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2010

## Why Moms Drink

Anne Freeman

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Why Moms Drink

Anne Freeman

An abstract presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing.

## Abstract

The personal narratives and poems contained within this thesis explore one of the most primal and powerful relationships in the human experience, that of a parent and child. As a mother of a young boy, I have found, and continue to find my greatest strength, sorrow, and inspiration in watching him grow.

The collection as a whole does tell a complete story, although not necessarily a chronological one. It is strongly influenced by the creative non-fiction work of David Sedaris. Like Sedaris, these essays portray everyday family relationships, often in less-than-flattering ways. In a similar style, these essays do not seek sympathy or adoration for the narrator, merely the recognition of a shared, honest experience.

Why Moms Drink

Anne Freeman

A Culminating Project presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Writing.

COMMITTEE IN CHARGE OF CANDIDACY

Department Chair, M. Beth Mead, MFA  
Chairperson and Advisor

*In dedication to my Mom who showed me what it is to be a good mother, and  
to my son for loving me anyway.*

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## Introduction

I don't remember ever wanting to be a writer. In middle school I wanted to be a Supreme Court Justice, but my mom says my very first career choice was when I was six and wanted to be a life guard. I came close to wanting to write when I went to college (the first time) and hoped to major in Journalism. When I finally finished my degree ten years later, it was in Human Resources.

It wasn't until I took Creative Writing as the last elective for my undergraduate, that I every really considered writing. What I thought would be an "easy" last class, turned into a never-ending, nagging voice compelling me to sit in a quiet room, or more often, to neglect my "real work" at my secretarial job, and search for the right phrase, or perfect verb.

After a few assignments, I realized I gravitated towards the same topic, over and over again – my son. I was told to write about what I knew, and besides excel spreadsheets and white wine, what I knew best was my son, Ben. When I would try to push myself to write something new, I would end up writing about other people's children in what amounted to little more than thinly-veiled autobiography of my own experiences. On more than one occasion I modeled my main characters after myself, only to be told that it read like the main character had an "unhealthy obsession" with her child. I suppose the truth can hurt.

Eventually, I learned that to write my own story, under the guise of a fictional character named Jane or Marie was not only dishonest, but cowardly.



To write my own, brutal, often unflattering emotions takes a courage I still struggle with.

The essays and poems in this collection attempt such honesty. They aren't about any spectacular events, nothing heroic or worldly, just the everyday human experience of being a child of questionable parents, and the faulty mother of an exceptional child.

One of my major failings as a mother is my lack of keepsakes as my son has grown up. I did buy a baby book before he was born, but as a single parent for the first two years of his life, I never seemed to find the time to fill out a single page. While I do own a digital camera, I generally don't print out any pictures. Some I have managed to save, mainly because I have emailed them to other people. But most stay on the memory card for a few months, until they are deleted to make room for a tree after an ice storm or another Christmas morning. While I have heard of scrap booking, as far as I know it is only for mother's who don't work during the day and have enough discretionary income for nine different pairs of scissors.

To make things worse, there are long pauses in my memory. My therapist claims that fluctuating levels of serotonin can affect memory. Perhaps this is why most of the time from ages fifteen to twenty-three in my own life are fuzzy. This creates challenges when writing personal essays, often causing long gaps in time. However I can say that the events contained within this body of work are as accurate as I can recall, or at least the truth as I experienced it.

Despite poor memory of my own childhood, I had thought I would remember every breath Ben ever took. But as he gets older, things blur. Did he walk at eight months or nine? Was his first word really *ball*? Did I meet my husband when he was two or three?

To my credit, there is one way I have managed to chronicle important moments in my son's childhood. I have written about them. It is these moments that comprise, in part, this body of work.

The moment I realized my son was no longer a little boy is captured in "From the Stands," as I watch him during baseball practice from the side of the field outside his school. Likewise, his first day of Kindergarten is frozen for me in "The Peach Tree." Finally, I can still feel heaviness I felt the night Ben and I watched fireworks in my back yard, the day after my friend's son was deployed to Iraq, when I re-read my poem, "Four thousand, three hundred twenty four." (The title comes from the number of soldiers that had died in Iraq as of the time I wrote the poem.)

The other pieces in this thesis come from various points in my childhood. "The Red Blanket" is probably the earliest memory I have of my own mother, and it is the night before my step-father entered an alcohol treatment program. (He remained sober from that night on.)

"Crab dip, Chardonnay, and a Capri Sun," forced me to remember parts of my past, and in a sense, re-live them. It details the relationship I had with my natural father and the forgiveness I learned after I too became a flawed parent.

While most of the essays revolve around what it is to be a parent, admittedly there are some that are more self-focused. I did debate whether or not a piece about my own vanity and self image belongs in a collection focused mainly on parent-child relationships. However, after seven years of living for my child, I have begun to realize that I didn't stop existing the day he began. Much of being a strong parent lies in the ability to be more than just a mother, a topic that I explore in "Plastic."

The final essay in the collection, "Admittance", explores the ever-present sense of mortality that parents feel as their children grow older.

"Why Moms Drink" is my attempt to understand what it means to be a mother, a daughter, and a woman - all at the same time, or at least, what it has meant for me. I have tried to capture the joy and simultaneous terror that comes with bringing a child into the world and watching helplessly as slowly, day by day, I loose him to the world in tiny, but unending ways.

## Ferocity

No one get's killed. My husband's alarm wakes me in time. But moments before, I'm on a school bus crossing over the Daniel Boone Bridge. Why I am on a bus with my entire family and why there is white toxic foam in the water, eroding the bridge, I have no idea. But I am the first one who realizes the bridge is collapsing. We are falling into the water.

As I search for an errant shoe, one leg in my last pair of buff beige pantyhose, my husband, half asleep, asks *what's the hardest part about being a woman?* I know he is thinking pantyhose and pointy shoes but I try to explain about the dream. How just as the bus plunged into the water, I looked at my son and calmly said *you are going to be ok.*

And how I awoke terrified, certain I would have abandoned, trampled, drowned everyone else to get Ben out of that bus, out of the water.

### From the Stands

He looks so small in this wide grassy field next to the two-story brick school. I stand in the shade of young trees, nod my head and pretend to listen to the other machine-pitch moms talk about ADHD and the caloric count of flat bread. The sound makes me turn my head, and I see the ball Mikah hit falling in a perfect arc toward my son on third base. *Where did that serious look come from, his face silent, eyes aimed upward?*

It can't have been so long ago that I rocked him in the kitchen, back and forth in front of the open freezer because the cold air on his face distracted him, made him forget about his achy gums. Now, even in the seven o'clock sun, I can still see that blonde streak of hair on his head, the only part that's still the pale blonde I remember. He looks up, pulls his hands from their resting place on his knees, and holds his glove over his head.

I'm a good team-parent. I bring enough snacks for everyone. I know all the kid's names. I clap when they hit the ball, and when they don't. But at this very moment, Ben is the only kid on the field.

He is the only kid ever, and I realize I don't want him to catch that ball. I want him to be suddenly distracted by a plane, or some dragonflies. I want him to be staring at ants in the dirt like Joe Jacobi in left field, not this athletic, resolute third-baseman. I want to wish it all away, the parents, the cleats, that ball, and for him to run over to me, and wrap hands that smell like dandelions around my neck.

But I know at the same time, I don't exist to him – nothing does. It's just him in the grass and that ball, falling, falling, and landing in his open glove.

“Did you see me mom?” he mouths as the next batter takes the plate. His eyebrows are raised, hands back on his knees.

I smile back. “Yes, Ben. I see you.”

## The Red Blanket

I don't remember the beginning of my red blanket. Time behaves differently for six year olds, so I assumed things like red blankets, mothers and slotted spoons had always and would always exist unchanged in the world. Since then I have had a series of complex relationships with countless other blankets, but red was my first, which carries its own weight of distinction.

Red was an unusually thin blanket. This made it ideal for building forts and wrapping up toys, but it was suspiciously cold for a blanket. On a Cartesian plane of bedding, with sheets being at one end, and duvets on the other, red would have fallen right in the center, directly at zero, at the beginning. But my mother made my bed with the red blanket on top of my rainbow bright sheets, so I always assumed Red was a blanket after all. Further evidence as to red's status lay in the soft, raised ridges that ran through out. I decided that while it is possible to have a very thin blanket that is consistently cool to the touch, it would be unheard of to have a thick, textured sheet on top of one's bed.

One night in fall, I remember thinking what a clever six year old I was to have thought this out so meticulously and carefully. I wanted to run into Chris, my older brother's, room and impress him with my new found conclusions. I climbed out of bed and tied Red around my neck like a cape. The bare floor was cold; it felt electric on my naked feet. My hand was on the doorknob when I heard my parents in the hallway.

Something made me stop. The words were wrong, out of place somehow, like they belonged in someone else's hallway in someone else's house. I left the

door open ever so slightly and silently crept back to bed. My Step-Dad was laughing, but the laugh was ugly and thick and it made my stomach hurt. I brought Red all the way over my head, and wished it had been thicker so I wouldn't have heard the yelling and the yelling and the yelling and the sharp thud of something large hitting the floor.

Then it was quiet.

It was quiet for a very long time. My door opened and I saw my mother's silhouette. Neither one of us spoke. With a wet face, she gently scooped me out of bed. She carried me down the mud stained stairs to the front door, with Chris sleepily trailing behind. I saw my Dad, who was really my Step-dad, but had been called Dad from my earliest memory, sitting on the end of the couch holding his head in his hands.

"Jude, wait...I'm sorry," he said softly.

I remember thinking he must have said it too quietly, because my mom kept walking as if there had been no words at all. She didn't hear me either, when I whispered in her ear to ask where we were going. She merely exhaled softly and tightened her grip around me as we spilled out into the moonlight. We crossed the parking lot to our neighbor's apartment. I put my head down on her shoulder and fell asleep with Red still tied around my neck, flapping in the night wind.



### Crab Dip, Chardonnay, and a Capri Sun

His arrivals were like air raids; my mom would only give us an hour's notice. It never occurred to me she might have known much further in advance, but didn't want to tell us until she was sure he would show up. My brother and I would scramble, packing Uno Cards and G. I. Joes while my mom searched frantically for Calamine lotion and extra socks to cram into our backpacks.

From Chris's window, we could see the parking lot. Neither one of us would admit we were looking for his car. Instead, we would flip through old Sears catalogs and circle toys we wanted. Walt, our birth-father, didn't send Christmas or birthday gifts, but when he passed through town, he was good for a trip to the mall on the way to Grandpa's house. The only time I saw a real hundred dollar bill in the 80's was when my dad was pulling one out of his wallet.

I almost always picked out a cabbage patch doll with an Eastern European sounding name like Nadia or Anastasia. Inevitably, my brother would leave Nadia out in the sun, so her face would get soft enough for him to smash and then freeze into a contorted position. My entire collection of adopted dolls looked like they had suffered some horribly unfortunate farming accident.

After a while, we would give up any pretenses and stare out the window, backpacks over our shoulders, pressing pages of the Sears book into our chests. We would guess what color his rental car would be this time. I always picked blue. Chris would promise he'd leave my next doll alone, and I would believe him. Waiting for our Dad always made us both a little too hopeful.

Our grandparents lived two hours southwest of St. Louis in a town called Cuba. Despite the "*Viva Cuba*" flags on each of the seven light posts in town, I still didn't consider Cuba to be a real town. There was no McDonalds - the only restaurant was the Kum N Git It Buffet. I used to look for other seven year olds as we'd drive through town, expecting them to be wearing bonnets and holding dolls made out of corn husks. I was able to appreciate the gradual changes in the town as it grew, the way someone who hasn't seen a child in a year notices how much taller she has gotten.

On the way to Cuba, I would sit in the back seat listening to National Public Radio, and silently count how many hours I would have left with my dad. Chris and I didn't know when our dad would come back, but I knew I had the next forty-two hours promised to me. Like a squirrel stashing away a walnut under a bush, I was compelled to sear every moment to my memory. If I could remember the way the clouds looked like fish, his sunglasses in the console between the seats, the black leather jacket he was wearing, or damp smell of the jeep, I wouldn't starve the next winter.

Dad liked to take the back roads to Cuba. "It's more scenic than the highways," he would say in-between static on the radio. Secretly, I preferred the highways, with the even, straight roads, the eighteen-wheelers and the Meramec Cavern billboards. The back roads made me hot and sick.

I would fall asleep about 30 minutes into the trip. Most of the time I would have the same dream--I had waited all day in line for a roller coaster, and then half-way through the ride I'd realize I didn't have a seat belt on. There was nothing holding me in.

My aunt Sara called me on a Tuesday night and told me she had a surprise for me. It was odd for her to call me; we normally didn't see her unless my dad was in town. Unusual or not, I was excited. I didn't mind going to her house, which is the highest compliment a fifteen year old is capable of. Aunt Sara had a huge kitchen and hundreds of magnets in the shape of states or tiny appliances on her refrigerator. When we visited she would make mini rye bread pizzas, little smokies, crab dip with wavy ruffles and whatever dessert had been featured on one of those magazines in the check out lane at Kroger's. She had one of those houses with two living rooms, one with formal looking blue and mauve Victorian furniture, the other with large overstuffed couches and a big screen television. Most of the time, we'd eat our rye bread pizzas from tray tables next to the overstuffed couches, but at Christmastime, we'd find them waiting for us on serving dishes next to the Victorian couches.

From the formal living room, you could see the balcony of the lofted master bedroom. I heard she had a Van Gogh up there, but I never asked to see it. There was just something about being in a house with appetizers on trays and the possibility of a Van Gogh upstairs; it was like I was on vacation from myself.

My brother drove us to Aunt Sara's the following Saturday. He'd had his driver's license for three years by then but I think it was only the second time I had ever been in his car. His arrival was similar to the way my dad would have picked me up, quick and silent. Chris didn't come in the house, either. I hadn't seen my brother in months, and I desperately wanted him to see how cool I was.

"I've been thinking about those little weenies all day. Do you think she remembered to make some?" I asked closing his car door.

He shrugged and turned up the radio. I could feel my *coolness* slipping away.

"Not that I care anyway," I said, trying to redeem myself. I didn't say anything for the rest of the trip.

When I walked in, I saw the crab dip in the fancy room. My dad was next to it. At my Aunt's request, he had parked up the street, so we wouldn't see his Jeep with the U-Haul behind it. She had wanted to yell, "Surprise" as we walked in the door. I imagine she had asked my dad to hide behind a couch with a noise maker and some confetti, all things he would have thought excessive.

Oddly, I don't remember much beyond the crab dip. I think I was happy he had moved back. I must have been.

"He was afraid to come home," Aunt Sara said later that night as we cleaned up the kitchen. "He was afraid you wouldn't forgive him."

I didn't understand what she meant by that. Years later, I would realize I shouldn't have given away my tickets to see *Les Miserables* because he wanted me to go to a Civil War Reenactment with him, or that I didn't need to pretend that I liked trout fishing and hated Walmart.

On the way out to Chris's car, my dad showed me where Orion was in the sky. It was the first and only constellation I would ever be able to find as an adult. Years later, I learned the light you actually see from stars is something that has already happened, millions of years ago. Some of the stars have changed since then, grown, shrank, even exploded, but that light hasn't reached us yet. I

still have a hard time with that. No matter how hard I try, I can't believe what I see isn't there anymore, that something that big could ever change.

I was going to sing in public. Based on the available attendance statistics for the St. Charles County Community College Theatre, there wouldn't be many people, but singing in front of even three of them made me terribly nervous. My character was a devoutly religious woman who sang hymns while working tirelessly in her husband's general store, somewhere in Kansas in the late 1960's. It wasn't really important, the director explained, that she sing well, she just needed to lift her voice unto the Lord.

After two rehearsals, my singing lines were cut down to one verse, and I was given a broom to use at the same time as I sang, hoping that the swooshing on the stage would somehow temper my voice. Still, whenever I would begin my song, I could see the directors' faces look down. "Do you think she could hum?" they would ask each other.

I had been involved in high school plays, but this was different. It was college theatre, it was real. People from the community would come, people other than just the student's parents and obligated English teachers. Standing backstage in the dark, I imagined myself in ten years, giving an interview to *The New Yorker*. "My favorite role?" I would say, "I guess that would have to be Mildred, from *The Diviners*. Sure it was back at this little community college in my home town, but it was a really powerful experience for me. I learned so much about myself from that role..." I'd go on and on and say the things terribly interesting people who live in studio apartments in the village say.

The show ran for three nights. My mom and step-dad came to opening night. The next night, my mom came again and brought my grandmother with her. Each night, after I took my bow, I'd get out of costume and hurry to the back door, where people waited to give their family members flowers and take pictures. On the second night, after I pretended to sign an autograph for grandma, I pulled my mom aside and told her she didn't need to come for closing night.

"You've got to be getting tired of this thing by now," I joked.

Closing night was a big deal in the theatre. It was the death, the director said, of this thing we had birthed. More people came to closing night, so the applause was louder. People would hug and cry backstage and the lead characters would tell people like me how much they enjoyed working with us, and how much they would miss us now that this was all over.

I think my mom would have come for the third night, but she understood why I didn't want her to come again. My dad was coming, and even though they had been divorced for 18 years, none of us had gotten to the point where they could sit next to each other in a dark auditorium and listen to me sing with a broom.

The following night the Community College theatre set a new attendance record, filling almost 60 percent of its seats. The lights were too bright for me to see where my Dad was sitting, but I was pretty sure he was enjoying the show. Having only moved back a few years ago, he had only been to one show I actually performed in during high school and that was my freshman year. I was shy then, and I'd been so quiet during that show, that afterwards he told me he couldn't

hear a word I had said. This time, I sang my verse loudly, "Rock of ages, crest for me, let me hide, myself in thee."

In the very last scene, a mentally retarded boy drowns, and my character is supposed to be frozen in horror as the townsmen are unable to save him from the river. I forced myself to stare at my shoes the entire time, unable to stop smiling. My Dad probably brought me roses, I thought to myself, not carnations or daisies like the other parents. He had lived near New York before he moved back home, so he would understand roses are expected on closing night.

The next day I had a message from my Dad. He had been antiquing that afternoon in Illinois and gotten a flat tire. By the time he got the tire changed and came home, he had already had a pretty bad day.

"I just decided to bag it and stay in last night," he said on my machine, "I'm sure the play went well."

It is very important to maintain internal consistency when you create your own world inside your head. It makes everything so much easier to understand. If I would have remembered the Christmases he missed, the birthdays, the dance recitals, the time I had the chicken pox, all things he missed, I wouldn't have been so surprised when I went out the back door and he wasn't there. I wouldn't have sat in the bathroom until everyone else had left the theatre. I wouldn't have decided that I never *really* wanted to be an actor anyway. I wouldn't have sung so loudly.

I waited until the waitress had brought my dad his third beer to tell him I was pregnant. I don't remember what he said after I told him. I wonder if he had

any idea, if he had noticed that I ordered water instead of Chardonnay I had known for over three months by then, too late for even him to suggest I have an abortion. Three months had also been the amount of time it took Ben's father to stop answering the phone.

Shortly after Ben was born, I realized how flawed human biology actually is. Reproduction requires an actual male only for a few minutes in a Motel 6, after that the miracle of life stomps forward, even if the male moves back in with his wife. I prepared myself the best I could. I read Virginia Wolf and Gloria Steinem and What to Expect the First Year. I washed and rewashed baskets full of onesies and gave up cigarettes, vodka and rare meat. Benjamin Orion was born at 3:33am with a birthmark identical to the one on his father's neck. When I was asked to fill out paperwork for his birth certificate, I left the "father" space blank.

"I will make this up to you," I promised him the day my brother picked us up from the hospital.

For something only slightly bigger than a bag of flour, Ben ate like a wide receiver. I was always feeding him, so I never slept more than an hour at a time. When an hour would go by and he didn't wake up, I would lie next to him and make sure he hadn't succumbed to SIDS. Sometimes I wasn't sure he was still breathing, so I would slap the wall behind his crib and then duck down so he wouldn't know it was me that woke him. When my neighbor complained of random loud wall pounding at night, I switched to tugging at his feet to make sure he was still alive, something I would do periodically for the rest of his childhood.

The priests started appearing when he was about two weeks old. They would sneak around my apartment and hide things like the remote control, my cell



phone or bottles. I could see their long dark robes out of the corner of my eye, but only for a second. They were very fast.

“They aren’t there to hurt me,” I told my doctor. “They are just trying to annoy me by moving things around.”

My doctor wrote me a prescription, which meant I would have to stop breast feeding. Formula bothered me more than the priests did, so I put the prescription away in a drawer.

A week later, I woke up and Ben’s eyes were faintly glowing red, a pitchfork-shaped tongue darted in and out of his mouth. I hid in the shower and listened to him cry until the morning.

Ben deserved more. I bought formula. I filled the prescription.

I don’t quite remember how it came about, why I decided I was going to till under a grassy spot behind my house and grow my own tomatoes. I can’t say I was ever overly fond of tomatoes or gardening or doing things in non-air conditioned places. My Dad was always the one that grew tomatoes, Big Boys, Romas, Cherry, all staked nicely in a plot of black soil behind his house. It would be nice to think I wanted my son to understand that food comes from the earth, that it isn’t made in the back room of a grocery store. A good mother would have wanted to teach these things to her son. A good mother would have bought seeds from a catalog and with his little hand, pressed them into the dirt next to a picture of a tomato, glued to an old Popsicle stick. But I am not that kind of mother. I am the kind of mother who lies in bed watching Law and Order

marathons on Saturdays and who most likely only planted tomatoes to compete with her father.

As I am apt to do, I became obsessed with my new undertaking. My plants had only been in the ground for 24 hours, when they were attacked by a large herd of hungry rabbits. Half of the leaves had been bitten off, and I was sure I could see bunny tracks in the dirt. Within the hour I was pulling back into my driveway with metal stakes and a roll of chicken wire tall enough to keep even a deer out.

I found a never-ending supply of tomato tonic recipes on the internet, and I studied at least 17 of them. I settled on one that called for, among other things, liquid dish soap and a 32 oz Pepsi. I sprayed this bubbly mess over plants every week. I sprinkled used coffee grounds around the bases of them every Saturday. I made my entire family eat a bag of oranges every week, so I could take the rinds, grind them in the blender and sprinkle them in the garden. The casual observer may have mistaken my garden for a compost pile, but I was confident in the advice I had gotten from reliable sources like Greenthumb54 and Tom\_Pro680. When I found out my Dad was only using Miracle Grow, I felt pleased that he couldn't have done as much research as I had.

"Just spray it on them once a week and give a good soaking every other evening, and let them be," he had told me.

When I alluded to my super secret formula, he nodded his head and smiled as if I was five years old again. I smiled along with him, another thing I am apt to do. That night, I bought some Miracle Grow too, just in case.

I imagined the conversation we'd have that August. We'd decide to plant fewer Romas next year, they just didn't have the flavor of the Big Boys, and we'd make plans to put a bunch of them up in a week or two.

"Maybe next year, you'll tell me how you grew them so fast," he would say.

It would be something we would be able to talk about. Something I had done better than him.

I intended to find Ben's baseball glove the night before, but after a bottle of wine and a bowl of cereal at midnight, it just didn't seem that critical. The next day I realized this was a poor decision on my part, leaving me tearing through my hall closet in search of the glove and yelling at Ben to hurry up and eat a pop-tart, seven minutes before his first night of Coach Pitch Baseball. I hate losing things, but no matter how hard I try to be organized, I am always searching for car keys, a shoe, static guard. When I can't find them I begin to panic and create more of a mess than I had started with. Half way through my glove rampage, I found a picture on the floor of the closet. It's a rare thing to find in my house, a real picture on glossy Kodak paper. When I can actually find my camera, and when I remember to take it somewhere, the pictures normally stay safely tucked within the memory card, until they are deleted for the next trip to the zoo or birthday party.

My Dad has always been interested in photography. I am told at one point in his life, he had his own dark room and developed rolls of 35 mm black and white film. I found some of those old pictures in the basement of my mom's

house. Tucked away in wet smelling boxes I've seen my older brother on a tractor, fishing, going to Disneyland. I found only two of myself, one where I am sitting like a blob on beanbag, the other I am wearing a crown of clover flowers on my head. The pictures he took end when I was two and Chris was six, as if that's all there was of us. He has a digital camera now, and most of the pictures he takes these days are of Ben - Ben eating shrimp lo-Mein, Ben as a pirate last Halloween, Ben eating cherry tomatoes out of his garden in the rain.

Pictures are odd, the way they make things real again. I stared at this one as it lay on the floor of the closet, almost afraid to pick it up, like it would crumble if I did. Ben must have been two at the time; I remember this because the blue and yellow jacket in the picture was a 2T. My Dad and Ben were sitting inside a playground fort, both of them laughing at something unknown. I don't remember why they'd gone to the park, just that when I picked him up he'd already had the pictures developed and tucked inside Ben's backpack.

I appreciate pictures are impartial. Flat. Neutral. But I am not a picture. My memory isn't always in focus, so I am forced to believe what I hold in my hand really did happen. This can be hard, because I don't remember my Dad as he is in the picture. I don't remember him ever wearing jeans, or fitting in small spaces, or looking to where a small finger pointed, or laughing or listening or showing up. I don't remember those things at all. Pictures are funny things. They make hope have weight. We are obligated to believe them, to believe things can change.

My dad and I sit next to each other in canvas chairs with Ben's half-empty Capri Sun and fruit snack wrappers between us. We watch as Ben walks up to the

plate. Ben's small tan arms raise the bat. As he focuses on the pitcher, his tongue peeks out of the corner of his mouth. I used to think he looked a lot like me as a child, but every day I see myself less. He is always smiling. His pink ears stick out from the batter's helmet. I remind myself to bring sun block next week.

"I do believe that kid has gotten taller since last week." my Dad says.

"I wouldn't doubt it. He has eaten every single Cherry tomato we've gotten, right off of the plant," I say laughing.

"Why don't you two come over this weekend, he can eat all of ours. Maybe we'll barbeque some..."

We are interrupted by the unfamiliar sound of a bat hitting a ball. I realize everyone is looking at Ben, who appears to be stuck to home base. He watches the ball roll past two kids who are looking for bugs in the outfield.

"Run," I say quietly.

"Run Ben, put the bat down and run!" I hear myself yell.

Ben looks up at me and smiles as his legs starts moving. My Dad straightens up in his chair and smiles as Ben passes first base. I stand up, knock over his Capri Sun, and applaud uncontrollably as his foot finds another base and another.

I watch him run, so fierce, so determined, and I wonder what he will remember about me. Will he remember the time I couldn't find his glove and he had to borrow a purple one from the other team's coach? Or the year I put him in a cheap daycare with the teacher that yelled? Will he remember the empty wine bottles in the trash, or the cigarette butts on the garage floor?

Or will he remember this moment, hearing my voice as his foot finds home.

## Plastic

“You want me do lip too?” she asked with a wand of hot wax poised over my face. Eyebrows I understood – there was nothing quite like the perfectly smooth arch of a freshly waxed brow. But my lip? I have seen women who could benefit from some type of facial depilation, but those were *other* women, mostly older and probably Eastern European. But *my* lip? The thirty-one year old lip on *my* pale Blonde face? Still, once asked, what other answer could there possibly be? *No thanks, leave the hair, I’m trying to grow it out?*

Later, I would whimper and chain-smoke my way home while my best friend would try to convince me that never once had she noticed a hair problem anywhere near my mouth. She was probably just trying to up sell, Tamma would argue, something I should appreciate given the sales job I was applying for. But inside the Fiji Nails that thought never occurred to me. I mumbled yes, as she was already smearing the wax around my mouth.

From the time I opened my first Barbie on my sixth birthday, I understood there were beautiful people and there were other people. But it wasn’t until high school that I realized I was the latter. Fortunately, by then I had friends, and they weren’t beautiful people either. We weren’t hideous, just plain as cake doughnuts. Those of us that had any boobs to speak of had bigger stomachs than chests. Our hair didn’t cascade around our shoulders in symmetrical blonde coils. When we wore make up it looked awkward and intentional, like we were using twenty year old Avon our mothers had thrown away. The beautiful girls were like

well packed, expensive suitcases, while I was a duffel bag full of gym clothes. Thankfully, there were only about seven beautiful people in the whole high school. Like the lottery, you knew your chances of being a winner were incredibly remote, so you didn't get upset when they didn't pull your numbers.

And then there was college. On the sprawling campus I'd see them everywhere—walking out of big white houses with pillars, holding cups of chai tea away from their New-Lady-Fitness bodies so as to not spill it on their pastel sweaters or tennis length skirts. Due to their sheer numbers it stood to reason that a few of them would end up in my dorm, but they all looked lost, like they were waiting for someone from Gap corporate to walk in and apologize for the mistake of putting them on the same floor as me. Me with the pierced eyebrow, streaks of manic panic purple and pink, and the size 18 bell bottoms I made myself by sewing blue velvet triangles into the legs of jeans my grandma gave me at Christmas.

I like to think I could have been beautiful. Maybe I just didn't want to. I didn't have extra appendages or mildew growing on my face, but beautiful was just a role I found too difficult to imitate. It was much easier to model myself after the girls that cut Spanish class to make hemp necklaces, slept through morning classes and got high in the agriculture department's green houses.

After college, earth-mother gave way to punk, which eventually grew up into comfortable shoes. Comfortable shoes worked for a long time, it got me through becoming a mother, finding a husband, and getting a job, until one of the beautiful people tapped me on the shoulder at work and told me there was an opening in the beautiful department—otherwise known as sales.

Clinical Laboratory sales doesn't really sell anything, at least nothing tangible like a car or pen. Instead they carry briefcases into doctor's offices and convince the staff how much better our laboratory tests are than another labs. They get doctors to order from us, and if they already do, they convince them to order more expensive tests. When sales does their job well, they are rewarded financially, which they spend on three dimensional highlights, trips to Sea World and new custom built shoe closets.

Sales was the sorority of the company, and I decided to pledge. After I had done all I could with my resume, I realized I needed to go all in. I needed to become one of the beautiful people—or as close to beautiful as a plus-sized thirty-something can with a Macy's credit card and 90 days.

"It's relatively simple as diets go," my mom explained, drinking wine at my dining table. "You eat less calories, and take a supplement. It makes you lose weight very fast, but it's administered by a doctor, so it's all perfectly safe." She then pulled out a fifty-two page document that explained the "relatively-simple diet" she would be starting next week. After pressing her for more details, I learned "less calories" meant 500 a day, "doctor" meant holistic chiropractor in a rural town two hours south of us and "supplement" meant Human Chorionic Gonadatropin—or HCG, the human hormone that increases during pregnancy.

"Pregnant woman urine? You are going to drink pregnant woman urine? And how could you possibly survive on 500 calories a day?"

"Don't be silly—it's just *made* from pregnant woman urine. And you don't drink it, you put it under your tongue. And it's worth it to lose a pound a day."



“A pound a day?”

A week later, I drove the two hours to the strip-mall-based “Healing Center” and learned just how much pregnant woman urine to put under my tongue and when.

The theory behind the HCG diet is that while you only eat 500 calories a day, taking the HCG allows your body to tap into its vast fat deposits in your mid section. At 279 pounds, I figured my body would have plenty to eat. My mother had been correct, the diet itself was very simple. There are only a handful of foods you could eat, and you ate them in small quantities, day after day, for a month. Yet for as little food as I ate, it was overwhelming to adhere to. I spent my evenings weighing exactly 100 grams of chicken breast and counting asparagus spears. I had to be ever vigilant not to accept a mint or piece of gum, or lick my finger when testing the temperature of my son’s Ramen noodles.

I’d lay in bed at night and imagine my body eating what it had stored over the years – things like the caramel Oreo cheesecake I ate the night I knew my son’s father wasn’t coming back, the gallon of Cherry Vodka I drank in my dorm room the morning I woke up and remembered having sex even though I’d said “no,” or the hostess cupcakes I ate one after another in the hospital parking lot the last time I saw my step-dad. All of these things I carried with me for years, safely tucked away in my hips and arm fat, but without anything else to eat, they would burn away. They wouldn’t exist anymore. I’d be beautiful.

Without the time consuming burden of actually having to eat food, I found lots of free time. This came in handy, as having lost forty pounds meant I’d need to buy new, slightly smaller, plus-sized clothes. My strategy was to find

something on sale, and then not leave the store until I had built an entire outfit around it. That way, I was saving money and ensuring what I bought wouldn't decay in the back of my closet.

"Isn't this a killer ring?" I'd say to my husband, dragging several bags out of the car. "It was on sale for \$4! Can you believe it? Oh, the rest of this stuff...well, I needed something to wear with the ring."

My dear husband remained supportive of me in my job change endeavor, but I began to suspect it was mainly because without my new salary, we'd have to sell our son to the neighbors to pay for my new fossil bag and ever growing mountain of shoes.

Having lost a little weight, and been given a tepid green light to spend money, the subject of style, specifically business-beautiful, became an obsession. At first, I assumed women dressed for men. Why else would we subject ourselves to thongs and bras made almost entirely of lace. Why bother with low cut tops and high cut skirts? Both are entirely impractical if you need to change a tire or serve snow cones at a PTO fair.

Then, one morning I dug one of my favorite shirts out from the recesses of my closet. Somehow it had ended up in between my son's fishing vest and the brown skirt I wore to my mom's wedding. It was a marvelous fade-free, silk-like polyester number with ornately patterned circles of browns and reds swimming in a black background. The sleeves were short enough to be spring appropriate, but long enough to hide residual arm fat. More than anything, I liked the shirt because it made me feel good. People noticed the shirt, and by proxy, noticed me. When

I walked downstairs that morning, I suddenly remembered why I didn't wear it anymore.

It wasn't that my husband said anything about the shirt, rather it was the lack of anything said that alarmed me. After years of marriage, Ron is enough of a morning person to realize that I am not. I am a lazy rat in a maze, and I need several small rewards to keep on going. Take away my cheese, and I'm likely to sit right down and chew on my tail. So, like a good husband who realizes the connection between me showing up to work and our mortgage getting paid, he provides me with my morning cheese. If I roll over after the alarm goes off, he'll scratch my back. When I get out of the shower, he'll put lotion on my feet while I fall back asleep. When I finally get dressed and emerge from the bedroom, I get a "You look cute today – where you going for cute?" Occasionally he'll glance at his watch and ask how long before I have to leave, implying some activity that would certainly mess my hair.

But the morning I bounced down the stairs in that shirt, all I got was "Can you see if Ben found socks yet?"

I waited.

"Can't find your keys?"

"No, wait maybe, but how do I look?"

"Fine."

I headed back upstairs and looked in the mirror. "Is it the pants? Are they too tight? Is the necklace too much?"

"It's the shirt," he said from the doorway.

“This shirt? This shirt that I am wearing?” I cross my arms over my chest, as if to keep the shirt from hearing him and becoming depressed. “I love this shirt.”

“It reminds me of something my mother wore. In the 70’s. I think she might have had that same shirt.”

“This is *last* season’s Lane Bryant.”

“Well it looked just like that.”

I had run out of time to start the outfit process over again, so I crawled out of the house in my dead mother-in-law’s shirt anyway. I drove off deflated, in search of an egg McMuffin, my next piece of cheese, which I would end up dropping on the shirt anyway.

Later that day, after I washed the McMuffin droppings out of it, I would be vindicated for wearing the shirt when four different woman complimented it. That’s when I realized women dress for other women, or at least they do at work.

Men might see the cleavage and calf skin, but they pay little attention to what is just beyond it. Maybe they see the black jacket or pink button up shirt, but do they notice the pink piping around the pocket of the jacket? Are they aware the red in our earrings is the exact hue of red in our bracelet, despite purchasing them separately *and* on sale? Perhaps men see the blonde highlights we paid too much for, but do they simultaneously notice the subtle yet oh-so-important chestnut low lights? This level of minutia is reserved strictly for women.

Other women notice these things, and if I’m lucky, they compliment me. I’ll smile, say thank you, and act like I hadn’t even noticed the flower on my shoe

complements the one on my ring. But inside, I secretly hope they are jealous. If I think there's the slightest chance they envy me, even for a second, I am thrilled. I am beyond thrilled – I am one of them. I am dancing.

One of the easiest things to get a compliment on is shoes. Unlike pants or sweaters, cute shoes come in all sizes. While trying to model my wardrobe after my beautiful co-workers, I began to notice their shoes. Specifically, I noticed mine were lacking.

A year ago, my husband forced me to see a podiatrist after having heard me complain, for the last time, about morning foot pain.

“Really, it's not that bad,” I'd say through clenched teeth, crawling into the bathroom, unable to put any pressure on the heel of my foot.

The real pain came later that day, as Dr. Young-and-Tan told me I had plantar fasciitis. “Basically,” he said, pointing to a diagram of a huge foot, “your feet can no longer support your body.”

He wrapped my foot in an elaborate piece of spandex, gave me some pills and told me I'd have to wear athletic shoes until I lost weight. After my body managed to eat 40 pounds of itself, I rejoiced as I uncovered my flat black loafers with the silver buckles from the trunk of my car. They had seemed sharp enough when I had picked them up at Target two years ago, but against a pair of red snake skin print stilettos with a pointy toe, or a bright yellow peek-toe wedge, I might as well have had Kleenex boxes on my feet. I went out and bought a pair of black pumps for \$140. On the well padded carpet of Macy's they were easy enough to maneuver, and felt oddly comfortable. Plus, they made my calves look 30% better. There is something about the promise of walking up in the morning, and

getting dressed, already knowing which shoes you will be wearing, and actually being able to find both of them.

The morning of interview #2, I wore the pointy-toed black pumps, and felt empowered as I sauntered to my car. I sang out loud to the radio on the way to work, even when I didn't know the words. Walking in to the building, my shoes echoed "you-rock-you rock-you-rock" all the way to my desk. However by noon, they turned on me. I kept a smile on my face as I walked cautiously down the hall after my interview, but I could distinctly hear my shoes whispering "die. die. die. die. die." I was ready to throw them away as soon as I got home, until on my way out, another sales rep complimented them.

"Cute shoes," she had said.

I apologized to my feet and drove straight to the mall and bought a pair in red and brown.

After clothes, shoes, and the painful, yet apparently necessary facial hair removal, there was the issue of finger nails. My own had grown to a decent length, no cracks or chips, so I figured I'd get them painted. I pretended to be engrossed in Wheel of Fortune as a young Vietnamese man painted the tips of my nails bright white. One the way home, I told myself they were pretty. I knew this was what pretty was, but still, the whole thing looked odd. Like little white flares at my fingertips. Three days later, the white paint chipped off. The remaining pieces of white only reminded me just how flawed my natural nail was. At lunch I ran to Walgreens, bought nail polish remover, and stripped them back to their dull nicotine yellow.

Before interview number three, I found a picture of the sales director, Mel. She was thin and tall, and had perfect acrylic nails wrapped around a glass of cabernet at last years Sales Holiday party. If I did make it to interview number four with her, I'd need to go plastic. It's not like I don't enjoy the unnatural perfection of acrylic nails. When I have them, I find I do more gesturing with my hands when I speak. I push strands of hair behind my ear while explaining that the temporary employee ID is actually just the last five digits of their social, or I'll point to something on the computer screen for an extended period of time. "See," I'll say, "this is the week of vacation she requested, this week right here, right where I am pointing."

As much fun as acrylic nails can be, they aren't terribly practical. While they should be great for scratching, they are acrylic mittens, too thick, too rounded to tackle even the weakest itch. Typing becomes loud, if not downright burdensome. If a piece of uncooked spaghetti falls on your kitchen floor, forget about trying to pick it up. Buttoning that pink sweater or putting on anything with a clasp becomes impossible. And should I find that mysterious errant hair growing out the side of my neck, just under my chin, it is impossible to yank it with those pretty white tips. Still, a beautiful woman adapts and overcomes. A brand new binder clip, angled precisely right can act as tweezers. A ruler can quite adequately scratch an itch. Until someone with silent shoes walks past your cubicle and finds you with a binder clip stuck to your neck, or a ruler down your pants. But at least your nails look nice, and there is no hair on your upper lip.

Eventually, I think I was able to come close to beautiful, but only in short bursts – like 50 yard dash beautiful. I gained 15 pounds in white wine and cheese

fries. I did manage to lose it, only to find it again in the cereal aisle. I bought countless tubes of lip gloss, in search of one that wouldn't disappear after my first drink of coffee. I chipped my nail on the way to Ben's little league, and lost my \$12 mascara somewhere under my bed. Every few days I was sitting in a place other than my house after work – waiting for the shoe clerk to emerge with a stack of boxes, waiting for the gel wrapped nails to dry, waiting for the highlights to develop. It became exhausting.

I should have learned something. I wanted to be able to call Tamma up and tell her I suddenly realized this beautiful thing was a bunch of shit, that I was offered the job not because of my shoes, but because I was the best person for the it. I wanted to tell her I was beautiful all along, that I had learned to be comfortable in my own skin. That never happened. I did get the job, and I still feel happier, more powerful in torturous shoes and glossy lips than I do when I wake up late and eek into work wearing jeans and tennis shoes. I wish these things didn't matter, that I was more than them. I am not.

I leave work thirty minutes early to get my chipped nail fixed. On the way there, I am on the phone scheduling my next in a never-ending barrage of hair appointments, when I remember I need to get a birthday present for the six year old girl next door. Maybe I'll get her a Barbie doll, plastic and impossible, so she too can grow up to learn what she is supposed to want, but will never find.



### Checked Baggage

It was a fortunate thing that I actually, truly love my husband. The truth is I would have married him anyway. I knew from our first conversation that he'd make an ideal father for my son. I wouldn't say I exactly chose Ben's birth-father, more that he was mother-natures idea of a joke after dollar pitcher night at a bar and sex at a motel-eight the evening I planned on breaking up with him. I wasn't really surprised when he stopped calling me after I told him I was pregnant.

"I don't care about falling in love anymore, just finding a good father for Ben," I told Tamma as we walked through Walmart.

She thought I was kidding.

My husband, Ron, was exactly what I needed to find. He was a few years older than me, but had kids around Ben's age. He was a divorced dad also, but he stayed around. The first time Ben met his kids was at a park near his house. Ben was about three, Ron's son was five, his daughter seven. The boys played in the mulch under the slide and Ron had brought snacks for everyone. I knew he was the one.

Even before we were married, Ben called Ron "Dad" – and he was. So I was not at all worried when four years into our marriage I had to spend about two months traveling extensively for a new job. Although I had never left my son for more than a weekend, I knew they would be fine. Ron cooks most of the meals in our house and is usually the one responsible for getting Ben ready and to the bus

stop in the mornings. Still, the idea of being in Pennsylvania, Kansas, Seattle, or New Jersey instead of at home with son made my stomach hurt.

When I was younger, maybe eight, I remember Walt singing while he played the guitar. My favorite song was "Leaving on a Jet Plane." When he would come in town and take us to Grandpa's house in the country, I'd ask him to sing that song for me. After awhile, he said he couldn't sing it anymore.

The night before I left for my first trip, I had that song in my head.

"I'll be back next weekend," I told Ben as he got ready for bed.

He didn't say anything.

"And I promise to bring you a surprise back."

He seemed better, but when he hugged me that night, I wasn't sure which one of us wouldn't let go.

I'm not sure what I expected from being gone. I was with a group of about fifty other employees from different parts of the country. You could tell right away who had children and who did not. The meeting rooms always had a snack area outside, and the mom's in the group were the ones who would put extras in our purse to take home to our kids. And those of us with children always excused ourselves after dinner to make a good night phone call home.

I could hear the girl in the room next to me when she would call home at night. She was from Alabama, or some southern state.

"Now ya'll be good for Aunt Amy now...momma luvess you both to pieces," she'd say every night about an hour after I had called home myself.

I wouldn't have admitted it to anyone, but being away was easier than I thought. Most of the hotel rooms were nicer than I probably deserved. I slept all

night long, uninterrupted by children's tummy aches or bad dreams. Dinners went by quicker, as I didn't have to stop several times to cut up someone else's pork chop, or get paper towels to clean up spilled root beer. Conversely, breakfasts by myself were longer. Without having to spend time to find Ben a pair of clean socks, or fix his hair I found I had time to read a newspaper in the morning. I took a bath at least once in every hotel I stayed in, and didn't get out until the water was cold.

Still, for every night of room-service delivered hot wings and beer, I felt guilty. I would call my son every night and ask about his day, but I wasn't there for our traditional two hugs, a kiss, and pull the blanket over his shoulders tuck in at bed time. I imagined Ben and Ron de-evolving back at home, eating peanut butter with their fists out of the jar, sitting in mismatched clothes, talking about how much they missed me.

Unfortunately, they did just fine with out me. When I'd call home, they'd be out at Ben's favorite Chinese buffet, or eating Ramen noodles in my room while watching the Disney Channel or playing video games.

It occurred to me as I put away my travel sized lotion and toothpaste, that Ron is ten times a better parent than I am. He is infinitely more patient with Ben. He worries less. When he took the kids to Six Flags over the summer, he let Ben ride the Screaming Eagle, something I never would have let him do. He trudges out to muddy fields on Saturday mornings to be third base coach while I am still sleeping in bed. In Ben's Kindergarten journal there were countless references to his Dad – Dad cooks good food, Dad plays video games with me, Dad is kind and

funny. In the whole book, representative of an entire school year, there were two references to me. “Mom likes to sleep” and “Mom likes to watch tv.”

“Don’t worry about it,” my husband assured me.

“Two times,” I said. “And one of them was sleeping.”

“But you’re the Mom. That’s way better than cooks dinner.”

In Ron’s words, I am the “known quantity” for Ben – the one he goes to when he is sad or hurt. I am the comfort, the one that carries the weight of things. And I know he is right. But while I might carry Ben, I know Ron carries us both. For that I am incredibly fortunate.

Lately, Ben will fall asleep with out asking me to tuck him in, and my heart breaks a little bit each time. But Ron reminds me how when I was traveling, Ben slept every night on the floor of our bedroom with his blanket – the one he has had forever, the one he still drags around the house when he plays and wraps around himself at dinner, the one he calls “mom blanket.”

Four thousand, three hundred twenty four.

We spread a dinosaur blanket on the hill in the backyard.  
With the smell of barbeque and bug spray still in the air,  
Ben and I laid in the un-cut grass with cherry popsicles,  
to watch the fireworks.

This time, he wasn't afraid of the pops and bangs.  
We ood and aahed at each explosion.  
Ben was certain  
this day was the best of his life.

I thought of the text  
I'd received yesterday from a friend.  
Her son had been deployed again,  
"He just left and it's killing me."

And then there was Ben,  
half awake, telling me he loved the red, blue and white ones.  
Shamefully,  
Selfishly,  
I prayed he'd never love them too much.

### The Peach Tree

The year Ron and I bought our first house, my Dad gave us a peach tree as a house warming present. Unlike the Chinese gong and pink flamingo he had given me previous Christmases, the peach tree was something I actually wanted.

Growing up, my grandpa had fruit trees on his farm in Cuba, Missouri. They were full-grown trees, planted in seemingly random places. I'd be walking past an old shed, and there, by an empty chicken coop, I could reach up and pick an apple. I really only clearly remember apple trees, but I like to believe there were peaches also.

The day we went to get my peach tree, we drove two hours to Louisiana, Missouri; apparently Home Depot didn't sell peach trees. When the salesman showed us where the peach trees were, I was stunned at how small they were. The trunk was no bigger than a crayola marker and the branches thinner than crayons. I figured it would take years for this twig to ever bear fruit, but I reminded myself I had time. After moving six times since Ben was born, I finally had my own house, my own hill on which to plant this tiny stick of a tree we brought home.

My Dad unloaded the tree in our backyard and my husband and I were left staring at it. It reminded me of the day I brought Ben home from the hospital. My brother had picked us up and drove us home to our apartment. Even though he lived right next door with his wife and their two year old daughter, the moment he left I was terrified. I remember looking at Ben asleep in a car seat that seemed far too large, and I thought – *what on earth do I know about being a mother?*

“Do you know anything about growing peaches?” Ron asked dragging the tree to around the side of the house.

“Put it in the ground and water it. How hard can it be?”

It took us a week to figure out where to plant the tree. Most of our back yard is a hill, so our level ground area is rather limited. If we planted it in the middle of the flatest area, the kids might trip over the stakes or ropes I was sure we would need to hold the tiny tree up. If we moved it to close to the other tree in the yard, I worried it wouldn't get enough sun, or heaven forbid a storm should come and knock a limb off of the larger tree, crushing my baby peach tree. We opted for a spot two feet from where the hill began, out of the pathway of children, and where I could see it from my kitchen window.

Every day that summer one of us laid the hose at the base of the tree and let the water seep into its roots. One week it rained for six days straight, and I heard how some trees in a nearby park had simply fallen over, the ground too wet to hold them in anymore. Fearing for my tree, I had my husband tether it to a tiki torch. The tree didn't fall over, but it did end up with a permanent lean where the torch had been.

It wasn't the first time I allowed my love to scar something small. When Ben was about two months old, I put a pair of long socks on his tiny legs for his first Christmas Eve. We had been visiting family, and I was worried about taking him out when he was so young, so I dressed him as warmly as possible. When we got home that night, I took off his flannel outfit and put him in some pajamas. But my apartment still felt so cold, I left the socks on him, pulled up his to shins.

The next morning, Christmas morning, I pulled off his socks and his feet and legs were almost white, all the way up to a red and purple raised line where the sock edges had been. I spent Ben's first Christmas crying on the phone to his pediatrician's exchange.

"Yes, he is moving his feet, yes – the color is coming back. No, I won't use those socks anymore."

Other than some red marks that lasted for weeks, Ben suffered no serious lasting effects from the socks. But seven years later, sometimes I'll watch him getting out of the pool and I can still see two scars that go all the way around both tan legs.

Despite the peach tree's tiny size, less than five feet, it did manage to grow peaches the first year we planted it. They were tiny at first, like little fuzzy tear drops. Over the course of a month, they swelled, causing the branches of the tree to drop, nearly brushing the ground. I thought for sure they would fall off, or worse, the branches themselves would snap under their weight. But my peach tree surprised me. It grew about a foot that summer.

While I was toasting Ben's waffle, the morning he was to start kindergarten, I glanced at the tree from the kitchen. The peaches had grown so large; I could see them from the window.

"When you come home from school today, we will probably be able to pick those peaches," I told him, trying not to cry, trying not to panic at the thought that my six year old child would be getting on a bus in 15 minutes without me or anyone else in the world who knew him.



We didn't get any of the peaches that year. That morning, as we stood at the corner of Birdie Court and Amberly Drive, we watched as six or seven squirrels ran past us with peaches in their mouths. I swear as they stampeded by, one of them turned and looked at us, and had he not had a peach balanced perfectly in its furry mouth, I swear that squirrel would have smiled.

All I could do was hold Ben's hand, hands that used to fit completely inside of my palm, hold him next to me to keep him from chasing after the squirrels. Later, I would tell me husband that somehow, those things knew when they saw the GI Joe backpack and me with the camera and damp eyes, that I didn't have the legs to chase them down. Even after the bus pulled away and headed down the street in the same direction as the squirrels, I was unable to chase them, unable to move from that corner by the stop sign as I watched the most precious things carried away to places I didn't belong. Places I couldn't reach.

The following season, I decided to take actions to protect the peaches. Ron bought twenty five feet of black bird netting, the kind designed for blackberry bushes or gardens. We used about seven feet of it to encase the peach tree, the rest we gathered around the trunk in an awkward mess. When I looked out my kitchen window, I no longer saw my fragile, crooked tree; instead I saw a swarm of black netting with some leaves peaking out from underneath.

"Let's see the squirrels make it through that."

Despite its hobo appearance, we actually did get peaches that year. I remember the pride I felt as I cut one still warm, into thin slices for Ben. He

carried it off to his room, to watch something from Shark Week. Ten minutes later he came down, rubbing his eyes.

“Mom, there’s something in my eye,” he said.

His eyes were pink, his eyelids puffy and swollen. I watched small red welts develop around his mouth and on his hands. I rooted around the medicine cabinet for Benadryl. Ben was allergic to peaches.

When I was ten, my best friend was Tamma Keim. Tamma lived down the street and during summer’s we would spend every night sleeping over either at her house or mine. But one of the reason’s I loved going to Tamma’s house was because her mom was nothing like my own. My mom wrote out entire weeks of dinner menus and stuck it to the refrigerator with a magnet that said “What’s Cookin’.”

Down the street, Tamma’s Mom would sometimes just make appetizers for dinner. She was always rearranging the furniture in her house or painting her kitchen another shade of yellow. I remember when we used her good sewing scissors to cut up biscuit dough; she sighed and said “I think my doctorate will be entitled Why Mom’s Drink.” We would laugh or roll our eyes, never really understanding what she meant.

Thirty years later, I would understand that Mom’s drink because we plant peach trees when our children are allergic to peaches. We put socks on their feet that mark them for life. We lay awake at night wondering how we will get them out of their rooms if the house is struck by lightning, or what we would do if that child on the leukemia telethon was ours. I worry about nosebleeds, dogs that

come into our yard, or if Ben is still upset about the kids who laughed at him at lunch when the Jello I packed spilled onto the table, or if he will be stolen or abused or drink, or grow up or be lonely or diabetic. Our love for them is brutal, immobilizing, terrifying and irrational. We drink because that love overwhelms us.

**Snow**

When summer's sunburn begins  
to peel and flake,  
I like to stand over a dark blue blanket in the yard  
scratch and dance about,  
and watch the pieces of me  
fall to the ground  
like snow on Christmas morning.

In the winter,  
there's dry legs to scratch,  
chapped lip skin to peel  
and throw out the window,  
unless I accidentally swallow a shred of myself,  
like when I poured your ashes out of a bag  
and into a large clay pot. Some of you  
blew back in my face and I swallowed it, too.  
The rest of you we spread from the Mississippi river  
to the Mid Bay Bridge in Okaloosa county.

So I'll shake, bite and peel the dead pieces of myself,

I imagine they'll meet up with pieces of you,  
they'll go to 7-11 and get a banana slurpee,  
end up as dust on someone else's coffee table,  
a mess for someone else to clean up.

### Admittance

Ben's second grade class sang at Busch Stadium the night I decided to quit smoking. By the seventh inning the Cardinals had a firm lead, and Ben was getting cold in the September evening, so we decided to beat traffic and head home early. After I carried him to his bed, I couldn't sleep. The blankets kept curling around my legs and I could feel a spring poking my hip from inside the mattress. I was overcome by the fear that must reside somewhere in all smokers. I am going to die of cancer.

So much of my childhood is vague to me, like it happened in a book I skimmed. Endings I remember, but how things begun or those parts in between are absent. I don't really remember why I started smoking. The first cigarette was a Kool Menthol I stole from my Step-Dad and smoked behind his Volkswagen Golf. I hated it.

The next clear nicotine memory I have is sitting in a Denny's booth in at four in the morning studying for a Humanities Mid-Term. I ordered a piece of chocolate cake and countless cups of coffee with two creams and a sugar. In between refills, I smoked cigarettes one after another and read Des Cartes and Humes.

All though I smoked through college, I don't remember myself as a smoker. There are no memories of rummaging through jean pockets for four dollars in change. I don't think I ever pulled off the road to buy a lighter because I couldn't find the one I had bought two days ago. Not once do I think I ever stood outside in the rain, or ran through a theatre lobby during intermission because I needed to smoke.

At first, it was convenient. Working a double shift as a waitress is easier when you can sit for a few minutes on empty beer kegs by the dumpster to smoke. The girls that didn't would spend their time filling salt shakers or making tea. Plus, smoking meant something. I am not sure if it meant I was old enough or that I didn't care I had dropped out of college to serve beer and well-done steak. I think it probably meant I wasn't afraid.

It would take years before I would find that fear. Even after my mom called me about the spot they found on Steve, my Step-Dad's, lung, I wasn't afraid.

"It's probably just pneumonia, or maybe just fluid build up from his heart attack," my mom had told me over the phone.

Her voice sounded scared. My Dad had smoked his entire life and had never gotten as much as a cold. He used to joke and say that a germ wouldn't dare try to live in his body, the smoke would kill it. I remember Christmas mornings when my brother and I would wait in our pajamas while my mom made coffee and Dad smoked in the garage. Yet in all my memories of him, I never remember the smell of cigarette smoke, just the smell of the peppermints he always had in his jacket pocket.

Steve had worked for the police department in Maryland Heights, but only on Wednesday's and some weekends. His real job was as a salesman for a moving and storage company. A year after he died I learned he had wanted to be a full time police officer, but when he met my mom, she was studying for nursing school at night. Someone needed to watch Chris and I, so he took a different day job and only volunteered when he could with the police.

He had retired from the police department by the time he had his second heart attack. Unlike the first one, this time he was in intensive care for two weeks, much of the time unconscious. When he would start to wake up he would fight with the nurses, the IV, the bed rail. We hadn't been to church in years, but my mom called the priest from our old church and he sat with us, talked to my mom quietly in another room.

Somehow, he survived. The doctors said two-thirds of his heart had been damaged, he had congestive heart failure, but he was still alive. Even after he recovered, he had to cut his hours back at work when he found himself surveying the contents of a customer's basement and was too winded to walk back up. Even that he laughed about.

"So I just sat on the stairs and talked to them about where they were moving, and how many hours the packers would need to be there."

When he wasn't working, he'd get bored. He'd go to Walmart and arrange all the movies in the \$5 dollar bins. He'd cook dinner for my mom, trying to sneak real salt in the food instead of salt substitute. When Ben would come over, they'd watch television or knock a plastic golf ball around the living room floor with tiny, two-year old sized clubs.

Occasionally, he'd end up back in the hospital, for what specifically, I don't remember. I feel like I should – like I should have remembered each admittance, each time what was left of his heart allowed fluid to back up in his body, but I don't. I remember not being able to sleep most nights. Ben and I were living with them at the time, and every so often, my mom would run into my room in the middle of the night and tell me I needed to open the door for the

paramedics who were on their way. I would lay awake at night, waiting to see her silhouette in my doorway. Eventually, I got my doctor to prescribe anti-anxiety medicine. And after that, I don't remember much at all.

He did quit smoking after his heart attack. I believed then, that somehow God was fair; that we each got one really bad thing to deal with, and congestive heart failure was what my Dad had drawn. I figured lung cancer would be someone else's card. It wasn't.

He died a week before Christmas, almost two months after I was married. He had been at my wedding, walked me down the aisle with Walt, my birth father. I danced with them both at the reception, but Steve had been first. I didn't know then the cancer had spread to his brain, that a few weeks later my mom would call me and ask me to come over before she could would call an ambulance for the last time.

"I thought I could do it Anne, I thought I could keep him here at home. But I just can't."

I like to think he was too confused by then, that he didn't realize I was lying when I sat with him behind the curtain partition in the admitting department at Missouri Baptist and told him he was going to be fine. I think he knew he wasn't.

He was unconscious at the end. I remember the sound of the ventilator rhythmically pushing air the last time I saw him. I thanked him, told him I loved him, and that I had forgiven him for things we never spoke of. Later, I'd hear that sound again, once on the beach in Florida before a storm, and countless other



times when I couldn't sleep and I'd stare at the ceiling listening to my husband breath.

That should have been enough for me to quit smoking. For my mother's sake, I tried to hide it. I'd sweep cigarette butts off my garage floor before birthday's, and carried Febreeze and gum when I'd meet her for dinner. But as soon as the party was over, as soon as I pulled away from the restaurant, I'd be digging around my purse for a lighter.

It wasn't that I hadn't quit before. When I was pregnant with Ben, the smell of cigarettes made me sick. It was easy that time; it wasn't even a decision I had to make. The night I knew Ben's Dad wasn't coming back; I broke down and went to my sister-in-laws apartment and smoked one of hers. That night I dreamed of giving birth to a child with no arms or lungs.

I didn't have another cigarette until the day I stopped breast feeding. I figured smoking one wouldn't make me a smoker again. Once became two, and then a pack, and then I was carrying febreze and lighters around again, this time in my diaper bag.

When Ben was about nine months old, I found myself sitting alone in the apartment I shared with the boyfriend I had met after Ben's Dad but before my husband. He worked nights as Casino security, and after Ben would fall asleep in his crib, I'd go out on the patio and chain smoke. One night, I ran out of cigarettes. The closest pack was at a gas station across the street.

While I could see the gas station from my bedroom window, it still required me to get in my car, turn down two streets and cross a highway to reach. All of which I did, while my son slept, alone in the apartment. I was gone maybe

six minutes and he was fine when I came back, still dreaming what ever it is infants dream. None of the thousand things that could have happened in those six minutes happened. What terrified me even more than those six minutes is at that moment I didn't care.

Ben was about two when I saw him pretend to smoke a red crayon. We were sitting in traffic when he found it in his car seat, and held it up to his lips and pretended to smoke it. He smiled at me.

The next day, I enrolled in my company's smoking cessation program. I quite so successfully, I became the poster child for the company. They tacked my "testimonial" on bulletin boards by the time clock, and had me write a piece for our employee newsletter. I was famous. They even put my story up on the QuitForLife website, although they used some stock photo of a thin brunette sitting beside a lake. For a time, you could Google my name and it would come up with me and that red crayon.

I became a smoker again after two margaritas at a happy hour. It felt like I was home. After that I tried to hide my smoking from Ben. I would only smoke when he wasn't around. If I was at home, I'd smoke in the garage, claiming I needed to make a phone call or talk to Daddy privately. Sometimes he'd open the garage door and find me throwing something down, or exhaling a white cloud. I would yell at him and tell him to go back inside, afraid to meet his eyes. Once or twice he'd ask about the empty pack in the trash or the cigarette butts in the yard.

"Oh those?" I'd say. "That must be from Aunt Donna. Go inside"

I knew he knew better, but he was smart enough not to ask again.

A month before I quit again, the father of my best friend's son, hung himself. Tamma had Caleb when she was 17, but never married his Dad. Caleb, now 13, had begun acting 13, and she had sent him to his Dad's house for a week.

"Maybe he can straighten him out before school starts," she had told me over the phone. She sounded tired.

I was in a hotel room in Seattle when she called me and told me what had happened. His father, apparently despondent over an argument with Caleb's stepmom, tied a rope over his bedroom door and hung himself. Caleb later told his mom he knew something was wrong because he could see the rope tied to the outside of the door, on the handle.

"I can't explain how fucking pissed I am," Tamma said. "He was just so selfish, to leave Caleb like that, to even think that was a choice."

That's what I was thinking the night after the baseball game. That I was selfish, how Ben would have to hold my hand, run his hand over my hair like he does now before he falls asleep, when I am in a hospital bed dying of cancer.

I was finally afraid.

Having quit two previous times, I assumed this time would be similar. It had been always been easy to stop – not starting again had been the problem. When I woke up Saturday morning, I put on a nicotine patch from my holidays-with-the-family supply. At first it wasn't so bad. I tried not to look at the garage. I cleaned – closets, sock drawers, the bath tub, my son's star wars ships. I watched the Cardinals game and tossed a Nerf ball back and forth with Ben for all nine innings.

When I was about eight, Steve had tried to quit smoking for a brief period. This was before cancer and heart disease, so I have no idea what his motivation was. But I remember him being mad, his fists were clenched for days. In the car, I remember him saying something about divorce and my mom. A week later, he was happy again, a pack of smokes in his upper pocket.

By the third day with out a cigarette, I became worried that mean words would come out of my mouth. I stayed very quiet. When my hands started to shake, I crawled into bed and played solitaire on my phone. I tore the acrylic nails off my fingers. Driving anywhere on my own made me want to cry.

Sometimes I'd feel my chest get hot, my heart would beat as if I'd been racing. Mostly I'd get this feeling when I'd wake from an alarmingly vivid, nicotine-induced dream. Lying in bed, I'd remember something I had misplaced, my cell phone, a book borrowed from a friend, my flash drive, and I couldn't go back to sleep. Losing things had always made me manic, but my coping mechanism had been to smoke. I sit barefoot on my porch, take slow, deep drags, and calm down. Inevitably, I'd remember where I left my keys, or where I'd hung my black shirt. With out that cigarette I was all alone, left with nothing but a dark house full of all the things I had lost.

Twelve days into my quitting, I was able to speak more with out fear of what I would say. I painted and repainted my nails. I was still wearing a nicotine patch, so I knew all of the lost and uncomfortable feelings were primarily in my head. I could go several hours with out thinking of it, and then one of an unending list of things would happen – coming home from lunch at my mom's,

waiting for the oven to preheat, the second glass of wine – and I would find myself almost walking back to the garage.

More than anything I wanted to be able to sit the edge of Ben's bed, and while he would sleep, whisper, "I promise I won't die like that," or at the very least, "I promise you I will never smoke again." But I know I can't promise either of those things.

At times, I know I am about to give in and smoke, but I tell myself to wait twenty more minutes. After the second failed round of solitaire, Ben comes in; he wants to know what toga is. Eventually I give in to his requests, put my phone down and search for a white table cloth. I won't even notice when twenty-seven minutes have passed. Instead I wrap him up in a toga, tucking the corner in tightly behind between his shirt and shoulder so it won't fall off when he jumps on my bed.

"Make it so it will last for awhile," he says.

And I try.