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Marni Valerio

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Cleaning Out

A Thesis

Presented to the

Department of English

And the Faculty of the Graduate College

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in English

University of Nebraska Omaha

by

Marni Valerio

May 2007

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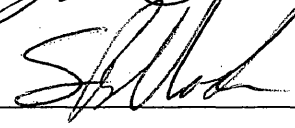
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Cleaning Out

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University of Nebraska, 2007

Advisor: Dr. Lisa Knopp

Narrative writing gives agency to people that are often misrepresented and empowers each of us to tell and revel in our own stories simply because they have resonance. This collection represents a year's worth of reflections that attempt to delight, skewer, and otherwise deal with a gamut of issues from the banality of one more zoo trip to the profundity of living and dying. *Cleaning Out* represents my journeys, both past and present and physical and emotional, and it is my wish that this collection will offer hope, clarity, and a little humor especially for women whose forays as wives and mothers have left them a bit unsure where they stand on their own.

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Finally, I dedicate this work to my Grandmother, Muriel Valerio, because she really did think I was the best thing since sliced bread.

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Introduction

Dreaming of Paul Theroux

Two nights ago, I dreamt I was on a rocky, unpopulated island in the Pacific where Paul Theroux set one of his many travel essays. Theroux visited this empty island to “hear” the silence and test some high tech equipment: night vision goggles, and a battery operated telephone and camcorder. A traveling acquaintance was also there to observe the habits of sea turtles. My husband, Dan, inadvertently woke me up when he came into our room, but I was not really awake. I was in that half-dream state that is either blissfully pleasant or horrifying depending on the dream. There I was on the Island. I was alone with the crags and silence and sea turtles. The colors were otherworldly blues and greens, and Dan tells me that I kept trying to convince him that I was really there; perhaps I was.

Long before I became a fledging essayist, I read Paul Theroux’s book, Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through the Americas. I believe I picked it up while browsing in the used book section of a thrift store. It was moving and engaging, and, in the intervening years, I often thought about the writing and the adventure itself. Theroux did his best to chronicle his lengthy train journey originating in Boston and ending at the tip of South America. I remember bright descriptions of young villagers chasing the trains and selling wares and dank descriptions of hot, overcrowded train cars. I have romanticized the length of his journeys, the hours he spends reading and whiling away time, and his diet. He is always nibbling a cluster of grapes along side Swiss chocolate, nuts with champagne or beer tucked somewhere in his rucksack. The years he has devoted to reading move me toward shame. I have these visions of him wearing khaki

draped in a low desert chair devouring books, or paddling his kayak with one hand nose embedded in the folds of one of V.S. Pritchard's many offerings. The pragmatist in me secretly wonders what sort of library access he has in the remote vistas he heralds but that kind of thought ruins the reading romance. As I read essay after essay, I learn about many authors that I should be deeply acquainted with and several new words, some that erroneously appear made up, including "onanist" referring to Charles Dickens's character, Uriah Heep's, tendency to masturbate too frequently. From context, I had assumed Heep's symptoms would have been some sort of drug affliction; I am grateful my husband looked it up, so I did not use this word mistakenly in casual conversation.

Like Theroux, I spent some time on trains as a young person in Europe. I had a Euro rail pass and spent many weekends and every night of my "ten-day" break trying to sleep on various trains bound for a multitude of destinations. That semester I traveled from Greece to Norway and Poland to Belgium and most points in between. With the exception of a few nauseating busses and two ferries, trains were my mode of travel. I lived in Italy and was thus used to a lesser caliber of train. Italian trains are not often pretty. The stench, sealed windows, and continuous mugging attempts could do little to dampen my enthusiasm as I waited to begin a weekly journey to wherever on an overnight train out of Termini Station in Rome, especially when I heard the mantra of the vendors heighten as the train made ready to leave, "birra, coca-cola, aqua minerale!" There is just something about how the Italians trill. Our classes ended at 1:00pm on Thursdays and resumed at 1:00pm on Mondays, so the intervening time was mine, and I traveled. I admit we were relieved to transfer to trains in Germany or Austria—those trains were blessedly clean and light.

Looking back, I see I was nothing like Paul Theroux. I was a student spending a highly structured semester adventuring when it was permitted. Theroux makes no such claims. He is an escapist. In a more recent collection of his, Fresh Air Fiend, he admits to feeling estranged from his family as a young man and needing to wander and essentially experience exile. He speaks often of the prescribed loneliness that necessitates writing. Theroux is one of seven children I imagine crowded into too small an urban space. My mother was eldest of nine and often recalls things like recycled bathwater growing ever more tepid and frayed, wet towels handed on to the next person whose still wet legs would cling to their jeans. This is how I see young Theroux. Unlike my mother, who had the heavy responsibility of a first girl child, Theroux left and spent a decade in isolation in Africa and Asia. I can imagine how desperately sad his parents might have felt not knowing; I can imagine how free he felt, lonely perhaps, but unencumbered.

I know now that I (and most people) cannot live and write like Paul Theroux. I have not decided if he is lucky or not. The more I read of his work, I find myself wandering in and out of his consciousness, which is not necessarily a good thing when I have small children and students, a life. It took me months to read, Riding the Iron rooster: By Train Through China. That is odd for me. I am a fast reader—even dropping details at times. I am not sure if the slow speed had more to do with the density of his writing, the weight of Chinese politics, or a reluctance to extricate myself from his adventure. He began that story with a tour group in London that he skewers mercilessly all the way through Siberia. Theroux's apprehension grows as he listens to the mindless chatter that will interfere with traveling peace from London to Mongolia.

"I hear China is as clean as a whistle," Rick Westbetter said.

Miss Wilkie said, "I've heard it's filthy."

Hoping to please her, Rick said, "But London's clean!"

"London's a shambles," Miss Wilkie said and reminded him that came from Edinburgh.

"London looks clean to us," Rick said, taking his wife's hand. Her name was Millie. She was sixty-three and wore track shoes. They were one of those oldish hand-holding couples who you're never quite sure are being happy or defiant.

"Of course it looks clean to you," Miss Wilkie said. "Americans have lower standards than we do."

Bella Scoons said in her Western Australian whine, "How far are you going, Miss Wilkie?"

"Hong Kong," the old lady said.

Then everyone thought: Ten thousand miles and six weeks of this. Good lord.

At least I did.

His irreverence toward others strangely intoxicates. If these are indeed the passengers' real names, fiction could not have improved them. I can see Millie Westbetter's pudgy body adorned in a black sweat suit with a jaunty pink "racing" strip along the side just atop her "track shoes." Miss Wilkie has to look like the typical caricature of a librarian. Theroux spares no one including "Blind Bob" who wants to see China before his eyes fully lose sight. Poor Miss Scoons makes another appearance as she continually measures distance based on their length relative to her home in Kalgoorlie.

The distance from London to Paris was Kalgoorlie and back. The trip to Berlin was "To Kalgoorlie, and back, and back again to Kalgoorlie." Moscow was seven trips to Kalgoorlie. And once I heard her mumbling, working out the distance to Irkutsk, in Siberia, and I heard her finish, "and back to Kalgoorlie."

I love this sketch; one of my sisters works in a "cage," a glass-encased room with lots of money and a Miss Scoons-like coworker fixed inside. Everyday her "Scoons" tells her about panda births and forwards rakish kitten emails and tells what her son is

having for lunch at the local high school and reports each time the weather changes a degree, and, then, dear sister tells me. People are simply weird, and I suppose we all are to varying degrees.

A reader knows what characteristics and types of people Theroux disdains: chubbies, shoppers, braggarts, drunks, complainers and prudes. A reader also knows what he likes people to be: quiet, resourceful, self-disciplined, savvy, and interesting. Of course, all measured on *his* personal continuum that reveals itself over time and many hours of reading. (It is possible to be chubby and interesting). As Theroux wrote this piece, he does not share real time, but it becomes obvious that, after he cast off the tour group in Mongolia, he was alone in China for months and months. He was married then; what was his wife doing? Not that a wife cannot have her own life and pursuits separate from her husband, but his children were back home too, so I can imagine quite well the breadth of her individual pursuits.

I have to consider Theroux's idea of exile seriously. It is true that I personally do not have enough time to write. Exile would certainly produce the time, but I would imagine, for me, exile might remove the heart from my writing. I do not know this; I only speculate and, perhaps, if Theroux would find me interesting enough to "share a beer with" he would tell me that my inclination to associate exile with a lack of heart is simply a convenient method for justifying what he might see as my staid existence in my many roles in Omaha, Nebraska. Theroux is not alone in believing that exile and selfishness are necessary for producing writing. As a young man, my husband devoured many volumes of the Writers at Work series and became convinced that exile was indeed a component of life as a successful author. I risk mild anger or annoyance committing

this brief story to paper, but the “exile” concept simply resonates. We had been dating about a year and had been friends prior to being romantically involved. As Dan neared graduation with vague plans of a life of writing and an English and philosophy degree, he decided the one thing that would hinder his writing was a stable love relationship. I suppose if I had behaved like Zelda Fitzgerald—the thing might have been salvageable from his perspective. So, I packed up my belongings and left. I went home to parents’ house and wept and listened to Paul Simon’s “Negotiations and Love Songs” ad nauseam. Dan called me after a very disorienting four weeks in a quasi “writer’s” apartment, and we have been together since; in spite of love, he has just published two poems in two respected publications.

I have to consider seriously the characteristics I identify in Theroux as enviable: his capacity of cruelty toward individuals he encounters, his willingness to leave behind family entanglements, the amazing breadth of what he has read and how easily he references obscure writers as though they were friends, and his irrepressible, often crass and humorous, observations. At times, I find myself longing to do what he does, but that is primarily deep in my sea turtle induced state. I am a parent, a teacher, a daughter, a wife, a friend, a citizen of my community, and sometimes I get a chance to write. I can freely admit that I would like more time to read and write; I would like more time to myself; that is not my present reality.

Paul Theroux makes solitude his reality in spite of the consequences: divorce, loneliness, nomadic living. I simply cannot absolve myself of personal and familial responsibility for the art of writing; I cannot write every morning and then eat vegetarian curry, kayak for several hours and end up at a local tavern discussing politics over a beer.

My musings have led me to the conclusion that I will never be an exiled writer like Paul Theroux. I will have to settle for being “prolific” during preschool hours and naptimes, but only on Mondays and Fridays. A few years ago, I lamented, to a retired friend of mine, my lack of time and space and that I had three long years to wait until both kids were in school all day. He responded, “In a scant fifteen years, they’ll be gone forever.” Sobering thought and I just learned this morning that Noble’s teacher thinks he is ready to go to kindergarten in the fall. My eyes just swelled with tears. I cannot leave my family like my friend, Paul Theroux, to write in exile. In the future, I will try not to wish for more of anything. Perhaps I can be happy with what I have accomplished in graduate school and life during the confines of five years of my children’s naps. I can certainly aspire to read and write more, I can promise myself another train trip at some future point, and I can dream.

Chapter I

Quarters

My sisters and I are perfectly drawn and quartered. We are four equal parts Italian, Irish, Norwegian, and Lebanese. I find it interesting that while all of my grandparents identified *strongly* with their own heritage, none of them felt it necessary to marry their own *kind*. Part of that was World War II taking an Italian boy from Utica, New York to the plains of South Dakota where my blue-eyed, blonde-haired Norwegian grandmother was working as a soda jerk in Sioux Falls in the early 1940s. Another city kid from Scranton, Pennsylvania, wound up in Scottsbluff, Nebraska, where my fiercely independent, red-haired Irish grandmother was riding her horse to the one-room schoolhouse where she taught. These unions led to many things, but most notably to tables laden with lutefisk (cod soaked in lye), kibby (raw meat loaf), macaroni and gravy, and boiled dinners.

My childhood travels largely consisted of sampling these fares each summer and whenever I joined the branches of my family in New York, South Dakota, and Nebraska. I loved being, but not eating, on the South Dakota farm; traveling to western Nebraska brought new vistas, tons of cousins, and, thankfully as we got older, boxes of sugar cereal and trips to Scotty's drive-in with my mom's youngest sister. The people, rather than the cuisine, made these places memorable, and at the same time, I always tried the food—at least once.

Quarter One

I will not pretend that Italian food is not my favorite of these choices. It is plain and simple. While macaroni with gravy may conjure an image of blue Kraft boxes and

Thanksgiving—just trust me, it is nothing out of box. Fresh made, steaming tomato sauce that smells of garlic, olive oil, and the pork bone that adds flavor means “macaroni with gravy” at my relative’s houses. Picture a round table, regular size that has somehow accommodated about 15 people overeating and drinking red wine (sometimes Uncle Frankie’s) from mismatched, tiny juice glasses. My Aunt “Yo” sweats, fusses and periodically bursts into tears because we took the time to visit. Before leaving, everyone must pass the “Wall of Death,” which grows sadder with age. At first, it was just my great-grandmother “Ma” who died in 1979, and the boy who had been my grandfather’s older brother, Johnny. I could take the passing of these two people and their sad, newly tinted portraits because I am used to those deaths—but never the strangely pink lips. Now, my father’s cousin Bobby’s picture is among them. He was Yolanda’s eldest son, and a good man, a health nut, and, now, a cancer statistic. I have not been back to her home in Rome, New York, to see that framed addition, but I know it is there.

My grandfather’s five living siblings and their progeny have rich, Italian names: Noble, Yolanda, Victor, Eleanor, Marianine, Priscilla, Pasquali, Vance Raoul, Dominic, and Francesco. Many of these names are shared with past Italian monarchs, so it becomes quite a spectacle when the names are shouted in their shortened forms: Yo, Vic, El, Ma, Cilla, Red, Vin, Mimi, Lil’ and Big Frankies, and my grandpa Noble, “Toe.” How can they routinely reduce Noble Anthony to “Toe?” It must be the wine.

Around the table, there are flushed faces, content bellies, lots of talk about insurance, and a constant retelling of the family mantra: “10%! Save 10% like you never had it!” I only managed to save it one year—they do not know I have quit trying, or they might withhold my macaroni and gravy.

My travels to Italy have only abetted my love of this quarter's cuisine—none of my international food horror stories take place in Italy—in other countries I have routinely lost weight, fasted, or ordered food I did not recognize. I may be biased toward Italian food—but I never was served Frisbee meat in Italy as I was in Prague. “Meatness,” does however, seems to be a special part of being Lebanese.

Quarter Two

I know there are wonderful Middle Eastern dishes; I consider hummus a food group. But, I must beg my mother to withhold the kibby at family gatherings. Raw meatloaf? Has this side of family heard of health codes? They always excuse it with—“It's well-spiced!” We do not live in pre-refrigeration, spice trade, dip-it-in-vinegar, take your chances times. When chicken juices drip on my counter, panic ensues. But my Lebanese family does not make the best food choices—or life choices for that matter.

I am not proud to say it, but I know the least about this quarter of my family. A stoic picture of my great-grandparents sits in a gilded frame in my parent's living room next to a wooden carved buffalo. The grimly pictured faces reveal about as much of substance as my own grandfather has ever shared with me. When my Grandfather left his home to enter the army, his family divided and sold all of his remaining belongings; of the five siblings that stayed in Scranton, three of them feuded and literally refused to speak to each other ever again, even though they lived within blocks and probably saw each other at the raw meat counter. I have only met one of my grandfather's siblings, my great aunt Rose (a feuder). I believe one of her children had a tax evasion problem and now, newly reformed, he owns part of a NASCAR stadium. She fixed kibby for us when we visited.

Since leaving was tantamount to death and talking to family optional, I can only imagine how my grandfather parented my mother and her eight younger siblings. Especially since I have a tear-leaking, über-loving father who wanted to be involved with *everything* as I grew up. As my grandfather has gotten sicker in the past year, I am learning more about how my mother grew up and the quiet stoicism that she sometimes lapses into becomes understandable. The only thing that rescues this culinary quarter of my heritage is knowing there are many fabulous dishes that my family simply refuses to make and the bread—great swaths of Syrian bread, flat with brown bubbles trapping the butter and grape jelly so deliciously, culinary redemption for sure. As for redeeming the interpersonal trials, I think that will take more than bread and butter.

Quarter Three

Luckily my Norwegian relatives are gracious, fun to be around, and dote on me since, at age seven, I mistakenly said (in Norwegian and/or gibberish), “My how old you are!” to my great-grandmother who was turning 80. I say luckily because none of the food I have sampled has scant redemptive qualities. Lutefisk, blood sausage, overly-buttered, bland rolls with a paper-thin, Atkins-defying slice of ham, whipped meringue candies, and badly made lefsa all send shivers of dread down my spine. I have tried them all—even the blood sausage. One does not easily say no to my great aunts: Shirley and Marvel. Rich, though radically dissimilar, names abound in this part of the family too: Muriel, Amber, Ryne, Herman, Palmer, April, Alma, and Rosalie. This list, unlike the Italian one, conjures the plains and different folk and rural life.

These differences are also reflected in the snapshots from this quarter. My grandparents, dressed nicely and smiling brightly, pose in front of a red combine; my

“Uncle” Ryne holding a watermelon under his shirt facing my mother “holding” my little sister under hers; the 2005 Thanksgiving shot of the original “three” sisters: Muriel, Marvel, and Shirley respectively 86, 83, and 79 wearing various shades of coral lipstick and their perennially jaunty scarves.

When we visited the farm as youths, there were still dairy cows that generated the ample manure we shoveled, the giant sow that chased me up a pile of refuse, and beautiful Clydesdales, named Prince and Duke. The farm folks were always playing pitch or Scrabble—it was a special treat to get to handle my great-grandmother’s timeworn letter tiles housed in the smooth, wooden box. My father beat her one time in his thirties—I can beat him rather handily—so I like to think I could have kept pace.

My great-grandmother Alma was a blue-ribbon winning painter and cook and a renowned ballplayer, playing catcher well into her forties. She lost her husband, Halvor, in the 1950s and lived large and on her own until 1987. My grandmother remembers her dad as the “kind” one. He was never harsh and would treat the girls to county fairs, Lake Okoboji trips, and ice cream. Being married, I can see how this probably played out for them: Alma running a Depression Era soup kitchen out of the Renner Garage and disciplining the kids, and Halvor laughingly spending any excess on his girls and storytelling. That he doted on his children is lucky considering that in his own youth, he was essentially “sold” away to a neighboring family when his mother remarried upon arrival from Norway—his step-father’s motto being “out with the old.” Nevertheless, he remained kind, and, for that, my grandmother is eternally grateful.

Much to the delight of my family, I visited Halvor’s ancestral home when I visited Norway. I had a memorably awkward Coca-Cola on an overstuffed, floral couch

with a distant cousin. Strange as it is, that is all I honestly remember consuming while in the country. I was there over twenty hours; I must have eaten something; perhaps I simply carried too many memories from South Dakota dinners past. Norway's natural beauty was breathtaking: the old woman carrying groceries on a self-propelled sled uphill was surreal, my cousin running breathlessly into the train station to hand me a hand-carved wooden troll memento (because his wife would be mortified if he hadn't) was poignant, but the food I made due without—perhaps sustenance is not always ingested. My Norwegian quarter includes some of the nicest, most genuine people around—pass the genetics; please hold the lutefisk.

Quarter Four

My travels have unfairly weighted my culinary adventures away from my Irish roots; sadly, I have never made it to the Emerald Isle. That has not stopped my trying various boiled dinners, bangers and mash, all varieties of potatoes, and many of their liquid *grains*. Other than the grains, I can safely say that boiling is not my favorite method of preparation—though many recipes taken in conjunction with large amounts of liquid grains become more tolerable. The Irish tendency to bread and stuff and butter and fill overwhelms my self-imposed dietary restrictions.

My Irish grandmother, Mary, was born on a farm in Western Nebraska, the eldest of six Merrigans—the rest boys. To say she has done her share of the laundry, cooking, caretaking, cleaning, and teaching fails to say enough. Farm children work; wives of “entrepreneurs” work; mothers of nine work. She and her husband made very little money, and my mother had the same meals each weeknight for most of her young life: a

pound of meat stretched to feed eleven; spaghetti with meat sauce sometimes meant ketchup and tuna.

They owned “Thomas’ Grocery” at the corner of Center Street in the tiny town of Mitchell, Nebraska in the panhandle. When I was a girl, we could still get into the store through the passageway in the kitchen—which was delightful—my sister and I got to choose one box of sugar cereal for the first morning of our arrival. Such foods were forbidden fruit in my youth along with Twinkies, soda and the like. I actually took carrots and celery cut up for my birthday treat as a first grader—but this essay has not the room for such woes.

The Irish have such checkered past in their own land and as immigrants to this one. Their reviled status in the 1800s is long forgotten amidst the “Kiss Me I’m Irish” buttons and green beer drink fests. Irish people could “say it loud” in heavily populated cities, but I think the Irish families like my Grandma’s were purposefully more quiet about their heritage; proud, but contained, blending the stoicism of the Great Plains with the hangover of remembered persecution.

My Grandmother Mary does not smile much in pictures—she smirks. I am still in trouble for missing an early nineties photo shoot of all the grandchildren, arranged by individual families, wearing color-coded shirts—my sisters wore teal in honor of my dad’s love for the shade. My scotch-taped head affixed to the frame floats above my sisters in an incongruous pink sweater. In her eighties, my grandmother is still a fine household manager, canner of produce, and rememberer of birthdays for her minions. Failing to mention the constancy of fresh sweet corn at lunch each summer day would be shameful, so for the corn’s presence I am grateful. I will eat corn and her fresh green

tomato jelly spread on my grandfather's fine bread in a kitchen quieter than the Italian and Norwegian ones I normally inhabit and be thankful for my composed Irish grandmother and the recognizable vegetables that adorn her table.

Reunion

We were tired, cold and the five of us sat resigned on a bench facing a Volkswagen dealership. Melancholia had set in on us as we were in the middle of our “ten-day break” from our semester abroad and had visited one country per day for the previous six. We were in Berlin, Germany; we felt adrift in a sea of culture and custom that had little meaning to us in our travel-weary state. We had already succumbed to a bad schnitzel at a museum cafeteria for lack of funds and, to add insult to injury, we now sat waiting to watch a Volkswagen technician simulate a car crash that would release an “airbag,” still a novelty in the early nineties. Yes, we were in Berlin and rather than focusing on the majestic Brandenburg Tor, the American-guarded gate leading to what had been East Germany three years earlier, we sat facing an automatic display of an airbag demonstration that was set to detonate in nine minutes and thirty seconds. None of us had any money anymore. We were sightseeing failures in that we failed to be able to afford to see the exquisite, and we were too tired and cold to partake of the cheap. We just sat and waited.

Friedrich Wilhelm II commissioned the building of the Brandenburg Tor in 1791, to represent peace. It is a beautiful monument reaching 65 feet high and 213 feet across with twelve Doric columns marking the various roads people could travel. Sitting atop the gate is a statue called the Quadriga, the goddess of peace, driving a four-horse chariot in triumph. The landmark had such noble beginnings. Sadly, the communist regime incorporated the gate into the Berlin Wall and it served as “Checkpoint Charlie,” the exit and entrance to the American-controlled part of the city. The Berlin Wall was 100 miles long, and its purported purpose was to keep Westerners, and their ideology, outside while

at the same time keeping Easterners living under Communist rule inside. The former gate of peace bore reluctant witness to the many violent deaths of people attempting their escape to freedom.

Sitting so near all that majesty and tragedy, we had a cup of “wassel” that was supposed to warm us. It had been slightly too expensive for an office-like styrofoam cup of the watery wine mixture. We sat because we had already ingested too much. All of our speeding through the great sights and sounds of various countries reduced them to their greatest cathedral or monument or the market where we bought our wine. Obviously, we missed something—the people or customs perhaps, but something that made us so weary that we actually sat five across on a bench to stare at an airbag display on a cold, November day.

The growing squeals, chatter, and laughter of multitudes of excitable children *finally* drew our attention away from the plate glass display and red clock. The timer had ticked down to nearly two minutes, and there was a pervasive sense of aggravation that something, anything would draw us away from this moment of “airbag” release. We finally turned our fixed gazes to the source of so much clamoring and saw a sea of children, dressed brightly and red-cheeked, flocked together. They were all facing the Brandenburg Tor and eagerly anticipating something.

The “something” we happened to stumble upon was a celebration commemorating the fall of the Berlin Wall three years earlier on November 9, 1989. I remembered that one of my closest friends from college, a life force with a German ancestry, had risked travel to Berlin that month, against advice, to secure a small piece of the rock wall for her grandfather. Behind us, a swelling group of children pushed en

masse toward the great gate. The peals of laughter and good-natured din of excitable kids speaking their language and preparing for something moved us to our feet.

Standing, my taller companions could see the children purposefully moving toward the gate. I stood on the bench to see better—the airbag demonstration abandoned. The members of the group I traveled with were not the freest of souls. The physical size of Big Bill and Jim scared many of the Europeans we had met, so they had taken to awkwardly hunching their 6’7” frames and keeping themselves as unnoticeable as possible. They now craned their necks to see the commotion. Andy paid less attention; he had retreated inside himself, filled with worries from a far away Texas home and an even greater lack of money than the rest of us. We watched as near the front of the Brandenburg Gate the children gathered before a group of construction-style barriers standing just to the West and East of the entrance.

Suddenly, what seemed like hundreds of whistles began blowing from both directions. The reality of what was happening finally dawned on us as we saw the mass of small bodies become an unstoppable one, breaking through the blockades on both sides of the gate and running, headlong into the other group, freely, purposely mingling East and West.

I found myself running alongside Chris, my other traveling companion and closest friend of the group. We were similar in nature and shared most things, including the scabies that he picked up in some random train car. The crush of people had been too intoxicating for the two of us to stay still. I was not German; I had not been oppressed; I was not even a very good tourist that day, but I euphorically ran. In my memory, Chris and I dwarfed the children, who all seemed about nine-years-old. Running over the

physical splinters of the shattered blockades and unrealized “dreams” of tyrannical regimes was surreal. I do not remember consciously thinking. I was just feeling the swell and heat of the small bodies running with such abandon and an inexplicable levity. As we slowed, the crowd began rapidly thinning out.

I realized we were in the East. We looked back the other direction and saw the dissipating crowds quickly going back to their lives on either side, or both. It was haunting for me being in the East and staring back West. To this day, I cannot think of that moment without the hairs rising on my arms and sharp memory of the bronze statue, whose name I fail to remember, but whose arresting face is forever fixed in my memory. I could not read the words at its base, nor did I have to. This guardian stood with his voice and body anguishly outstretched toward his Western brothers, the mouth gaped open in a perpetual cry. The figure in Edvard Munch’s “The Scream” shares characteristics with the statue but lacks the intense humanity of the bronze figure. It was so sad. All of these people wrenched apart at the whims of governments and wars. Madmen come up with such walls and to imagine it lasting well into my lifetime from its inception after World War II overwhelms me. We did not remain in the East for long; the lingering presence of people being shot where I was standing for trying to get what I was squandering on a bench was too much reality for a nineteen-year-old kid.

My expectation of more fanfare dissolved. The moment was just over. We had spent a longer time waiting for the never-to-be-seen-airbag. I looked a bit sheepishly at Chris considering our rather bold participation in something so far from ours and looked away again. This was personal. We never have discussed how the experience affected

us. Just as Bill, Andy and Jim had reveled at the marvel from their fixed point on the bench, Chris and I ran for our own reasons.

That night, as we waited for our train to Denmark, my group discovered that I alone had a “sizable” (about twenty dollars) amount of German marks remaining. They asked me to share my wealth. My money netted them a largish bottle of Jägermeister and me promises of future riches back in Rome. The liquor store closed behind us, and we spoke little as we drank, the bottle passed from person to person on the cold, cement floor of Berlin’s central train station. The harshly lit depot was barren of movement and sound; ours would be the last train and was not due until midnight--more fruitless waiting. We remembered the airbag. We picked at flecks of yellow paint that dotted the cold floor and, strangely, did not play the requisite game of five-handed hearts that often passed the time. Jim was a maddening player who never noticed he had the two of clubs to start the game.

That night and for the remainder of the trip, I carried those “running” moments so quietly and intensely. I was happily traveling with a group of guy friends, but I realize now that there was less talk and reflection than there could have been between us. Maybe there should have been more; maybe that is why they needed to drink. So, I was simply quiet, no small feat for me.

We left Berlin that night on the late train headed toward Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to round out our trip. We were to rejoin the rest of our group back in Munich for a last beer at the Hofbrauhaus before heading back to Rome for finals and real life, if our life in Rome that semester was real.

I did not speak, intelligently, of what passed in Berlin until four years later when I was fixed at a family style, plank table in Munich with a wiesse beer in my hand. My then-boyfriend and I were beginning a month-long European trip. We shared our table with a family that just beamed with happiness. The man must have been about 55 years old and smiled so kindly that we struck up a conversation with them.

It began with my mandatory, “Guten tag, do you speak English?” To which Germans always kindly and ironically respond saying, “My English is imperfect, but I certainly will do my best.” So, we spoke in my language about his countries, the one of his birth, Germany, the one of the bulk of his life, East Germany, and his new one, Germany. I told him where I had once stood and a little of my Brandenburg Gate tale, but my story of the reenactment so paled with the story of his reality. He had been to the Hofbrauhaus as a little boy with his father and mostly remembered the size of the pretzels; they range from the miniscule to the unliftable. And he, and his smile, were back, for the first time in almost 50 years—he could taste those pretzels again, and, more importantly, travel freely in a reunited land.

Being Dependable

In the last twenty-four hours, I counseled two dilapidated marriages, comforted a friend dealing with an unexpected death, acted as room mother artfully arranging cookies on a platter, ferried one friend to surgery and another to the airport, dealt with my student's writing anxiety, served as a surrogate grandfather, corresponded with my two great aunts who I have recently disappointed, and hosted a "Stitch n' Bitch" party where my main craft was to sew a button. I also somehow cared for my own two children, remembered to feed the dog, exercised, maintained the house, paid the bills, and, now, I find myself with a quietish moment to try to collect my thoughts. Unfortunately, my thoughts are rather blended, being one part mine and twenty parts other.

I keep thinking life will slow down; there will come a moment when some blessed routine is established that provides permanency and order and tidiness to my life. I suppose I should be careful what I wish for as order and tidy are not words suggestive of humor or spontaneity, but, still, a part of me longs for less chaos. What would my life feel like if none of the people that contributed to the litany of events detailed above asked *me* for help? Feeling harried and spread to thin, I felt the compulsion to find out how I got this way. Is it healthy to be a pivot in so many lives? I decided it was time to take a page out of Dickens' book and find out what I did to get here and whether or not I, like Ebenezer Scrooge, need a change.

The First Visit: Summer 1990

A crumbling two-bedroom apartment where two college-aged girls are trying to plug the gaping hole in their "walk-out" closet while a giant cockroach pedals one of their bikes. The girls seem strangely happy and largely impervious to their surroundings.

I listen as they discuss their dinner plans. “Marni, what do you want for dinner canned green beans or canned corn?” The other pony-tailed coed replies, “Well, Beth, what do you think goes better with the 1.5 liter of White Zinfandel?” I stifle a laugh as they choose green beans, screw open the wine, and blare a tape-recording of Anne Murray’s “Greatest Hits.” The checkbook register lies open on the counter revealing a whopping balance of \$1.82. They have moved out onto the surprisingly nicely treed patio in an otherwise urban landscape. As the wine level sinks, dreams of more money, better menus, and real boyfriends rise, and I hear the girls sharing and chattering secure in their friendship and long future.

* * *

That high-hopes-pony-tailed friendship later became rocky and this friend has only recently become part of my life again. I always wondered why we became estranged (other than the dress she made me wear in her wedding); I know now, for several years, she has been oppressed. Her husband has named her worthless, unattractive, humorless, and boring; watching her on the patio, I could see her as she once was: luminous, playful, funny, and joyous. She is one of the people who called on me in the last twenty-four hours. She has asked to speak with me, see me, and interact with me because I remember her, and she is only beginning to remember herself and her own memory needs jogging. Should I become the jogger? Should I insert myself so deeply into someone else’s marriage and psyche? Should I have screened the call as it flashes on the caller id to avoid someone else’s unpleasantness?

A person who wishes for less chaos should shy away from such heavy responsibility. She gave me two days notice of her intentions to be in Kansas City and

asked if I'd have time to come see her. I'd have to write notes of regret with recent child pictures included for missing the reunion dinner at the fire station in Renner, South Dakota; I'd have to make sure "surgery" friend had enough food and another emergency contact; I'd have to have Dan drop off "airport" friend; I'd have to be back for my shift at the church festival's "redemption booth" (prizes, not salvation); I'd have to miss my soccer game. I did not screen the call; I have my bags packed. Inside there is a slightly better bottle of wine, comfort foods, and an old Anne Murray tape. I went and said all the things a spouse should say. I promoted the worth of the fragile human being who is going to need every bit of strength she can muster to protect herself and her small son. It was the least I could do.

The Second Visit: September 1997

I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply the stench that can only be sweaty high school cafeteria. A new young teacher had apparently noticed the acute apathy around her and reacted in her typical fashion: less dignified than some, certainly louder than others, and with her whole heart. There she was dressed head to toe in pirate garb attempting to whip some lackluster students into homecoming frenzy. Perhaps someone else would have hung a flyer or something—that person surely would have been cooler out of a pirate suit and face makeup that practically begged acne to bloom by seventh hour. She was barely making a dent in their yawning visages; until she leapt upon a table and produced a scroll that cursed the yellow bellied Knights who did have a prayer of beating the mighty Pirates. After a few convincing ARRS and some fairly intelligible pirate speak, the students seemed to wake from their stupors and realize an adult who was insane perhaps, but risky and innovative and who wanted action was in the room. She

jumped from the table and bowed out of the cafeteria with hundreds of eyes watching her disappearing gait.

* * *

That action made a difference and the level of school related excitement and pride rose palpably—later the Knights won the game. I do everything that way as a teacher. An assistant principal once likened me to James Brown and feared I would need to be carried out of my room at the end of each day. This was a proud and sad moment in my life. I thought the physical comparison was ridiculous—I dress and wear my hair in noticeably different fashion. Jokes aside, I was touched. I was weirdly proud of the comparison until the administrator ruined the comment telling me I should “slow down” and warning me against burn out. I sat there thinking he didn’t get it. If you can have James Brown for a little while, why settle for Julio Iglesias every day? And people wonder what is wrong with public education.

I still teach the same way. I threw over my whole lesson plan last class to make certain my students were not apprehensive about their writing assignment when they left. I pleaded and cajoled. I am fairly certain that 90% of them left knowing what to do and to give it their best effort for themselves. I was not wearing a pirate suit, but I still carry James with me. When I am done teaching with passion, I will know and will find something else to do.

The Third Visit: Fall of 2005

I breathed a sigh of relief as the pleasant sight of soft light, wine, and hors d'oeuvres replaced cafeteria vistas. I stood staring at a house party for thirty and forty somethings, an awkward sight for the uninitiated. All these parents that are escaping

responsibilities for a few hours that behave like their high school counterparts, though legality is no longer questioned. Small groups were spread out watching football, drinking and talking. I joined a group staked out in the kitchen and laughed and talked and began relaxing with a group of women I knew from pick ups and drop offs. After a little wine, one of the husbands began spinning eighties tunes in the basement. There we were, four women dancing as though we were at a taping of Solid Gold. DJs came and went—but we endured, laughing, sweating, and freely being basement dancers.

* * *

It was hard for Dan and me to move to Omaha. My parents lived here, but all of our friends were spread out elsewhere. We were broke, Dan felt out of place in his new school, our newborn son struggled to gain weight, I loathed our new house, and we had no contacts in our new neighborhood. We went to the closest church for our son's baptism and thought we would join because it was walking distance to our home; there were few friendly souls. It was a rough year. We bounced around finding too conservative Catholic churches and lived a bit reclusively at first. Then, an acquaintance told me about the preschool at that same first church that might be a good fit for my daughter. She joined the school.

Being in a school affiliated with the neighborhood church feels like the sun breaking through on a cloudy day. I began nodding hello, cracking a few jokes, going to the park after school, and, all of a sudden, we fit. I could dance in basements; they wanted me too; they were lacking a dance leader. I am a room parent, get frequent yellow cards on the over-thirty soccer team, I go to PTA meetings, and parties. I was in

the right hand woman for the Grease Band chair for the festival this year—glad-handing the band, keeping the beer flowing, and trouble shooting whatever came up.

It dawned on me last week when I hosted the Stitch n' Bitch party—that I am invited to this gathering because I am friends with these families. I can barely sew a button. I am part of the group because of whatever I bring to it emotionally. I still correspond with and deeply miss my friends elsewhere, but I am now more secure in my friendships here. I danced to the festival music while sweeping the dance floor with familiar children dancing at my feet.

The Hopefully Distant Future Visit

Just like Scrooge, I know I am in a cemetery. I am so going to kill Dan, he knows I wanted to be cremated and not take up a plot of the Earth with some creepy box. My experience differed from Scrooge's in a number of ways. It is a sunny fall day; eighties dance music fills the air. Leaves blow and scatter on the jackets of the many people I recognized: friends from all over the country, the old Stitch n' Bitch group, families from church, teaching colleagues, relatives, my children, so old, airport, surgery, and pony-tailed friends all in evidence.

* * *

Formerly Vivacious MWF Seeks Sense of Humor

I was just about to start this essay about my inability to get happy when I received an email from my father about a man who is blind, ninety, lost his spouse of 70 years, and is being moved into a nursing home and is STILL happy. The sage man discusses being happy about working parts as opposed to failing parts, about memories he draws on like a bank account, about living simply, and giving more and expecting less. That my father passed along this elderly man's life acumen at the moment I began this essay (with the understanding that I would pass it on to seven others in order to have a "miracle" tomorrow) really screws with my mind. Now I can't talk about why I can't get happy because I am not 90, blind, dealing with the loss of my spouse, or moving into a boxy, antiseptic room I rate one step above a coffin.

The ability to sit around and deal with existential questions presents quite a double-edged sword in our modernized, moneyed society. No Tyrannosaurs Rex is going to come steal my proverbial eggs. Rather than be happy to be alive or excited that I have another meal coming—I contemplate my relative successes and failures and, at times, end up feeling sorry for myself, generally upset, and, now, guilty because I am not nearly bad off as Mr. Blind. Death to forwarded emails!

Chapter II

On Other People's Vegetarian Blues

I just spent the last few minutes researching bacon substitutes on the Internet. I had to; I knew that crisp turkey bacon might ultimately be the downfall of my fledgling vegetarian diet. Thank goodness there are other people out there who need a BLT support group as much as I do. One woman reviewed three soy-based products with such detail, I worried her brainpower and time could be better spent in the fight against cancer or the reduction of nuclear weapons. Another man would ultimately refuse soy-based products and prefers to cook one part of the tomato in liquid smoke to simulate “the hot/cold contrast that is one of the most pleasing features of a BLT.” This guy meant business. I will try the recommended soy product (Morningstar Farms®) and, hopefully, breath a sigh of relief.

It is not hard for me to be a vegetarian at home. I buy quality foods that, yes mother, contain protein and make sure I eat a balanced, varied diet. Traveling to see my extended farm family in South Dakota was another matter all together. The wedding reception buffet line consisted of iceberg lettuce with croutons, fried chicken, slabs of roast beef, vast quantities of gravy, buttered-whole kernel corn, and a vat of instant mashed potatoes. I had run ten miles that morning; I was hungry. I passed on the small, Styrofoam bowl where the ranch dressing enveloped and disfigured the limp lettuce. I took a real plate and piled the lettuce on beside my gritty potatoes and shiny corn. I passed on the giant doughy roll—though I probably should have eaten it just for sustenance purposes. I walked back to my table where my family stared at my plate and clucked and worried over my improper dinner. Out of nowhere, they became insistent

pushers of fried chicken saying, “Just a little bit won’t hurt you, here just eat a wing.” After my mother said “wing” any temptation that the aroma might have induced was ruined by an anatomical vision of a flapping bird running frantically away from its captor. The flapping sealed it; I turned my attention to the corn.

While munching the corn and watching the mounting pile of chicken bones grow, I couldn’t help thinking about the general weirdness of human interaction. In general, Americans are blitzed with diet suggestions and bombarded with pictorial representations of how an “ideal” person should look, but there is a catch: people simply do not handle change, like my choice to refuse chicken, well. Further, I lost weight two and a half years ago. Some people that had not seen me in awhile paid me compliments while others made remarks like: “Slow down—or they’ll be nothing left to lose” or “Wow! Your neck bones really do protrude” or the “oh so sincere look” coupled with “Are you really ok? I mean are you eating food?” Just last night, my mother hugged me, but could not resist saying, “You are skin and bones!” In the future, I will direct her hugs to my *derrière*.

Yes, I am still eating food, and I will admit to tending toward eating disorders at certain points in my life, but this lifestyle change that put me on a course of healthier eating and marathon training is the path I want to be on. I have children and want to model good habits of eating and exercise as part of a normal and healthy life. I am in better physical shape than I have ever been in, and I feel like a more attractive person in general, aside from my constant adolescent case of raging acne. I have learned about what I am putting in my body and how these substances affect me. Hence, the gradual shift to vegetarianism. I hope I will not become an annoying non-meat eater like I have

become an annoying non-smoker, but the cards are stacked against me; I have taught and studied Upton Sinclair's The Jungle.

People are often vocally supportive about lifestyle changes like serious alterations to diets, training for marathons, taking risks, or going to counseling—but in reality they become saboteurs because, I hypothesize, they do not wish to see themselves in the change's reflection. Not only might my perceived "skinniness" might make someone else's curves more apparent, people seem to react pressured as though my change condemns their inability or lack of desire to alter the same aspect of themselves. One person's change does not necessitate anyone else's. I know this because I have often flirted with giving up alcohol for Lent—I even broached the ideas with friends, who then did it successfully, felt good about their self-discipline and sacrifice while we discussed it over nachos and O'Doul's® (them) and the hard stuff (me). I honestly did not become an alcohol pusher, but the thought did frantically cross my mind as my self-loathing increased. Looking back, I could have, at the very least, skipped the real beer in their presence that afternoon.

Similarly, my being a vegetarian at Thanksgiving is going to be a downer for the group. It will be a topic of hushed discussion, and I am certain to be the target of many furtive looks. I hope no one chokes while too quickly cramming turkey down their throats. I am fine simply eating side dishes—or if I chose to eat turkey, so be it—in all honesty, it will be the spiral ham that is the temptress (even as I wrote that I had a mental image of pig dressed in "come hither" attire that stopped temptation in its tracks).

Thanksgiving will go something like this:

Family prayers: Dad will get teary as he mentions the family not with us, grandpa will say “and bless the little hands that made the food,” and then we will all say something we are thankful for—one person’s being that Marni is still able to stand in spite of her obviously (neck bones) deficient diet.

Loading of the plates: Can she eat that? No, chicken stock. That? No, giblets. That? No, ground sausage. I leave the line a plate crowded with gherkins, olives, and sweet potatoes while many sad eyes follow my poor neck bones as they depart the room—looking eerily like the turkey carcass.

Consuming the food: Awkward silences fill the spaces that are normally punctuated with, “succulent bird” or “what a cut of meat” or “how does meat get in a spiral anyway?” For the record, though I might think it, I would never say anything like, “Just days ago those animals were joyfully alive and just scant hours ago they were on the cutting room floor of a packing plant.” That would be rude—although I might snap if anyone mentions my ribs again while hugging me for the holiday.

Me becoming a vegetarian does not have to ruin Thanksgiving, though my meat-dominated extended family should have concerns as I am the main family cook at most gatherings. They will forever doubt my intentions and ingredients. I can see my father now bending in to suspiciously smell something that looks like chicken, tastes like chicken...but is it chicken? He will become as paranoid about soy products masquerading as chicken as he is about cream cheese. He loves my carrot cake—but does not eat cream cheese ever...except for every time I make carrot cake.

I suppose we will weather the storm as a family. I have asked my husband if he would be willing to try vegetarian recipes a few times a week, and he warily agreed. I

pointed out that eating meat fewer times per week would allow us to buy organic or locally grown meat that would surely be better for him and the children to consume. I could tell his acquiescence had more to do with quieting me and praying for this to be a passing phase. He fears not having enough food without meat on his plate. I knew he must have been slightly vocal about his displeasure when Libby came back from a popcorn-hotdog-football orgy saying, “Your not going to make a vegetarian out of me!” What joy spills from the mouths of babes and disgruntled, carnivorous fathers!

A Slippery Slope

I felt defeated as I walked alone to the car. Noble had hurried off with his teacher. Libby, after an out-of-character backpack-kicking spectacle, had sweetly asked to buy the special lunch catered from Pizza Hut. I stood there wondering what had prompted my placid five year old to repeatedly kick her backpack that housed snack for her entire class, and thinking about the time I have devoted to protecting my kids from fast food and attempting to minimize the importance of commercialism in their lives. I gave in; I handed the lunch ticket to the teacher and tucked Libby's whole-wheat sandwich, carrots, grapes, and baby plum back in the car. The forlorn little lunch box rode shotgun as I drove away. It looked like the velveteen rabbit after the little boy had moved on to bigger and better toys. But Pizza Hut is not bigger and better than the lunch I prepared. Why did my principles desert me as I faced this first of many small challenges?

Part of me said "yes" to pizza because I want to please my daughter. I know her transition to full day school has not been easy. She has not felt comfortable using the bathroom. She is the only person who has new glasses. She came home with red marks on a social studies paper yesterday. This is a good girl who is loving and responsible. Something is troubling her, and I know Pizza Hut is not the answer. Libby faces the risks of rampant childhood obesity and a culture overly engrossed in material goods and instant gratification. I gave her a lunch ticket to that particular kingdom today.

I have a tendency to be hard on myself; I have high expectations for others and me. I did not expect Libby to ask to buy Pizza Hut like the little playground lemmings that surrounded her. It was shocking to me, and I am shocked that I am making such a

big deal out the situation and that I have taken the issue to heart; however, for me, one day of Pizza Hut represents a slippery slope. Am I going to be one of those parents who give in all the time? Will I appease them because life can be hard?

Maybe what is truly bothersome is the nagging feeling that somehow Pizza Hut beats me in terms of popularity and desire. I have the similar feeling when I have picked up my kids from their midday preschool and they watch with longing as the lengthy line of short four year olds clutch their lunches and climb the stairs to the aftercare facility where they will sit until a parent comes to get them after 5pm. Somehow there is glamour in this process, and both of my children have requested the privilege of going to aftercare. I simply shrug it off and say, “Well, you don’t need to go to after care because I am here to get you.” Normally, the conversation moves on until the line forms the next day. I can’t help thinking, “Why you ungrateful little curs. We have been poor, and I have given up solid career prospects to be able to give you the gift of time, and you want to go to aftercare?” Now, I have never uttered these words aloud—but I have thought them numerous times along with, “Fine! You want to go to daycare, go! I’ll get a fancy job, get rich and famous, and travel the world while you sit in daycare.” I haven’t said that either.

Dropping off the children brought strange, sad relief. I drove to work for my office hours prepared to spend some time in the adult world. After being at school for an hour with a rather jocular group of teaching assistants, I was feeling quasi normal until a pair of lovely, weeping and bespectacled eyes disconcerted me. A young woman in my composition class came to a meeting with me so anxiety ridden and distraught that she could not control her tremors and wept freely about the state of her paper and certain

ineptitude. Her eyes, unlike Libby's big blues, were deep brown with flecks of gold and green that the tears made luminescent. The fact that she is someone's Libby did not escape me; her less than perfect effort on her essay might have felt to her parents tantamount to Libby's choosing Pizza Hut or kicking a backpack to me. I tried to tell her she had some solid ideas in her paper, but she did not believe me. I asked if she had attempted any of the ideas I had suggested to assure better organization or logic and she stared at me blankly and was barely able to suppress the hysterical laugh I could see bubbling about her lips.

I did my best to console her, to make her believe that she can write, and remind her that I have 80 unusable pages of a thesis and many a resulting horror story. I will be able to see in class tomorrow if she slept overnight. She is normally such a fresh-faced kid. She answers questions well and with confidence in class, I only hope that I can help her concretely change her negative writing patterns but, alas, that is a tall order, sort of akin to repeatedly telling my friend, "Of course your rear end looks great in those horizontally striped pants."

I fretted about the slippery lunch decision all day. When I picked Libby up, I casually asked how she liked the pizza lunch. She said it was good. She was excited that it came with peaches and a salad and white milk and a cookie, but she only ate half of the cookie and wished for the extra \$1.10 that would have purchased the coveted second slice of pizza. I cannot see major harm in her eating a semi-balanced lunch once in awhile; I wish it had not been the commercial pizza day that she had chosen to request. I would somehow feel better on corn dog day, though corn dogs are disturbing on a whole other level. Next time, I believe I will say no on Pizza Hut day but will compromise and let her

chose a different day to buy someone else's prepackaged and preservative filled idea of what my extraordinary daughter should consume.

After dealing with the great lunch incident of 2006 and my weeping writer, my mind wandered back to the strange backpack kicking I had observed. Not knowing what to think, after we got home, I sat Libby on my lap, her eyes shining as big and blue behind her new glasses as my weeping student's had this morning. I asked her why she had been kicking her new backpack. Her face quivered, lips drooped, and eyes cast downward as she said, "I don't know." I prompted her with more questions but my efforts yielded little. Finally, I just told her it was unacceptable and that I never expected to see something like that again. She sort of skulked by me for a moment or two, which I have learned to take as a nonverbal apology and then off she ran to play with her brother in the basement.

Libby normally knows not to kick her backpack. I normally have some perspective about fast food and parenting. My student knows enough to know that her writing lacks clarity and that it does not look like the stellar example I showed them in class, but neither did anyone's else's paper. I want her to know she should take heart in that and that she is in the same boat as her peers and that she can learn to refine and question and lessen her anxiety, but she has to trust me and allow herself to realize that this is not a failure. I know from the look on her face that she felt a failure. What a sad, overwhelming feeling for a nineteen-year-old person, but the parallel strikes me that my Pizza Hut parenting failure affected me in the same way, just as Libby's choosing to demonstrate weird rage or show off conspicuously in front of peers affected her later when she knew I was disappointed in her.

I truly did not know after I dropped off my children if things would be the same when I returned to get them, and the truth is, they were not the same—I have learned something of life's foibles as the day unfolded. My children are growing, changing, and challenging; my students are trying to uncover their worth and pick up their pens, and I find my, at times irrational, self in the position of steward to many people who stare brightly behind glasses. I am trying to be open to the role, and I hope to find renewed strength each day, but, if I am honest with myself, being emotionally wiped out at 4:30pm does not bode well for a well-balanced dinner. Maybe I should order a pizza.

Noble Does Italy at Nine Months

The passport debacle: My mom is so cheap; she tried to pass off a digital print of my three-month-old headshot from Olan Mills Studios. As if anyone would still recognize me—that was ages ago. Thus, we made a trip to Target passport studio in a snowstorm on the Saturday of the last possible day to expedite thirty minutes before the last postmark. That I look stressed in the picture goes without saying. She did not even take me out of the fruity, pastel snowsuit that used to be Libby's. I am for all eternity in the archives of the federal government in a girl's snowsuit. I know my mother still carries that photo in her wallet.

Airtime: One of the great indignities of being a child under the age of two is the routine denial of one's own seat on an airplane. I have overheard many adult conversations touting this wonder and plotting to deny children second birthdays. We children have to assert ourselves, so I steadfastly refused to sleep on the eleven-hour flight to prove the very valid point that we are people too and should merit a chair for maximum comfort. Perhaps I went a bit overboard with the excessive bouncing on my Mother's legs. Perhaps.

Jet Lag: Call me crazy, but adults do not handle time changes well. I was wide-awake when we got to Rome; I was ready to hit the streets, take in the sights, shop, "do" a cathedral—but no, the adults needed a nap. It was really embarrassing to be in Rome on a beautiful day watching (with mom) as the other adults slept for hours. I overheard my mom saying that she "thought she booked the overnight flight." Military time is supposed to be easy.

Sightseeing: Ok—so all the “adults” have napped and now—near my bedtime they decide to venture out. I would have stayed in Omaha with Dad and Libby if I had only known. Libby warned me; I failed to listen; truth be told, I am addicted to breast milk. Off we went into Rome at twilight—evidently a rough time of day for scooter drivers to see stroller riders. We passed many lovely sights, but the narcolepsy-inducing ride prevented me from taking in much. I was glad to catch a snooze. My mother kept shaking me and begging me to wake up—but anyone who has seen a sunset in Rome while being pushed in a plush, reclining stroller knows the score.

Dining: I love Italian food and their food-service professionals in general. They all loved me. Scores of diners pat my head and restaurant personnel keep plate after plate of plain pasta coming. In Italy, plain pasta has true flavor. My mother, though well intentioned, never salts anything at home. My greatest annoyance was the tendency of the “adults” at my table to sample my pasta at each meal. I often retaliated, throwing handfuls of noodles under the table, which lodged in their shoes, dried nicely, and crunched amiably on walking tours the next day.

Grandpa: I owe a tremendous debt to my grandfather for his traveling “behavior” that distracted my mother from my foibles. He ranted about needing “meat” and how the light switches were different. He would give me forbidden bites of chocolate gelato.

Sleeping: Sleep is not a priority for me on the trip—but I had to mention another great humiliation I suffer repeatedly: sleeping in drawers. Tell me who thinks drawers lined with itchy blankets are deluxe accommodations? My mother evidently thought, “If the shoe fits.” Or the entire body in this case...

Three years later: Like all travelers, I was glad to see the trip end. I have a few nice mementos—though Libby scored a navy blue Roma hat that I covet. When I look at the world map now—I can say, and often brag, that I was Italy. Libby has only been to Canada. My mom was a bit problematic to travel with, but I have since heard her say that she is proud that Big Noble, who is 85, and Little Noble, me, his namesake, got to travel to Big's native country that he had not seen since he was five years old. I may go back—but I will probably wait until I am older—Libby tells me six is a fine age.

A Mother's Rant

“You make it seem so worthwhile,” says a well-meaning person referring to my “success” as an at-home-mom. Well, I have not felt so successful lately. I am having a hard time recognizing my children. I mean their hair and eyes are the same. I have not had any shaved heads or rainbow Mohawks walking through the door yet, but things have changed. A perennial sassiness grows unchecked somewhere in my daughter's belly. She uses it to wag her hips and make the little clicking noises that emanate from her mouth as she tells me the next thing I have done wrong. Another day, my son actually ran up from the basement to upbraid me about turning off an inconsequential light that would hardly affect his play. He ran up the stairs; I can call for endless minutes and have him not respond, and, yet, he came to yell at me. I felt like I should be starring on an episode of “Nanny 911,” a reality television show that attempts to fix “broken” kids.

It is tedious when after a hot, annoying day at the zoo, your child whines that the car ride home is too long and that they are “booorreed.” I think to myself, “You're bored?” Not a chance honey. I have been talking to zoo animals with more regularity than adult humans for almost six years. The endless stream of picnics, carousel rides, and being sprayed with the anal pheromones of a tiger (well that only happened once—but *it* happened) somehow continue to delight my small children while secretly driving me mad.

I was back at the zoo recently with a friend who has never been there and the kids said, “Mom, there is that tiger that likes you.” My friend shot me a glance of inquiry and requested I share details. I had been making my kids laugh; I had been speaking to the tigers. For example, “Hey Mr. Tiger, how is life at the zoo today—feelin' cagey?” One

of the tigers responded. He turned his body until his rear section was facing my direction, gracefully lifted his tail, and stoutly sprayed me with anal pheromones. I learned later from a friend who is a chemist that I was really lucky. Apparently, the pheromone is only harvested from scraping the anal gland of cats and has enormous value, as big (I hope) as the “scrapers” salary. We are talking about scraping a delicate area housed in *live* cats’ derrières for a living. For many years, this substance was a staple in many adored fragrances like Chanel N° 5. Score one for the poor people. Thankfully, perfumer friend tells me a synthetic product is now available; she also now tells me that I misunderstood her. She said I was lucky because I am attractive to *any* animal not because I sprayed with the tiger pheromones in particular. It turns out the most valuable scent comes from the anal gland of the Civet—a small cattish, weaslish creature. Well, so much for my story and not washing that sweatshirt.

* * *

I have never liked parades either. This bothers some people in my immediate family who think of me as a poor sport, a downer, and a curmudgeon old person trapped in a thirty-three-year-old female’s body. Nevertheless, I have decided not to be an apologist about this any more. I had one sister who was captain of the flag squad, another who was the first chair of the flutists from sophomore year on. Sorry. I like flags as much as the next person; I secretly wish I could play “Hot Cross Buns” on my children’s recorders, a gift from the flag-captain mother of three who had a moment of foolishness in the instrument section. (I confine the recorders to the basement recreation room along with the triangles, tambourines, harmonicas, and the perennial maracas.) Perhaps, my sisters truly like parades, or perhaps they need to justify large portions of

their young lives spent marching around in enormously hot, stiff band paraphernalia. The white boots with mum-like green yarn balls still firmly attached have been gathering dust since 1989 on a particularly disturbing shelf in a closet of my parent's home.

Consider the details of a parade for a moment. Cars with people perched on the backs of seats wearing some banal banner of honor, like "Miss Douglas County Dental Associates 2006." Or, a myriad of puffy, red-faced men that are squeezed into old sports uniforms to commemorate that special three-hitter back in 1962. Or the poor firefighters sitting atop their engines with lights flashing and tootsie rolls flying a disproportionate number of Saturday mornings each year. Then there are the high school dance teams, the over-the-hill dance teams, bad sound systems, and poorly designed floats that leave a swath of paper products behind. And, finally, the candy, I spend years teaching my children not to eat off of *my* kitchen floor and take food from strangers and then I marvel at the hordes of children, including mine, racing to pick up candies off the ground from complete strangers. Call me unpatriotic; call me a downer; just don't call me when there is a parade.

* * *

Road trips for the lower middle class have also begun to ease into the parade category. Lots of squishy sandwiches, "Hyveetos" (store-brand Doritos®), and overripe fruit that truly affects everything else that is in the vicinity. I mean the rogue banana in the "food bag" actually penetrated my box of microwave popcorn. The packets housed in a box and sealed in plastic and, yet, when I popped the corn at one of our many destinations—it tasted like bananas. I ate it, me being too frugal to throw away a bag of \$.37 popcorn. I "sold" the treat to my family, saying, "It's just like when you mix in a

little caramel corn or Milk Duds® at the movies.” Just like that—except it tasted like spotted bananas.

Road trips give the opportunity for many things: especially games and talking to large animals. We play “I spy.” I like the game as well as the next person—but I admit playing with Noble, age 4, is annoying. He always spies something on the floor of the car that my spying, as the driver, would result in a felony or serious neck injury. Then there are the unavoidable disagreements about color families. Noble: I spy something orange. Libby: It better not be that gold tractor you are looking at. I try for harmony—Dan simply refuses to play. How do dad’s get away with that? I am sitting in the car feeling like a sap debating the colors of farm equipment while Dan relaxes to Dylan’s “Basement Tapes.” And that brings up another point. We don’t even have a CD player in our ’98 Plymouth, let alone a DVD player. We were stunned recently when traveling with another family when they produced, not one, but three DVD players equipped with earphones for each child. Though I risk sounding like my grandparents, today’s kids no longer have to demarcate a line in the middle of the backseat or share a book. They plug into three separate machines. I remember feeling sort of uncomfortable (and oddly drawn) to the sight of the three machines—picturing slack-jawed, silent zombies ingesting crack-cocaine for minors. I remembered those silent, bewildered creatures with longing later as I said hello to the 400th cow and began arguing about shades of blue.

* * *

Speaking of other’s people’s children, and I know I should not be. You love your friends, sisters, and extended family but you may not always like how their progeny behaves. That is fine when my children (and theirs) are tucked snugly in their beds—

being together constitutes a completely separate matter. How do you politely tell a dear friend or relative that their children are simply ruining mine? I fully realize that my kids can be mouthy and can tend toward the raucous—but I have real problems when they come home from a play date mannerless and making eerie, unearthly sounds that frighten me and all seem to have something to do with “doody.” My daughter never talks about such things—my son, however will insert the word in sentences as often as possible. For example, after returning home from a recent play date with friends, Noble called our dog, Jesse, saying “Come here! Doody Jesse!” What would Freud say to him inserting toilet matters into everyday activity? I am certain something is severely wrong.

I felt better or worse, I have not yet decided, when Noble’s Godfather, a brilliant man well into his thirties, repeatedly used potty humor when we visited. I feel better because maybe this is a man thing; I feel worse because I called him brilliant, and he is in his thirties!

* * *

Babysitting

My life feels like a tumbleweed gathering debris as it rolls, but my rolling halted abruptly when, in the midst of a very busy day, a cousin called wondering if I could watch her baby girl. There is something calming about holding a baby. She is six months old, smiley, and does not argue with me. She pleasantly coos and kicks her feet. I feel almost weepy for her innocence. I have surrounded her with pillows so she can lie next to me as I work. What would it be like if I were to leave the computer room and, rather than write about her, just hold her? That might be too intimate. As she drank her bottle fixated on me, I just marveled. Too much marveling is not good for my mood; I might start to think that another child who smiles at me and wants me to hold her all night would be just the ticket.

The ticket to what and where would remain to be seen. The ticket might afford passage to my local sanitarium or maybe to a better, slower place where I might reconnect with another self. The little baby, no longer happy, wants to be held, so, for now, I am typing with one hand as her smell tickles my nose, her hair brushes my cheek, and her heart beats so fast against my holding arm. How long can I keep this pose?

Chapter III

Walking Among the Ruins

My family enjoys being outside, and we intended to go to Hitchcock Park in Iowa. Unfortunately, a head cold and unexpected breakfast guests slowed our wits and our departure, and we settled for a closer location to enjoy a walk on an unseasonably warm January day. From a distance, the Mt. Vernon Gardens on Omaha's south side are lush green and resplendent white. As my family approached from the north, we saw manicured beds of soils and a white-pillared mimicry of the Greek architecture seen at the real Mt. Vernon, the ancestral home of George Washington. As my children rushed to enter the "church," my husband stopped them short of the space littered with broken glass. As we continued down the paved path toward the nature trail, my children, ages 3 1/2 and 5, discussed how there should never be broken glass.

They were right. My reflections, though quieter, were running in a similar vein. I was actually at Mt. Vernon when I was a child. I remember best the formal parlor that was a pale blue and had tapestries and diminutive furniture. All of us tourists were somewhat hushed in a museum-like way and simply looked at a house full of possessions untouched for nearly two hundred years. There we walked undisturbed with no expectation of dread. The broken glass littering the floor of the replica had stripped me of that freedom, and I found myself walking more warily than had been the intended spirit of our outing.

The sort of nagging doubt elevated quickly as we passed the next parking area where two bleak men sat, waiting for something I immediately assumed was untoward. Their surly faces simply did not suggest bird watching on a sunny afternoon.

Nevertheless, we walked on to the trailhead that would lead us down to the Missouri River. The grass path was worn enough to follow easily, except for my son who had to find ankle-twisting holes with regularity. As we walked, my husband's cold left him quieter than normal, and I was left to answer the intermittent questions of my children and imagine what the men might be waiting for inside their cars on this lovely day. I first thought of drugs, wondering what the drug of choice was for middle-aged, angry white men. I had settled on meth when I began purposely stepping over condom wrappers on the walking path. Perhaps this was a lover's rendezvous. But as we traversed downward, the glimpses of industrial waste coupled with the foul stench of bad river propelled my thinking of the seedier side of "love" that might have been what brought these men all sitting grim-lipped in their vehicles waiting for something that they would not speak of later to wives or friends. The only witnesses to the acts: the fragments of condom wrappers and a can of *Colt 45* taken for nerve.

My son interrupted my rather seedy reverie excited by the many types of moss we saw and kept wanting to touch the springy green plants. I cringed at each attempt because I remembered walking in the Rocky Mountains with my father as a young girl and him saying a human's touch destroys years of growth, and, if handled, the moss would never be the same. I weighed my fear of the death of the moss and how touching it seemed to thrill my son, and, that day, I opted for the touching. Maybe my decision would have been different in more pristine surroundings, and, after further reflection, my choice saddens me. Even I failed to be a guardian for this sad, defiled place.

I obviously did not share these specific thoughts with my family as we walked along, though my husband's mind must have also been similarly engaged as he requested

this be our last visit to these “gardens.” My daughter was concentrating on using her walking stick, a hand carved gift from Grandpa Vance. I was already carrying my son’s stick as my husband had predicted. We reached the trail’s end near the river and what appeared to be a broken Greyhound bus greeted our efforts. The foul smell was stronger, and the moment only salvaged by a distant train whistle that delighted the children and a single, purple branch that was brighter than the whole experience.

My husband and I turned and quickly urged the children back up the trail—me carrying my son to hurry the process. Once, securely back on the paved path, we had to pass the same lurking men, grown so dubious in my mind, and fulfill the dreaded promise of a picnic of fruit and snacks for the children that typically follow our adventures. I glanced into the bag, wishing I had brought apples—a faster fruit. What an awkward orange peeling session so fraught with my imagination. We sat on benches facing the pavilion, the men still sitting, waiting firmly fixed in my peripheral vision. We were too far to see that glass, but I had simply assumed too much about the place to relax and had failed to better Omaha’s Mt. Vernon Gardens.

As we drove away, another single man sat in his truck, and a sign read “In Case of Odor, Call 444-5900.”

Cleaning Out

My mother once threw away a whole set of my sister, Erin's, school pictures from kindergarten or first grade. I truly believe Mom was trying to protect her from the later barbs and jabs that accompany such a snaggle-toothed picture, but, for Erin, the slap still stings and a small part of her feels gone, relegated to a trash heap. That stuff accumulates should be on the list of universal truths or at least on a t-shirt. Stuff is one of those nondescript words that fail to describe adequately the possessions that scatter, lodge, reside, or take over our homes. Personally, I exist between spheres of influence. I married a neatnik but came to the marriage saddled with a dowry of clutter. I have come to see the beauty of simplicity and known the horror of throwing away my children's "lesser" drawings. After helping clean out my father's ancestral home and our family running four garage and one estate sale, I realized the time to take this matter seriously was upon me.

My grandparents, Noble and Muriel Valerio, lived in a stately home at 11 South Main Street in Sherburne, New York for over fifty years. The house was yellow with green shutters and had a majestic front porch. The places to explore were endless: the "sun porch," the attic, the canning room, the shed. Because my grandmother valued *everything*—clippings, furniture, recipes, scraps of material, anything lacy, buttons, jewelry, tins, glass bottles, photographs, unique stones, or *anything* diminutive that could be used in play—my grandparents had and enjoyed more "treasures" than anyone else I know.

I am from a migratory family. We moved every two to four years as I grew up. I have always had a brave face about this and prided myself on being able to fit into any

new clime with ease. Chameleons must be lonely, never being seen in the same way, always adapting, and I feel, at times, part chameleon, but at the Sherburne house, we fit. Grandma would set up play dates with girls our age from her small town; she would host elaborate tea parties poured from wicker-covered Chianti bottles long before I acquired the taste for red; she would dress us in an apron, and we were Cinderella.

My sisters and I would go to sleep to the sounds of wind moving through trees, an occasional 18-wheeler, and echoes of my Aunt Toni's police scanner filtering down the hall toward our sun porch, a three-season room, on the second floor filled with windows. The windows opened upward and the "eye" affixed the window caught the "hook" that was attached to delicate chains that descended from the ceiling. I have never slept so fancily.

Libby, Noble, Dan and I slept there in the summer of 2005. It was not as glamorous as I remembered from my youth but mostly because of unfortunate overcrowding of unused furniture and the patina of dust that had become too at home there. My family accompanied my mother, father, grandparents, my older sister and her children, and my kid sister "home" to Sherburne to help clean the house and organize the "stuff;" the trip was ill conceived. I am normally the family workhorse—cleaning, scrubbing, taking on hard tasks—I was not helpful that week. I tried—but one of us always had to keep the kids (ages 4, 4, 3, 2) occupied; another person had to keep grandma occupied. It was not kind to bring her; I sensed this as soon as we got there. Her beautiful mind had atrophied, yet she knew we were in her house of fifty years and something was out of place; she noticed empty spaces on the wall where her fruit plates had nested but could not remember what had been there. And worse, when she was in

one room, we would throw away ancient tins, spices from 1972, and bits of her life, hoping she would not notice the next time she passed through. This did not sit well with me: a person should not have to feel lost in their home of over fifty years. Our appointed drinking hour kept moving up each day. My father soon recognized that he should not have brought her or me. I suppose that bewildered him, but, in truth, this was a far more visceral dismantling of any home or space I have ever lived in.

When I was a kid, we would go to Sherburne each summer and often during holidays. I remember being about seven and talking the long drive from Milwaukee to central New York in one day. I remember seeing the sunrise over Chicago's skyline, playing car games with my sister, and our arrival about eleven in the evening. We drove into the darkened town, up the narrow driveway and Erin and I wondered if anyone was even awake. Of course, the sound of the car alerted them to our presence and the back door opened flooding us with light and warmth. There she was, resplendent in her muumuu, elegant gold house shoes shining with the door propped beckoning us to forget the luggage and take a repast. At this late hour, little girls should be in bed, but there we were eating dainties off toothpicks and deviled eggs and sipping drinks from a cup "just our size." Looking back and knowing my father's patience level more intimately now, I imagine he would have been both proud of her and slightly annoyed thinking she was spoiling us and being silly.

She was silly and wonderful. She was a tender soul who often said that she was so lucky to get to "play house" as her main life's work. My father's only sibling, Toni Manette, was born premature, suffered brain damage and functions at the level of six-year-old child. She lived at home with my grandparents until 2001 when she turned

forty-eight. My Grandma was a full-time at home mother from 1945 to 2001 and loved that. I have been a mostly fulltime mother since 2001 and sometimes I shriek and claw at my eyes Greek-tragedy style. Perhaps Toni struggles occasionally now at her group home because she was doted on and cared for lovingly and perhaps she was spoiled rotten, but I cannot resist thinking of grandma's courage and acceptance of her special daughter. I respect that she looked at Toni as a gift that allowed her to play and be child-like her whole life. Their "stuff-filled" routines: dressing dolls, making table displays, rearranging rooms, or having "fancy" tea were a source of constant delight to both of them.

Every table she set was lovely with just the right accoutrements. Toni's cereal bowl and coffee cup adorned the same spot at the table each night. Each dresser, shelf, and square inch had a display of some sort. My sister and I could wander for hours and not see all of them. There was "stuff" everywhere. This never bothered me as a child; I am sure it bothered my mother who saw the cleaning as a logistical nightmare. The only time the stuff bothered me was when I went with the purpose of cleaning it out. Granted, there was a lot of stuff—there was a scrap of a letter, a length of string, an old picture under every doily, behind every picture, and under every plate, but, while she was living, that was simply where those things belonged.

I have started to categorize people concerning their stuff, which is perhaps not my place. I read an article about a sixty-something couple who voluntarily downsized their family home of thirty years and moved into a two bedroom condo where "their grandchildren still come to dinner" albeit in a smaller room on Sundays. They wanted to spare their children the muck of going through their belongings. I appreciate this idea

from a logistical level, but I admit the author's description of pizza at card tables on Sundays failed to excite me and rang a bit hollow. I will call them the motivated martyrs. They made their choice with others in mind—but they seemed very willing to talk about how gracious that was of them.

Another group might be called cruel over-shredders. They simply do not respect the stuff of others at all. I have a dear friend from college whose disheveled home is, at times, hard to be in. At least she is self-aware and has that poem on the wall about excusing this mess because she values human interaction over tidiness. Last Christmas, while my friend visited family southward, some cruel over-shredders came into their home as a "gift." They engaged dumpsters and removed filth, paperwork, spare clothing, household items, and treasured possessions. When the family returned, they found their home orderly but not their own. Her children wept without teddies and scraps of blankets from birth. My godson lost a baseball cap formally bequeathed him in the will of his deceased Grandpa. The family's horror grew as they discovered all of their glassware, silverware and other like items had been reduced to the number of people in the family: they were left with six forks so dishes would not stack up. The women had taken black markers and left cheerful notes on drawers and bins: "A full toy bin is a happy one" and "Peter's underwear!" The degradation went on and on. In essence, they had been robbed of possessions and dignity all in the name of a "clean sweep." I have no love for the self-righteousness of cruel over-shredders.

My family is in another group that I cannot name easily. My father hoards things. He and my sisters are stackers. They can find anything they need in their stacks—but they are rather unsightly. Perhaps they house a leftover agricultural gene that compels

them to keep paper things as our ancestors may have stored potatoes in the cellar or hay in the loft. I have discovered a connection recently between the stacking, hoarding, and moving. I propose that many frequent movers may also be hoarders. As I readied my belongings for potential sale or gift, I realized they were housed in period boxes that reflected my nomadic young life. I had scribbled “Texas memories” and “New Jersey stuff” atop boxes long unopened. Maybe we all need to know that we lived in these long forgotten places. I do not have a friend from elementary school or middle school or my first two years of high school. I do not carry a picture in my mind or wallet of the many houses that have been my address. I have a few boxes in comparison with my dad and sisters who carry boxes from place to place. These boxes must have come to mean something. I am speculating when I suggest that the boxes validate their existence in those spaces and times.

My mother, like me, has fewer boxes and, I would hazard to guess, less desire to remember. Perhaps we are more half-empty people in some ways. The more boxes means the more places we lost, more friendships dissolved, more gardens left untended. I now want to open my boxes and display what I like and get rid of the rest—perhaps that would be a poor person’s cathartic therapy, but what am I hanging on to when I am keeping the display that bedecked my closet as a senior in high school? The *National Enquirer* headline reading: “Jin, the Fat Boy!” detailing the birth and eating habits of an enormous baby, a weird Far Side® poster with rats and scientists, one of those fake newspapers that reads: “Marni Valerio Sticks Fist in Mouth,” and array of equally odd stickers and snippets comprised the display. If these items are a natural part of me—they will stay that way. If they are a forced reminder, maybe they are taking up space better

devoted to my developing self, and, after reading the list, I cannot help but be grateful that I will never be a teenager again.

The only house and space from my youth I will carry forever is the Sherburne house which was sold this past summer. It can be sold; it can physically belong to someone else's family, but my clearest memories from childhood are there will live on tangibly in my mind and heart rather than in nondescript carton marked "Sherburne memories." In case Grandma is wandering through, I hung her "fruit plates" prominently in my kitchen and purposely unpacked the last Sherburne carton my father foisted on me marked, "Marni's cut glass," last weekend. The single best thing inside the box is a simple glass plate that has an etching of a bird on the front that is earmarked for Libby who loved watching birds with her now-deceased great grandma.

I hope my mom and I find new things to keep and that my dad and sisters can let go of some of their tangible stuff, be happy with the less, and remember how much they already carry. I will have to reside somewhere in the middle of people who give away too much and regret it and those who deny themselves and others small joys like a surprise picture under a doily and the playful disarray of stuff. I will try to live as my grandmother did: thrilled with the things around her. I can reserve and have the will to throw or give away something that fails to bring me joy, but I know I do not have to either.

Wedding Bells

I feel comfortable calling the affair “a red-neck wedding” because the mother of the groom, my husband’s first cousin, referred to it that way. I have to tread carefully that I do not offend any of the hard working, loving people that made this event possible, but, in all honesty, I saw enough fodder for an entire essay collection in that one evening alone. The ceremony was outdoors at 6pm on the first of July. That means the breeze blowing on our folding chairs placed directly in the still-fiery sun felt like catching a breath from my dog’s gullet, and the point of contact between one’s freshly-showered and deodorized back and thighs and the chair was wet with measurable precipitation.

The location for all of the nuptials and sweating was at the Wichita Falls Vineyard. I tend to be slightly snobbish about wine and found it hard to believe they were growing Syrah and Cabernet grapes in a climate that predominately produces cattle, oil, and heat. I felt a small victory when the lady admitted that the “cab” grapes were California grown—but she was quick to note the actual wine was made on the premises. The sheer number of pickups that pulled up for the event was overwhelming. The only similar vehicular concentration I have seen in my urban environs would be the surreal number of SUVs at the new, trendy shopping village in west Omaha. Moreover, the number of pickups with refrigerator units or coolers filled with beer in the “bed” was nearly as high. The poor groom and his entourage had opted for the ultra-formal white coat with a stifling black vest and pants with the highest collared shirts available. They looked lovely and about to faint as a group as we approached. I could not guess why they opted for such formal wear for an outdoor ceremony that a Texas Justice of the Peace, who could have passed for Gus McCray, of *Lonesome Dove* fame, conducted in the brutal

July heat. The bride's dress was equally lovely and well dusted before her amble down the aisle was through. Most of the crowd was dressed nicely enough, a few pairs of pressed wranglers being quite normal at such functions. I do admit to being taken aback by the young man wearing the "Official Heart-Throb" t-shirt sitting squarely in the front row of the many floral and stripy dresses and slacks abounding.

The service itself was largely unreligious with some heavy admonitions of "Are you certain? Is this what you want to do?" from the JP. His heavy, Magnum-like, mustache was so close to their faces, I sure I might have cracked under his glance and probing questions. I was sort of thankful for the tedious counseling process that accompanies all Catholic weddings, because once the day has arrived, the priest pretty much leaves you be—this ceremony combined the counseling with the vows and made me slightly nervous. My sister-in-law, Colleen, Dan, and I played a horrible game preceding the nuptials: find the ignominious sister of the bride who was refusing to raise her own children thus leaving them to for the newly-marrying young couple to raise. It didn't take long. I am not sure if it was the low-cut dress on a skeletal, tattooed frame or the Keystone Light tallboy that she was carrying up to the ceremony that tipped us off more. I just hoped that she and the "Official Heartthrob" would wait to make out until they got to the "Party Barn," the location of the reception.

The barn—it really is a barn is located in Iowa Park, Texas. Thankfully the goats in attendance were kept separate through the marvel of fencing. I can honestly say that I could not smell the goats—the human sweat was enough and the aforementioned sister of the bride's choice to chain smoke in front of a giant fan near the barn door added to the general ambiance. The barn was clean and the decorations sparse—but in evidence. The

bride's smile was the brightest thing in the room, and the enormous cooling fans borrowed from the local airport made conversation somewhat difficult.

Somehow, Dan, Colleen, and I managed to cover an array of topics: the variety of dress in evidence from flimsy negligees to soccer cleats and shin guards, the constant chomping of the head chef (gum or buffet-line fodder, I know not), and a grizzled grandmother's use of a spittoon just outside the barn door. Now, as I think of my judgment and the trend of our conversation, I blush. As I write, I know I have broken our borrowed-from-Vegas-motto for the evening: "What happens at the Party Barn stays at the Party Barn." Perhaps it should have.

We had heard there would be a keg of beer but saw only the line of teas, lemonades, sodas, and waters that filled a long table. We sighed thinking longingly of the "good" Catholic weddings we were used to attending. Finally, I saw the tattooed maiden bearing down hard on an area with two large cups in hand. Bingo! The warmish light beer was free-flowing—at least until the keg floated. I had a beer wondering briefly if I truly wanted to join ranks with "the sister." Evidently, I did.

I wish I could say that I inadvertently walked passed the "food" table noticed the signage and simple kept walking, but I confess, I went back to my table and grabbed Colleen and my camera. The rotund rectangles of about-to-be-uncovered delicacies were labeled "PIMENTO CHEESE," "SPAM," "TUNA," and "CUCUMBER." I loved this. We were in an 85° barn with three options of mayo-based sandwiches—made from "products." I snapped two quick pictures, tried not to make a scene, and was seriously wondering how cucumber had made it into those ranks. Watercress anyone? Later, when Dan was refilling fruit cups for the kids, he overheard the head "chef" complaining that

that Spam was going untouched and that she should have put “HAM” on the sign instead.” Good thinking—I’d just rather be lied to about such things,

It was at that point that Colleen and Dan said the groom’s cake was worth a look. It was. It was a replica of some sort of motor cross racing with cars flipped over in various positions affixed to the chocolate icing. Would wonders never cease? My children approached and wanted something to eat, so I dutifully and nervously joined the buffet line to wait my turn.

As I waited, the dancing began. The first song was a country melody about everlasting love that highlighted the newly married couple. A few people attempted to dance, but once Cody was on the floor—no one dared approach. Cody was a pressed wrangler man with a hat worn low and his arm so tightly around his dance partner’s neck that I feared for her ability to breath. They moved to the two-step in a way that stopped the rest of lip counters from joining. His yoke-like hold on her neck allowed for absolute movability. Dan heard someone poor guy lament, “I cain’t dance like Cody dances.” None of us could.

It took the DJ ten songs to realize that Cody and his noosed partner were the only people dancing. Once he realized, he made the smartest move of the night: he played “YMCA.” All hell broke loose on the dance floor from that point on. “Booty” shaking and whooping became the new style of movement as Cody’s chokehold faded into the distant past. I will admit to dancing—I love to dance. I danced with my kids, Colleen, Dan, my former Church of Christ-divorcee-aunt-by-marriage-who bumped hips with me amiably in her floral dress. I led one Conga-style line and lost count of the number of times that people made two aisles so that one particularly bad move after another could

be displayed more prominently. The best of these came from the groom's particularly Christian elder sister who, as a rule, does not dance in public. She went down the line as often as possible with a careless abandon that was infectious. Her mimicry of Elaine's dancing on Seinfeld was particularly hilarious. She looked so free. My father-in-law asked if she danced much where she lives. She answered that she never danced in public but admitted being a closet dancer since junior high. The crowd eventually tired of rappish, large derriere songs, and I requested something like Frank Sinatra so I could dance with my father-in-law. The DJ played Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get it On." Needless to say, I skipped the "dad" dance on that one.

My reflections remind me of a very funny essay where the essayist, a "fat smoker," looks at the lives of the obese and smoke-filled and finally spots himself among that crowd. I wondered what people in attendance would have thought of my wedding. It did take place in a Catholic church, but my husband, not Catholic, did not participate in the rituals of kneeling, prayer, and communion. I wore a cotton dress with an incongruously ornate veil. The reception was held in my parent's backyard where due to the 100° heat, we were playing pool volleyball and drinking beer not long after noon and perhaps sooner than we should have. While there were no spittoons or Spam in evidence, I would hazard to say that many of the Party Barn attendees would have liked my wedding just fine.

My immediate family lives, financially, on the lower side of the middle class moniker. We make due without luxuries and even, at times, essentials, but it is amusing how I set myself apart from the disreputable group of people in attendance at the Party Barn. I can think of two reasons for this separation: Both of my parents hold doctoral

degrees; I know that advanced degrees are not necessarily typical, but spending enormous amount of time and money in pursuit of more education and opportunity was my reality. I have the ample security that comes from having parents, in-laws, and many friends that are willing and able to be called upon in a moment of crisis. I am not trying to excuse my behavior with these reasons, only to understand my foibles early enough to behave better at my next opportunity.

The second of my reasons, the safety net, I have come to see as the most important distinction. My children would truly never have to go without food. I have many people who would gladly help me. I like to think that is at least partly true because I help others—but it may also be considered a class distinction. My husband and I have opted for low paying, “noble” professions while many of our similarly educated friends and families have taken paths that are more lucrative. I can rely on those “above” me to assist with necessities if needed or even just to pick up the tab for the fancy dinner we might not have otherwise eaten. I see now that I hang out on (and probably, in truth, aspire to) those “higher” paths more often than those paths I witnessed at the Party Barn. I would rather go to the swank Cuban place than sit in a semi-circle around the back of a pickup with a spittoon. Evidentially, I am judgmental. Perhaps my own extensive education, in comparison with most Americans, might have taught me better. Like the smoking essayist, I finally saw myself. My self-sighting came when I was relaxing with a dear friend in Dallas who opened a bottle of wine I could never afford. She will name me as her Matron-of-Honor when the time comes, and I realize I do not possess either the social knowledge or the money to host the event as Texas oil-people are going to expect. I will be the one in the fishbowl.

I awoke that post-wedding Sunday morning and listened to my children, who were patiently tucked into one twin bed in a tiny amount of floor space practically beneath the bed frame where Dan and I were sleeping. My son Noble woke up in a contemplative mood. I did not dare peek at them because I knew they would cease speaking to each other if I did. Therefore, I can only imagine that his hands would be entwined behind his head with his elbows out saying, "Libby, what did you like more, the wedding or the Party Barn?" Libby responded that she preferred the wedding because it was more "flowery." Noble replied, for him, the Party Barn won no contest because of the "great dancing." I lay there trying not to laugh and loving this little intimate pillow talk between my children and quietly agreed with Noble. The dancing had been pretty great.

Reading To Kids

We had recently begun reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder series. I remember loving the books as a child; my children are fascinated with them now and have taken to regularly playing “Ma and Pa” or “Laura and Mary.” I love that they are so imaginative and willing to play with each other; however, my life’s experience and nearly twelve years of higher education forbid me from uttering Wilder’s oft-repeated mantra: “the only good Indian is a dead one.” I also have difficulty with the ubiquitous gun references, though admittedly mostly referring to the killing of edible game. I, who refuse to house water guns, now have children pretending to make bullets to kill large animals or “look out” for “barbarous” Indians. Admittedly, that turns my stomach, and I have taken to altering the words slightly, substituting Native Americans and the like here and there. Where I choose to edit, my husband, Dan, is a word purist. This annoys me, but, truth be told, as soon as Libby is fully reading, she will correct me and wonder if she has been living with Big Brother’s Little Sister all these years.

Anyway—Dan brilliantly found the first two books in the series to take along on CD for our road trip. Honestly, it made for a quieter, less “questiony” (are we *still* on highway 35?) trip than usual. The occasional, “Holy fishhooks Edwards!” punctuated the steadily browning drive to the south. I winced each time I heard some horrible invective I had previously altered and guiltily watched in the rearview mirror to see if Lib had noticed. She had.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Laura Ingalls Wilder. She has provided me ample opportunity to discuss matters of race relations and the second amendment with my children with more clarity and far earlier than I would have ever expected.

Chapter IV

Remembering My Youth In Spite of My Personal Mental Ban

There are times when I wish to replay my youth in sharper definition: how classmates looked, how my various houses smelled, how I got to and from school, or how I felt about (or if I had) special friends. We moved every few years. My stock answer to “why” has always been that my father sought new challenges and loathed the idea of sitting in the same lackluster job and slowly waiting for the person above him to retire or die. To be honest, I know the latter moves were more complicated than that, so it is possible that the early ones were as well; we don’t speak of it much. For me, forgetting people and place associations seemed an easy way to handle the sting of moving. But, now I am curious to see what I *can* remember releasing my stranglehold on my brain’s memory place. I am going to attempt a daring recall of a few memories in chronological/geographical order. My biggest challenge is to test myself to share memories from my own head, not those from past conversations or photographic evidence.

Minnesota 1973-1977

I remember eating a cinnamon red-hot off the floor while baking with somebody. I remember my grandma buying me an ice cream cone as big as my head that was a mass of swirled color looking purplish; I dropped it one minute later and wept and got another.

Colorado 1977-1980

In kindergarten someone wiped a horribly large booger on the carpet and we had to sit in a circle with our backs to the offensive mark and close our eyes tightly until the perpetrator stood up and claimed his/her missing piece. It was not me.

My first grade teacher took me and another girl named Peach, who was Asian and had been badly burned, out to lunch for Mexican food. I ate a giant tostada under an umbrella table on a patio. I can't remember why she and I were singled out; I remember nothing of the conversation; I only remember marveling that the tostada was bigger than my plate.

I once petitioned my elementary school principal to allow first graders to eat seconds on chili and cinnamon roll day. We won the right to consume more, and I pray I am not indirectly responsible for any diabetic or diet related problems that may have cropped up for my classmates.

I remember playing a game called "chicken-fat" with my older sister. The object of the game was to successfully run around the kitchen/dining room/living room circle without getting tagged and without laughing or making noise while my dad worked on his dissertation.

I remember snow so high we could jump off our six-foot gate into the deep, deep snow.

I remember playing church in our closet. Erin wore vestments and crackers and juice represented God. When we weren't being godly, we were trying to watch the drive-in screen from our bedroom window. We once saw half of John Travolta's arm as

he raised the iconic seventies pointing disco finger. On a similar note, we saved enough money for our first record: *The Grease Soundtrack*.

Our dog, Annie, won second prize in a dog costume parade: she wore my shorts, a Rocky Balboa t-shirt, and a little slugger baseball cap. She lost to a Lapsa Apsa dressed as Bo Derek in *Ten*.

I remember an awkward session with a book about how babies are made in rather vivid detail.

Wisconsin 1980-1984

My baby sister was born. My parents lied to us and said it would not happen that night. When we woke up the next morning, our parents were gone and Ted Johnson, our close friend and neighbor and a 6'7 former player from the Cleveland Cavaliers, was sleeping on the couch and his giant feet scared us as we crept down the stairs.

Our group of friends often put on shows in this era. I once was the drummer and wore jeans, only a vest, and a beanie cap and pounded a box with the support beams from the knock-off Barbie dream house, less than dreamy I suppose. Our parents responded with their own show: Rhea and the Pipes loosely based on Gladys Knight and the Pips. My dad wore a revealing shirt while he, Ted, and my mom sang back up for Rhea who was a part time gospel singer.

Once Brekke was born, Erin, our local dramatist, instituted our annual Christmas pageant where I had to be Joseph every time; my beard was itchy and totally unrealistic.

My Grandmother took us all to see Streisand's *Yentl*. Strange viewing choice for children ages 2, 9, and 12. We lived in Milwaukee and she was from a town of 1,200

people, while driving, she kept clutching the middle of the steering wheel and honking at herself without realizing. This was definitely funnier than *Yentl*.

I went to the school nurse with a terrible stomachache and had no fever so she said I was exaggerating and needed to go back to class. I cried hard on the bus and Erin called my mom, a nurse, who palpated my belly on the vinyl tiles of our kitchen floor and determined I needed an appendectomy that day. I got to eat pudding pops in the hospital.

New Jersey 1984-1989

I once had a paper route, and I would try to be up, have bagged all of my papers, and delivered the first half of my route before my older sister removed the sleep from her eyes to start her route. I am still shamefully competitive.

I “loved” the young, skinny boy who lived kitty-corner behind us; he did not reciprocate. Strangely, he didn’t seem to like any girls and no one else liked him, so I kept wondering what was wrong with me. Evidentially, he was a slow bloomer; he had commitment issues in sixth grade; when he bloomed after high school graduation, I heard he was physically abusive to a former friend of mine. Hark! The awkward sixth grade body, demeanor, and general misery have a silver lining: no boyfriend is better than an abusive one!

New Jersey girls had impossibly big hair. Toni Campana’s hair literally blocked all of the background of her yearbook headshot. These girls were called “cheezedawgs.” I never had big hair; Erin did. She had a wave of bangs that stuck straight up in an unearthly fashion.

I remember that a young man “popped a boner” on our school trip to see the New York City Philharmonic. When told this information, I stared blankly at my young

friend—she made a Michael Jacksonesque move, and I said, “Oh! You mean he got an erection?” Remember that evil book about how babies are “properly” made from the late seventies? I was cursed with only knowing anatomically correct monikers.

I remember walking to school through this dense foliage that created a tunnel between the properties in our neighborhood. It was a bit creepy on your own, and I remember walking quickly; I was even grateful when my little sister was with me even if she was not quite five and sporting a side ponytail.

I remember mowing lawns for money—twenty for the neighbors—fifteen for my own. I also weeded the garden. Once, I found a humongous mutant zucchini and drove it on my bike to my closest friend’s house just to make she and her mom laugh. I almost wrecked on Union Avenue—the thing was nearly two feet long.

I was eighth grade class president. I was also voted class clown in eighth grade and got and gave a whipped cream pie to the face to Michael someone who was my male counterpart. Once you have Redi-Whip® rotting and itching in your ears and nose all day—you will never eat it atop a sundae again.

I remember the day my kid sister turned five and brought cupcakes to school to celebrate the occasion. I was in eighth grade to her kindergarten and my parents requested I help her hand them out to the administration, lunch ladies etc. We were on our way to the principal’s office when she dropped the cupcake she brought for Mr. Schmidt, who looked exactly like Daddy Warbucks. She picked it up quickly and walked straight to the water fountain and “washed it.” This is still one of my favorite memories of her earnestness as a child. That was the only year she was in school with either Erin or me ever.

My father, PhD did manual labor after leaving his professional work at NYU; I had to leave my mom and sisters and go with my Dad alone mid year to his new job in Texas so I would make friends.

Texas 1989-1991

I remember my Dad driving me to school in the car that the university let him borrow until my mom could move down. It was bright yellow, three and half beach towels long 1973 Plymouth station wagon that had a disarmed chicken brake and said **“MIDWESTERN STATE ATHLETIC DEPARTMENT”** on the side in green letters. Is it any wonder that, at age 15, I opted to take the bus with the rest of the students from our apartment complex?

I made friends with a nice Catholic girl who told me “You must be like a tiger in bed.” I kicked the blankets a lot and walked and talked in my sleep—is that what she meant at the tender age of fifteen? I found out quickly that people drank and had sex for entertainment in my new town. I picked up the drinking part—lucky for my nonexistent STDs and me; I still had the same “sixth grade effect” on boys in Texas.

I got to pick out the house we moved in with my dad because my mom was not there. It had a cool loft room; Erin got it.

I ate the pickles off my future husband’s cheeseburger and danced with his grandmother long before we dated.

I was voted senior class president and class clown again—even in an entirely new state. My parents were only pleased with half of my winnings, saying, “What is it exactly that you do in class?” I did deface a really bad late sixties era mural which depicted nerdy school children going to and from class and school with words like:

PENCILS, GLUE, SCISSORS, and PENS inserted helter skelter into the picture. I placed a strategic letter I in the word "pens."

I remember meeting Paige, a kindred spirit, after she returned from a year abroad in Switzerland. I was from New Jersey. Most people in our Texas town thought they were about the same place and did not truly trust either of us. Paige and I drove her antique, yellow VW bug and had many adventures together.

I graduated from high school slightly broken hearted, not particularly attitudinally prepared for college, and with the knowledge that my parents were moving again. I would not routinely come back to this Texas place physically or mentally--but, I see when I put my mind to it, I can remember; maybe I just haven't wanted to.

Too Many Choices

I am not a good decision maker; I often find myself paralyzed when trying to decide something. I blame my perpetually self-induced state of bewilderment on my former school district in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin that forced me to teach basic principles of economics to juniors in high school; I rue the day I learned the material and subsequently passed this on to those poor children. The one particularly offensive economic concept that has clung like a barnacle to my mind is the concept of: “opportunity costs.” This concept forces a person to study all aspects of a decision closely, ever aware of alternate paths, potential risks, possible benefits, and to understand just what one gives up (the cost) when any choice is made. For example, my students completed a chart to help them consider many of their post-secondary life options: a public or private university education, community college, vocational training, or taking a minimum wage jobs. Oh the charts—how clean and neat they seemed! Who could deny the seductive power and ease of a chart and numerical combination indicating the “best” choice?

My students loved it. After all, how many people really like making difficult, gut wrenching choices? Tell a sixteen-year-old that a four-year public institution two hours away from home is the practical path he should follow, and he may balk; prove it numerically, and it becomes near gospel, and I got phone calls of approval from parents fearing Harvard-style bills to prove it. We all took it seriously—I actually made my husband fill out the ubiquitous charts with me when we began planning yet another major move after the birth of our daughter. I had no idea how much impact that six-week economics unit would have on my decision-making strategies for years to come.

I immediately began thinking in terms of costs: both lost and gained. Finally, I had a way to explain the downside of amassing credit card debt for superfluous stuff to Dan; I could look logically at the future prospect of our having children and graph how kids might alter our life; I could elucidate this “all-knowing” principle to strengthen the decision making of the people around me (lucky them). All options were chartable.

Belatedly, nearly ten-years into the implementation of my wondrous new system and nearly seven years into parenthood, I have learned some things do not fit (or belong) on a chart. I laugh rather maniacally that I ever thought I could predict what my children have done to me and for me on paper. No chart on the planet is immense enough to encompass the power of my four and five year old. I have realized that always looking at nuance and “flip-sides” and alternate routes leads to fractured decision-making and a depressing awareness of regretting something never possessed in the first place.

A close friend illustrates this point as he suffers paralysis every time he chooses what book to read next because he knows how many other pieces of quality literature he simultaneously shuns. I see his mournful face as the wheels of his mind turn standing in front of an overstuffed bookshelf in near mourning. This impulse habitually clouds anything illuminating he might have gained from the book he finally chose to read.

As far as helping others make their choices, well I am giving that up for lent this year. My frequent elucidations for others are probably annoying at best, intrusive and bleakly illuminating at the worst. What foolish person actually wants to calculate with grueling regularity what they are constantly missing, or worse, have me do it for them?

I can barely resist the siren that is opportunity costs, and I stand before my reading audience stripped bare, exposed for what I really am: addicted to coming up with alternatives.

Don't get me wrong; I am not foolish enough to wish away choices. I am not wishing to live in a totalitarian regime, well excepting the George Bush's, or not have choices like my female counterparts who live in societies that habitually refuse an education to women or believe stoning is the appropriate punishment for being a victim of rape. I simply no longer want to punish myself (or others) for the choices *not* made. I am not sure I even want to know about them anymore. If, like a valve, I could shut off that finely honed part of my mind that immediately sees seventeen unique options to solve one problem, I just might. Look at me—I said “might!” Here I was writing this strong “valve” analogy, and I end with *might*? I cannot even commit when writing about how I might need to stop.

The task of actually altering how I make decisions is now upon me. I must change before my tennis-match style vacillations permanently scar my children. One time I am going to walk into a restaurant and order with authority, not like the usual debacle. “I'll have the Cobb salad, is that good? Is there another salad you like better? No? Not the berry one? Ok—I'll take the Cobb, but will you please take off the bacon, cheese, and onions and put the dressing on the side, oh, and would you see if I could get a side of berries?” I can actually see the word “nutcase” forming on the server's lips. I know this because I was a server for many years. She covers nicely offering some “nuts” to sprinkle atop the salad. I refuse, honoring my steadfast fat principles, and, then, the next thing I see is a depressing vista: plain iceberg lettuce with a few wilted cabbage

shreds thrown in for good measure. Adding insult to injury, the snappy server adds, “Sorry, the berries are all spoken for and would have cost you \$3.00 more anyway, enjoy your dinner and come back anytime you want to pay \$8.99 for \$.49 cents worth of lettuce.”

Now, under the auspices of my new plan, you know simply choosing like other people, I would just order the berry salad that I obviously wanted, but somehow moved me to guilt. Was it the extra fifty cents? Did consuming a berry salad count as some sort of food group violation? The berries seem indulgent—sort of like ordering a cinnamon roll salad. Perhaps self-indulgence should lead the charge in my new decision making plan—I feel guilty for even writing that sentence. This is never going to work.

Runner's Cheeks

I am a runner. I like the fact that the equipment is minimal: you need a pair of shoes, and, according to a website run by a two-first name man, “Barefoot” Ken Bob, even those are optional. There are lines of clothing and accessories to support the industry of running, but they are superfluous. A runner has to be clad in something—just enough to avoid breaking any indecent exposure laws. The fastest women racers essentially wear a bikini; their washboard stomachs so tightly muscled that they can pin their racing numbers directly to their skin without pain. When I started entering races, I would pick some poor, unsuspecting young girl with a floppy, blonde ponytail and a cute outfit and make it my goal to beat her. I often exhibit such mature behavior as this, especially when I am wearing a sweatband, shorts from 1982 and my dad’s old t-shirt. It is only thanks to my mother-in-law that I have any stylish clothes devoted to exercise. She realized that I was getting more serious about running, and I’m sure my outfits were a tad embarrassing to her golf-course living, sun-drenched Florida neighbors. Now, she keeps me outfitted in snazzy spandex pants suits that have racing strips, and she even got me an iPod Shuffle®, so I look extra cool with the tell-tale white “status” earphones.

Runners come in all shapes and sizes and have a variety of goals. When I started going to competitive races, I was amazed to look around me (and what else is there to do?) and see the multitude of body types: short, wide, tall, lean, beer bellied, absolutely scrawny, old, young, in shape and out of shape. A classical runner’s body is quite lean. Serious, heavy mileage runners often look emaciated in the cheeks, neck, and hips. They tend to be lean because they often burn more calories than they consume. I heard an NPR interview with an “extreme” runner who puts his children to bed each Friday night, kisses

his wife on the cheek, and then takes off for a 75-mile jaunt. A pizza deliveryman meets this runner on an appointed corner each weekend near midnight and this guy snacks an entire pizza as he runs along. His wife and kids drive and pick him up each Saturday morning. Another NPR interview was devoted to a young lawyer who was running one marathon per week for an entire year. He had done several and described his schedule as “hectic.” I guess. He lawyers all week, catches a plane to some random city, eats a pasta dinner, runs 26.2 miles, catches a plane home, and gets back to start tabulating his billable hours on Monday morning by nine. I believe he was doing it for charity rather than a Guinness world record but, still, it seems a bit much.

I am not sure if oddly-motivated lawyer guy is worse than the pony-tailed, beer gut guy bursting from a taut tank top that read “50 States Marathoner.” This is the sort of man that you might expect at the bowling alley or bending over in an unsightly manner as he tends to your plumbing. He carbo-loads the night before, but on beer rather than pasta. That special stale beer scent clings to his form as he passes me. Then I think, depressed, “He’s passing me.” There are quite large groups of these sorts of runners at the races I have been to. They don’t follow famous runner, Hal Higdon’s, marathon-training schedule religiously for eighteen weeks prior to each race. I am convinced they only run on marathon day several times a year—clinging to the vestiges of being in just enough shape to propel them to the finish line and to their celebratory beer. They see the country, check out a variety of pubs nationwide, and get a tank top for their efforts. They really have run a marathon in every state; this also means that this pony tailed, clogged arteries, beer swilling, tank top wearing, apple-bellied guy is rich. Ain’t life grand?

Many beer-laden runners and seriously old men have passed me, but I pride myself on routinely passing seventy-year-old women. My husband and friends were not so lucky at the Lincoln Half Marathon in 2005 when they met one such lady. Keri, a Houston native and old friend from high school who had never been a runner. We rekindled our friendship over email a few years ago. I told her about my running, and she got motivated and went from zero mileage to running a half marathon in a matter of months. Her pace was more like Dan's and our good friend, Jeff. So, to make her feel welcome, they sandwiched her in between them and subjected her to their abysmally long assessment of Jon Krakauer's, Under the Banner of Heaven, and the finer points of Macbeth, sex and power became the theme of the day. Poor Keri. Meanwhile, the threesome spotted a seventy-year-old woman wearing a Laura Ingalls Wilder style sunbonnet, and, thus, dubbed her, "Bonnet Lady." Well, Jeff and Dan made it their duty to beat her to the finish. She would creep ahead of them, and, fortunately for the "men" the poor lady was prone to frequent bathroom stops where they could take the lead. Keri dropped back in disgust, hoping the literature soaked, hyper competitive (with the elderly) pair would let her suffer in peace for the remainder of the run. Forced to choose between Keri and the Bonnet, they pushed on determined to prove their manhood. They laughed raucously as they came first to the fork in the course that signaled the half marathon finish and the next leg for the full marathoners, and, then, they watched breathless and dumbfounded as Bonnet Lady turned to complete her next thirteen miles. Like I said, when it comes to running, you can't judge a Laura Ingalls Wilder book by its cover.

After the Lincoln Half, I had big plans. I would complete my first marathon in my adoptive home city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The course is lovely winding along my old, dear friend, Lake Michigan that reflects the gorgeous fall foliage each year in early October. I was training hard, glowing from my quickening pace and newly emaciated cheeks when I was sidelined with a hip injury. I could swim, roller blade, and bike, but I could not run without pain. My entry fee and lake visions were lost.

After a year of “hip-rest” I am training hard again, but not as hard as last time. When I was newly losing weight and beginning running, I ran for fast times. My head swells with pride when I think back to shaving a full seven minutes off my second half-marathon time. Both times, I beat my goal of completing the course in less than two hours. I also competed in a hilly 5K race running just under seven minute miles and coming in fourth place in my age group. That is fast for a newer runner, and my age group is tough because women often hit their running peaks in their thirties. I have alluded to the fact that I am a bit competitive, which is a gross understatement. But, now as I train, I am following directions more closely, stretching more, and I am not worried about time. Well, at least the first two are true. I still think and worry about time, but I have been better about controlling my impulses to push myself too hard.

I plan to run my first marathon, the full 26.2 miles on January 14, 2007 in sunny, flat Houston, Texas. The weather channel predicts a range of temperatures from 49-65 degrees Fahrenheit. I just got a bit ill when I think about the smog-choked run I will face in metropolitan Houston, but at least it's flat. I never knew that Omaha was more akin to San Francisco than other cities on the Great Plains until I started training here. I will

probably run a full minute faster per mile on a flat course. Beware pony tailed Texas beauties!

My real goal is completion in January. I hated sitting out for a year. I'd be a liar if I didn't say I want to run the race in less than four hours, but so far in my training, I am consistently running ten-minute miles in spite of hills, bronchitis, and rather chilly early morning temperatures.

When people ask me why I even want to run a marathon, I don't always know how to respond. I suppose, to them, I look more like the freakish lawyer or the pizza guy than I do a "normal" person. I want to run full marathon once in my life, after that we will see. I have a bit of an addictive personality, so I could turn into a "fifty-stater," but, more than likely, I put this notch in my life belt and keep running more modest mileages. 10K races are fun, half-marathons don't take an inordinate amount of training—but running one feels like an accomplishment. It is a good excuse to see a new city and meet up with fellow runners to support various charitable causes, and, let's face it, running keeps my face looking oh so svelte.

A Wife, A Mother, A Child, and Me

I am caught dramatically in multiple roles, as, I suppose, many women are. My mother once described the women of her generation of baby boomers as being uncomfortably sandwiched between Betty Crocker and Betty Friedan; she is both June Cleaver and CEO. She is a fence rider; one who is able to make a pie from scratch but no longer will on principle. The principle, at times, becomes muddied, especially if one craves a delicious pie and somehow feels marginalized making one. Women are often portrayed as “weaker” or mistaken for pampered, bon-bon eating, stylishly manicured “shopaholics.” Maybe somewhere really wealthy women only sip mint juleps, but I have yet to become acquainted with such a woman.

I also cannot realistically comment on the life of early cave women, but I am certain of one thing: they had to work hard, as most of us do. I am a bit more familiar with the lives and record of American women. Historically, as this nation began, a grown woman’s first duties were her “wifely” duties: a healthy dose of obedience, sex on demand, childbearing for labor purposes, and special attentiveness to her husband’s needs. Rural American women were known as “farmwives,” never farmers themselves, though their duties were broad and encompassed production of many saleable farm goods like tending poultry, gathering eggs, skimming cream, making cheese, and maintaining vegetable gardens, often the very efforts that supported a family struck by hardship or natural disasters. As America shifted from a predominantly farming nation to a more industrialized nation, people moved to more urban and, ultimately, suburban areas and became more commonly known as “housewives.” That is perhaps one of the shortest descriptions of one of America’s most colossal and profound shifts as a collective nation.

What did housewives do in comparison? They often retained the obedience and sexual roles and certainly maintained the home, cooked, cleaned, laundered, and had “perimeter” duties: flowers beds, vegetable patches. These women under either moniker also often had the duty of educating their children and overseeing their chores and serving their men and communities. I have studied these groups of women, but women of my generation do not truly belong to these formerly more male-centered groups.

Presently, even though women still cater and, at times, defer to men, we are no longer called “housewives;” we are the minions known as “at-home-moms” and are, more often, child-centered. The key word change in the attitudes and duties is the shift from wife to mother. Society now places a greater emphasis on my role as a mother and, in turn, I have done the same thing, and I have just begun to recognize this profundity.

I am more married to my children than I am to my husband. Not in any Greek tragedian way, but, simply put, vows of sickness and health and constant love are easier to deal with and attend to with children. My impulse to provide stability and care for them feels biological in nature. I do not mean to imply that a farmwife living in 1900 loved her children less than I do; I simply offer that the former hierarchy and her attention to vital daily tasks were more pressing and consuming than my own. I often marvel at my own capacity for violent thought when I see one of my children in danger from a stray dog, a mean kid on a playground, or a driver that take unnecessary risks near my progeny.

I am more aware of and slave to my motherly responsibilities than any other set in my life: teacher, student, writer, wife, daughter, or friend. These attentions become nearly all-consuming, automated, and top my list of priorities. I arrange my own

schedule rather brutally, so I never see one of my children with an expression of “I have been forgotten” on their little faces. We mothers ferry and fetch, serve as a cook, plaything, and entertainer. I dote and cuddle them. Even after a day that stretches from sunrise to sunset with little reprieve from the clamor, roughhousing, arguing, and deep disappointments that make up the minutes of a child’s day, I always mean my kiss goodnight; I always feel peaceful when I see them asleep.

To have a child is to truly understand unconditional love, and I have discovered that understanding and feeling and catering to the special kind of love found in parent child relationships has the potential to undermine the different kind of love found in adult relationships. I have realized I hug and kiss my children more easily than I ever do Dan. That is unsettling. I came from a demonstrative family; he did not. I truly do not celebrate this inequity; I just realize its existence and the tinge of sadness that accompanies such thoughts. What would my “wife-life” feel like if I were as free and forgiving with my husband as I am with my children? That question and how a different, refreshed attitude might affect my relationship with my husband, a good person, deserve continued exploration.

Early in our marriage, Dan and I read the hysterically titled book, Sex Starts in the Kitchen. Before you get carried away thinking about bear rugs on kitchen floors, think again. The author’s hypothesis was quite simple: work as a team and you will have a healthy and enjoyable sex life. His favorite example had to do with dishes. If a husband would only help his wife in the kitchen after dinner (rather than recline with remote in hand) then towel snapping and water fights will be the entrée for further fun later in the evening. We were so young when we read that. It seemed silly, but marriage is much

harder than it looks. I observe marriages: my own, my parents, my sister's, my friends all functioning quirkily. Based on deep conversations with many women friends navigating love relationships, I can attest to very little exploration of real intimate questions, the surface matters often overwhelm and strain conversational time before the deeper issues get touched. My mother once told my elder sister and I (with a good-naturedly turned up nose) that she would never have married *our* husbands. That was a weird thought but does point out that no one else belongs or can fit inside another person's marriage.

The most common mantra for a healthy marriage advises people to consistently create alone time for you and your spouse. It becomes way too easy to pass on our needs. Dan and I used to walk every night, rain or snow or shine, when we lived near the lakeshore in Milwaukee. Those moments of talk without diversion were peaceful and productive. Now, when walking, the dog bowls me over once or twice, I only have to carry Noble part of the way, repeatedly tie shoes, carry that humiliating bag of poop, and never finish a coherent thought. So, we tried putting the kids to bed and then walking the same block repeatedly and checking on the children every few minutes. The dog and the poop still present and accounted for. The lack of scenery change feels limiting and annoying to both of us; that time has to be a consideration sullies a once wonderful respite from daily life. But, I will try to walk our set path more enthusiastically next time.

When adult love relationships become diluted or relegated to an inferior status beneath children, careers, or the plethora of other diversions, I wonder how often people recognize the magnitude of what has happened. If they are self-aware enough to notice

the alteration, I suppose people have the obvious choice to redouble their efforts or stop them entirely. I often wonder if the divorce rate in this country reflects disengagement more often than it does extreme cases of mental, physical, sexual, or substance abuse.

Navigating the adult world is difficult, and I miss words like “free” and “forgiving” and “peaceful” that I associated with motherhood. Sadly, these are not words I would use to describe other roles I perceive in my life. My role as child has increased in complexity tremendously this past year. When I was little, I understood the power dynamic between my parents and myself, I did not always adhere to it; but I understood my intended role. Giving birth to a new generation and burying the eldest redefines those previously understood boundaries. My parents are troubled with the amount of responsibility they feel for the young families my sisters and I have begun, the risky choices my little sister sometimes makes, and for their remaining elderly parents. The old adage about burying your own child retains top ranking as the most horrifying job a parent can ever do, but, a close second, might be the process of a child parenting his/her parents, from managing their money to assisting in the bathroom to watching the atrophy of a courageous mind.

And let me be clear: my parents are parenting my grandparents, but I also see me beginning the process of *trying* to parent my own parents. Granted, the latter is far subtler than the former. My grandfather lives in my parent’s home and eats their food and is a constant reminder of age and the death of my paternal grandmother last spring. I find myself trying to devise coping strategies for my parents to deal with their new reality. I try to make them hopeful and reorder their living space and cope with changes just as they once attempted to steward me through adolescence. I feel about as helpful to

them now as they did to me then. It seems that mid-life is no different than any other stage in terms of “knowing it all.” The funny thing is, I am better equipped in my present life to accommodate the needs of additional person “who is underfoot all the time.” That is right where my children keep themselves. I already cook all the time and never have fun evening plans to give up (that do not include kids or happen post-bedtime) because quality babysitters are hard to find and harder to pay. My main life’s work right now is being a caretaker; my parents had an empty nest, a bank account, and wholly different priorities—not bad ones, simply different and even deserved ones as they approach retirement.

I wish our present society and gender roles allowed for a more placid and generous transition to all stages of life. Our society is so strange. We have licenses for driving and fishing but not for parenting, retirement, or getting truly old. Someone needs to start being a little more forthcoming with information for all of us—trial by fire is tiresome and hard to navigate. An openness to the likely possibility that we will be tending to the perfunctory biological needs of aging parents just as they changed our diapers when we were little needs to be discussed with dignity at some early point; but, so far, is woefully ignored. The reality of this phenomenon coincides with longer life expectancies and great strides in medical technology but, plainly put, is uncomfortable to watch.

And I had to watch my grandmother die. I accept this. She was old and sick, but she was mine. I am 33 years old and had never lost anyone so close to me until the fourth of May this year. That day, and the few previous, watching was not too hard; I read the hospice pamphlet studiously. I knew to watch for mottling and discoloration on her

extremities. I knew she would get colder. I knew her neck would tilt back and her mouth would form that unnatural drawn, tight-lipped “oh” that I had seen on other faces as I walked the halls of the Hospice House to her room. I knew to expect the sounds of the “death rattle.”

The weeks and month preceding her death were much more difficult to watch and participate in. I had to face that, though I had and valued my own adult opinion, families never truly become democratic no matter how old the child. I wanted my grandmother to come live and die at my house. My parents moved her first to their home, then to a sad, smelly, poorly run place, and finally to the Hospice House. Their decision was not made lightly, but the resulting tension was hardly bearable. Truly doubting the decision making of my parents was new to me, and my insolence and lack of respect for their decision was equally as frustrating to them. My “in-town” sister, parents, and I discussed this fundamental breach in our lifetime of familial communication just once, sitting at black wrought iron table in blinding sunshine on the grounds of the first home where they moved my grandma. We all wore sunglasses, which was bullshit because none of was used to speaking to others behind glass. The conversation didn’t go very well, and I know in my heart that this fundamental disagreement and fundamental lack of true respect for one another’s ideas and opinions has colored every familial interaction since.

A prime example is the stress that surrounds my grandfather living with my parents. An eighty-eight year old man who has been a primary provider since age eight should never feel worthless and burdensome. I wish my parents could not feel stifled and listless as though accommodating the person that gave my father life signifies the end of their life and marriage. I want to scream, “This too shall pass, and, when it does, you will

be both motherless and *fatherless* in this lonely world!” I don’t want to be parentless either because of death or wracking decisions. I do want my grandfather to feel the love I know my parents feel for him more than he feels their fear of aging themselves or the annoyance that becomes obvious as they accommodate his every need. I sit here at the computer afraid for my parents to ever see this, but also wanting to live harmoniously again with greater peace among the generations and clear expectations for what is to come.

Years ago, I was not a good daughter, and, for many years until last spring, I tried to be so good. I have been doing dishes and raking leaves and making peace in conflicts as penance for nearly ten years. By my family’s standards, I was wild in my youth; the only thing I celebrate with my best friend from my youth is our drawing the line at hard drugs, though, if I am honest with myself, I am grateful those substances were never offered to me to test my paper-thin resolve. I remember many crude things happening to us that, even now, I will not record.

I am thankful that I try to be a good, patient daughter and have learned from the rather persistent mistakes of my youth. How I will weather the challenges I face with my own parents remains to be seen; I hope my memory of the last year stays vivid and strengthens my ability to age and care for my own parents and in-laws with poise and serenity.

As for my final role, the “me” of the title, I simply cannot isolate this role as easily as I have the others. Two powerful memories come to mind when I consider myself. Once, I was sitting in a Waffle House® in Dallas with my mother. I was in college and we were having an unusually frank discussion. I remember her lamenting not

knowing where to be buried because of our frequent moves and subsequent lack of roots. She suggested, rather grimly, that she be dismembered and small pieces of her body buried in the many places she'd been. I was probably 18; she was 46. The other memory comes from Mary, a teaching and parenting mentor. Mary once compared her life to a totem pole. Mary envisioned her dog, Biscuit, firmly at the bottom. Her husband, extended family, job, and mortgage were all neatly chiseled near the top where her three children reigned. On her own totem pole, Mary was barely a chunk of tree above her dog, but, by God, she could be above something! She did not mistreat the dog—but a palpable sense of vengeance asserted itself at times. Biscuit got the lowest brand of generic dog food Mary could find; Biscuit did not get any of her tenderness.

I use these two illustrations to begin to share how similarly I have sometimes come to feel to these two accomplished women I respect. I realize I run the risk of sounding self-absorbed or self-pitying or annoying with this section of the essay; however, I also find it interesting that this is the only section I have apologized for, a eureka moment to be sure. I am, by far, the most uncertain in this role. If I was a canvas—this part might feel blank. That might surprise some people who see me as confident or self-assured. When I try to see myself as others see me—I get caught up in my other roles. It's not that I think it is necessary to define oneself, only troublesome that I cannot. When I think back to what my mother and Mary shared about themselves as adult women navigating many roles, I know that I am not alone. We have the luxury in this nation to be introspective and consider our existential selves, I do not typically take the time, but on the night of December 15th, 2005, I begin taking stock of myself.

I am sure that my ability to pinpoint the date seems odd, but the fifteenth was the night of the U2 concert in Omaha. I went in the company of many people. I led an eclectic group of eight people to their seats: my mother, sister, some Catholic Church friends, and some teenage cousins who had just eaten so much of the food I had prepared prior that I went without.

I was first supposed to see U2 in 1987 for the *Joshua Tree* tour. A friend asked me and then got angry with me and consequently gave my ticket to someone else. Oh the woes of seventh grade politics still haunt me. To say the least, my visit with the band was long overdue. The experience that night was surreal. I have been to many concerts but when I think of some the artists I have seen routinely in the past several years: Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson, the Jayhawks—I realized the passion for these musicians belongs to my husband; I simply tagged along good-naturedly. U2 was different. I had a personal memories stretching from age 12 to the present like breathlessly running home with Tricia Weckenman from a night of New Year's Eve babysitting just before midnight to see if "With or Without You" would be the video of the year; or doing the "family dance," a montage of moves Libby, Noble, Dan and I often perform, to the recently released "Vertigo." The music awakened me, energized me, and seemingly resurrected a part of me I suspected no longer that existed.

I cannot explain who this person was, but I do know she felt free of responsibilities. Even though my mother was present—I did not alter my reaction to the music in any way. My husband was there, but I did not dance for or with him. My young cousins and church friends were there—but I did not consider their feelings as I

shouted and danced and frolicked and felt euphoric. I knew my babies were safe with their grandpa, and I was not concerned. I felt deeply for myself.

This probably sounds inane—but I cannot explain it better than to try to identify some of the powerful feelings I have had in the past six years: gently touching newborn Libby's neck and weeping that she was my best "arts and craft project ever," finding a pea size lump at the base of Noble's throat and feeling it and my anxiety grow larger until surgery proved it to be benign, holding my grandfather after a swell of memory of his late wife took his breath and balance, and fiercely advocating to get my grandmother out of a home not good enough for her beauty as a person.

What those memories have in common is their focus on others, even as I reread the list; I am shamed that feelings a concert evoked even come near that list. But shamed or not, I am trying to understand that evening and other events that followed: an increased tendency and desire to go out, a spur-of-the-moment trip to see my best friend alone for *three* days, and a recognition that I like feeling free and the guilty feeling that accompanies that knowledge. I think I accepted that marriage and family responsibilities meant small deaths to parts of me outside of being a daughter, a mother, and a wife. That thought is heartrending and, upon reflection, I know that the notion has validity, but it does not have to bind me and not being bound remains challenging.

As I matured and became a "better" daughter, I see that I have maybe said yes when no was more appropriate; I see that I sometimes made peace, when rebellion and change were more in order, I stopped pushing all together until last spring when my grandmother was dying and my doing so has altered our family landscape, for better or worse remains to be seen.

All along, I thought I was growing smarter; after all, I have been in graduate school for five years. But, regardless of the many historical and literary lessons, I think self-subjugation is precisely what I have accomplished. I have acted in what I felt was the most responsible appropriate fashion for each of my roles with little regard for my own impulses or past.

For good or bad, my children still represent my greatest present responsibility, so I must go forward teaching them to live a quality life. I suppose the best way to teach that lesson is to live more fully as they watch. Modeling far surpasses verbiage in terms of effectiveness. I have to let that fun, concert-going kid have some say in the decisions I make. Assuredly, I will continue making mistakes, but perhaps they can be made with more freedom and less weight attached; perhaps they can be made with appropriate rebellion rather than false peace; perhaps they can better reflect my whole image.