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THE EMPTY PAGE

By Julia Dover

An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Mass Communications with an Emphasis on Writing.

2004

This work is the combination of several different pieces harvested from a cluster in my graduate program that focused on writing the memoir.

Memoir writing, for those who may be unfamiliar with it, is the art of dissecting memories into pictures, textures, aromas, melodies and flavors, then reconstructing them into some coherent form so as the reader may feel as if she has lived the experience herself. This is ultimately the goal of the memoir, but I do not believe it is the purpose of writing it in the first place.

The purpose of the memoir is *reflection*. The writing of the memoir is the very personal and private act of examining one's own actions, personality, blunders and triumphs. It is the task of explaining to yourself how and why you are the way you are.

And that is the easy part.

The hard part is realizing that at times you are not a very good person at all. To so closely inspect your own actions, your own *flaws*, is humbling at best, embarrassing at worst. Writing your memoirs makes you yearn for a real-life time machine so that you may go back and slap yourself in the face, or at the very least give yourself a good shake and a stern lecture.

However much cringing you do in the process of writing your memoirs, there are happy moments, too. Revisiting simple, joyful times, for one. Visiting with loved ones who are long gone for another, and having the chance to tell the world how great they were. Quite a tribute, in its own way.

The memoir is the writing of your history, however biased it may be. And while it may not be an easy history to write, if you are honest with yourself, it will be worthwhile.

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDATES

THE EMPTY PAGE

By Julia Dover

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Lindenwood University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
of Master of Arts in Mass Communications with an Emphasis on Writing.

2004

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY:

Professor Michael Castro,
Chairperson and Advisor

Adjunct Assistant Professor Harry Jackson

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my mother. Without her, it would not exist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my father for his many hours of listening and delicate council, in this and any other endeavors I have ever taken on.

I would also like to thank Harry Jackson. You have been an inspiration to me, and you made me believe that I could be a writer, even when I wasn't so sure. Thank you for your always constructive criticism.

And last but not least, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Michael Castro. Thanks so much for your quiet advice and encouragement throughout the years.

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Introduction

I was born naked.

I don't mean in the sense that I wasn't wearing any clothes. We were all born like that. I mean naked in the sense that I was a blank page: an empty, white space for family and friends to scrawl their will and their ideas upon. I was nothing that became something. No one who became someone.

Some of the writer's of my story wrote lovingly and sweetly upon my blank space, using their hearts and their good intentions. Others wrote upon my pages without ever knowing that they were doing so. And while the story began with other people's writing, I eventually took the pen in my own hand and began to make the story mine.

Put a pen in the hand of a young, inexperienced writer and she's going to make some mistakes: spelling errors, comma splices, misuse of grammar and tense. But a young writer will eventually become the editor of her own work, going back through what she has written and seeing that the rhythm falters, that her characters are thin and two dimensional, that her dialog is boring and pointless, that parts of the

story that are plainly told would be better off to be shown. Through this, the young writer will learn from her mistakes.

This is where my metaphor ends, because the young writer can go back through her story and change it. She can make her characters believable and interesting, she can interchange words and phrases to find her rhythm. I, on the other hand, cannot go back and change my past, no matter how much I might want to.

But like the young writer, I can learn from my mistakes and not make them in the future. In order to do that, I must thoroughly examine what I have done wrong, and I must own up to it. I have to experience that terrible cringing feeling I get in my chest when I know I have royally screwed up and made myself look like a total ass.

Then I have to forgive others and myself, and let it go. I have to accept that the past is written in stone and understand that it has made me who I am today.

A twenty-four year old girl can only keep so much bottled up for so long.

Not that I've had a horrible life, because I haven't. My life has been wonderful so far. But I define myself by the people who love me and by the people I love that may not love me back.

My goal in life is to be a writer. I love fiction, and I even have a few different kinds of stories started. But my mind would not let me write any of them until I had told the story of myself.

Consider it a kind of exorcism, if you will. Maybe the stories that I tell you here will free my soul to tell the ones that really thrill me.

Few will ever read this. Those that do may not like it. But through this I have given some of my demons away, and I do not want them back.

Perhaps now I will be free to write the rest of my blank pages the way I feel they should be written.

Or at least, only let people write on my pages who are truly worthy.

Daddy

I was six years old when it happened. The trauma gave me nightmares for months afterwards. The event also began a distinct pattern in my life.

My mother and father dragged me to brunch on Sunday mornings once a month to meet with our extended family for years. This particular Sunday morning our excursion was to a restaurant called Noah's Ark.

Noah's Ark was shaped like a huge boat made out of wood. Giant statues of all of God's animals surrounded the restaurant. Near the entrance to the restaurant was a shallow pool behind ropes. In the center of this pool a massive mechanical hippopotamus opened and closed its huge mouth, exposing a flat pink tongue and four round white teeth. Passersby aimed pennies at his open mouth, hoping that if God's hippo swallowed them, their wishes would come true.

The underarms of my purple sundress were sweaty as I stood next to my nine year old niece, Jeni, behind the ropes of the wishing well. My father dug into the pockets of his khakis for pennies. I

could smell pool-smell, which I would now say was chlorine, as I watched him expectantly.

“Ya got some pennies, Daddy?”

He didn’t answer me, only dug further into his pockets. The fierce sun glared off of his black-rimmed glasses and gave a red tint to his dark brown hair. I noticed that he was taller than anyone else around. His top lip disappeared under his thick mustache as he concentrated on the change jingling in his pocket.

Finally he pulled his hand from his pocket. He opened his hand palm up to Jeni and me. Our small fingers sifted through the quarters, nickels and dimes, only shoving the pennies into our tight fists.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

“I’ll go first,” Jeni announced. I stuck out my lower lip and waited while she swung her arm back and sailed the penny across the ropes. The penny bounced off the hippo’s nose with a “ting!”

“My turn!” I waited for the hippo to open his mouth, swung my arm and released my penny over the rope. My penny landed in the water with a “thunk!” miserably short of the hippo.

“Ha Ha,” Jeni mocked. She took another penny, stood on the concrete side of the pool, leaned into the rope, and threw. Her penny landed in the middle of the hippo’s open mouth and stayed there.

Never one to be outdone, I, too, stepped onto the edge of the pool. “I’m so little,” I thought. “I still can’t reach far enough.” I looked around. Mommy and Daddy were talking to my aunt and uncle. I lifted my sandaled foot and put it over the rope. Holding on, I pulled my other leg over. When I had my balance, I let go of the prickly brown rope. Just as before, I waited for the hippo to fully open his mouth. Then I swung my arm, leaned forward...

Splash! Panic and fear like I had never known! Not only was I going to drown, that hippo was going to eat me!

I flailed my arms and legs, trying to get away. My long hair hung over my face in a sopping curtain. I couldn’t see! *Where is the hippo? Which way is away?*

I felt something grasp my arm. *Oh no! The hippo’s got me! Help me!*

Wait! I was being lifted from the water! I was hanging sideways. I saw glimpses of sunlight through my hair.

I felt water squish from the soles of my sandals as the ground was put under my feet once more. I flopped my hair out of my face with my forearm. Someone big and warm and comforting was kneeling in front of me. It was my daddy. My daddy saved me!

“You okay?”

“Yeah,” I whined. My relief was short lived once I realized the extent of my situation. “But now I’m all wet. I can’t eat all wet!”

Daddy pulled his black eyebrows together over his glasses. Then he stood up, pulled the tail of his yellow polo shirt from the waistband of his pants, and tugged it over his head, exposing a white undershirt. He handed the polo shirt to my mother.

“She can wear this as a dress.”

As well as I can remember, this is the first episode in a long list of times where my dad has saved my life.

I was a curious child, and I was always getting myself into some situation that I couldn’t get myself out of. But my dad could get me out of them.

On more than one occasion I have slipped into the deep end of a swimming pool, and on more than one occasion my daddy would

jump in with shoes, glasses, money and all to save me from drowning.

These experiences prompted my mother to get me swimming lessons.

I would go to stay the night at friend's houses, and always around ten or eleven o'clock, my stomach would start to feel nervous and icky. So I would call my daddy, and he would come pick me up. On the way home he would never ask me why I had decided not to stay.

.....

One night when I was twelve, my dad dropped my friend Anna and me off at the skating rink.

Not that we ever roller-skated. We ran around the place in our sock feet and flirted with boys. It was the only real social event for a bunch of middle school kids on a Friday night.

Let me make it clear that twelve-year-old girls can be unbearably cruel. Anna and I were definitely not the "cool" girls, which meant that we were the picked-on girls. And that night, we were picked on.

Twelve years has clouded my memory of that night, but I think the situation started when either Anna or I had flirted with one of the

popular girls' boyfriends. And when you had to deal with one of the popular girls, you had to deal with ALL of the popular girls.

What I do remember is a crowd of girls surrounding the two of us, and lots of yelling and screaming. One girl said, "We're gonna kick your asses!" I knew she meant it.

Anna and I were scared. We stood back to back in the middle of the circle, while girls in designer jeans and Adidas jackets sneered and spit on us. We knew that as soon as they made their move, we were goners.

Just about that time the skating rink security guard cut through the circle, yelling "break it up, break it up!" The girls scattered like leaves. Anna and I stood there, back to back. We both had tears sitting just above our lower eyelids.

"What's going on here?" The security guard looked at Anna, then at me.

"Nothing," we said in unison.

"Didn't look like nothing to me," he said. He was skinny, and he had red hair.

I looked at my feet. "They wanted to beat us up," I told him.

The security guard looked at the bulky watch on his thin wrist.

“You girls got someone coming to pick you up?”

“My dad,” I replied.

“Come on,” he said. “I’ll wait with you out front.”

Anna and I stood outside of the skating rink with the security guard. As the other girls passed us to get into their mother’s cars, they looked at us and wrinkled their noses. One girl even stuck her middle finger up at us. My heart raced, and I worried about what would happen at school on Monday. Would they corner us there and finish what they started?

When my dad’s Oldsmobile pulled up, the security guard walked Anna and me to the car. He walked over to the driver’s side window. Once we were in the car, my dad rolled down his window.

“What’s going on?” He asked the security guard.

“Well,” he started. “These ladies were being threatened by several other girls. It looked like these two were about to have a fight on their hands. I broke it up before anything happened, but I thought I should stay with them until you got here.”

“Thanks,” my dad said. “I appreciate it.”

The next day, my father tried to teach me to fight.

“If they grab you from behind, stomp on their instep as hard as you can. That should make them let go of you.”

We stood in our living room, face to face. I was embarrassed to be having this conversation with my dad, but I was more scared to go back to school.

I listened intently to what he was telling me. My dad knew a little bit about being picked on. While my father was by no means a violent man, I knew that he knew something about fighting.

My dad was born a dirt poor white kid in Arkansas with too many brothers and sisters coming right behind him. Back then if that didn't get you picked on, nothing would.

I'm sure it got worse for him when his family moved to the south side of Chicago. He was still a dirt poor white kid from Arkansas, but being in Chicago made things that much worse.

My dad had to learn to fight. It was that or be pummeled every day of his young life.

I'm sure he learned a little more about fighting when he joined the Navy at seventeen. His ship cruised some parallel or another during the Vietnam War, but they never saw any action. But you

don't leave the Navy without learning something about defending yourself.

After he left the Navy, he joined his mom, stepfather and brothers and sisters in St. Louis. He had a good job with Emerson Electric and was doing pretty good financially, so he started taking karate. He took it until I was born several years later.

Knowing all this made me sure that my father was an expert on the topic.

"If they hit you, try to hit them in the throat, or to push your fingers into their eyes. The throat will make them not be able to breathe, and the eyes will make them not be able to see."

I knew he was serious because I could see his eyebrows over the rims of his glasses. I nodded my head.

"And," he continued, "you can always kick them in the cookies."

"But Dad," I said. "They're girls, not boys."

"Doesn't matter," he said. "It'll hurt like hell either way, and it'll give you time to get away from them."

I nodded. I sure hoped he knew what he was talking about, because if not, when Monday came, I was dead.

“You can also use the palm of your hand to hit them on the underside of their nose.” He clawed his fingers and juttred out the bottom of his palm to illustrate. “It’ll shove their nose into their brain.”

“Dad! I’m not trying to *murder* anyone!”

His eyes looked huge behind his bifocals. “Do you think that they are going to fight fair, Julia? There is no such thing as a fair fight. You do what you have to do to defend yourself, even if it comes to that!”

I just looked at him.

He kept going.

“We already know that these girls are going to try to jump you. They are not going to try to fight you by themselves. So when a big group of them corner you again, *you* start it.”

“But Dad, if I hit them first, I’ll be the one suspended from school!”

“You might get suspended, but you won’t get beat up anymore. And you won’t be in any trouble with me.”

I could not believe what I was hearing. My dad was telling me that it was okay if I got suspended for fighting.

“Anyway, like I was saying, *you* start it. You find the biggest, baddest one out of all of them. And you hit her with all you’ve got.”

He showed me how to ball up my fist and throw a punch the right way, from my shoulder and not from behind me, and how to follow through with it.

“Julia, you hit her until you’ve got her on the ground. And then keep on hitting her. Do NOT let her get up, because if she does, she’s got you. You just keep hitting her as hard as you can, and don’t stop until someone pulls you off of her.”

He put his face three inches from mine, and looked me square in the eyes. “Do you hear me? DO NOT stop until someone pulls you off of her.”

I flinched and pulled back a few inches. I had never seen my father this deadly serious.

“Okay, Dad. Okay.”

Monday came like it always does. Anna and I were sure that the second we got to school we would be met by an ocean of mean, pretty girls who wanted nothing more than to see us bleed.

My father's instruction didn't make me feel any better about the situation. I didn't know if I would remember everything he'd taught me if the situation called for it.

I may not have remembered the actual moves, but I got the picture: he was telling me not to be afraid to stand up for myself. I didn't have to stand there and take the popular girls' abuse.

Truth be told, Monday was anticlimactic. Nothing happened. No ocean of Adidas jackets, no meanies jumping out from behind classroom doors. Definitely no fists in our faces.

Tuesday, however, was a different story. There was still no physical violence, but looking back I think that I may have preferred it.

There was a folded up piece of paper that had been shoved through the vent on my locker door. Written on the front of it, in block letters, was "Rover Dover." Inside were all kinds of threats, name calling, and accusations. One of the latter was that I had sex with one of the boys in the grade ahead of me. This particular boy happened to be dating a very popular girl. The letter said, "Watch your back, because when we catch you, we are going to sew IT shut." They were not referring to my mouth.

The accusation was insane, of course. I was twelve years old and I had never even kissed a boy, much less had sex with one.

The harassment didn't stop there. While no one was waiting for me on Monday, on Wednesday a select group of girls started following me in the hallways. They would call me "whore" and "slut" until I walked into my next class.

I tried to talk to my principal and the guidance counselor. My parents talked to them, too. The school's administration opted for "mediation:" where the feuding parties got together and tried to talk out their differences. These sessions turned into cruel "Julia-bashing" fests. Even the guidance counselor said to me, "I don't think we can resolve this."

I never did figure out where all of this animosity had come from, but my mom suggested that they were jealous because I was pretty (but so were they!) and in all the advanced classes, and that many of my friends at school were boys, even if none of them were my boyfriend.

Eventually, I lost the friends I did have. It's hard to be friends with someone that everyone else hates.

Eventually I refused to go to school. My parents stopped trying to force me to go. The next year, I switched school districts. I went to school with my niece, and no one else there knew me. I got a fresh start.

My father has done much of the writing on my blank pages in my life. Everything he has ever written had been a lesson. That year, the lesson he wrote was this: Stand up for yourself, even when the opposition is strong.

.....

Shortly after I switched schools, I stopped talking to my dad. It seemed like we didn't even speak the same language. All he wanted to do was to tell me what I could and couldn't do. He wanted me to follow his rules, and I thought that his rules were stupid and outdated. He didn't want me to have phone calls from boys, or to spend the night with my friends without talking to their parents first. No one else's parents had these rules. Eventually, I stopped asking his permission and just did what I wanted.

I remember one time when I was about fifteen. I had been out with one of my male friends who had a car. He dropped me off at home.

My dad was in the front yard cutting the grass. When I walked up the front sidewalk, he shut the mower off. He looked at me and said, "You're not allowed to ride in cars with boys yet."

I looked back at him and said cheekily, "I've been doing it for two years now. You're a little late, don't you think?"

True to form, my dad didn't reply.

We didn't really start to talk again until my mom got sick, and not even then really until we found out that her cancer was terminal.

I remember it exactly.

I was almost eighteen. I was a senior in high school.

My mother was skinny and bald and jaundiced. She had to have a wheel chair and a hospital bed and a chair that would lift up to help her get out of it. Her handwriting looked as if she had been sitting on a tractor: shaky and lopsided.

God, I loved my mother.

She was my best friend, and she was dying before my eyes.

I tried not to let her know how much I was hurting. I didn't want her to be scared, and I didn't want her to worry about me.

Frankly, I was a little pissed that she was going to leave me by myself with *him*.

He didn't understand me like she did. I couldn't talk to him about my problems. He *judged*.

So I hid it. I hid my pain from her, from him, from everyone. No one understood what I was going through. No one.

I would drive away from the house to go hang out with my friends, and when got four blocks away, I would turn around and go home. *She's not going to be here much longer. I need to spend all the time with her that I can.*

I would get home and Mom would say, "Baby, I thought you went out. What are you doing here?"

I would shrug and say, "I thought I'd come home and hang out with you."

She would smile and shake her head and say, "Honey, you need to be with your friends. I know this is hard on you. Go out and have some fun."

I would hug her. She would smell like cigarettes and Gloria Vanderbilt. Then I would leave.

In the car by myself, I would try to cry. I would try because I knew I needed to, but no tears would come.

I would start to breathe hard and fast. I would attempt to calm myself down by thinking *everything is going to be okay. You have always been okay.* I would calm down for about two seconds until I realized that the only reason that I *had* always been okay was because my mother was there for me. And when she died, she wouldn't be there anymore. There would be no one there to pick up my pieces.

Still, no tears would come. But I would hear a sound. It was a long, medium pitched moan. It was the most pitiful sound, so full of grief and heartbreak. It would always startle me, because I didn't know where it was coming from. And then I'd realize that the sound was coming from me.

That sound bothered me every time I heard it. It sounded like an animal dying. But I wasn't the one dying; she was. I had no right to make a sound like that.

Eventually that sound got to bothering me so much that one night when I heard it I turned the car around for the second time that night and headed home.

When I got there I walked right past my father in the dining room and into my bedroom without saying a word. I shut the door behind me and flopped on my bed. I buried my face in my pillow, even though I still couldn't cry.

After a few minutes there was a soft knock on my door.

"Come in."

My dad peeked his head into the room. "You okay?"

For the first time in a very long time, I took a good look at my father. His dark hair and mustache were threaded with gray. The skin on his face was starting to wrinkle. The strain he felt from taking care of my mother was evident on his face.

For the first time in many years, I gave him a chance.

"Can we talk?"

"Sure," he said. He came into my room and shut the door behind him. He looked around for a place to sit, and finally chose the edge of my bed. "What's up, kid?"

I looked at him with dry eyes. "This is so hard," I whispered. "I know that she's dying. It hurts so bad, Daddy, and I just can't cry."

He nodded. For once, the fact that he wasn't saying anything didn't bother me.

"So I try to cry, right? And I can't. I hear this sound. I hate this sound. It's so awful. It sounds like an animal in excruciating pain. And then I realize that the sound is coming from me." My voice was shaking.

I looked at my dad. Behind his glasses his eyes were full of unshed tears. He cleared his throat.

"I know what you mean, kid." His voice was thick. His face twisted and the corners of his mouth reached for his ears. "I just don't know what we're going to do without her."

His tears fell down his cheeks in a flood, and he was having trouble getting his breath. His chest was heaving.

I don't know if it was telling someone else about the sound or if it was seeing my dad bawl like a baby that did it, but it wasn't half a second after that I, too had tears on my face. I was crying just as hard as he was.

It was then that I realized that someone did know how I felt: my dad. He lived with Mom every day, just like I did. I was losing my mother, but he was losing his wife.

That night in my bedroom, I forgave my dad for making my life hard for me. I had always known that in his weird way, he was trying to protect me, even if I didn't agree with him.

We held each other and cried: for us, for my mom, for the grueling path ahead. And I kept saying to him, "We'll be okay, we'll be okay."

And while we might not have known it, we were.

My father has written on many of my pages. Sometimes I'm so much like him that it amazes me. Some of the things he wrote were "Parents try to do what is best for you, even if you don't like them for it," and "It's okay to ask for help from someone you may not like too much at the moment."

That's okay. I'm sure I've written some of his pages too.

The Fat Kid

Every year I took a trip to Arkansas with my parents to visit with my father's side of the family, but this year I was confused. Grandma and Grandpa hadn't been together since my dad was seven years old. Grandpa was married to another woman who I called Grandma Dorothy. But for some reason, Grandpa was here, at Grandma Lee's house. He even stayed for supper. Then he spent the night! He slept in the same bed with Grandma. Something wasn't right.

I sat on the front porch by myself. Mama and Grandma were talking in the kitchen, and Daddy and Grandpa were in the driveway looking under the hood of my father's luxury van. There wasn't a whole lot for an eleven-year-old girl to do, so I was occupying myself with a Babysitter's Club book. As I read about Kristy's adventures with the rambunctious Pike family, the sun made me squint my eyes and made the top of my head hot. I could smell the neighbor's just-cut grass.

The sound of the van's hood slamming shut made me raise my head. Daddy and Grandpa began walking to the porch. Grandpa's

oiled hair glittered silver in the sun. He, too squinted his eyes as he took a long drag off of his cigarette.

As the men passed me on the steps, Grandpa dropped a hand on top of my hot head. He left it there for a moment, and then took it away.

“How ya doin’, Fat Girl?”

My dad walked into the house. He must not have heard him. Grandpa followed him while I sat on the porch with a dumb look on my face. Did he really just say that to me?

Fat? I was definitely chubbier than many of the kids I went to school with. I never thought I was fat. I looked down at my thighs. They poked out of my shorts like thick sausages and flattened out against the gray concrete of the steps. I noticed that my little belly lapped over my waistband. Was Grandpa right? Was I fat?

I didn’t really know my grandfather very well. My mother wasn’t fond of him. One of the first times I ever heard her use the word “asshole” it was directed at him. We rarely saw him when we came to Arkansas and he never came to St. Louis to visit us.

Was he joking? The few times I had seen Grandpa he had seemed mean. He had to mean what he had said.

What would Grandma say when I told her? I knew she would stand up for me. My grandma had always been my buddy. She had lived with my family when I was younger. She helped me make doll clothes and showed me how to make ice cream out of snow. We had been very close until she moved to Arkansas. I decided that I would tell her. She would make sure that he didn't say things like that to me anymore.

I walked through the front door into the living room. My parents were sitting next to one another on the couch. Grandpa sat in the big leather recliner. Grandma sat in his lap. She was smiling. Her dentures sparkled in two neat rows. Her black hair curled around her wrinkled ears and her forehead, stopping just short of her glasses. I had to think of a way to get her alone so that I could tell on Grandpa.

Before I could say a word, Grandma, still smiling, said, "You're right, Leon. She is fat!" She giggled a little.

I stood there in the middle of the green shag carpet, trying to catch my breath and understand at the same time. Grandma thought I was fat, too? I felt my face get hot. Before I knew they were there, tears were slushing down my cheeks. I turned and ran out of the house. My vision was a blur.

My grandmother had hurt me more than she could ever know. My heart felt like it was being wrung out like a wet dish rag. I trusted her. I had thought she was the greatest thing ever, that she would always be on my side.

I stopped when I got to the van in the driveway. My mother was right on my heels.

“Stop!”

“She... she said I was fat!”

“Julia Michelle, you are not fat! You are eleven! You’re body is changing. You will slim down. He’s an asshole. Don’t listen to that dirty old man.”

I sniffed, sucking snot into the back of my throat. “Mom, I don’t want to go back in there.”

Her green eyes flashed and her lips became a straight line. She looked serious.

“We won’t. You don’t ever have to see your grandfather again. We’ll stay with Uncle Johnny tonight and we’ll go home tomorrow.”

For much of my life my parents played tug-of-war with the pants role of the family. Sometimes my father won. On this day, my mother firmly put her foot down, and she won. So that’s what we did.

We left my grandmother's house right away. We went home the next day.

After that, my grandfather went back to his wife. I never told my grandmother how much her comment bothered me.

After the incident, it wasn't the sound of my grandpa's voice saying I was fat that stuck in my head; it was the sound of my grandmother's. I didn't want to be fat anymore. I didn't want to *feel* fat.

I quit eating. I came up with all kinds of crafty ways to avoid eating. I would take my plate into my bedroom with me, claiming to be watching a movie on my television. I would scrape the plate into my trashcan, returning it to the kitchen empty.

At first, it was my hunger that sustained me. When I was hungry, I'd look down at my thick waist or my jiggly thighs, and I'd know that the feeling of hunger was a good thing. It meant that my body would eat itself, and that I would get rid of the excess Julia.

Eventually, I stopped getting hungry at all. While my body was starving, my brain didn't register hunger. It's one of the body's survival mechanisms.

Sometimes my stomach would feel upset from being so empty. I'd feel as if I was going to vomit, but I would just dry heave. Instead of putting something in my stomach to make the feeling go away, I would take some Pepto Bismol or eat some Tums, sometimes both.

I knew that the body could survive indefinitely without food but would die quickly without water. I drank at least a gallon of water a day to keep myself hydrated. I wanted to be thin, not dead.

It worked. All of my hard work paid off. In one summer I went from a woman's size twelve to a junior's size one. That's about five dress sizes in three months. I was starting to look ill, but I felt better emotionally, if not physically.

Sometimes I would get lightheaded and dizzy. I found out later that this was from my blood pressure dropping too low. Sometimes I felt like I would faint, but I never did.

Yet even as a size one, I never felt thin. I always felt fat. My girlfriends and even my sisters would always comment on how skinny I was, but I never thought that they were being genuine. I thought they were just saying that to my face and then later going behind my back and talking about how fat I was. I was somewhat delusional.

Young girls always think that their mothers don't pay attention to them, but they do. Especially mine. I didn't even think about it: who bought my size one jeans for me? Just a couple months ago, she had been buying a much bigger size.

She also noticed that I didn't eat with the family anymore, and that I was never hungry. Besides, she had been there the day that my grandmother had said the hurtful words.

One day, my mother wanted to "do lunch," which was one of her favorite things to do. We went to Spinnaker's, one of her favorite places.

When I was an eater, it was one of my favorite places, too. Even if I wasn't hungry, I still wanted the taste of the sweet flowerpot bread and butter, the salad with ranch dressing, cheese and real bacon bits, and the French onion soup with all of the cheese melted on top of the bowl. It would be hard to pass up, but I'd do it, and even make it look like I'd eaten some of it.

How stupid did I really think my mother was? Did I think that as she sat directly across from me she wouldn't see me put my piece of bread under my napkin? That she wouldn't watch as I intentionally

dropped forkfuls of my salad in the floor, or notice that I never took a bite of my soup, just stirred it around?

We had been in the middle of a conversation about something else entirely when she said to me, “Do you want to die, Julia?”

I wrinkled my eyebrows together and looked at her like she was crazy. “What? No!”

Her eyes were turning red behind her pink glasses, filling with tears. “I know you don’t eat. I know your starving yourself.”

Let me make it clear right here that my mother did not cry on a regular basis. When she did, it was serious.

I couldn’t say anything. I had been found out.

“You’re wasting away to nothing. You’re a beautiful girl and you’re killing yourself.” Tears were streaming down her face.

“I’m not, Mom!” A delayed attempt at denial.

“You are not fat and you never were.”

“I am... I was. Grandma –”

“Your grandmother is an insensitive idiot.”

“Mom, I’m not going to die.”

“Yes. Yes you are if you don’t eat. And if you die, you might as well just take me with you.”

I looked at my mother across the table, and I knew she meant it. Even if I didn't love my own body, I loved my mother.

I ate every bite on my plate that day.

I did gain a few pounds. Not much, but I was at a healthy weight for a teenage girl. I stayed that way for a couple of years.

I began to notice a distinct pattern: every two years, my weight would swing like a pendulum. I would get to 140 pounds, and I would hate myself until I got it off. I finally stopped letting the pendulum swing the other way past 125 pounds, because then I became too thin and I looked sick.

For a while I did every diet known to man: the grapefruit diet, the peanut butter diet, Weight Watchers. Then I found out that diet pills were a much easier means of shedding some pounds.

Those worked for a bit until the FDA discovered that Ephedra is dangerous and removed it from store shelves. So the pendulum swung.

I finally found the most novel idea for maintaining a weight that doesn't make me feel like a lunatic: diet and exercise. I bought

myself a gym membership and started using it. I started eating anything I wanted, but I monitored the portion size.

I'm healthier than I ever have in my life even if I still don't like the way my body looks.

I don't starve myself anymore, but I probably qualify as at least a borderline anorexic. What I see when I look in the mirror is not what others see when they look at me. I will never again let my weight get out of control. When I have no control of anything else in my life, I have control of this.

I have unhealthy feelings about what it means to be fat. To me, being fat is worse than being a heroine addict or an alcoholic. To me, those are disease over which the victim has no control. Even though I know it isn't right, I equate being fat with being lazy and having no willpower.

A few years ago, I forgave my grandmother for the comment she made so long ago. I had to; I just couldn't carry it along with me anymore. I never told her I forgave her because I had never told her what her remark had done to me in the first place. But I forgave her in my own mind.

My grandmother wrote words on my blank pages that devastated me, but they make me who I am today. She never realized that those words would affect me the way they did. It was completely unintentional.

Her words taught me something else, too. They taught me that even the noblest people will do or say something out of character to impress someone they love. I have no doubt that she still loves my grandfather. You don't have five kids with someone and just stop loving them.

But whomever it was that said, "Words will never hurt me" – well, they lied.

Shirlene

My oldest sister has always seemed so much, well, *older*. That doesn't mean that I don't love her, because I do. But we have a generation gap of a parent and child. She is, after all, twenty-one years older than me. Maybe this is why we have some trouble communicating.

This difficulty was especially evident at her youngest son's eighth birthday party. She had done the typical kid birthday party: held in her home, with cake and ice cream and games and a piñata and twelve screaming boys all under the age of ten.

I had a headache.

I love kids, don't get me wrong. But a dozen of them are way too many.

My sister was in her country-style kitchen stirring spaghetti sauce in a large metal pot. I sat in a chair at the dark cherry wood kitchen table with a few other adults, namely our middle sisters the twins, and my dad.

My sister looked up from her pot and shifted her eyes to me. She smiled her sweetest smile. Her frosted hair was curled away from her face. Her brown eyes looked innocent.

I braced myself. I knew what was coming.

She was about to say the same thing that she has said to me at every family function since I was 16.

“When are you going to come spend the weekend, Julia? We never get to see you anymore.”

I’ve been in this situation so many times that I should have been better prepared for this. Unfortunately, my mouth could not form an answer.

My guilt had frozen my jaw.

I think I know why Shirlene does this to me.

It stems from childhood trauma. Mine, not hers.

I was three years old, and I adored my big sister. She was twenty-four, and thought I was cute, but I bet she had better things to do on a Saturday night than baby-sit me.

But that was exactly what she was doing.

My dad was playing guitar with his country and western band at a local bar, and our mother went with him. I'm sure she needed some "grown-up" time.

So that left me at home with my sister. She had just broken up with her live-in boyfriend in Texas and had moved home. I was three and being typical for that age.

Shirlene was standing in the kitchen hallway with the telephone up to her ear, gabbing a way.

"Yeah, I told her so, but she wouldn't listen...men are such jerks," she was saying.

I was wearing red corduroy overalls with white knee socks and brown Mary Jane's. I was sitting on the couch with our miniature (actually, very fat) poodle, Baby.

Baby liked to play a game where we would put our hands on either side of her face and shake her head back and forth. We called it "roughing her up." She would shake her head free and open her little mouth wide. She would pretend to bite our hands, but her mouth would never close. She was too gentle and besides, she loved kids.

This particular Saturday night, this was what Baby and I were doing. I was laughing and she was growling playfully through her open muzzle. We were having a grand old time.

I decided that I was having trouble reaching Baby's head very well since we were sitting side-by-side on the brown velour couch. I looked at Shirlene, who was still in the archway between the kitchen and the dining room / living room talking on the phone.

"I don't know, Kim, I just don't know what I ever saw in him..."

Her back was to me, and I could see her bra straps sticking out from beneath her baby blue tank top.

I knew she would never notice if I turned around and faced the back of the couch to play with Baby. So that's what I did. I scooted my little butt around and sat on my knees. I grabbed one of Baby's tiny paws in each hand for support as I made myself comfortable. My little brown Mary Jane's hung off the edge of the couch.

This was my first lesson in slippery fabric. Velour, as most people know, is cheap, ugly and slippery. I did not know this at three, but I soon found out. In a very painful way.

Off the couch I slid, and onto the poo-brown carpet. Into the floor between the couch and the coffee table I went.

Did I forget to mention that this particular coffee table had lots of sharp edges? Maybe I didn't know that at three years old, either, or maybe I had forgotten. I was reminded when I hit the crown of my head on one of them.

The impact made my teeth come together hard. The pain was so fierce that I couldn't breath for a few seconds. When I did finally breath, it came out as a scream.

That got Shirlene's attention. I heard the phone clatter to the floor. I opened my eyes just enough to see her baby blue tank top hovering over me. I felt myself being lifted, and I heard her saying, "Oh, baby, baby."

She wasn't talking to the dog. She was talking to me, and she was freaking out because my head was busted open and bleeding.

I was surprised I could hear her talking to me because someone was crying and screaming just like a little baby.

Wait, that was me.

Shirlene hustled me into the kitchen and sat me down in a chair. She took a clean dish towel that was hanging from the stove and

pressed it to my head. She ran to the telephone receiver that was lying on the linoleum. It was protesting loudly to the harsh treatment she had subjected it to. She pushed the button to hang it up, and called the bar where my parents were.

Everything else is fuzzy to me. I remember my parents rushing in the door. I remember riding in the silver Mercury Grand Marquis to the hospital, my father driving, my mother in the back seat holding my head in her lap. I don't remember much about the hospital except for someone throwing a green blanket over my head and telling me not to move.

The corner of the coffee table had only broken my skin, not my skull, but it was enough to warrant stitches. I remember coming home much later that night, sleepy and sedated. I didn't want to sleep in my own bed that night. I didn't want to sleep with my parents, either.

I wanted to sleep with my sister.

.....

I think Shirlene felt guilty for a long time after that for not keeping a better eye on me that night. I never held it against her, though. I still thought she was the best sister ever. She was pretty.

She had long brown hair that she would let me play with sometimes.

The twins never let me play with their hair.

Shirlene smelled good, too. She wore perfume with exotic names like Shalimar. People said I looked just like her.

When I was five, Shirlene married Jerry. I thought Jerry was neat, too, because he did magic tricks and told me that I would grow up one day to be just as beautiful as my big sister.

A week after they married, Jerry took my sister away to Virginia to live with him. I believe that this was the first time my heart was ever broken.

They promised that they'd visit often, and they usually came about twice a year – Thanksgiving and Christmas. They could never spend their whole trip with just our little part of the family – they had to divide their time between our mother and my father, Shirlene's dad, and Jerry's family in Arkansas.

I missed my big sister so much. I was really lucky that she was kind enough to let me go everywhere she went the whole time she and her husband were in town. I just wanted to be with my sister.

I was Shirlene's St. Louis shadow up until I turned twelve. Then I had my own friends that I wanted to play with and spend the

night with. I didn't want to go over to her boring old Italian grandmother's house and play with her fat cousins while the grown-ups talked.

Sure, I talked with her and Jerry when they were at my house, but I didn't follow her around anymore.

Looking back, I'm sure her feelings were hurt and I'm sure she showed it, but I never noticed.

When I was fifteen, Shirlene and Jerry had their first child. They named him Clarence James (Yuck!) after Jerry's father, but even when he was just born they called him C.J. I saw him for the first time when he was three months old. I loved him very much, but I was a teenager, and he was out of sight, out of mind.

Not even two years after that Shirlene and Jerry had Joshua. The first time I ever got to see him was when Shirlene and her family moved home.

My mother had never liked Jerry. She thought he was a "chauvinistic asshole." She didn't keep her opinion to herself, either. She not only let Shirlene know what she thought of her husband, she let Jerry know, too.

He always acted like he didn't hear her.

I always thought Jerry was okay, even though he had stopped doing the magic tricks long ago. That was until they moved back to St. Louis.

Jerry decided to have a house built for his family in Pevely, which is about forty-five minutes away. One night after dinner at my house, I heard Jerry and Shirlene talking on the back porch. They thought no one was listening.

“See, Shirlene, I move you back home and you see how much help you get from your family? They’re only out to the house what, every week or two? Your mother rarely comes out. Where’s all this help you were going to get?”

“My mother never comes to our house because she can’t stand you.”

“And what kind of mother does that make her, Shirlene?”

“One that wants her daughter to be happy,” she shot back.

“We should have moved to Arkansas to be around decent people.”

I stopped listening. I didn’t want to hear anymore.

.....

The same year Shirlene and Jerry had their house built, our mom got lung cancer. Jerry continued to be the doting father and husband in front of the family. I was too worried about my mom to consider what was going on behind closed doors.

One day, when Mom was really sick, Shirlene and I sat at the table in the dining room, just feet from where I had gashed my head open fourteen years before.

“I missed it,” she said to me.

I looked at my sister in confusion. What was she talking about?

“Missed what?” I asked.

Tears pooled in her brown eyes and dimples appeared in her chin as it started to quiver.

“You. Growing up.”

Too consumed in my own pain to care about anyone else’s, I told her, “Yes, you did.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I felt a little better. At least now she would know that I noticed she had abandoned me.

Tears streamed down her face as she left the room. I did not follow her. I wasn’t her shadow anymore.

.....

My mother hadn't been gone three months when Jerry left Shirlene for another woman he'd met in Arkansas. Joshua wasn't even out of diapers. He left my sister in a \$250,000 house that she couldn't afford to pay for, sixty miles from her closest family member. She was alone and sad. I know there were times when there wasn't just Pepsi in that plastic soda bottle.

I was going through my own grief, trying to find my own way, trying to find someone who loved me just as much and in the same way that my mother did. I wasn't paying much attention to Shirlene's grief. Maybe if we'd paid a little more attention to each other, we would have been less destructive to ourselves.

Don't get me wrong, I did go spend weekends in her big house with her and the boys, but they were few and far between. All those years and miles *had* made us grow apart, as much as neither of us planned for them to.

.....

I finally had an answer for her. It wasn't a very good one, but it was the truth.

“Y’know, Shirlene, I just don’t have a lot of time right now. I’ll to get down here to at least spend the night some weekend.”

“The boy’s miss you, you know.”

“I miss them, too.”

Shirlene looked like she might cry for about half a second.

Then her eyes cleared and she smiled. Sincerely.

“I bet all those boyfriends you have keep you really busy,” she said.

“Yeah, they do.”

“You’re so pretty.”

“I get it from my sister,” I told her with a wink.

Shirlene and I are still not really close, but she has added her own writing to may pages of life. Not so much that she has directly affected my life, but I have watched her life and learned from it.

Shirlene has written volumes about being self-sufficient, about taking having the ability to take care of yourself financially, even if you don’t have to.

I admire my sister for what she has gone through. I desperately wish that I could take those hateful words back that I said to her so long ago.

Rachel

My best friend laughed all the way down the aisle.

In a puff of white meringue and mosquitoes, Rachel fumbled her way down the white paper aisle that covered the damp grass, and she giggled.

Her shoulders shook with nerves and excitement, jiggling the large breasts that were protruding from the top of her dress. The goofy grin never left her face as she stared at her soon-to-be husband standing beneath the archway of roses. She nearly tripped over the hem of her dress every third step or so. But she never stopped laughing.

I am notorious for crying at weddings. But this time, my eyes were dry. Not because I didn't support Rachel's marriage to Joe, because I did. Not because I wasn't happy for them, because I was.

I wasn't crying because I was laughing too hard.

All Rachel ever had to do to make me laugh was to laugh herself.

.....

I met Rachel on my first day of high school.

It was my first year at a new school. I knew a few people there because my niece was a senior there, but not many. I did, however, have a boyfriend that went to school there.

He wasn't a very good boyfriend, but what did I expect from a seventeen-year-old boy? I had heard from several people that he'd cheated on me over the summer with a couple different girls. One of the girls was named Rachel.

I hadn't dumped the jerk because I was too young to know better and too insecure to think that anyone else would ever go out with me. So I did the next best thing I could think to do: I would try to find the others girls he'd been messing with and beat them up. That would make sure no one messed with my guy again.

Looking back, this idea didn't make much sense. I'd never been in fight before, and I weighed 115 pounds with bricks in both pockets. I just wasn't thinking.

At lunch that first day I was walking with one of the only friends I had, Lyne. We stopped behind a brick wall where kids were hiding and smoking cigarettes. Lyne introduced me to some of the people standing there, but I didn't pay attention to anyone else's name after she introduced me to a girl named Rachel.

I stared at the girl. She was very tall and her legs were long to support her height. She had short reddish brown hair and freckles. Her nose was turned up and her lower jaw stuck out past her upper jaw. Her boobs demanded attention. They were huge, and her black tank top barely covered them.

Was this the girl that had helped by boyfriend cheat on me?

I looked at this Rachel girl, raising my right eyebrow so that it disappeared beneath my bangs. I pulled myself up to my full height of five feet, four inches, and I stuck out my narrow chest, and I asked her in my snottiest tone, "Are *you* the Rachel that's been screwing my boyfriend?"

The girl looked at me and her blue eyes became magnified behind the tears filling her lids. She looked scared.

"No, I'm not." She said quietly. "But who is your boyfriend?"

"How do you know you're not if you don't even know who he is?" I asked her.

"Because I haven't been screwing anybody," she told me.

I looked at her open face and I knew that she wasn't lying. I felt my shoulders relax, and I smiled at the girl.

"So who is your boyfriend, anyway?"

Rachel and I talked for the rest of our lunch period. Before long we were laughing like idiots at something I can't remember.

Our friendship lasted much longer than my relationship with what's-his-name did.

I've been to a lot of weddings, but this one was different. The pastor did something I'd never seen before.

After vows and rings were exchanged, he explained to Rachel and Joe that he'd like for them to step behind the rose arch and take a few moments to tell each other why they love each other.

I watched as Joe wrapped his arms around Rachel's waist. I saw them talking to each other in low tones so that no one else could hear. Joe looked serious as he spoke to Rachel, and his eyes were full of happy tears. Rachel put her hand on the back of Joe's head and pulled him to her in a hug.

He was so short and she was so tall that his face landed exactly in the crevasse of her ample bosom.

The couple, along with the audience, erupted with laughter.

No one is very smart at sixteen, especially not Rachel and me.

I had a tendency to date guys a couple years older than me (and on occasion, maybe even a year or so younger) that were tall, thin, and good-looking. Rachel, on the other hand, had a thing for Mexican men – usually *much older* Mexican men. And this particular man was no different.

Julio and his brother Joelle were from Texas, just near the border. They were in St. Louis “conducting business.” Rachel and I obviously did not think to ask precisely what that meant.

Jose was twenty-six, and his brother was twenty-nine. Rachel had met them at the pool hall where we hung out five nights a week.

Just what Julio was doing messing around with a sixteen year-old-girl is beyond me, but we didn’t think about that then. We thought “Yeah, an older man.”

Anyway, Julio and Joelle were staying in a motel across the highway from the pool hall. I had my mom’s car one night and Rachel asked if we could go see her new friends.

She was my best friend in the whole world and we were inseparable. Of course I said yes.

We got to the hotel room early in the evening. Joelle was in the shower, and Julio, Rachel and I were sitting on one of the double beds, chatting and watching television.

A loud knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it?” Julio called.

“Management,” came the muffled voice from behind the door.

Julio was making his way to the door when it opened from the other side with such force that it hit the wall.

Julio jumped a mile his face gained a look of panic, and his hands shot into the air like bullets.

Rachel and I stopped breathing.

Standing in the doorway was not a motel manager, but two large men with guns a-blazin’ wearing bulletproof vests with “DEA” printed on the front in white letters.

I’m pretty sure my heart stopped beating. Rachel gripped my upper arm, and I was immediately sorry that I had ever talked her into getting those acrylic nails. But I didn’t say anything.

All I could do is watch.

The Drug Enforcement Agents had little interest in Rachel and me. They went straight for Julio.

Two more agents came into the room. The first two were searching Julio, and the other two had stormed into the bathroom and yanked his naked brother out of the shower.

Rachel and I backed up against one wall and huddled together. She was still digging her nails into the tender flesh on the underside of my arm. She bent her head so that her lips were level with my ear, and whispered, "Oh my God, Julia, we're going to jail."

At her words my mouth went dry. How was I going to explain to my parents what we were doing in the motel room of two much-older Mexican men during a drug bust, even if it was a mistake? We were minors. There were laws against this kind of thing!

My mother was going to kill me.

It was too much to hope that she wouldn't tell my dad.

I looked at Rachel and realized that silent tears were streaming down her face. Those tears were the only things that kept me from crying, too. I knew that if Rachel saw that I was as scared as she was that she would lose her cool.

The agents searched the room, lifting up the mattresses and pulling the pillows from their cases. One agent opened the guys' suitcases and started pulling out clothes and underwear.

Julio sat on the floor at the foot of one of the beds. His knees were bent and his elbows sat propped on them. His hands were pushed into his black hair and seemed to be supporting his head. He looked at the floor and didn't say anything.

Joelle stood leaning the doorjamb to the bathroom. His waist was wrapped with a towel, and beads of water (or was it sweat?) dotted his forehead and upper lip. He looked otherwise calm and bored.

"Who can get us out?" Rachel whispered in my ear. "I'm *not* calling my mother."

"Shhh!" I told her. Maybe we could get out of this if she could just keep quiet.

"Nothing," one agent said to another. "The place is clean." He looked disappointed.

Another agent looked at Rachel and me. His gaze started at the tops of our heads and ended at our feet.

"How old are you girls?" He asked.

Rachel's talons dug further into my arm.

"Sixteen." I told the truth. If the girl squeezed any harder she was going to draw blood.

“Both of you?”

“Yes,” I answered for Rachel.

“Huh,” the agent said with disinterest.

He turned and looked at Joelle. He pointed a finger at him and said, “I’ve got my eye on you.”

With that he and the other agents walked through the door. The last one closed it behind him.

As the door clicked shut the four of us heaved a sigh of relief in unison. Rachel released her vise-like grip on my arm. I turned to her and we hugged each other hard.

Julio and his brother started to laugh.

Rachel and I looked at each other in confusion.

“What’s so funny?” Rachel asked.

The guys laughed even harder. Julio stood up, but he was laughing so hard that he was stooping over with his hands on his knees.

His brother managed to talk although he was gasping for air.

“Th – they were too late!”

Both men seemed to think this was the funniest thing in the world. Julio flopped onto the bed in his fit of giggles. Rachel and I just looked at each other.

I thought, "Did what he just said mean what I thought it meant? Were these guys really *drug dealers*? There was no mistake?"

I wondered if Rachel was thinking the same thing.

Joelle crossed the room to the nightstand, still laughing. He picked up a wad of tissues. He opened it up in his palm and held it out to me. It was a small amount of marijuana.

"This is all we have left," he said. "And they missed it!"

The brothers laughed even harder.

Rachel and I looked at each other. The look on her face was one of pure disgust.

"We gotta go," she said.

"What do you mean, 'you gotta go,'" Julio said. "You just got here. What, are you scared now?"

Rachel looked at Julio with hard eyes. "No, I'm not scared. I'm just too good for you."

And with that, Rachel grabbed me by the hand and we walked out the door.

I hugged my friend and her new husband at their reception. Joe laughed, while Rachel and I alternated squealing, crying and laughing.

This was one of the moments in my life when I realized how lucky I was. I had the best friend anyone could ever ask for; we had never once been in a fight or an argument in the ten years we had been friends, as long my bad attitude on the first day we met doesn't count.

We had been through each other's crazy, abusive, and cheating relationships. We had helped each other through drama and death. We had been serious and silly, fun and fatigued, embarrassed and elated with each other, sometimes all at the same time.

I realized at that moment that *this* is true love. This perfect union that I had with Rachel is what many people spend their whole lives looking for. We all want to have unconditional and lasting love, and I had it. So what if it wasn't with someone that I was romantic with? Who ever said it had to be?

I looked at her in her beautiful white dress, and I told her words I had told her a thousand times.

"I love you, Rachey."

"I love you, too, Peanut."

And I felt that she did.

Rachel writes on my pages every day. Life with her is always an adventure. She is my lighter side, my loved side. I know that I can let loose with her, but more importantly that I *should* let loose and not be so serious all the time.

Besides that, Rachel has shown me the true meaning of friendship. If I never have another friend in my life, I will consider myself lucky because I will still have Rachel.

The Dash

Just off Interstate 70 in St. Peters is a flat slab of marble barely protruding from the ground. Half of this slab is covered by a brass plate. Written upon this plate, in bold font, are these words:

Shirley Jean Dover

Beloved Wife and Mother

April 28, 1943 – April 30, 1998

This is the grave of my mother. Her once very alive body lies beneath this slab.

Of all the information given on this plaque the most important thing is the most overlooked. It is not her name, or what she was to our family, or the day she was born or the day she died. It is the tiny dash nestled between the dates.

This dash doesn't say much. It doesn't say that my mom was born on a farm in Macon, Missouri. It doesn't say that she was the youngest of four children. It doesn't tell how her brother used to take her to school on the back of a mule, or how the mule would have to cross a wide creek to get them there.

The dash also doesn't say that when my mother was a teenager, her parents moved into a house in St. Louis City. It doesn't tell how Shirley and her best friend, Jeannie, would run around the city streets in sweaty halter tops and pedal pushers, teasing boys and smoking cigarettes. It doesn't tell how they both spent thousands of hours at Crown's Candy Kitchen, sharing milkshakes and devouring bowls of chili.

This little rectangle doesn't mention that my mom married her first husband at the age of fifteen because she was pregnant. It also doesn't say that this is what you had to do back then if you were young and in trouble. The dash doesn't say that the marriage didn't work out and that she was divorced at sixteen.

The dash does not tell about her falling in love with her second husband soon after, or how she didn't realize before they were married how life would be. It doesn't tell how he beat her, or how he kept her and my sister locked in a second floor apartment with no telephone. It doesn't tell how he wouldn't let her go to the doctor with a bladder infection. The dash doesn't even begin to describe how she felt when she finally sneaked out to go to the doctor and found out that she was pregnant – with twins.

The dash in no way describes how she almost died giving birth to my carbon copy sisters. It doesn't tell of how when they would cry in the middle of the night their father would hold my mother in the bed and refuse to let her get her babies. It doesn't say where she finally got the courage to leave him.

The dash never tells how hard it was for her to be seventeen, have three kids and two divorces under her belt and to be on her own. It never says anything about the girls being little and my mother working so hard that she gave herself mononucleosis.

This puny dash never describes her next couple of failed marriages, or what it did to her and her children. It doesn't go into detail about how she got to be stronger and more independent than most people ever get to be. It doesn't say how she loved her three babies more than anything in the world.

The dash never even mentions my mother meeting my father and marrying him. It never tells of her relief that she had finally found someone to be good to her and her children. It doesn't say anything of the problems that they surely had, or how they got through them.

The dash also never tells of how she felt when she got pregnant – again – when her youngest children were nineteen years old. It doesn't say how she felt about finally getting to stay at home with one of her children...another daughter – me. The dash tells no part of the relationship that blossomed there, or how I felt that no one else could ever love me more.

The dash doesn't tell how scared she was when she found out she had lung cancer. It doesn't tell how she tried to hide her fear from her husband and her children. It doesn't tell how, try as she might, she just couldn't give up the cigarettes. The dash never says anything about the conversations that a dying woman has with the people she loves.

The dash never says a word about the sickness and the deterioration of a once vivacious woman. It doesn't say how she or her family felt about any of it. It doesn't say that she waited for as few people as possible to be in the house when she finally gave up.

The dash doesn't describe her looks or her personality. It gives no indication of the kind of life that Shirley Jean Dover lived. I wish it did, so that other people could know.

The life of my mother alone has written huge volumes of my own story. There have been times that I have worked to emulate her; other times that I have tried to avoid her mistakes.

These are not things that she has done for me directly. These are things that she has done simply because she ever lived.

The Twins

It was going to rain. Flat gray clouds covered the sky making everything on the ground cast strange shadows. Far off, thunder rumbled, vibrating the ground. Still, my sister Bonita pushed the shovel into the soft ground of the flowerbed, scooping the dirt and depositing it next to the expanding hole. Sweat and tears mixed together on her freckled cheeks. She looked up at the sky and then around her manicured back yard. She took a deep, shaky breath and looked back at the hole. It looked big enough.

Bonita nodded to her identical twin Anita. Anita picked up the rough wooden box, made that morning, from the white iron patio table. She cradled it like a child, looking at its painted top and not caring that her own tears fell on the words “Jules Michelle Hamm – our beloved Shih-tsu.”

Bonita took one end of the 2 ½ foot long box, letting Anita take the other. Together they slowly set the casket in the grave, careful not to unsettle its contents. Neither said a word. Anita picked up the shovel and began filling the hole with earth. Bonita stood watching, hugging herself as her face contorted around millions of tears. Jules

had been Bo's princess, the child she would never have. She had been the only thing Bonita had ever needed – with the exception of Anita, of course.

My sisters were born to my mother and her ex-husband nineteen years before I was a twinkle in anybody's eye. She had almost died giving birth to them. In 1961 there was no such thing as a prenatal ultrasound, so my mother was surprised to have two babies instead of only one.

She thought they were the most beautiful creatures she had ever seen. They were exact replicas of one another: tiny, with auburn hair and cornflower eyes. My mother named them Anita Jane and Bonita Ann. She loved them so much that she left their abusive father before they fully opened their eyes.

Times were tough back then. My mother already had a two-year-old daughter, Shirlene, from a previous marriage. She worked full time during all of their childhood. She also married four more times over the next fourteen years. My tiny sisters witnessed stepfathers woo my mother, use and abuse her, then leave her. All but the last one, whom they now consider Daddy.

Even as babies, the twins never needed anyone but each other. As toddlers they had their own language that only they could understand. They were never away from each other and shared the same friends. They helped my mother with housework, were always in bed by nine o'clock, and worked hard in school. For some reason, they became perfectionists.

The girls visited their real father and his new wife every other weekend. Their dad was always sweet to them, but they were terrified of Dorothy, their stepmother. When the time came for them to visit their other family, they cried to my mother and begged her not to make them go. When she asked them why they never gave a reason.

The reason was that Dorothy was cruel to them. She beat them and locked them in closets. She made them eat dinner in the dining room floor even though their younger half brothers were allowed to dine at the table.

Anita once told me a story of a particular Christmas. The twins couldn't have been more than six years old. The two tiny redheads with their freckled skin and cornflower eyes were dressed in identical green velvet Christmas dresses to visit with their father. That day happened to be the day that they spent with their stepmother's family.

In the living room of their step-grandmother's home was a decorated tree so tall that it touched the ceiling. Beneath it were what seemed to be thousands of gifts wrapped in red and green paper. The room was filled with family, including many children. All of the kids were handed gifts to open. All of the kids, that is, except for the twins.

They waited politely like their mother had taught them, envying the ever-growing piles of unwrapped gifts the other children had deposited on the floor to open more packages. Anita was trying to be patient, but she noticed that the piles under the tree were dwindling fast. She decided to take some initiative.

She approached a tall man in a dark blue suit. To get his attention, she raised her tiny hand and gently tugged on the tail of his coat. The man looked down at her.

“Yes?”

“Mister, are there any presents under that tree for me and my sister?”

The man shook his head. “No, there aren't.” He walked away.

Like always, the twins clung to each other in their sadness.

Their stepmother found out what Anita had done. When they returned

to their father's house that night, they were beaten for embarrassing her.

When they were eleven, their father stopped coming to get them. They didn't hear anything from him again until they were eighteen. Their aunt called to tell them that their father was dead. He had died of a heart attack.

The rain started to fall just as Anita put the last pile of dirt onto the grave. Anita put her arm around her twin, and they, Anita's twenty-six-year-old daughter Jeni, and I stood in the rain at the grave and cried. Jules had only been six years old. She had died that morning of a rare bone loss disease.

The four of us filed inside of the twins' pristine home. The twins sat on the antique couch in their living room, wrapped in baby blankets our grandmother had made, trying to dry their tears. I went into the kitchen and began to make dinner. It was the least I could do, after all they had done for me.

When I was a kid, the twins and Jeni came and picked me up every Friday night to sleep over. We played Uno or Yatzee and ate junk food. They always had little gifts for me, like a new outfit or a small toy. We would wake up on Saturday mornings to clean the

house. We would turn the "Top 40 Countdown" on the radio and dance and sing while we mopped and dusted.

The twins always planned exciting outings for me and Jeni, who was three years older than me. They would take us to the zoo or Six Flags. Several times we went on weekend float trips. These times were always filled with excitement and laughter. I loved spending time with them. At least once every time I was with them, one or the other would give me a sly wink, squeeze my hand and say, "Jul baby, your sisters love you."

I was eighteen when we lost our mother to lung cancer. We were all lost without her, but the twins kept life going. They planned my high school graduation party and helped me get ready for my senior prom. They were always there for me to talk to.

The twins have also helped me fill in the blanks about my mother's life. While I had her for just eighteen years, they had known her for thirty-seven. I always ask about what she was like when she was younger. Anita and Bonita are always happy to supply the details.

While they are identical, they are different. Anita is always the first one to comfort me when I am upset. Bonita is always the one to tell me exactly what I don't want to hear, which is always the truth.

I go over to their house when I am bored, lonely, excited, depressed or need advice. They have taken the place of my mother very admirably.

I sometimes spend days there, so they have given me my own key. They are always saving dinner for me. I rarely leave without dessert on a paper plate. They want me to move in, but I don't have the heart to leave my dad by himself.

I walked across the polished hardwood floors to the living room to tell them that the spaghetti is done. What I see makes me smile. They are both asleep on the antique couch, one on each end. This time, I save dinner for them.

My sisters love to apply their pens to my pages. They feel that it is a big part of their duty in this world to influence me.

To be honest, sometimes their eagerness overwhelms me. They want to influence – to help – so much, that I feel like I can't do anything without first asking their opinions or their advice. The

advise is almost always more than I want to hear and I immediately wish that I had kept my thoughts to myself.

But through them I have learned to be charitable (even if I may not want to) and to help my family get through the rough times, and to do it the best way there is – together.

Michael

I still remember my mother's long bejeweled index finger wagging in my direction, her green eyes stern and serious. "Don't you ever let a man lay a hand on you, Julia Michelle. If he does it once, he will do it again. And even if he is bigger than you, you don't have to take that shit. There *are* equalizers, you know."

I would nod and look serious too, and say "Never, never..."

I have since learned to never say never.

Michael and I started dating in 1999. He was tall and so lean that his collarbones protruded from his shoulders. His eyes looked like chips of ice. He wore a tattoo of a pentagram on his arm like a banner. I was in love.

Michael never finished the tenth grade. He had no driver's license or car. It was a miracle if he could hold any job for more than a month. He liked to drink, smoke, and do any drug he could get his hands on.

Michael was fun. I would skip school to hang out in his mother's filthy little trailer, planted in a field off of a country road.

We would watch movies and he would cook pot roast. We would cuddle on the couch and smoke pot.

Michael could make me feel like I was queen of the world. Every day he told me he loved me and how beautiful I was. Every member of his family asked me, "What's a purty college girl like you doin' with *him*?" Every member of my family asked me the same thing, minus the country grammar.

My mother had been gone for a year, and I ached for her attention and constant affection. Michael offered me some form of that.

We had been dating for about six months and I was getting impatient with him. He still had no job, no money and no car. He had been using methamphetamines, had been injecting them into his arm. He had also tightened his leash on me. He didn't like my friends, so he wanted me to stop hanging out with them. He had to know where I was at all times. If I was spending time with my family, he would call my cell phone eight or nine times, always wanting to know when I would be "done," when I was coming to see him.

I was still crazy about Michael, so I came up with the perfect solution. I would write him a letter about all of my grievances. I told

him in the letter that if these things didn't change immediately, I would leave him.

I knew that Michael was as wrapped up in me as I was him. I figured that he wanted me so bad that he would make all of my requested changes.

I gave him the letter on a hot fall day. We were riding in my car, talking and listening to the radio. I was satisfied with myself as he read it silently beside me. Our relationship would be better.

He finished the letter, looked up at me. His eyes were no more than bloodshot slits. His mouth twisted as he crumpled the letter, threw it out the window. It was then that I discovered that Michael could yell louder than anyone in the world.

He screamed in my ear that this was all *my* fault, I had always had everything and he had nothing. I was a spoiled little bitch who was pissed because she finally wasn't getting her way. And all of my friends were whores just like I had been before he took me off the market.

Not one to back down from of fight, I countered his every word. I tried to shout just as loudly as he did. I hoped that my veins were pooping out of my neck like his were. I was furious, too.

Just about the time Michael got tired of my arguments, he clamped his hands around my throat and began shaking me violently back and forth. I was trying to take in air and keep my little Lebaron on the road at the same time. He gripped at my shirt, breaking the fine gold chain that was my last birthday present from my mother before she died.

He finally let go of my throat, and I gulped in as much sweet air as my lungs could handle. But he wasn't finished. While he was screaming at me, "If I can't have you, nobody can," he gripped the steering wheel from the passenger seat and began jerking it back and forth. The car was in the wrong lane, and other vehicles were coming!

From within me I found some kind of Amazon strength and got his hands off of the wheel. I pulled the car into a parking lot and put it in park. Michael grabbed my throat again, this time snapping my forehead against his. Everything got fuzzy, then went black.

I was awakened by the sound of sobbing. I was still in the driver's seat, slumped over the wheel. I lifted my head to see Michael's eyes swollen with tears. His mouth was still twisted, this time in some private agony instead of anger.

“Baby I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. It will never happen again, I swear. Don’t leave me, I’ll change, I promise.” That was all he had to say. I forgave him.

I might have gotten hurt, but I thought I’d gotten what I wanted. Michael would change.

Now, looking back, my mother’s words haunt me. She was right. He would do it again. And again and again over three years, before I finally found the strength to leave him.

I don’t know what took me so long. Maybe I was afraid of the pain and anguish I felt when I lost my mom.

She was right about another thing. There are equalizers, but maybe not in the way she meant. Mine was my independence.

I learned a lot from Michael. I learned what I was willing to put up with in a relationship, and what I wasn’t. I learned that you can’t ever change anyone but yourself. And I learned that I am emotionally stronger than I think I am.

Michael wrote his words on my pages very deliberately. He wrote things like, “You are too weak to go on without me.”

God, I love proving people wrong.

Just because they write the words on my pages does not mean that I have to believe them.

Mommy

My mother didn't get to see me graduate from high school. Last year I graduated from college. Now I'm pursuing a master's degree. I'm a pretty nice person, and I like myself. I'm relatively responsible and I make friends easily. This is all because of the influence she had on me.

Because she loved me.

On a bright Wednesday morning in November, I rode next to my mother in her gray Oldsmobile down Woodson Road. I had skipped school again. Lately she had gotten used to me skipping school. Education was very important to her, but she didn't say anything about me not attending my twelfth grade classes.

Instead she drove down the road, steering with one hand. In the other she held a Kool cigarette. The ashes had gotten so long it looked like they were about to drop onto the gray upholstery. She hummed along with the radio, some obscure song on her favorite soft rock station.

I personally did not care for the song or soft rock, but I didn't argue with her choice of music. As far as I was concerned, Mom could have anything just the way she wanted.

Today we were on our way to have lunch, which was one of my mother's all-time favorite things to do. Especially if I was skipping school.

These lunches usually consisted of large quantities of French onion soup and salad, or sometimes cashew chicken and egg rolls. No matter what the food was, the company and conversation was always good. These were the times that my mother and I talked about important things. Like her tumultuous past. Or my latest dilemma. Or about why it was imperative that I go to college.

After we finished eating, we would sit and sip coffee and smoke cigarettes while we talked. Mom always treated me like an adult.

I looked back to my humming mother. She looked at me with pea-green eyes from behind her pink-rimmed glasses. The white of the cotton turban around her head made her eyes look brighter than usual. Her face was round like the moon, a side effect of the steroids. She smiled at me, and without looking away, ground her cigarette

with its two-inch ash into the ashtray. She put her hand on my thigh and patted it, still humming.

It had been about two weeks ago that we found out that her radiation treatments weren't working as well as we had hoped. Since the cancer had spread from her lungs to her brain and lymph nodes she had been deemed a terminal patient. We didn't really know how long she had.

"Oooh, Julia, listen to the words of this song," she said as her manicured hand turned the volume knob on the radio. "Listen."

I was feeling like I should humor her, even if I didn't care for the music. I focused my ear on the woman singing.

I recognized the artist at once. It was Celine Dion. Definitely not my favorite. But I listened anyway.

Celine sang:

... You gave me wings and made me fly

You touched my hand I could touch the sky

I lost my faith you gave it back to me

You said no star was out of reach

You stood by me and I stood tall

I had your love I had it all

I'm grateful for each day you gave me

Maybe I don't know that much

But I know this much is true

I was blessed because I was loved by you...

"I don't think this is a song about a man and a woman," my mother told me. "I think this is more like a song to a mother."

I saw the tears welling in her eyes, and I knew she was thinking of her own mother. My grandma had died the summer before. She and my mother had been very close.

I thought about what my mother had said. I listened hard to the chorus of the song.

....You were my strength when I was weak

You were my voice when I couldn't speak

You were my eyes when I couldn't see

You saw the best there was in me

Lifted me up when I couldn't reach

You gave me faith 'cause you believed

I'm everything I am

Because You Loved Me...

My mother had always been my best friend. I could come to her with even the most embarrassing problems. She encouraged me to dream and to follow my dreams; she supported me in every decision I made, even the ones she thought were wrong.

My mother had always been my champion. She had always been there to stand up for me when I couldn't stand up for myself. My mother gave the best advice. She knew me better than I knew myself.

She also gave the best back scratches and the best French braids.

We were so close. All I had to do was smell her familiar scent of Gloria Vanderbilt bath powder mixed with her own unique fragrance, and I was comforted.

I knew my safety net would soon be gone.

I tried to be brave, but I didn't know if I could handle it alone.

I had wanted to ask my mother something, but until now I had been too shy to broach the subject.

“Mom?”

“Hmmm?”

“When you die, will you ask God if you can be my guardian angel?”

She pause for a moment, swallowed hard. She looked at me and tilted her head to one side. I never noticed it until then, but I realized that she always cocked her head like that when she was making a promise.

“Of course I will, baby, of course I will.”

I did lose my mother about six months later. Seeing her body deteriorate before my very eyes was the most difficult thing I think I will ever go through. I hated to watch my beautiful, strong and courageous mother suffer.

I am glad, though, that we knew she was going to die. I got to tell my mother everything I wanted her to know. She got the opportunity to tell me what she wanted me to know. We got to talk about how I should handle things once she was gone.

My mother has been gone now for five years. Sometimes I feel like she was just a dream, like she never really existed at all. Even my memories are starting to get foggy.

But I always come back to reality. I realize that I had an incredible mother. I couldn't have *chosen* a better mother, even if I only got to have her for eighteen years.

Because it had meant so much to her, I made sure that that song was played at her funeral.

My mother has written on more of my pages than anyone. She has written about love, life, anger, art, music, self-esteem, being a fighter, and finding a way to be happy no matter your situation, among thousands of other things.

On this day my mother taught me about death. She taught me that it could be bittersweet. Bitter because death is loss and loss hurts, sweet because loss makes you appreciate what you have, and in our situation, we had the opportunity to appreciate our relationship while we still had it.

Lightning

Last night I stood barefoot on my front porch and stared at the sky. About once every minute, the sky would light up, a warning to the coming storm. I couldn't sit down or go back inside. The concrete felt cool and smooth beneath my naked feet. My eyes were glued north. This is where I had seen the most and best activity.

All of my life I have been drawn to lightning. My favorite place to be during a thunderstorm is near an open window or outside on porch. I will stare at the gray sky and watch the phenomenon for hours. I will watch storms during the day, but at night, the show is really spectacular.

I leaned against a porch column, eyes transfixed to the dusty clouds, and let the wind blow my hair around my face. The hairs on my arms were standing at attention, and the humid air made my skin feel sticky. It hadn't yet quite started to rain.

I realize that storms, and especially lightning, can be dangerous. But when I see the sky glow and then sputter out like a candle in the wind, I have no thoughts of the danger. Storms can be unpredictable. Some can turn deadly. As the sky rips open to reveal the jagged silver

tentacles reaching for the earth, I don't worry about the unknown future. I am fascinated.

The bellow of thunder vibrated the step beneath my feet. I felt a chill shimmy up my neck. I stared at the sky and waited. One one thousand, two one thousand, three... There it was. Eerie light chased itself across the black canvas, splitting off into three different directions. Just as quickly as it appeared, all of the craggy lines disappeared at once.

I realized that I had been holding my breath. I let out a sigh, and thought of James.

Eight months before I had been desperately struggling with myself. I wanted to leave my boyfriend of three years. I didn't think I had the strength to do it. Suddenly, life gave me an incentive.

Michael and I were at a friend's house. I sat on the couch next to my boyfriend, holding a purring kitten. I was bored and frustrated with Michael. He was drunk and acting the fool again. I knew if I tried to go home, he would put up a fight. I was in no way motivated to cause a scene.

The front door opened. Three people walked in. I never even noticed the other two. I stared openmouthed for a split second. I

caught myself and looked down at the kitten. I was pretty sure I had just seen the most perfect looking man I had ever seen.

He was tall, with curly dark hair and soft eyes the color of coffee. They were framed by thick black lashes. His lips were full and sensual. I had a sudden urge to put the tip of my finger in the center of those beautiful lips.

I was in shock as he stopped directly in front of me and knelt down. He raised his hand and gently scratched the kitten behind his ears.

“Hi,” he said.

I manage to look at him for a split second.

“Hi,” I repeated, quickly looking down again.

“Julia?” He said. I wondered how he knew my name. This time, I fully looked at him.

“Do I know you?”

“James. Remember, we went to elementary school together.”

I suddenly remembered. He had always been a quiet kid. I always remember him being very smart. I never expected him to look like this. I smiled.

“Oh hi!” I cooed. We started chatting. He told me that he was getting ready to graduate from college. He was also in a band.

“We’re playing a show this weekend. You should come.” He gave me the name of his band’s website.

James said goodbye and left with his friends. Michael wanted to play “Twenty Questions About James.” I was too tired. I ignored him until he said he wanted to go home.

I couldn’t stop thinking about James. Just remembering him made the hair on my arms rise. I felt hot and flushed. From that moment, I could concentrate on nothing else.

Later that week I went to his band’s website. I sent James an e-mail. In it an unusually bold move for me, I asked him if he wanted to have dinner. He wrote back and said yes.

I suddenly didn’t feel so bad about leaving Michael. My attention wasn’t on him anymore. I wrote him a letter, too. In this one, I told him that I didn’t want to be with him anymore.

James and I started dating. We had a whole world of things in common. We liked the same music and movies. We both made nightclubs our regular haunts. We were both passionate and independent. Something big was brewing here.

Just when I was sure things were getting serious, the sky broke open. James announced that his ex-girlfriend of four years had cancer. He felt the need to be there to support her through her therapy. He said he still had feelings for me.

“I have my preferences, Julia, but I also have my obligations.”

I had to respect his decision to stop seeing me. I cried for days. I couldn't eat or sleep. I even missed Michael. The pain that I had caused him months before finally hit me, because I was now going through it. I was crushed, but there was nothing I could do.

I may have respected his decision, but he didn't. He called when he missed me. We were still spending time together.

For the first time in my life, I was the other woman.

The thought bothered me. If his girlfriend had ever found out, a very sick young girl would have been heartbroken.

I also wondered if James was toying with me. What if, instead of his girlfriend's heart, it was mine that was broken?

I had all of these feelings, but I still couldn't help it. I was transfixed. I knew it was wrong. So why did I say “yes” to touring with his band over a holiday weekend?

I knew there was danger, but for some reason, I couldn't avoid it. I knew that this situation was unpredictable, but I didn't take myself out of it. I was walking into the heart of a tornado. I was spellbound. I didn't care if I made it out in one piece or not, just like when I was watching a lightning storm.

I sat on the steps and watched the lightning show. It comforted me. I watched for so long that I fell asleep. I was awakened by the cool rain licking my bare feet.

James wrote on my pages, but I don't think he ever meant to. I don't think he thought about it, or cared.

I'm still trying to figure out most of the things he wrote. But some things I have already deciphered.

Because of James I know now just how selfish people can be. I know that people can walk around with a heart beating in their chest, but that doesn't mean that they feel emotions.

James offered me a hard lesson on just how cruel the world can be.

Jenifer

“We’ve been wondering what’s going on with you. Why didn’t you call?”

It was hard to explain myself between sobs, but I tried anyway. “I j-just wanted to get h-home and I talked to Daddy and I’m n-never gonna get out of Alabama and I’m so ALONE!” My mouth contorted out of control on the last word and my sobs gave into my hyperventilating breaths.

“I know, baby, just calm down. Do you want me to come get you?” My niece sounded concerned.

The knot was still in my throat and I still couldn’t breath, but I started to feel just the tiniest bit better.

Somehow I got the words past the knot. “Meet m-me. It’ll be faster.”

“I’m on my way.”

Those were the words I needed to hear to get me off the pay phone at the gas station on the side of the highway in Nowhere, Alabama and back behind the wheel of my Grand Am.

Broken hearted and palsy-handed, I maneuvered my car back onto the road. It was just after 8:00 am on a Saturday, Memorial Day weekend to be exact, and I just wanted to be home.

What had started out to be the chance of a lifetime, one of those wild times in your life that you later tell your grandchildren about, had turned into a nightmare.

I had been seeing James for about 9 months. He was sexy, smart and talented. His band had just been signed by a record company and required the guys to go on a short four-venue tour.

My friend Chelsea and I had been thrilled when he asked us to go with them for the weekend.

My relationship with James had never been solid. It had been fraught with an ex-girlfriend with cancer, groupies and my own insecurities.

Despite my intuition telling me that James would never settle down and be a real boyfriend, I had fallen in love.

Hard.

With someone who surely didn't love me.

The guys had a radio interview in Memphis on Thursday. Chelsea had to work that night and I had to go to class, so the plan

was to leave in the middle of the night and meet them in Memphis some time in the wee hours of the morning.

The lead singer of the band had a cousin in Memphis, and we had all been invited to crash at her house until after the Friday night show.

That night I drove five hours to see someone who lives five minutes from me. Imagine my surprise to find him passed out in bed with a naked woman.

I was in shock. I didn't wake him up. I didn't leave. I went into the living room, found myself an empty patch of carpet and a blanket and went to sleep.

I met Dana when I woke up in the morning.

The woman James had chosen to betray me with was beautiful in every way. She was slender yet curvy. She had soft brown eyes and dark auburn hair. To make matters worse, she was nice.

James had told her that some "friends" were coming down to meet them. He had made no mention that he and I were an item. Maybe in his mind, we weren't.

He had nothing to say for himself. When I asked him about why he had slept with her (especially when he knew I was on my way!) he just shrugged.

He wanted nothing more to do with me, that much was obvious. He was so enamored with Dana that he rarely took his eyes off her.

I was so stunned that this information took a little while to sink in. I hung around and waited for his attention to come back to me. I guess I should have paid more attention to the signals he was sending me, because by Friday night, he had started to be cruel.

He said, "Don't you get it, Julia? I don't want you. I'm done with you. I never really wanted you to come down here in the first place."

We all have those moments in life when we wish we had acted differently. This one is at the top of my list.

After the show that night our entourage headed to Florida for the second show. I was so heartbroken (not to mention drunk) that I acted the psycho.

.....

Alabama is the most boring state to drive through even if you're not heartbroken, alone, ashamed and 1,000 miles from home with no tail lights, no cruise control, a sprained right ankle and a cell phone that someone had left in a wet cooler.

I look back at those long hours I spent on the highway by myself and I know that I have seen a part of hell. By all rights, I should have never made it home.

I'm sure my mother was in the passenger seat. My body felt shaky, my head felt numb and my stomach felt sick. I was such a jumble of emotions that I probably just didn't notice.

If I thought about how James had treated me or the awful things he had said to me, or if I thought about how I had freaked out (jerking the steering wheel out of Dave the drummers hands, trying to jump out of the car on the highway) or about how they had all (including Chelsea) left me on my own at a gas station in Pensacola to take off in a strange city on foot, I would have gone mad. I knew I had to concentrate on something else.

I had to concentrate on something that would get me to my niece. Being with Jenifer would make me at least feel like I could breathe.

.....

I was born an aunt.

From time to time I meet other people whose families are twisted in such a way, but most of the time when I explain to people that my niece is older than me, I'm met with confused looks and a "how did that happen?" or two.

And I always explain it like this:

"My mother had her first daughter the day after her sixteenth birthday.

Two years later, she had the twins.

"When the twins were sixteen, Anita, the older twin, gave birth to my niece, Jenifer. Three years later, my mother had me."

People always smile and nod their head and say, "Ahhh..." Sometime I think they still don't get it.

But people not understanding it doesn't make Jenifer any less my niece.

Or me any less her aunt.

When we were children, Jen was bigger, stronger, faster and smarter than me. The three years she had on me automatically made

her the boss. Therefore, she could be mean to me whenever she wanted to.

I made it really easy for her because I worshipped everything about her.

I wanted to look like her. I felt like the ugly duckling because I didn't have her blonde corkscrew curls or her bright blue eyes or the deep dimple in her cheek.

I wanted a Cabbage Patch doll just like hers, with long red hair and pants with suspenders. I wanted a purple two-wheel bike like hers, with no training wheels.

I wanted clothes just like hers.

Occasionally we would get shoes or jackets that matched. Jen hated this. She didn't want me copying her.

She didn't want me to follow her around the neighborhood when I spent the night at her house and she didn't want to sleep in my room when she stayed at mine.

She bossed me around when we played "house" or "Barbies," and always made me be the husband or have the doll with all of its hair chopped off.

But I didn't care.

Although I had three big sisters, they were so much older than me that to fight or argue with me would have been ridiculous. While I loved them and looked up to them, I didn't idolize them like I did Jenifer.

For all the times she was mean to me (and I'm sure I did my fair share of egging it on) there were times when we had no one but each other. The vacations with my mom and dad, when we were each other's only playmates, for example. Or the time when we both had the chickenpox, and no other parents wanted their kids to be around us.

The older I got, the more Jen seemed to like me. I remember when she was thirteen and I was ten. She was having a slumber party, and her and all of her friends were going to the skating rink.

My sister had made her invite me to the sleepover, which meant that I got to go skating, too. I'm sure Jen's motives weren't entirely unselfish when she put me in her cool clothes, styled my hair (she used A LOT of hairspray) and put make-up on my face. I'm sure she didn't want to be seen by all her popular friends at the skating rink with her nerdy ten-year-old aunt.

But that night, I wasn't the pest. I did my best to act older, to act thirteen. I didn't talk much lest I betray my true age.

Jen introduced me to boys she went to school with. "This is my aunt Julia," she'd say. "She's thirteen. Isn't she pretty?" She looked at me with such pride that night. She glowed. I did, too.

I think that's the first time she ever really liked me.

That night was the beginning of a pattern that would repeat itself for many years.

I was a shy kid, and I didn't make friends or boyfriends easily. The one's I did make sensed some kind of weakness in me and didn't stick around for long.

But Jen did. I've never met any sixteen-year-old girls willing to go pick up a thirteen-year-old and take her to party, but that's what Jen did. She took me everywhere she went until I found my own way to make friends and have a social life. That meant she took me on dates with her, to parties and just out bumming around.

Back then there was nothing I loved more than riding in her Ford Tempo in the summertime. We'd have the windows all the way down and the radio all the way up, blasting Rush or Snoop Dog or

Pantera (our musical tastes varied widely back then). We'd drive around till our midnight curfew.

I idolized her so much that I followed her to college. She was a senior and I was a freshman. I had just lost my mother, and I had been incapable of making a decision about where to go to school. So I used her decision as my own and went where she did. I trusted her judgment when I couldn't get mine to work.

Over time, we grew to be true friends. Oh, we probably never would have been had we not been related, but I always knew that I could count on her.

And I was counting on her now. I was counting on her to rescue me.

.....

I would have cried with relief when I reached the Tennessee border, but my tears hadn't stopped since I'd woken up in the motel room in Alabama that morning.

I pulled over at a gas station to use the pay phone. I called Jen on her cell.

"I'm in Tennessee," I told her.

“We’re in Illinois,” she said. She had brought a friend with her to drive my car so I could ride with her.

“What should I do?” With my cell phone not working, it was hard to determine a central meeting place.

“Stop and call every fifty miles,” she told me. “I think we’ll probably meet some place in Kentucky.”

I started to sob into the phone again. Kentucky? I was only in Tennessee!

“Don’t worry, Jul, Tennessee is a skinny state.”

I knew that in order to keep myself sane, I had to keep driving.

.....

And that’s what I did. I kept driving. And I stopped every fifty miles to call Jen’s cell phone. Every time I called her, I knew that she had also driven another fifty miles. Every fifty miles for me was another hundred miles closer to being with my family.

By the time we caught each other in Paducah, Kentucky, I had cried all the tears I could squeeze out. I leaned limp against her in the parking lot of the Amoco station and sobbed dry tears.

She put me in her car. She handed me a bottle of water, two Aleve for my ankle and a Xanax for my heart.

Then she leant me her ear and her shoulder all the way back to St. Louis.

For the first time in over twenty-four hours, I got to really tell someone what had happened to me. Someone who loved me even though I had flipped out and who was on my side no matter what I told her.

I finally felt safe.

Even though we we're still a couple of hundred miles from St. Louis, I felt like I'd finally made it home.

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As far as I'm concerned, Jen can write on my pages any time she wants to. I know that anything she writes she writes with love.

One of the things she has written: "You can't help who you are related to, but sometimes you get lucky."

Another: "I'm your biggest fan."

How lucky can a girl get?

Epilogue

My book is not finished.

My book does have a lot written in it, but it is nowhere near complete.

There are new characters. My future husband has only just picked up his pen; he hasn't shown yet what he is going to write, but I'm betting that it will be good. I've made some new friends. Only time will tell if they are made of the same stuff that Rachel is.

Though my father is getting older, he still isn't finished writing. The truth is that none of my characters are finished with me yet, except for James. He does not get another chance to write on my page. I cannot allow it.

Even Michael got a second chance. He turned out to be a pretty good friend. We have a great relationship now, as long as we don't date.

The difference between the two is that Michael cared enough to be psychotic. James didn't care at all.

I look forward to what other people will write on my pages. What will my children teach me, or their children?

Perhaps mine is a book with no ending. My children will surely contribute to my ever-growing ream of written pages, but I will begin theirs.

End the end, aren't their books just an extension of my own?

DATE OF BIRTH: 10/15/34

PLACE OF BIRTH: [illegible]

ADDRESS: [illegible]

EDUCATION: [illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE: [illegible]

[illegible]