head rocked from side to side. “Hey, you kids wanna buy some shit? I got all the best shit. Just what you’re looking for; you won’t even know what hit you.”

“Nah, ignore him.” Alex batted a hand at us. “That’s just Ion. He’s all doped up all the time. You don’t need his shit.”

“You’re killing my deals, midget.” Ion’s fists closed. His shoulders stooped, and he leaned in two inches from Alex’s face, his body still swerving.

“Yo, Ion.” Sleepy stood up to his full height. “Leave him alone, or I’m gonna scrape the sidewalk with your face.”

I started praying with my head up, eyes wide open. *God, please don’t let anybody get hurt in this. Please. Just let Ion go away. Please, God.*

“Fuck it.” Ion spun around and stumbled away.

I took a deep breath. *Thank you.* I looked at Gwen and Andy. Their expressions displayed the shell-shocked feeling I felt, with my heart beating far too fast and my stomach flip-flopping the orange I ate for lunch.

“You kids’ll be okay.” Alex glanced over at Sleepy and nodded. The lanky guy slid back against the brick wall. “Don’t worry about people like Ion,” Alex said. “They don’t usually start anything until after dark. Make sure you’re inside once the sun goes down. It can get real ugly down here.”

Not far away, we came across a man in a sweat suit eating a piece of pizza. We sat on the concrete planter beside him and started a conversation. He introduced himself as Gary. “God gave me this blessing today,” he said. “He gave me this piece of pizza. You see, He’s providing for me even out here.”

A large woman in a beanie and a purple windbreaker walked by, wheezing as she laughed. “You mean your god just dropped you a piece of pizza out of the sky?” She shook her head and kept walking.

“I believe it, Gary,” I said. “God can be pretty awesome sometimes.” I didn’t know what to tell him other than that. I believed God could give him that piece of pizza, allowing him to find it or encouraging someone to buy the food for a stranger.

Gary’s faith, though, was far stronger than my own. He told us his story, about his wife who physically abused him and kept the kids from him.

“You wouldn’t think that happens, would you?” he said. Then, he rolled up his sleeves to show us the scars along his arms, and he pointed to the dark lines across his cheeks and chin.

Gary explained how he talked to his daughter the last time he stopped by the house, and he told her he loved her more than anything on the whole world. But, his daughter didn’t believe him. ““Why are you always gone then, daddy?”” he said. “That’s what she said.” He explained how his wife came home and came after him with a knife. “I had to leave. I had to. But I’m going to get back there one day. I’m going to see my kids. I love them. And just like God gave me this pizza, he’s going to show me a way out of this mess.”

I wanted faith like Gary’s. We prayed with him that afternoon. And he prayed for us. He prayed that God would protect us, strengthen us, and open our eyes to the situations happening in the Tenderloin, not so we would blame God but so we would see people, so we would know, so we would not forget, so we would go home and reach out to our own community. That prayer Gary said over us—I believe it.

That man understood the meaning of the verses I’d pondered the previous night, Philippians 4:12-13. Gary knew what it was to be in need, and yet he relied on God to get him through even the most horrid circumstances. I realized how selfish I’d been to think

God had made a mistake with sending us on this experience walk. God didn't want me to be behind the counter of a soup kitchen. He wanted me in the streets. He wanted me to see what He sees. He wanted me to know and to become passionate about it and to take the situations I experienced and to react.

#

That night, in the homeless shelter, I set out my sleeping bag once again on the wood floor between Andy and Gwen. I tried to process everything that had happened in this one day. *God, where are they all going to go? How are they going to eat? You're going to take care of them, right? What's going to happen to Gary, to Alex, to Jamie, to Neil?*

As I lay on top of my sleeping bag, I soon felt an unpleasant urge. Quickly, I hurried to the community bathroom. I pushed past people crowded around the sinks, ignoring their cursing. I rushed into an open stall. Instantly, I recoiled at the sight of the urine-splattered toilet bowl. Swallowing my pride, I closed the door on its squeaky hinges. The toilet bowl was filled with someone else's excrement. I used the sole of my shoe to push down the toilet handle to flush. Nothing happened. I tried again. Nothing. I now had to choose whether to try to hold it all night long, or add to the reeking pile of human waste.

That evening, the city had shut off the water to the homeless shelter. Through conversations with other women, I learned this was a frequent occurrence. We huddled around the sink and spit thick toothpaste at the open drain. The stench of body odor filled my nostrils. There would be no showers tonight.

Of all the things I thought of when I envisioned *homeless*, this was an element I had never considered. Without the water in the shelters, there weren't many other places to go. All the stores and shops in the area had signs posted to their bathrooms: Customers Only. If you can't afford to make a purchase, you can't use the restroom. When you live on the streets, you lose your dignity. Degradation is not a one-time deal either; you're demoralized moment after moment after moment.

#

Gwen and I agree: The trip to the Tenderloin District of San Francisco altered the way we lived our lives. When I returned to Reno, I continued to pursue God through reaching out to his people. Being a Christ-follower required more than simply saying, "I am a Christian." I needed to incorporate personal elements, such as striving to place God at the top of my priority list, seeking Him daily in prayer and repentance, and reading Scripture to glean vital lessons through the Bible's stories.

God took me to the Tenderloin to show me the faith of a man who had nothing. He took me to the Tenderloin to make me grateful for the good life I had. He took me to the Tenderloin to open my eyes to the sorrows of this world. And not so I could lose myself in the sorrow, but so I could have hope in God. And because I hope in God, I try to make the world a better place.

Who am I to hope and to attempt to help others? Making a difference in the world is quite the hefty goal. In fact, in the grand scheme of this world, what I do in this life may not show much impact at all. But, that doesn't matter to me. I'm going to try anyway.

I've been told I'm too idealistic. I've been told that it won't matter in the long run if I bring one meal to a homeless man on Fourth Street in downtown Reno or if I try to help kids in Africa with a few on-campus fundraisers. I may be idealistic, but I believe it becomes a beautiful aspect.

Because I'm doing what I can. I'm helping where I can. And I'm reaching out in all the ways I know to those I know need it. And, just like I discovered in the Tenderloin, it's not always about me going to help somebody else. Because very often, that somebody else is going to help me. Therefore, I am so blessed and, frankly, just happy.

I do what I do because of what God has shown me and because of who God is. For me, it's not about doing good works to be admitted into heaven. Rather, the key is to know God as much as I can by partnering with Him to reach out to people He cares very much about here on earth. For me, it's pursuing a relationship. I don't have to love people, but I want to. And that's because I love God, and He loves me.

He loves everyone, so shouldn't I?

## Separate

Tara and I knew Vince didn't have many friends. We didn't wonder why. But for all his faults, we figured nobody deserved to be alone on his birthday.

In the campus cafeteria in early December of my freshman year, I stood near a long table surrounded by my friends. Tara counted down from three. Then, I told Vince he could open his eyes.

"Happy Birthday!" The small crowd erupted in shouts and whistles as Vince stood, slouched, with his mouth agape. His shock transformed into a beaming, toothy smile. Coming behind us, Casey presented Vince with three boxes of pizza to share with the group.

"Oh my god," Vince gasped, shoving his blond hair from his forehead, as we burst into the classic birthday tune. "Oh my god, thank you. Damn. Thank you." He grabbed me around my waist and smothered me in a hug. I cringed a bit, but I tried my best not to let him notice.

#

Months earlier, in October, Vince started walking out of class with me. I didn't like the silence as we walked back to the dormitories. I asked Vince about classes, about his poetry, and about his musical interests. He talked and talked. He thought classes were full of a bunch of shit he already knew. He thought writing was easy and marveled that he, a science major, could both write and calculate. He owned the biggest CD collection of anyone I'd ever met, and he stored more than 25,000 illegally downloaded songs on his laptop. Vince declared he hated elitism, hated fake people, and hated his hometown. "But, you, you're really cool. You're probably the best girl I've ever met. You won't pull

shit like other people.” I smiled and nodded, telling him thank you. I didn’t think much of it at the time. Maybe if I’d have known Vince better, I would have deterred that kind of talk from the start.

#

On November 3<sup>rd</sup>, during my freshman year of college, Vince began to follow me. I went to hang out with Tara, who lived two dorm doors down from Vince. His door was open. Those days, it was always open. He saw me pass, so I said, “Hello,” and quickly continued to Tara’s room. Vince rose from his desk chair and followed. We chatted for a few minutes in the doorway to Tara’s room. Then, Tara and I excused ourselves from Vince, wished him a good evening, and opened the door to leave to meet Casey for a drive around the McCarran Loop.

“I’ve got nothing better to do,” Vince shoved his hands in his sweatshirt pockets. “I may as well come with you guys.”

Casey and Tara just looked at him and shrugged. I didn’t say anything.

#

Vince followed me to meet Casey to play pool in another dorm. He heard me confirm the game with Casey over the phone in the hallway near Tara’s room. As I opened the door to leave the hallway, I realized Vince was hovering behind me. When I questioned him, he asserted that he had nothing better to do. I hurried through the night along the sidewalks, crossing the streets, and to the front door of Juniper Hall. Vince always stayed one step behind me. His behavior sent a chill up my spine, increasing my pace.

At the pool table, Casey and I were on a team pitted against Vince and some dude who'd randomly asked to play. Now something about Casey: he flirted with every girl on the planet, especially if she was hot and Asian. Be she friend or stranger, it's what he did, and Tara and I were used to it. It came as no surprise during the pool match when Casey came up behind me, leaned over me with his arms around me, his skin brushing against the sleeves of my black shirt, and tapped the cue ball with the chalky edge of his cue stick. Usually, I'd shove him away and laugh it off. But this time, I let Casey get away with it, hoping the flirty behavior would deter Vince.

I stepped away from Casey for my next shot. Long cue stick in hand, I eyed the ball. Suddenly, my right arm was shoved. Hard. I missed the shot, and I nicked my middle finger knuckle against the table's wooden edge. As the balls on the felt rolled around in disarray, I whirled around to see Vince directly behind me.

He was fidgeting and twitching from head to toe. "You're flirting with Casey."

I gripped the pool stick "And you pushed me into a pool table."

Vince's twitching increased. "Fuck this shit!" He shoved his hands into his sweatshirt pockets and stomped out of the room.

#

Unlike most of my fellow students in the Honors program, I enrolled in MATH 120, one step above remedial math, for my first college semester. Despite the basic level, I didn't understand a bit of it. I needed a tutor. In September, I asked a few girls in a Calculus class if they wouldn't mind using their math-attuned minds to teach me the fundamental material I needed to understand my math homework. They were too busy. Vince wasn't. Sitting up from his slouched position, he popped his headphones off and

volunteered to help me learn the math. Grateful, I gave him my cell phone number, dorm room location, and an invite to come over to tutor me and work on homework every Sunday and Tuesday night for the rest of the semester. He declined monetary payment. He said he was fine just helping me.

#

In the dorms, the door to my room was often open in the first few months of school. As recommended by the R.A. on our floor, this would provide an excellent environment for all of us freshmen to become acquainted more quickly. But by the end of November, my door was always shut. In addition, I colored a Post-it note black with a Sharpie marker and tacked it against my door's peephole. Fortunately, my roommate Charlotte didn't mind. My Post-it note plan ensured no one in the hallway could tell if my room's light was on. No one would be able to tell when I was inside.

This premeditated precaution evolved after one afternoon when Vince strolled into my room, placed a one-page typed letter in my hands, and walked out the door without saying a word.

My breath caught as I read his letter.

*Ever since I met you, I have stopped wanting to kill myself... Without you, I wouldn't have any friends... I don't know what I'd do without you... You're the nicest person I've ever met... I want to tell you something that I haven't told anybody else... Sometimes, I get so mad I can't control myself... Sometimes, I just want to end it all... I want you to know... I am bipolar....*

I didn't see this as an encouraging thank-you note. I didn't focus on the fact that he didn't want to kill himself anymore. I didn't smile as I read that he was happier with friends.

I freaked out.

From my perspective, Vince believed *I* was the solution to all his problems. I was his reason to live. I was the reason for his happiness.

I did not want this responsibility. If anything happened to Vince, it would be my fault. If I did anything wrong and that prompted him to end his life, I would always hold myself responsible.

#

During my sophomore year of college, in January, a girl named Brianna Denison was abducted near the university campus. DNA tests soon revealed that the person, later revealed as James Michael Biela, who had abducted Denison had also ravaged other young females. In the light of Denison's disappearance, two other girls stepped forward, shoved shame aside, and spoke in public for the first time about being raped on campus. As an employee at the school newspaper, I heard the latest updates on the case, including stories of this sexual predator in detail.

One evening at work, I copy-edited an exceptionally vivid account of a sexual assault in the Brian J. Whalen parking garage. One rape victim described that she walked to her car one evening, and she checked beneath it as she always did. Suddenly, she was seized from behind. She felt her attacker's hands on her breasts, and she was forced to the ground where he lifted up her skirt and raped her. In her testimony in court, she said she threw away her clothes that night and didn't tell anyone about the atrocity because she

wanted to forget about it. Eventually, she told her roommate, who went to the police with the story.

For months, university students feared the attacker would strike again. Photocopied drawings of the unidentified rapist were taped to the entrances of each dormitory and tacked to the bulletin boards of the union. UNRPD distributed a written description of the assailant to students by e-mail. For protection, girls turned to pepper spray, self-defense classes, and even stun guns. The university intensified their Campus Escort services, which allowed students to call a hotline to be picked up and driven to their destinations by student employees in an official minivan. The implementation of Campus Escort during this time was exactly what we girls needed. Unfortunately, the university service couldn't keep up with the demand.

Often, I called Campus Escort only to be informed by an automated machine that the line was busy; call back in five to ten minutes. After calling back several times, I finally reached an operator. He would inform me that Campus Escort would be on their way to my location as soon as possible, and to expect a wait of twenty-five to thirty minutes for the minivan to arrive.

With my job, I was predominantly on-call for production nights. Anytime between 5:30 p.m. and 8:00 p.m., a section editor from *The Nevada Sagebrush* would call to let me know that the pages were printed and I needed to come copy-edit immediately. We were on deadline.

Whenever I called Campus Escort and received the message about the half-hour wait time, I couldn't linger in the dorms for the van to arrive and transport me to the Joe Crowley Student Union. Instead, I had to risk my virginity every Sunday and Monday

evening as I hurried for ten to fifteen minutes across campus under dim streetlights and the shadowed glow of the moon.

#

Mid-November, during my freshman year, Tara called me. She wasted no time in getting to the point. “What happened with you and Vince?”

“What are you talking about?” I felt uneasy. I hadn’t responded to his text messages earlier.

“He practically just deconstructed in his room!” Tara shouted over the phone. “Dude! He broke Alex’s lamp with a chair! And there’s imprints on the wall because he threw shoes across the room so hard!”

I felt like I was going to puke.

“This wasn’t just one of his usual mood swings.” Tara talked faster than a hummingbird’s wings flit to keep it afloat. “He’s so pissed! He was yelling ‘Fuck this!’ and ‘Fuck that!’ and ‘If I ever fucking catch that fucking son of a bitch with Ally again, I’ll kill him!’ What the hell is going on?”

I tried to keep my voice sounding steady over the phone. “We need to get Casey, and we need to talk.” I was shaking, I was so scared. “Things are getting out of control.”

#

During my sophomore year, Mitchem and I started dating on a dare. Casey told me I couldn’t date a guy, even I wanted to. After Vince, I kept finding flaws in all other men. Well, I proved Casey wrong. I found the hottest guy in my scope and hinted at him like crazy. Muscle-man Mitchem took the bait. Several coffee shop conversations later, I decided Mitchem’s lack of direction, wandering eye, and bad temper were warning signs

against pursuing a relationship. Fortunately, Mitchem came to the conclusion that he was still in love with his ex-girlfriend. Crisis averted. We parted peacefully.

Matthew—the twenty-four-year-old youth group leader in my kayaking class—invited me to lunch two months later. We struggled to find things to talk about. Thank God. I hadn't realized until we ordered food that I was on a date. I had zero desire to be in a relationship. What good were boys?

Some blonde kid named Jeremiah snagged my phone number from his roommate, who was a high school buddy of mine. While I sat at my dorm room desk, copy-editing an article for *The Nevada Sagebrush* one Saturday night, he called.

“I need to talk to you. In person. Can you meet me in the Mezz?”

I walked down the stairs and found Jeremiah sitting on a couch in the Mezzanine, the foyer of the dormitory hall where I lived.

“So, I really like you.” He smiled. “I'd like to take you out to dinner to see if there could be something more between us.”

His blonde hair shone too brightly under the fluorescent lights. I wasn't attracted to him at all. But I wondered if chemistry would come, so that Friday I allowed him to treat me to dinner.

#

Vince walked beside me after our class together on our way back to the dorms. “Hey, did you buy the new X 2007 CD?” Vince's voice came out in a rush, and he smiled. His hair was slicked back with copious amounts of gel. I'd never seen him do anything with his hair before.

I gripped my backpack straps. “No, I haven't gotten around to getting it yet.”

“Good!” He sighed heavily. “Well, don’t buy it, okay?”

“Why not?” I bit my lower lip and stared at the cement, refusing to make eye contact.

“Because I bought it for you.” He sounded annoyed. What was I—stupid or something?

“Vince, you don’t need to do that!” I remembered a story he told me once of his ex-love interest, a girl who he had bought CDs and slit his wrists over.

His teeth clenched. “I. Want. To.” The harsh, short stops in his speech scared me. I would not be the next girl to drive him to suicide. I would not take this CD.

“Look,” I said. “I appreciate the thought. Really, I do. But what if you just keep it for yourself? I’m sure it’s a good album. I bet it’d probably be a great addition to your music collection.”

“I didn’t buy it for me.” Vince’s voice rose, almost shouting as we walked through Hilliard Plaza. “I bought it. For. You.”

I looked around. There were people here. I felt safer knowing I had witnesses. Emboldened by the students passing by, I stopped walking and turned to face him.

“Vince, you can’t keep doing this. I don’t like you, okay? *I do not like you.* None of what you’re doing—no CDs, no hanging out—nothing is gonna change that.”

He ground his teeth together. He started twitching and his fists shook visibly through the pockets of his thin sweatshirt.

#

Blood pulsed through my veins, and I gritted my teeth together as I walked to work at 8:30 p.m. The Joe Crowley Student Union was in sight, but still stood a good distance away. No streetlights illuminated this stretch of road.

But I had a voice these days. I would scream. If any man attacked me, I would claw at his face with my fingernails. I would take the serrated edge of my car key, place it behind the attacker's ear and yank forward. That way, I would have time to run, I would have his DNA in his blood on my key, and I would be able to tell the cops to look for a guy missing his left ear. I would swing that bottle to smash his skull. I'm not a violent person, but I had an entire year to plan a strategy if I was ever placed in a perilous situation again.

But even with my strategizing in mind, fear intensified the beating of my heart. I tightened my grip on my keys and the thick, glass bottle. My feet quickened their pace, and in the night, I bolted for the well-lit Union.

No, he wouldn't catch me.

#

"Is he out there?" I hugged my knees to my chest as Tara peered out the peephole of her gray-blue, dorm door.

"I don't see him." Tara whispered.

She turned to look at me. "He better be gone. It's two in the morning. How long can he stay out there?"

Recently, Vince had established a habit of staying near Tara's door or my door to our respective dorm rooms. He liked to listen to our conversations, which wafted into the hallway through the gap between the bottom of the door and the ground. This way, he

knew everything we discussed; he could bring it up and use it against me in later conversations. And if I tried to leave the room, Vince was guaranteed to be there, ready and willing to follow.

Daily, he sat on the thinly carpeted floor, back to the wall near the doorframe. We couldn't see him from that angle looking out the peephole.

Tara stepped back from the door to grab her room key from her oak desk. "I'll pretend to go to the bathroom and check if he's gone." She mouthed the barely audible words. She swung the door open and stepped out into the hallway to walk to the community bathroom.

#

I sat at a greasy table in the DC Store with Casey and Tara. My friends listened over a plate of chicken tenders as I explained all the gritty details of what I now referred to as "the Vince issue."

Casey spoke up. "You can't go anywhere by yourself anymore. And you definitely can't be alone with him. Stay away from Vince."

"How?" I played nervously with a piece of chicken. "He's always around. Even after class, he walks out with me all the way to the dorms."

"Ditch him." Tara said. "Tell him you have to meet with the professor and he shouldn't wait up."

"You want me to lie?" I dropped the chicken tender, splattering BBQ sauce as it hit the paper plate.

"You have nothing to feel guilty about." Casey waved his hands casually in the air. "This is for your own good. You're not safe with that creeper."

#

Monday morning, I did lie. After our class, I told Vince to go on without me, that I needed to talk to our professor. I wasted that teacher's time for minutes, desperately asking as many semi-related questions as I could about our assignment. Anything to buy me time.

When I finally had to let my professor go since she had another class to teach, I left Edmund J. Cain Hall through the rear exit. I was terrified of finding Vince out front. I had just cause to worry. As I left the building, I saw him leaning against the railing, waiting for me. I tried to avoid eye contact and escape unseen. No such luck. Vince had spidey senses like you wouldn't believe.

#

"We should call S.A.P.A.C.," Tara said, as we walked to my math class. In the distance, we spotted Vince waiting, perched on the steps to the building where I had class. Tara's hands balled into fists at her sides. "Get a restraining order. He's stalking you. This shit is sick."

No, I didn't want to ruin his life—that seemed like the nice thing to do. What would Jesus do? I asked. He wouldn't get a restraining order. Don't be stupid, girl. I was so naïve. I shouldn't have sacrificed my safety for the sake of being nice. I don't think Jesus would have asked that of me.

#

Midway through my senior year, my boyfriend Anthony held me against him as we sat on the carpeted floor of my apartment. My computer rested on my lap, opened to the digital pages of my freshman year journal. I had forgotten so much. Over the past

three years, I'd convinced myself that my situation wasn't that bad. I wasn't Brianna Denison. I made it out okay. Vince wasn't a big deal. I was exaggerating.

It's hard to run away when you hit the roadblock of your own written words. I stared blankly at the computer screen. Typed in Times New Roman were all the conversations where Vince intimidated me, the nights I woke up shaking because I dreamt he would rape me in the stairwell of the dorms, the mental games we played as we fought for friends' loyalties. I didn't cry. But I wanted to.

Anthony could tell. I didn't say anything, but he knew. His soft grip tightened.

#

In my sophomore year, I walked briskly to the Joe Crowley Student Union, where I worked at *The Nevada Sagebrush*. In one hand, I gripped a thick, empty, glass Sobe bottle. My other hand was secured against my jacket collar, gripping my keys and hoping my arm near my neck would stop someone's arms from easily strangling me. I wished I owned pepper spray.

I couldn't get the details of the rape in the Brian J. Whalen parking garage out of my thoughts. The criminal had not been caught. He'd been roaming around Reno, most recently responsible for the sexual assault and kidnapping of a nineteen-year-old brunette named Brianna Denison.

I too was a nineteen-year-old brunette. If any guy so much as came near me, I planned to baseball-bat-swing that glass Sobe bottle to his head. My pace quickened, and I glanced furtively from side-to-side. I had to look out for myself. All of us girls on campus at the University of Nevada, Reno did. The campus police distributed a drawing of the attacker, posted on public viewing boards and above the keypads to enter the

dorms. But the image was so vague, it could have been almost any Caucasian male. Baskets of thin, blue, cylinder-shaped, rape whistles sat on the counters of the Student Union and the dorms, free for anyone to take. I didn't take one. What good would blowing a tiny whistle do me?

#

In February of my freshman year, Vince showed up at my door in a rather unstable mind set. He knocked. I opened the door, forgetting to move the Post-it note and check the peephole. Vince strolled into my room. He walked straight at me. I walked straight back, trying to avoid him. I'd been avoiding him since the spring semester started a few weeks ago.

"Where've you been lately?" he said. "I never see you anymore. What's the matter? Why are things between me and you so different from last semester?"

"Things are different because this semester is different," I said. "We are all different."

"Yeah, but you are so distant," he said. "You can always come talk to me when something is wrong."

"No, I can't, Vince," I said. "Things are different between us. You scared me out of my freaking mind last semester. That's why we ditched you. Because you were practically stalking me. You were interrogating me. You also made me look bad in front of my friends."

"When did I ever make you look bad in front of people?" His body started twitching.

I couldn't believe he dared to play innocent. "How about this for an example, Vince? You walk into our class last semester, and in front of Mariana, Rachel, Nikki, and Sam and everybody, you declare, 'So how was sleeping with Casey in the back of his truck over the weekend?' I would never do that! I'm not that kind of girl."

"Yeah, sorry for being such a dick." Vince put his hand on my shoulder.

I snapped. "Don't touch me! Why don't you get that?"

"You let other guys hug you!" He stepped toward me. I backed up. He kept coming.

"Name one! That's not true and you know it!" I bumped into my desk in the corner of my bedroom. He took another step. I shoved my hand onto the desk behind me, sliding my fingers across the wood, desperately hoping to collide with my cell phone. I needed help. Casey lived just down the hall. I needed a guy's protection. Heck, even my roommate would do. Please come home, Charlotte. Any moment now. Please. I slid my body onto the tall desk's surface to sit atop it. I needed to get a little height.

Psychological—that's what this crap was.

Vince's whole body shook. He thrust his fist to his face, hitting himself twice in the forehead. "So stupid! So stupid!"

"Vince, stop it. Don't do that!"

His head snapped up. His pale blue eyes locked onto me. His hands formed fists at his sides. I spotted my cell phone across the room, sitting uselessly on my bed. *Oh God, he's going to kill me.*

Through clenched teeth, he spat his words at me. “There’s more to it with you and Casey, isn’t there? You’re not just friends. I know what you’re doing! You get with him when nobody’s looking, don’t you?”

“No! Stop it! Stop assuming stuff!” I shifted on my desk, fighting the temptation to stand to my feet. I hated being trapped, in this corner, in my own room. Bombarded by accusations and lies. “I don’t like Casey that way. We’re just friends.”

“What about me?”

I put my knees up in front of me, trying to create a barrier between Vince and me. “I’m sorry. I am not interested in you.”

He pulled at his blonde hair. “I know that! I’ve heard it a million times.”

I was tired of being pushed around by him. “Well then, you need to show me that you know. Not just tell me that you understood that.”

He breathed heavily and stared at me. “What do you expect me to do?”

I wanted him gone. Get out of my room. Leave me alone. I swallowed. “Be more positive for one thing. Stop hitting yourself. Change your perspective, and a whole lot could change.” For as much as he scared me, I couldn’t do him harm. I didn’t want him to become so depressed that he’d consider killing himself. If he did anything stupid, I would blame myself.

“Can I borrow a movie?” He stared at the stack of DVDs on my dresser.

I sighed. “Yeah, sure, which one do you want?” I climbed off my desk, careful not to turn my back to him.

“You know you can talk to me. I’m always here if you need help.” Vince brushed his hand against the back of my arm.

I bit my lip as shivers went up my spine. “Thanks, but I’m fine.”

#

“Can you do me a favor?” Anthony said as he drove me back to my apartment.

I looked at him across the car’s center console, still cooling down from a rant against men who take advantage of girls.

“Can you please stop comparing me to other guys?”

Well, I guess I haven’t learned that one yet.

#

In late February of my sophomore year, *The Nevada Sagebrush* printed a headline that notified students that Denison’s kidnapper was “likely to strike again.” In the article, two former FBI profilers informed the campus that people like this attacker tend to escalate in their crimes, justify their actions by satiating their own desires, can be motivated by anger or the want of a consensual relationship, and would continue until captured by law enforcement.

At work, I distanced myself from the events in the articles. Read the words, check for errors, and sign off on the page. But when I left work between midnight and 1:00 a.m., what I had read became fully imprinted in my thoughts as I stepped into the night. Often, as soon as I left the building, I began to run. I didn’t stop until I flung open the dormitory doors, exhausted.

#

Only a couple weeks into a shallow relationship with Jeremiah, I drove with two friends to San Francisco for a protest against injustice, raising my voice for the rescue

and protection of child soldiers in Africa. Jeremiah stayed in Reno. He didn't care much about the cause. But, apparently, he cared about me.

As I registered at the rally in San Francisco, Jeremiah jumped from behind a thick tree with his arms outstretched. I gripped the straps of my backpack.

“What are you doing here?”

“Are you surprised?”

“Yes.” I cringed as his long arms enveloped me and pulled me close to his lanky body. “Definitely surprised, Jeremiah.”

Later that week, I initiated an easy break-up.

#

“Yeah, I slit my wrists after that,” Vince said.

Amidst the neon lights spinning around the dark room, Vince hunched and hung his head as he spoke. “But she shouldn't have done that to me. Not on my birthday.”

I clutched my black purse close to my side. My worries of being the idiot freshman girl who brought a purse to a dance party were instantly dismissed. “But you weren't dating? How come you got so depressed that she dated some other guy?”

“She knew I liked her.” Vince bit at the edge of his thumbnail. “She took all the CDs I burned for her and poems and stuff.”

I glanced around the dimly lit room, hoping to catch sight of someone I knew. But neither a scan of the bodies grinding together, nor of the groups of people chatting to each other against the walls, provided me with any luck.

“You know it's better,” Vince chewed the edge of fingernail in his mouth, “if you slit your wrists down the vein instead of horizontally across the wrist.”

My hand crept to the zipper of my purse. I needed my cell phone.

#

Anthony took it slow. Five months slow. For five months passed from the time I realized we were both interested in each other to the point when he asked me out. This gave us time to become best friends before we entered a relationship.

Anthony was consistent, and he was calm. He didn't invite himself to hang out with my friends and me. He didn't show up at my doorstep unannounced. He didn't call me multiple times a day. He let me live my life. He let me get to know him.

The first time he held my hand, he asked if it was okay before he moved his palm against mine. I nodded. "Yeah, Anthony, you're okay. Man, I trust you."

#

"You have to change this headline." I plopped the mock-up of A1 on managing editor Nick's desk. This week's headline stretched across the page in thick, black font: "Denison's body found dead in field."

"What's wrong with it?" Nick swiveled in his desk chair to look at me. "It's true."

"It's callous." I twirled my red pen in my fingers. "It's disrespectful. She's more than just a body."

Nick stretched his arms behind his head. "You can't expect me to write 'Denison found.' That implies she's alive."

"If I was her friend," I said, "I'd be so hurt by this, Nick. We can't go to print with this headline."

He stared at me for a minute before exhaling deeply. “Okay, what do we change it to?”

That week the print edition of *The Nevada Sagebrush* read “Hunt for killer continues” above the fold.

#

In early April of my freshman year, I reclined against a booth bench beside Tara in the Denny’s on Wells Street. Across the table, Casey tinkered with an empty syrup shot glass.

“Hey,” he said. “Do you mind if Vince hangs out with us for your nineteenth birthday in a couple weeks?”

“Excuse me?” Tara sat up straight.

“Well, yeah, I’ve been hanging out with him lately, and he’s not that bad.”

“Oh great.” I rolled my eyes. “Now he’s won you over to his side.”

“Damn, girl,” Casey said. “Sorry, didn’t know you were *that* against him.”

“Remember what he did to us?” I leaned across the table.

“Yeah, Casey,” Tara said. “He’s sucking up to you, and now you’re running around like his lap bitch.”

“Shit.” Casey threw his hands in the air and slouched in his seat. “It’s not like you’re not hanging around with him.” He looked at Tara.

“Wait, what do you mean?” I said.

“It’s more like recon,” Tara said. “Vince stops by my room every night for a couple of hours and dumps all his emotional crap on me. He’s making me like his damn psychologist or something. But the boy never listens to anything I say. He absolutely

refuses to make his life better. And it totally could be!” She stuck her tongue out. “It’s ridiculous sometimes.”

I blinked and swallowed hard. “You... you’ve been talking with Vince for hours every night. But, Tara...”

“It’s not like that, I swear,” she said.

“He’s really not that bad,” Casey said.

“But don’t you guys remember everything he did? He was practically stalking me.”

“I’ve been hearing his side of things lately,” Tara said. “And, oh hell yeah, the kid’s messed up in the head. But I don’t know. Everything last semester was so confusing. I sometimes forget who to believe.”

I swirled my empty milkshake tin against the tabletop. I glanced at my friends, my makeshift family. Casey’s brow wrinkled, and his blue eyes darted to Tara. She looked me in the eyes, with her hand tangled in her red curly hair and her mouth slightly open.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

No one spoke. The waitress stopped at our table and asked if we were okay or if she could get anything for us. We shook our heads.

I sighed and stared at my hands in my lap. “It’s okay,” I said. “It’s probably Vince just playing mind games again. He’s trying to split us apart. You know, turn us against each other.”

“Sure, that’s probably it,” Tara said. Casey focused on the table’s sticky surface and nodded.

In late April, I realized my mistake. I should have gone to the counseling office back in November when I received his strange letter. I had proof back then. I had witnesses of his meltdowns from his floor. Mariana, who saw how he behaved once she joined our math tutoring sessions, would have vouched for me. In November, Tara and Casey had been protecting me from Vince, not shoving him in my face. I had real instances of his psychotic behavior in conversation and documented in text messages.

Now all I had was my word. My word against his. And if I said the wrong thing, I was going to find myself in a terrible position. I felt so stuck. I couldn't do anything to fix it.

One night, Tara said she felt Vince was likely to have one of those massive explosions again. "He's gone into time bomb mode," she said.

The next day, I opened a blank Word document and typed:

"This is so confusing, and I honestly don't know what to do about the situation. Just one more month. One more month until the semester ends, and then I won't have to think about any of this for an entire summer."

File. Save.

#

I should have spoken up. I was too nice, too naïve. Too many girls don't speak up. They don't say anything. We convince ourselves that it's our fault—if I hadn't flirted with Casey, this wouldn't have happened; if I hadn't tried ignoring Vince and dodging him, this wouldn't have happened; if I hadn't insisted he not touch me, it wouldn't have exploded into such a big deal; if I would have accepted his gifts, I wouldn't have antagonized him; if I didn't refuse.

But it's not my fault. At least that's what I was told by Tara, by movies like *Good Will Hunting*, and by pamphlets on victims of sexual assault. So let me repeat that. This is not my fault.

#

That is how I thought this story would end. For so long, I was terrified of Vince the way we female students on campus were scared of Denison's attacker. The above segment is the realization I came to during my first summer in college, as I separated myself from the situation. I can still remember the helplessness, the self-blame, the shame, and the fear from freshman year. But I declared power over the issue as I asserted that I was not at fault for Vince's behavior. That gave me the courage to move on. Unfortunately, the damage had already rooted itself into my psyche, against my will.

#

The second time I hung out with Anthony outside of school, he invited me to his apartment to watch a Thrice concert on DVD. We were standing in front of the English building, about to part ways as we often did after class. Anthony was smiling. His worn green messenger bag was swung over one shoulder. His thumbs were hooked in his jeans pockets.

"Would you maybe want to come watch the Thrice concert at my apartment on Saturday night?" His voice shook a little bit. His hands sunk deeper into his pockets.

I looked at him for a moment. Dumb idea number one: Go over to a guy's apartment, alone. Dumb idea number two: Watch a rock concert on TV with him, in his apartment, alone. But, this wasn't some creepy guy. This was Anthony, the funny kid with floppy hair who wrote fantasy fiction, asked too many questions in class, liked the

same music as me, and possessed the most distinct laugh I'd ever heard—and I heard it often. I had hung out with him in English classes for the past year. He knew how to make me smile. Potentially dumb idea number three: Just say yes.

“Yeah, I'd be down for some Thrice on Saturday,” I said.

“Really?” His whole face brightened.

“Sure. Why not?”

“Sweet! Mind if I call you later to give you directions to my apartment?”

Excellent idea number one: Bring my own car. Thank you, Anthony, for suggesting it.

#

One Thursday night in early May, I left the weekly large group meeting for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship feeling especially convicted. I needed to talk to Vince. Tara and Casey were right; he wasn't that bad. I must have been ridiculous to think that what happened the previous semester qualified as stalking. If the main speaker at InterVarsity could forgive her younger sister for stealing her boyfriend and marrying him, then I could forgive Vince.

But, at this time, I didn't grasp the full meaning of repentance. I just wanted a quick fix to the situation. I wanted to eliminate the awkwardness whenever we interacted. I wanted to forget what happened. I wanted him to stop bothering me about not spending time with him. Maybe if I sought him out and told him I forgave him, he would be content and we could then go our separate ways.

The next week, I found him in the cafeteria. I sat across from him at a long table filled with about six of our mutual friends.

“Hey Vince,” I said. “How’s it going?”

“Could be better.”

“Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh yeah?” He brightened up.

“You were at InterVarsity last week, right?”

“Yeah.” He took a bite of his pizza.

“Well, I wanted to tell you that we’re cool now. I forgive you for everything last semester. And I’m sorry I freaked out on you too.”

“Well, then, I forgive you too. And sorry I was a dick.”

I nodded. I picked up my sandwich. “So we’re cool then?” I managed the words as I chewed.

“Yeah, we’re cool.”

We were not cool.

#

The first several times I visited Anthony’s place to watch a movie during the first stages of actual dating, he sat on the other side of the couch. But, one evening, he sat next me. I scooted over on the couch. Don’t get me wrong; I really, really liked him. All my girlfriends knew, and we were waiting for him to make the move. But when it came, I wasn’t ready for it.

That evening, he walked me out to my car as he always did. Beneath the stars, he leaned in and I gave him a hug. When I let go of his torso, he didn’t release. Instead, he leaned in closer and his lips quickly brushed against mine.

He pulled back then. So did I.

“What was that?” I said.

“Well, it was supposed to be a kiss.” He laughed nervously. He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets.

“I have to go,” I said. I opened my car door and slid into the driver’s seat. “Good night, Anthony.”

As soon as I arrived at my apartment, I sent him a text message. “Not cool, dude. Don’t ever try that again.”

#

Near the end of freshman year, I heard from Tara and Casey that Vince submitted an application to be a resident assistant in the dorms. For weeks, I debated internally whether or not to approach the director of the residence halls and tell her my experience with him. Perhaps Vince truly had stopped liking me—which I didn’t fully believe—as he told me the last time I ran into him on campus. But I wasn’t the first girl who’d sent him into depression and fits of rage when I didn’t respond positively to his advances. I doubted I would be the last. What if he was the R.A. to a nice, brunette, freshman girl next year? Would he fall for her? Would she then find herself in the same position I was trapped in? I didn’t want anyone else to suffer.

That included Vince. I didn’t want him to suffer either. I didn’t feel I had the right to report what had happened because he deserved a fresh start. We all make mistakes, right?

Why should I destroy his plans by tattling? Because he could pose a threat to the safety of the girls on the floor he would be put in charge of. But were those girls really in danger? Vince had become more stable in his emotions since he had recently begun

visiting a psychiatrist. Maybe Vince wasn't the monster. He might be a victim too. He couldn't control the chemical imbalances in his brain.

I'm still not entirely sure why I did what I did. But I chose not to tell anyone. I just wanted distance.

#

After the awkward kiss, Anthony texted me an apology. "I'm sorry. I should have asked you if it was okay. I won't try anything like that again. I promise." He kept that promise.

"He seriously hasn't made any moves since then." I sat beside Tara on the porch of the apartment we shared with Shannon, Gwen, and Leigh. A candle flickered on the cement between us. "He's a really good guy, Tara."

"I like him, Alz. You deserve somebody respectful like him," she said. "I just hope he realizes that he can close the gap now."

"Yeah, maybe I'll have to drop a few hints, huh?"

One weed later, Anthony casually asked if I'd like to join him for martinis at a locals-friendly, jazz club downtown.

"Kinda like a date?" I said from across the table in the student union.

"Yeah," he said. "Definitely like a date. Is that okay?"

"Man, I'd love to go with you."

#

The summer after freshman year, Vince sent me three Facebook "Friend Request" messages to join my list of contacts and view my profile. Each time, I clicked the laptop mouse: "Ignore." That didn't wholly sit right with me. Rumors of a psychiatrist, a

chemical balancing drug, and regular counseling sessions materialized in my mind through my conversations with Tara. Maybe Vince had changed. Then again, maybe not. “Ignore.”

#

“We put each other through hell.” The words of Vince’s e-mail sent during summer glowed on my computer screen, igniting the darkness of my bedroom. “But without you, I wouldn’t have met everyone I’m friends with now. Without you, I would probably be dead.” I didn’t want to take responsibility for any of his supposed progress. If things went wrong again, I didn’t want to be blamed.

#

“What do you think of love?” Anthony lay on the damp grass a foot away from me.

I stared at the dark sky. The stars’ bright lights pierced the darkness. I inhaled deeply as my eyes began to water.

“I don’t know.”

#

As I lay on the couch in my parents’ home in Las Vegas, I read a passage from Matthew 5 in my Bible: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

Even away from Reno for the summer, unresolved issues with Vince occupied my thoughts. With Vince in mind, I kept reading.

“If you love those who love you, what reward is that? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than

others? Do not even pagans do that? Be merciful, therefore, as your heavenly father is merciful.”

Well, guess what, God? I’m not You.

But that answer didn’t suffice. My spirit felt disquieted for days after I chose to ignore the direct words of Jesus. If I was a Christian, wasn’t I supposed to follow what He said? This lesson, though, presented too much of a problem. Didn’t God see what happened? Didn’t He know the psychological fear I felt during my freshman year due to this guy? Surely, He couldn’t condone that. Why then would He ask me to grant Vince mercy?

I didn’t understand. I didn’t agree with God on this one. So I kept my distance from Him for a while.

#

During the first weekend of fall semester, my sophomore year, I attended a weekend-long music festival with my friend Andy. All weekend, away from Reno, I prayed and asked God to show me how to deal with Vince this coming year.

Through the persistent thoughts in my mind while praying, I realized God’s response. The grudge I held against Vince had become a cornerstone of my life. I had built what I did upon whether or not I would see him. The friends I hung out with, the things I said, and where I went all depended on the fact that I wanted to avoid this person entirely. Now my lack of forgiveness had formed a stumbling block in my path. *But, God, it’s too big. I don’t want to deal with this. My life is fine. I just want to forget about it.*

However, if I didn't work to resolve the issue with Vince, then I would never uproot all the hate, fear, and pain that had taken form in this block. By allowing these to grow, I would continuously poison myself and all my relationships.

#

Finding the courage to face the reality of the past certainly took time. I had to fully forgive Vince, I had to ask for forgiveness from God, and I had to forgive myself for all the words and actions I had wanted to take back.

This time, I did more than tell Vince I had forgiven him. I determined to put actions to my words. After almost a year of evading him, I came across him often in the dorms, in the cafeteria, and throughout campus. I didn't try to hide. Without being hindered by the past, I approached him, and we were able to speak amicably with each other.

"I forgive you, Vince," I said, one evening on campus. "What happened, happened. But it's in the past now. I'm not going to hold it against you anymore. I don't know how you feel about all this, but I hope you can accept my apology. I've been such a punk lately. I'm really sorry for the way I've been acting recently."

Vince stared at the ground for a moment. "Thank you," he whispered. "I really appreciate that. I really do." He looked me in the eyes. "And I'm sorry too. Damn, I was way out of line last year. It was stupid, so stupid. I'm sorry."

#

In December of my senior year, I sat at a long table along the wall of a steakhouse restaurant. In honor of Tara's graduation, a semester sooner than the rest of us, I'd

organized the evening and invited all us of who had a history together. We gathered together to celebrate the end of an era.

Genuinely grinning, Vince expressed his relief over finding a professor to oversee his latest research project. Casey congratulated him and leaned across the table to ask me to edit his application essays for an international economics internship. Tara laughed as she insisted we go for one more drive around the McCarran Loop with a Denny's pit stop, for old times' sake. And as for me, I sat beside Anthony. Amidst the jokes and laughter, we exchanged glances for a moment, and then Anthony reached for my hand. Although I didn't know it at the time, Anthony planned to ask me to marry him the following week.

Vince was not invited to our engagement party that Anthony planned.

#

Who am I to invite Vince to the table that evening? Who am I to forgive the person who stalked me? Just the same as you, I am simply someone trying to understand. I now believe in a person's ability to change more than ever before. I watched myself morph from a guilt-ridden girl into one willing to stand up for herself against men to a woman fully willing to trust. I watched Vince transform from a monster to a victim of something also beyond his control. When we separate ourselves from events in the past and are willing to begin anew, we are able to move beyond resentment and grow personally and in our relationships.

While I advocate for forgiveness, I would never encourage a girl in my situation to sacrifice her sanity in an effort not to hurt somebody else who is causing her evident pain. You have to learn when a situation is not healthy, and sometimes it becomes

necessary to separate yourself from destructive situations. But for whatever reason, Vince and I both changed. Forgiveness became possible. We needed to work at it for a while, but true restoration occurred.

Have I forgotten the pain of freshman year? No, I still remember what happened. I remember how it felt to be so intimidated and so trapped. To be honest, I will probably always remember.

#

“Hey, Anthony,” I said as I sat at the computer, just finishing this personal essay. “What do you think of Vince?”

He didn’t hesitate. “He seems like a nice enough guy. I think it’s unfortunate that had to go through that stuff. Who am I judge him for having a problem? It looks like he has dealt with that stuff, but you know. There’s part of me that wonders if you looked directly into his eyes, would you see that part of him there still? Even with you forgiving him, I think you would see that part there, because it’s a cautionary thing. I didn’t know him in the past, but I’ve heard accounts of him. So I can’t make assumptions, but I can make general...well, it’s the same way a cop can make generalizations when a criminal walks into the room and they investigate...yeah.”

*A criminal?* This brings another man into question. How do I view James Michael Biela, the rapist that wreaked havoc on the psyche of the young girls on our campus? Would I forgive him? Well, that’s the tough part, isn’t it?

Are we called to be consistent, making blanket statements that we must always forgive? Or are we supposed to forgive on a case-by-case basis?

I wasn't the one physically raped by Biela. I have no right to speak for the girls who were placed in that horrific situation. I have no authority to tell you what to think about him, for I didn't experience the shame, the pain, and the fear of my innocence being brutally stolen in a parking garage. All I can tell you is that I can speak for me, for what happened with Vince.

It's unwise to place yourself in dangerous situations. Sometimes you have to separate yourself to avoid continual harm, especially if the abuser has no intentions of changing his behavior. But sometimes those dangerous situations work out for the better. In the darkest of times, we learn who we truly are. We're faced with the stuff of movies and horror stories. And we have to react. And the way we react doesn't always make sense. It's not always consistent.

As a Christian, I was once asked, aren't you supposed to forgive Biela too? "Well," I said, "I don't know."

I know what to tell you about Vince. I know that I forgave him. I know that he hurt me. I know that I must have hurt him too. I know that I can be around him without worrying these days. I know that stops by my apartment to hang out with my roommates, and I'll welcome him in every time. I know that he congratulated me on my engagement when I ran into him at a gas station two months ago. I know that I don't like to be hugged by him though. I know that I worried he'd go back to his old self the second he'd discover that I started dating Anthony. I know that I do not want Vince to attend my wedding next month. But I forgave him. Does it make sense? No. Is it consistent? Well, then, I suppose not.

But we're all human. And in the end, we're real people, not manipulated characters on a page. We're living, breathing, thinking, reacting people, and let's face it—people don't always make sense.

#

At the start of my senior year, I shivered in my bathing suit atop a cliff face at Yuba River, and I peered over the rough edge to the Emerald Pool twenty feet below. Anthony waved his arms in the clear water, keeping himself afloat. He smiled up at me.

My toes curled against the solid rock. "I don't know if I can do this."

"You don't have to jump, Ally. No one is going to push you. I'm not gonna think any less of you." His soaked, dark hair was slicked back. Even from this distance, I could see his full face. Anthony wasn't lying.

In that moment, when the choice was mine, when he didn't push, when he liked my company regardless, I determined it was okay to take the risk.

"I want to do this!" I shouted down, my hands gripped at my sides. Then, I laughed. "I just hope I don't drown."

"You won't." Anthony shook his head, splaying water droplets from his hair and face. "I won't let you."

Squeezing my nose between my thumb and index finger, I inhaled and leapt.

### Don't Do Anything Stupid

There are few phrases you never want to hear out the mouth of your little sister:

“I'm pregnant.”

“I got into an accident.”

“I've made a huge mistake.”

“I have something to tell you, but you have to promise not to tell anyone else.”

I would have taken any of these. But that's not what I got. The first Wednesday after Thanksgiving, during my senior year, what my sister said hurt far worse.

“I want to kill myself,” she said, over the phone.

I plopped down on a worn chair at my apartment's dining room table. You think that's cliché—people having to sit down to take hard news. But clichés enter existence for a reason. I sat on the chair, grasping the wooden back, with my phone pressed to my ear.

“I want to kill myself,” she said. The words over the phone receiver sounded too dramatic to be coming from my nineteen-year-old sister. She can exaggerate at times, but I'd never heard anything near this level of intensity from her before.

“I've already thought of ten ways to do it. I just haven't picked one yet.”

Holy shit.

It's amazing what comes to mind when you're faced with such a situation. *Dang it* just isn't powerful enough.

“Where are you?” My voice shook. I gripped the back of the chair. She didn't answer me immediately. My heartbeats increased—faster and faster. Two of my roommates halted mid-dance-move in the kitchen, despite their favorite song playing on

the radio. Their smiles faded. I swallowed audibly. What if Erin wasn't on the line anymore? What if she called me right before she ended it? She'd been acting weird lately. I clenched the phone. "Erin! Where are you, Erin?"

"I'm in the floor lounge at the dorms."

"Okay." I exhaled sharply. After a couple years in the UNR dorms myself, I knew she was in a well-lit, very visible place. She wouldn't be able to do anything stupid. Well, now that I knew what she couldn't do—hopefully—I had to figure out what I needed to do. My thoughts skipped all over the place. I couldn't process what Erin had just dropped on me, especially at 1:00 in the morning.

"Come pick me up." Erin started crying. "Right now. Come pick me up. I don't know what I'm doing. I don't..." Sobs echoed over the phone.

I'm her older sister. It's my job to take care of her. I had to do something. That very second. Think. Think. Think! "Erin. Erin, listen to me, okay?"

"I'm listening."

"I'm coming right now. I'm grabbing my keys, I got my purse—somebody lock the door behind me, huh?—and I'm running down the stairs to my car right now."

"Okay. Hurry, Ally. Okay?"

"I know, Chiquitita." I thought of the ABBA song where we'd picked up that nickname. *Chiquitita, you and I know*. I breathed heavily into the phone as I reached the bottom of the apartment complex stairs. "I'm on my way, sis. Now, I need you to do me a favor, okay?"

"kay," I heard her whisper.

I threw my car door open and hoisted myself into the seat. “I need you to leave the floor lounge, take the elevator down to the first floor, and meet me outside of Nye Hall.” I turned the key in the ignition. “Can you do that for me, girl?”

“Yeah, I can.”

“Okay. I’ll be there before you know it. Just go downstairs and I’ll be there, right in front of Nye Hall.” I punched the car into reverse and peeled out of the parking space.

“kay.”

“Okay, I’m on my way.” I drove through the parking lot as fast as I could push the vehicle without sliding out on the ice. “Hey, Erin? You still there?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

“I’m just going to stay on the phone, okay?” I turned the car onto the main road. “I just want you to know where I am, and I’ll update you on the way. And you can fill me in on how close you are to the parking lot in front of Nye. Sound good?”

“Yeah. I’m leaving the lounge right now.”

#

*God, I prayed with my eyes wide open as I gripped the steering wheel. Please let me make it to the dorms. Can't you make this street light green? I need to be there for her. Dude, God, thanks for the green light there. Erin, don't do anything stupid. God, give her a desire to live. She's such a great girl. Make her realize that and stop thinking about suicide. God, don't let her die. Please don't let her die. Thanks for letting her call me first and all, but, get me there on time, huh? Get me there before... God, don't let her die.*

#

Later that evening, I held open the front door to my small apartment. Erin and I stepped inside and kicked our shoes off. She didn't say much. I dropped my purse and keys onto the kitchen countertop. "You want to sleep on the couch, or you want my bed?" I asked.

"Couch is fine," she said.

"I'll go get you a pillow and some blankets."

She didn't respond.

I came back with one pillow, two fleece blankets, and a stuffed animal leopard that Erin had given me when I left for college a few years ago. She stretched out on the couch, head on the pillow and arm around the stuffed animal.

"Don't forget to pray before you fall asleep." I covered her with the blankets. Erin mumbled into the pillow. I thanked God again for letting me arrive before it was too late. I breathed deep. She was on my couch. She would be okay. God would look out for her when I wasn't looking. Just like He had tonight.

"Night, Erin. Catch ya later." Then, I flicked off the switch to the nearby lamp.

#

Before falling asleep myself that night, I'd texted my boyfriend Anthony:

*December 3, 2009, 2:33 a.m.* "Please pray for Erin. She's staying the night at my place. Anthony, she has ten thought-out ways to end her life, and she tried cutting her wrists with her keys. Oh God. Dude, please pray more."

He and I had been praying for Erin consistently since a couple weeks before Thanksgiving. While I often joked that Erin treated me like a Crisis Call Center, I worried for her. Weeks would pass when I wouldn't hear from her. When she did finally

call, she'd always be crying. She'd always be off by herself at night when she contacted me. She said she was afraid of her roommate. She said the girl was driving her insane. She said she couldn't handle it.

When I talked to my parents in Vegas over the phone, I'd ask them if they'd heard from Erin recently. "Yes," they'd say, "she sounds like she's doing great up there in Reno."

"She's not," I tried to explain. "She's miserable up here. She hates her roommate and her classes and her life in general, apparently. I don't know what to do. She keeps calling me. But she never listens to anything I say."

"We'll ask her about it." My parents did. But Erin kept lying to them. She told them she was fine. I was hearing another story. I don't know why she made the distinction between us.

#

That Thanksgiving, only a week before Erin's distressing phone call, I decided to bring my boyfriend to Las Vegas to meet my parents. So, with Anthony in the front seat of my '89 Chevy Cavalier, we drove to the dorms to pick up my sister for a long-awaited road trip home.

Erin called me. "Hey, do you have room for one more person in your car?"

"Yeah, sure. It'll be a tight squeeze in the backseat, but we can make it happen." I laughed. "Why? You bring too big of a suitcase to fit in the trunk?"

"Actually, it's a person."

"Oh, cool. Which friend?"

"Umm, Brenda."

“Your psycho roommate?”

“Yeah, she wants me to ask you to bring her with us to Vegas.”

“Excuse me?” I slammed the car brakes at a stop sign, sending Anthony’s and my tea splashing out the sides of their to-go cups. “I thought you hated her.”

“I do.” Erin’s voice fell to a whisper. “But she’s an orphan, remember? Where is she going to go?”

“Valid point. Maybe you should give Mom a call with the heads-up.”

“Okay.” Erin’s voice returned to its usual volume. “Hey, can we wait until 12:30 to leave? Brenda’s aunt is supposed to be picking her up for the weekend. She invited Brenda to stay at their house since she figures Brenda shouldn’t be all alone on a holiday and her aunt wanted to spend some time with her. But we have to make sure to be here when Brenda’s aunt comes, so we can tell her the change of plans.”

“Wait... I thought Brenda didn’t have anywhere to go.” I drummed my thumb against the steering wheel. “Erin, why are we taking her home with us, if her aunt is being all nice and taking her in for the weekend? Dude, we’d be punkfaces to just drive off with her niece like that.”

“She said she doesn’t have anywhere else to go, and she said she has to come with me for Thanksgiving break.”

“Oh yeah?” I felt my cheeks growing hot. “She *has* to come with you? She told you that?”

“She *has* to come with us, Ally.” Then, Erin started talking too fast to follow.

“Erin, you hate this girl. You’ve been talking about getting away from her for Thanksgiving weekend ever since we started having lunch once a week. What’s going on?”

“I can’t tell you.” Erin’s voice dropped to a whisper. “She might hear me. And she’ll hurt me if she knows what I really think about her. I have to convince her we’re friends. We have to take her home with us, Alz. We *have* to. Otherwise, she’ll never forgive me. She’ll attack me in my sleep when we get back. I barely sleep anymore as is. She’s always awake at night, on her computer, looking over her shoulder at me. We *have* to take her home with us.”

“Yeah, you can forget that!”

“Ally, please...”

“No. No freaking way is she getting in my car. I don’t like what she’s doing to you. She is *not* going to our house and she’s definitely not staying in your room this weekend.”

“You don’t understand. I’ll never get out of here without her.”

“I’ll handle her. You just meet me downstairs in the parking lot in front of Nye Hall. Okay?”

“Are you far?”

“Nope. I’ll be there by the time you get down the stairs.”

Anthony and I arrived in the parking lot before Erin. Anthony listened and interjected his thoughts as I ranted about the situation. He saw Erin first. She was running across the parking spaces. I shoved the driver’s side door open. She ran to the edge of my car. Then, she crumpled to the asphalt. She panted and hung her head. I turned in my seat

to look at my boyfriend. To Anthony, I mouthed the words: “What is happening here?”  
He whispered back: “Is she okay?”

I pivoted back to face my sister, collapsed on the asphalt.

I was livid—at Brenda.

Erin had changed drastically from the sister I had always been so close with until this semester, her first at college. She didn’t deserve to feel this scared and worthless. Whether Brenda meant to or not, she was single-handedly destroying my beautiful sister. There was no way that chick was getting in my car.

I helped Erin to her feet. She hugged her arms around herself and stared at the ground. “You don’t have to worry,” I said. “I’m going to take care of everything. Brenda’s not coming home with us.”

Erin shook her head back and forth emphatically. “You don’t understand. She puts you into situations where you can’t say no. You have to do whatever she says.”

Anthony leaned across the car’s low roof. “I hate people like that—manipulators.”

Erin looked up at him, eyes wide. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Anthony nodded. “I don’t know if Ally’s told you, but I know how you feel. My supposed ‘dad,’” his tone darkened as he air-quoted with his fingers, “was like that. He was really abusive, pretty much in every way. Really manipulative.”

Erin nodded. She understood.

“But in the end, it’s okay.” Anthony held her gaze. “They won’t always be in your life. My mom told me and my sisters that those were the hardest years of our lives. Everything from here on out is heading up.”

“Anthony’s right.” I rubbed my sister’s shoulder, and she almost smiled. “Hey, Anthony,” I said, “grab your backpack and laptop out of the front seat and shove ‘em in the backseat.” He grinned and reached inside the car.

Then, Anthony and I tossed as much excess crap as we could onto one half of the car’s tiny backseat bench. I took a photo on my cell phone, as evidence that there was no room for Brenda. Sorry, girl, we can’t take you.

#

In Las Vegas, Anthony asked my father’s permission to marry me. But, that wasn’t the only tense conversation that weekend. Dad told me to take care of Erin while we finished the semester in Reno. As her older sister, that was my job. But, Dad—I wanted to say—I have school. I have a fiction workshop and a thesis. I have a bunch of other classes. You don’t take 16 credits lightly. Finals are coming up. “You have to do this,” Dad said. “Your sister needs you more than you know.”

#

On the Wednesday after Thanksgiving, Erin called me to pick her up from the dorms. She had thought up ten ways to end her life.

I prayed that I would make it to the dorms. I prayed that she wouldn’t do anything stupid. I prayed that she would find a desire to live. I prayed in thanks that she thought to call me before acting on her plans to end it all.

Dad was right. I needed to take care of her. But, after a while, I didn’t want to.

#

The next morning, my apartment was bustling as the four girls I lived with prepared for a full school day, only a week away from the semester’s final exams. I tried

to explain that Erin would be staying on the couch for a few days without mentioning the motivation. I didn't want to embarrass her. But it worried me. I brought my computer out of Shannon's and my room, set it up at the dining table, and tried to finish my homework. But I couldn't concentrate. My gaze kept darting to my little sister, all of her five feet and ten inches sprawled across the couch.

My phone started to ring. I didn't recognize the number. I answered it anyway. "Hello?"

"Hello, Ally." I immediately recognized the Armenian accent. "This is Suzy, Anthony's mom." She heard from Anthony what was happening with my sister. She's a social worker with Child Protective Services. Due to her experience in the field, she called to help me with my sister. Thank God since I had no idea what to do once Erin woke up.

"Here's the name and address of a psychiatrist near your apartment. You have a pen to write this down? You need to get your sister there by 11:00 this morning."

"Like in half an hour?"

"You have to get there while they still have walk-in hours."

"Today?"

"You said she was suicidal last night. You cannot wait. You need to get her in to see somebody now."

I floundered around for a pen to write down Suzy's information for the walk-in psychiatric help on Ninth Street. I felt so flustered. I needed to wake up Erin. Her life depended on it. I had to get her to this place in the next thirty minutes.

As I clicked my phone shut, I noticed Leigh, one of my roommates, open the front door. I hadn't heard the knock. Anthony walked through the doorway, a cup of hot tea in his hand. He always brought me tea when he suspected I'd appreciate the physical representation that he cared about me. Let's not forget the much needed shot of caffeine. He passed the cup my way against the table top.

"I love you," Anthony whispered to me as I wrote directions to the doctor's office.

Now I needed to get Erin to the doctor's office before 11:00 a.m.. I shut my laptop, knowing I wouldn't be attending classes that day.

I shook my sister awake. Her thick mascara had smeared across her face. "Sorry, Chiquitita, we gotta go now. You can sleep more later."

She kept the side of her face buried in a pillow. "Where we going?"

"To a doctor. He'll be able to help you out."

She rolled over on the couch, facing the pillows.

"Erin, please. You need to get up." I shoved her shoulder. She didn't budge.

"Dude, come on." I tugged on her sweatshirt edge. She wouldn't move. "Erin," I pulled her arm. "You have twenty minutes, and it takes ten to drive there. Come on, let's go." She groaned. I sighed and rolled my eyes. "I won't make you go to school today if you come with me." She lifted her head and looked at me. That was the motivation she needed to move.

#

I knew what Erin had before the doctor announced her diagnosis.

“Do you ever have racing thoughts?” The doctor’s articulated words came out slowly, each syllable punctuated by his thick Middle Eastern accent.

“Yeah, all the time,” Erin said.

“Do you spend a lot of money? Like when you go shopping, do you buy a lot of things you don’t need?”

Erin snickered. “Yeah, I spent like \$250 last week on UNR Wolf Pack gear.”

I rolled my eyes. I’d taken Erin to Wal-Mart on Monday. Her debit card hadn’t been accepted. She said there must be something wrong with her card and the check-out machine. I paid for her \$48 purchase out of my fund for rent.

“Do you have trouble sleeping?” “Do your friends sometimes think you’re using substances because you are so hyper?” “Do you often feel depressed?” “Do you set unrealistic goals for yourself and later feel guilty for not finishing all your tasks?” To every question, she answered yes.

Erin was bipolar. I was willing to bet money on it. I knew what these symptoms pointed to. I’d seen them before. I’d seen them in Vince. My throat tightened up. I wished Anthony was sitting beside me, instead of on the other side of my sister.

“What you have is called bipolar disorder,” the doctor said. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. It’s very common in the United States. Just be sure to take your medication. People who take their medication are very successful. People who are lawyers and doctors and mothers and businessmen and businesswomen have bipolar disorder and are okay with medication. People who don’t take their medicine, they end up in jail.”

All three of us pulled visibly back at the doctor’s last comment. On one hand, this condition was serious. But, at the same time, the scare tactics weren’t necessary, doc.

He prescribed Erin 5 milligrams of a pill that he didn't have the right amount of. We received boxes of trial medicine for 2.5 and 10 milligrams. "Feel free to up the dosage," the doctor said. "Some people go as high as thirty milligrams." I wanted to kick the doc for that comment. I didn't want her on any more meds than she had to be on. I wasn't fully convinced that a daily dosage would solve the problem.

#

It didn't.

One afternoon, I ate lunch with Erin in the cafeteria. "So, how was hanging out with Tamara and Brendon last night?" I asked.

"I can't remember." Erin stared morosely out the window.

I sighed. She'll get over it. She'll be fine.

But Erin didn't make any progress. She still obsessively talked about her roommate Brenda, even though Anthony, my roommate Shannon, and I had taken Erin to the dorms and moved all her stuff out. For the rest of the semester, she lived on the fold-out bed of the living room couch in my apartment.

I drove her to campus for class. I drove her to hang out with friends. I drove her to the dorms, so she could play in the snow. I'd wait for her to meet me in a place we had pre-designated. Maybe Nye Hall. Maybe the student union. Maybe the Tenth Street House. But more often than not, she wouldn't show up. I didn't know where she was. I didn't know who she was with. I didn't know if she was still alive.

I'd text her and call her, with no reply. I'd yell and I'd cry at my phone. Often, Anthony held my hand as we waited for her to meet us in a campus parking garage. Eventually, she'd text and say that she didn't need me. She'd get another friend to take

her home to my apartment. So, minutes to hours later, Anthony and I would leave the area where Erin was supposed to meet us. She'd show up at my apartment later, anywhere between midnight and 4 a.m. I always waited for her to come home. Then, I'd try to talk to her about how her day went, trying to gauge how her emotions were, trying to make sure she knew she was important to me and there would never be a need for her to rid the world of herself. But typically, she wouldn't talk. She only wanted to draw manga, or she wanted to sleep. That was all.

#

Every morning, I woke up Erin. She always slept through her alarm clock on her phone. I felt like our mother. "I'm too young for this," I complained to Anthony. "She's my sister, not my kid."

He agreed. "She can't keep doing this. It's not fair to you."

But, every morning, I got Erin to school by 9:50 a.m. for her 10:00 class. Half the time, she ditched class anyway. I hung around campus until my classes started at 1:00 p.m., attempting to scrape together the unfinished shreds of my essays, stories, critiques, and required readings. After my classes finished at 6:45 p.m., I left campus in hand with Anthony. Erin could find her own way home.

She's my sister. I tried to take care of her. But, I eventually reached a breaking point. I couldn't handle her antics anymore.

"Erin is being retarded," I said. After an exceptionally frustrating lunch with my sister, I sat next to Anthony in the library, trying to finish homework that was due in two hours.

“I can’t handle this crap anymore. She refuses to cheer up for anything. And, she’s always leaving me hanging. I don’t know where she is half the time. If she’s going to do that, then fine. Forget it. I’m done. She can figure her own life out.”

Part of me questioned my decision. As her sister, I needed to be supportive of her when she was going through such a difficult time. Furthermore, as a Christian, wasn’t I supposed to take care of those in need? Wasn’t I supposed to turn the other cheek when wronged? But, God, what about me? How long am I supposed to endure her actions and her attitude? Erin doesn’t deserve to be abandoned. But when caring for her, do I deserve to be emotionally abused?

#

After that moment in the library, I spent most my evenings with Anthony. Whether he and I were completing homework or chatting, his presence calmed my nerves. He cracked jokes about characters, like Crumpet Creatures who drank grape juice and saved the world one Gremlin encounter at a time, and professors and classes and future married life.

I remember the day I fully decided I wanted to marry Anthony. Two weekends before Thanksgiving and three weeks before Erin’s frightening call, we drove to San Francisco for a day-trip to see Thrice in concert. I had to trust Anthony a lot on that journey. He was in charge of tickets for the Bay Area Rapid Transit, the Muni, and the concert. He planned for us to venture to Pier 31, just to spend some time together before the night’s rock show. Anthony looked out for me on that trip, from navigating around the city to protecting us from some sketchy guys who wanted to steal his iPhone.

Personally, trusting myself to be alone with a guy in another state seemed like a huge risk. But I took it. And I came home to tell my four roommates that Anthony was *the one*.

Much later, in mid-December, Anthony took me on a date. We went to an all-you-can-eat sushi bar and ordered an exorbitant amount of raw fish. Afterward, we left laughing. Anthony patted his “food baby” belly through his thick jacket. My phone started to ring. Erin was calling.

“Hey,” she said. “I need you to come back to your apartment. I can’t get in. My key isn’t working.”

Anthony and I drove across town. I was frustrated with her for interrupting my date night. But I couldn’t make myself ignore her entirely. At my apartment, Erin was standing on the top step, leaning against the door. She didn’t have a jacket, despite the icy chill in the air. When I helped her with the key, we swung the door open to find two of my roommates in the living room, right on the other side of the door. Irony. She had never knocked on the door.

#

Late that night, Erin and I sat side-by-side on the couch.

“You don’t know how hard it is. Sometimes, I just want to do it, Alz. I just want to end it.”

“Don’t you dare...” I choked on my words, surprising myself as tears spilled and my throat caught. “Don’t you dare even think about killing yourself. Don’t do anything stupid like that. You know how much you would hurt us if you did. You can’t leave, Erin. You can’t. I wouldn’t make it without you.” For as much as I’d ignored her, I needed her. I needed her to be alive.

“I’m sorry.” She reached her hands around my waist. I pulled away and walked to the kitchen to get a tissue. I didn’t want her to see me crying so much. Erin followed me. As I tried in vain to clear my tears with Subway napkins, she wrapped her arms around me and apologized. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you felt that way. I don’t want to leave you. I’m sorry. I won’t try it again. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry too.” I hugged my sister close in the dim light. “I should have told you how much you mean to me. I’m sorry for ignoring you lately. I do love you. I just don’t know what to do sometimes.”

“I know. Me neither.”

“I love you, Erin.”

“I love you too, Alzy.”

#

Amidst all the craziness that happened with Erin, Anthony proposed to me on December 10<sup>th</sup>. Erin was there. Anthony embraced her as his own sister, spending time to check on her at school and making her laugh with his imaginative stories. The Crumpet Creature tales—those will always belong to Erin. So, when the time came, Erin helped my boyfriend become my fiancé, as he organized our friends together for the biggest surprise of my life. That night, when I walked into the den of Anthony’s home, the first thing I saw was my fiancé down on one knee, beaming. And, directly behind him, my sister Erin held one part of the hand-painted “Will You Marry Me?” signs. She wore a smile that stretched across her entire face. I love that night’s memories. Anthony was right when he said back in Thanksgiving that we could only go up from that low point in

the Nye Hall parking lot. Our engagement, along with Erin's participation in it, became the perfect step in that direction.

#

Anthony, Erin, and I drove to Las Vegas on December 17<sup>th</sup>. Erin was officially withdrawn from her UNR classes for the spring semester. She needed time at home, with my parents, with her friends, with our home church, to recuperate after Reno. It wasn't the milligrams of anti-depressants that eventually healed her; she needed someone bigger to step in. And He did.

#

Today, my sister is free. She's living in Las Vegas at my parents' house, and she's attending a community college where she's on the dean's list. She's off the medication, and it's been months since those dark thoughts entered her mind. I pray for her every day, and I thank God for her. Who am I to do that, when I'm the one who resented her calls, her very presence in a time when she needed me? I'm her sister. I did what I could. And, at the end of the day, I realized I loved her. Now, I'm not God, so I'm not as good as He is at loving unconditionally. But, I'm trying to be more like Him. Whether with my sister or with Anthony, every day I'm trying.

Love is the cord that ties the world together. I want to be part of that thread.

### **When the Soul Leaves Body**

When I was in high school, a classmate in Spanish II turned around in his seat in front of me, gripping a worn paperback copy of Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*. Without warning, he dropped the question. "Do you want to be buried or cremated when you die?"

At the time, I didn't know how to answer. I had never thought about death before. I didn't have to. I was sixteen.

Now, at age twenty-one, a long desert road stretched out beyond the windshield of the 1999 GMC Yukon. Anthony, my fiancé, held the wheel. We'd spent the last two days on a road trip from Colorado to search for jobs following our upcoming college graduation. Along the way, the two of us braved the Rockies during a blizzard and drove past snow-laden, desert rock formations. In this car, we were being bonded together by experience as well as conversation.

Shortly after we crossed out of Utah, dipped into an Arizona canyon, and emerged in the vast open space of Nevada, I decided to ask Anthony the question that I had been internally exploring since the first time it was so cavalierly presented to me. In a few months, I would stand before Anthony and utter the sacred words of our marriage vow: "Til death do us part."

As the marriage vow establishes, love never fails. The Bible itself contextualizes this in 1 Corinthians 13:6-8: "Love... bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." Beautiful. Inspiring. Encouraging. I love that passage. It's easy for me to read that verse and to ruminate on all the blessings that union

through marriage will bring, all the ecstasy, all the elation. Yes, love never fails. But love also “bears all things.”

How often do recently engaged couples consider what they might be asked to bear?

“Do you want to be buried or cremated when you die?”

You should’ve seen Anthony’s face when, without preamble, I asked that question. His eyebrows rose above the frames of his aviator sunglasses. He chuckled. “I don’t plan on dying anytime soon, so I’ve never really given to much thought to it.” I didn’t laugh. I wanted to know. I really did. He pursed his lips together. “Yeah, I don’t know.”

Out the driver’s side window, the Nevadan desert stretched for miles. Dry, cracked earth trapped behind barbed wire fences.

“Being buried seems so morbid and depressing,” Anthony said. His reflective sunglasses shielded his eyes. I watched his head tilt down while he set the cruise control to 75 miles per hour. With one hand casually resting on the wheel, he glanced at the desolate road. “If you’re buried, you’re locked in a box. But if you’re cremated, you’re free. I mean, it’s as if you’re moving on. Your soul no longer has a body at all.” Anthony reached out his hand and clasped mine, resting against the center console.

I squinted against the setting sun that blurred the white road lines into a rising mirage. “Do you think that cremation is, like, I don’t know, okay by God? Isn’t cremation like a pagan thing?”

“What makes you think of it that way?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I thought there was some Scripture verse about rising from the earth on the Last Day, and I took it literally. I guess the Bible does say ‘ashes to ashes, dust to dust,’ so why not become the ashes?”

Suddenly, images of Darth Vader burning on a pyre burned into my brain. Watching *The Return of the Jedi* at age nine—that was the moment I first discovered the concept of cremation. On an Endor moon, amidst the indigenous population, Vader’s dark machine melts away and his soul takes shape in a new spirit form. I can be such a nerd. But the concept made sense to me, and still does.

“God’s going to give us new bodies when we resurrect to heaven anyway,” I said. “Then, we’re just spirits in new forms, right?”

Anthony nodded.

“I don’t know if I like the idea of being buried. You’re trapped in a box. Forever. With pounds and pounds of dirt on top of you. And all those worms and bugs can gnaw through the box and eat your remains. That’s disgusting.”

“Yeah,” Anthony shook his head. “Why keep your body trapped in the ground? Instead, if somebody goes and throws your ashes off a cliff or in the ocean or something, then you’re free to dance. You join the earth and you still join with God.”

I stared out the window. Sagebrush crackled and broke in gusts of wind, careening along the side of the road. I sighed. “My parents would never let my body be cremated.”

“How come?”

“My mom just thinks it’s weird. But my dad has an actual reason. His dad was cremated right before I was born. He died of a blood clot. And his new wife Lois went off

and cremated him and disappeared after that. She took the ashes with her. My dad and his brothers never got to see their dad again. There was no burial site for them to visit. He was just gone, snatched away by this woman.”

“My aunt Norah still has a headstone even though she was cremated.”

“I didn’t know she was cremated.”

Anthony’s aunt passed away shortly before he and I became interested in each other. One of the first times I went to his family’s house, a butterfly on the wall caught my eye. I asked about it. The butterfly was part of a collage that had belonged to Norah, a compilation of all she wanted in life. The way Anthony tells it, Norah did everything she wanted to do before she passed. Through her career as an airline attendant, she traveled the world. She never wanted to be married, and she never was. She lived her life; she loved her life. And every single one of her “kids,” Anthony and his brothers and sisters, knew she loved them. Then, the cancer claimed her body.

I held Anthony’s hand. “Where are your aunt’s ashes?”

“I think Heidi has them. Norah and my sister were really close.” He gripped the wheel. “Norah wanted her ashes to be spread in New York.”

“Anthony, did you cry at your aunt’s funeral?”

“I teared up, yeah. But I think it really fully hit me later.”

“That’s what I did when my grandpa died. My mom’s dad, I mean.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I was at Shannon’s house. My dad called me. It was on a Wednesday. He told me over the phone. He’d waited two days after my grandpa died to tell me because

my family didn't want to ruin my trip to Oakland. The funeral was two weeks later. It was so weird, Anthony. I refused to cry. But I was so shaken up inside, you know?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

"My aunt Susan made me go up front. Have you ever been to a viewing?" He shook his head. I gripped the car chair's arm rest. "Don't ever go. The casket is just open, and the body is just laying there. My aunt Susan told me it would look like Papa was sleeping. That's a lie. Dead people do not look like they're sleeping. They just look dead. Like with all the color drained out and left with this wax-skin face. He didn't look like he was sleeping; he just looked dead."

Anthony gripped my hand. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, never ever ever put me in an open casket. And don't give me a funeral either. I want a wake or something. Maybe with less drinking. Nah, screw it; I'm part Irish. But, yeah, I'd prefer if everyone sat together and remembered good stories about me. Stories that'll make them laugh. I don't want people to only mourn my death. I'll be in heaven, for heaven's sakes! Can't we celebrate a little?"

I inhaled sharply and almost choked on my own air. "At my grandpa's funeral, some lady got up and sang. At the end, I went to clap, and right before my hands hit together, I stopped. Nobody else was clapping, Anthony. Nobody. It was a beautiful song commemorating his life, but apparently it's improper etiquette to clap at a funeral. Well, forget that. Clap a billion times when I die because, dang it, I lived. And I liked my life."

"I love you." Anthony glanced over at me, a smile hinting in the corner of his mouth. He peered into the rearview mirror for a moment. Then, he leaned over and kissed me quickly on the cheek. I love him. Smiling, he stared past the windshield. "That's the

thing with ashes. You can release them. Or you can keep them in a nice vase, or urn, excuse me. Then, you can place them somewhere important.”

“Does that creep you out at all?”

“What?”

“That whole keeping the ashes in a jar thing.”

“Why would that be creepy?”

I leaned against the passenger window, staring at the dotted lines whizzing past in the rear view side mirror. “I knew this couple at my church a few years ago. And the husband, Fritz, he got really sick and never recovered. We prayed and prayed. But for whatever reason, God took him home. But his wife, she couldn’t handle it. Understandably, right? But after Fritz was cremated, she kept the jar with her all the time. One night, my parents went over to bring her dinner and just chat with her. But all she did was lie on her bed and cry and cry, just clutching his ashes in the urn the whole time.”

Anthony shrugged. “Maybe she just needed some time to grieve.”

“That doesn’t seem healthy. That’s not his real self. He’s gone. It wasn’t Fritz she was holding. She was just clutching the remains.”

In retrospect, when someone that’s close to us passes away, isn’t it natural to hold on to the remains? Perhaps, we don’t literally clasp the ashes in our hands, but we still hold to the things they leave behind that remind us of their influence. My mother has a framed photograph resting on her living room table of my grandfather during his service in the Navy. Gwen always wears the tag from her mother’s cremation on a leather cord around her neck. Tara hasn’t kept much of her dad’s after he passed away two years ago, but every time she gets into her truck, she thinks of him. In a way, holding on is healthy.

“Technically, the ashes aren’t the person.” Anthony took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “But I’d like to think there’s a memento, you know? And I would rather that memento be something happy and beautiful, than a bleak stone: ‘Here lies a body. Blah blah blah.’ I’d rather be cremated. With an urn, if the family can look at it and think of all the good things that the person did during their life, then it’s like a monument. Every time someone looks at that vase, I hope they smile. Once people stop thinking of it as happy, get rid of it.”

We sat in silence for a few moments. Anthony and I rarely share quiet moments. One of us is always talking, or the radio is blasting, or his family or my roommates are making a lot of noise in the background. But, here, in the car, we shared comfortable, contemplative silence. And it seemed appropriate.

“I think I like that idea,” I said.

“What idea?”

“The idea of being released. The idea of cremation.” I stared at the gleaming horizon. “I don’t want a funeral, Anthony. I don’t want to be put in a box. I want to be set free. And I want the people who let my ashes fly away in the wind to know that I’m moving on to a better place. I’m not being confined in the earth. My soul will be with God. Doesn’t being released to the sky seem more representative of that reality?”

“You’ll fly someday.” Anthony squeezed my hand and smiled. “And if it ever comes to it, when one of us has to deal with the other’s remains, I want us to look at something beautiful because our lives are beautiful. Not something you stick in the dirt. You let it fly, not stay all wrapped up in the earth. You make the most of life as possible.”

#

Maybe we're naïve. Maybe life hasn't done enough to taint us. Maybe, you think, that if one of us were to die, we wouldn't think so romantically about the release of the spirit from the body.

Well, Anthony still has me, and I still have him. So do I really have any right to speak? Yes. I think I do. Because, yes, Anthony still has me, and I still have him. And we are joined together for eternity, 'til death do us part. And when that moment comes, we will grieve. I'm certain we will. For all the encouraging words spoken in Scripture, even Jesus wept when his friend Lazarus died. You never get over the death of someone close to you. You don't simply move on. You learn how to make it bearable. You adjust, you hold on, and you live.

You'll learn to breathe again.

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