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More Myself

Karin Louise McKie
San Jose State University

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MORE MYSELF

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Karin L. McKie

May 2012

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

MORE MYSELF

by

Karin L. McKie

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

Dr. Andrew Fleck	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Andrew Altschul	Department of English and Comparative Literature
Dr. David Terry	Department of Communications Studies

ABSTRACT

MORE MYSELF

by Karin L. McKie

More Myself is about living in the margins of the social network. As an ad hoc anthropologist, I survey my journeys, both internal and external, with a wry eye. I've lived alone since 1993, work mostly from home, don't have texting on my phone, and don't have any kids ... that I know about. Throughout these essays, I chronicle the differences, as well as the intersections, between loneliness and being alone.

What is the nature of solitude? Am I worth knowing; am I worth loving? How did I get where I've got? From Virginia to Chicago and San José, to China and the past and back again, I take a darkly humorous look at being a different kind of person, leading a solo life, leaping before looking more often than not. What has been done to me, and what have I wrought myself?

Along the way, I also explore specialness, wussiness, forgiveness, newness and brownness, wee things and fat asses, shame and soil, mummies and MLK, and how feeling *at ease* and being *just right* remain elusive.

Open your eyes, and ride the ride.

"What's past is prologue"

Antonio, *The Tempest*, William Shakespeare

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"I shall hereafter, my thrice-gracious lord, Be more myself"

Hal, *Henry IV, Part 1*, William Shakespeare



Karin McKie, September 1970

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	1
Got Your Back	11
Ötzi and Me	14
Bull in a China Shop	19
By 2020	29
Fag Hag.....	41
Crime Story.....	52
Most Wanted	55
Halfway House	63
Manifest Destiny	67
The Brown State.....	91
Me, Myself and I	94
Marlboro Reds	105
Bad Back	117
Bibliography.....	129

PREFACE

I am a storyteller. I strive to “hit my mark and tell the truth,” as James Cagney advised. My genre is creative nonfiction, with a secondary focus on dramatic writing. I’m a *bardolater* to boot. My book *More Myself* is thirteen interconnected personal essays, gathered under a guiding Shakespearean star, laid out in a roughly chronological order, where I combine my passions to illuminate my singular life, one on the margins of the social network.

Zora Neale Hurston said, “There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you” (Hurston xi), so I relish this opportunity to tell my outsider tales with honesty and dark humor, as first-person reports from the edge. Creative nonfiction emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as “new journalism,” where, rather than keeping a reporter’s distance, the writer was encouraged to become part of the story, as exemplified in seminal works like Gay Talese’s “Frank Sinatra Has a Cold.” Talese said:

“Though often reading like fiction, [it] is not fiction. It is, or should be, as reliable as the most reliable reportage, although it seeks *a larger truth* than is possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational style of the older form” (Talese, *Fame*, introduction, emphasis added).

My work and nonfiction writing in general are about vetted, refined and controlled perspectives of reality. I also see Talese's "larger truth" contained in my title, *More Myself*, taken from my hero William Shakespeare's Hal.

Creative nonfiction is rooted in honesty and accountability yet employs craft from fiction such as novels and scripts. I tenaciously adhere to the memoirist's responsibility for veracity, even as notable rule-breakers continue to sully the field's reputation, most recently by Mike Daisey on China and previously by James Frey about addiction. Nonfiction writers should be like photographers and take reality, warts and all, then frame it for maximum impact. Memoirists must artistically extrapolate facts and emotions to get at the core of a universal truth and provide a tangible take-away for the reader.

In my writing, I often use the braided essay technique and weave two seemingly disparate stories together for mutual and unexpected illumination, in a symbiotic yin and yang fashion. I frequently employ humor to mediate uncomfortable or darker issues, such as loneliness, mental illness or sexual assault. I'm a reporter, an anthropologist, an editor that "kills my darlings" to get to the heart of the matter. I pan for gold in a sea of troubles.

Alongside my writing and performing careers, I also research and produce Shakespeare scholarship and maintain a brain full of quotes with which I connect. Prince Hal's speech about being "more myself" resonates deeply, so that quote became my unifying book title. I added epigraphs among the essays to anchor the manuscript. Shakespeare often has rhyming couplets at the end of

his scenes, and I previously thought that they summed up what had gone before. Now I believe they give the character and her story a place to go, and foreshadow what's to come. I wanted those handholds and that momentum in my work, because, as Hamlet prophesized about the power of storytelling, "The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king."

In addition to being a fan of Shakespeare and early modern writers like ur-feminist Aemelia Lanyer, I equally idolize modern nonfiction icons like David Sedaris. I follow his gentle self-deprecation-while-learning-about-a-segment-of-society approach, which he applies in his books including *Me Talk Pretty One Day* and *Holidays on Ice*. I also emulate Sarah Vowell, Sedaris' fellow *This American Life* radio essayist, as she is also adept at blending autobiography, history and social commentary in works like in *Radio On* and *Assassination Vacation*. Cut from the same cloth, David Rakoff and his snarky and smart memoir *Half Empty* grapples with worries of a mediocre career and his recurrent health issues in a confessional yet refreshing manner which I also implement.

My book is a distinctive glimpse into a different way of being in a highly interconnected and social society. Much like monologist Spalding Gray, I illuminate life on the margins of "regular" society with stories and reflections of warmth and pain, isolation and comedy, resignation and ridiculousness. As Gray did in *Swimming to Cambodia*, I model an honest blending of humorous and poignant personal experience within a broader historical context, like when I explore California's Mexican heritage in my short essay "The Brown State." I'm

also a devout follower of Hunter S. Thompson's prose, and assimilate a stance like the warped yet incisive human observations from his *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Merrill Markoe's tongue-in-cheek (and tongue-on-face) books *What the Dogs Have Taught Me and Other Amazing Things I've Learned* and *How to Be Hap-Hap-Happy Like Me!* skillfully blend humor and pathos, elevating ordinary life stories as well, as I do throughout *More Myself*.

I'm inspired by other nonfiction luminaries, too, along with their trademark tomes. Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses* reminds me to incorporate sensory details into my work, to create vivid scenes for the reader. Food, feast and famine are at the forefront of my essay "Ötzi and Me." I follow the examples set in Jasmin Darznik's *The Good Daughter*, which also integrates lush sights, sounds, smells, textures and tastes. Her story paints the picture of her mother's Persian upbringing, both delicious and devastating, in contrast to the author's Americanized experience. I offer my short and surly WASP P.O.V.

Mary Karr's *The Liar's Club* also excels at sensual aspects, which brings readers from the lofty and general to the personal and specific. She records the smell of "the invisible cloud of odors that floated around Mother ... Shalimar and tobacco and peppermint Life Savers" (Karr 50); the vision of "a flowered dress that made her look a lot like a sofa" (Karr 53); and the feel of "the chenille bedspread, which had a nubble like braille under my hands" (Karr 56). Karr uses self-deprecation, such as "I was a world-famous crybaby" (Karr 45), along with continual reflection on the nature of memory to offer a flawed, yet still reliable,

narrator. She couches her recollections with tags like “some memory endures” (Karr 9), and “the central feeling that arises from memory of that time” (Karr 48), plus she calls witnesses, like her sister, saying “Lest you think I fabricate, Lecia saw it, too” (Karr 45). Her heightened use of language depicts distinct images, like that her mother’s face was “set so tight her mouth was a hyphen” (Karr 42).

Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood* also models lyrical images in what could have been mundane police reporting, and offers an array of voices and perspectives “in pursuit of the narrative” (Capote 222). His work provides detailed background and fleshed-out history to explore the crucial human question: “Where does evil come from?” I ponder similar life musings, such as “what is within our control?”, “is being alone the same as being lonely?” and “what makes a life?” Capote also provides a cautionary tale about becoming involved with interview subjects. His closeness to killer Perry Smith was likely inappropriate, but yielded a sympathetic portrait of how childhood abuse can lead someone to murder. I found myself in the middle of a rape and suicide when I portrayed in victim on television, and reflected on Capote when writing “Most Wanted.” I also thought about criminal complicity during my piece “Crime Story.”

Tobias Wolff owns up to his role as an imperfect person, as I do, and struggles to take his collusion and pain to create literature. He portrays himself as a typically troubled teen who deals with an abusive stepfather in *This Boy’s Life*, ingratiating himself to readers with humanizing flights of fancy like, “on bright cold nights like this one I could see the cloud of my breath and pretend that I was

smoking” (Wolff 17). He also shares reader’s faith by believing that “everything was going to change when we got out West” (Wolff 5). Like me, Wolff embraces this type of hopefulness as his truth, his reality and his nonfiction filter.

I look to *The New Yorker’s* Beijing correspondent Peter Hessler as a master employer of scene in *Country Driving*, in which he follows the rise of China’s car culture. In 2001, he got a Chinese driver’s license, and then traveled many of the country’s newly-built roads. In the remote villages he reached, he became friends with local families and businesspeople, and revealed China’s emerging middle class through thorough journalism and intimate portrayals. I employ these techniques as well when I write about my own Asian adventures in “Bull in a China Shop” and “By 2020.”

In order to ease the reader into his strikingly deprived upbringing, Frank McCourt assumes a childhood voice, one of innocent reportage in *Angela’s Ashes*. As seen and told from a kid’s perspective, the neglect and abuse of his “miserable Irish Catholic childhood” (Mccourt 11) are moderated and made more bearable. This perspective, which I study for my own writing, is an effective technique to free the narrator from judgment, while still sharing a point of view: “I wonder what the odd manner is but I can’t ask because I’m not supposed to be listening” (Mccourt 22). This style also shows how a youngster’s mind works, and tackles adult issues and questions from a naïve angle. From such a simple standpoint, readers can understand and empathize more. I engage a youthful persona in my childhood stories such as “Got Your Back” and “Marlboro Reds.”

James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son* encourages me when he says:

“Any writer, I suppose, feels that the world into which he was born is nothing less than a conspiracy against the cultivation of his talent...it is only because the world looks on his talent with such a frightening indifference that the artist is compelled to make his talent important ... The only real concern of the artist [is] to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art” (Baldwin 4, 7).

He also warns that writers need to be forthcoming yet precise in “the disastrously explicit medium of language” (Baldwin 7-8), which I weigh carefully in my essay “Fag Hag,” about my ongoing relationships with gay men.

As an actor as well as a writer, I also consume and contemplate solo performance works like Gray's, which blend clear storytelling with engaging delivery. Laurie Anderson's show from a decade ago, *The End of the Moon*, chronicles her time as the first, and last, artist-in-residence at NASA, and serves as an inspiration for the type of reflective narrative I create. Other dramatic monologues that inform my work include Bill Bowers' staged memoir *It Goes Without Saying*, in which he tackles difficult issues with humor and broad interest, such as growing up gay in rural Montana, losing his partner to AIDS, and then losing the use of his hands during the Broadway production of *The Lion King*. As an avid consumer of the confessional solo show, I've also been inspired by former San José State University student Ted Cox's *My Journey Into Manhood*, where he humorously recounts his bizarre deprogramming experiences in “gay

rehabilitation” programs. Dan Hoyle’s *The Real Americans* neatly interweaves his interviews with denizens of the south that he met on a van trip, using interpersonal modalities I gravitate toward as well. I plan on turning my essays into performance monologues, especially pieces like “Me, Myself and I” which explores my drive to be a storyteller.

Other international monologists also showcase the power of insightful material pared down to vital parts, which they then personify and portray, like I do in my solo pieces, such as “Turner” which tackles date rape, abortion and abandonment. Heather Raffo, with whom I took a workshop in summer 2010, made her study of Iraqi women affected by the first Gulf War into *9 Parts of Desire*, and Anna Deveare Smith indicted the U.S. healthcare system in *Let Me Down Easy*. Their styles capture the core of important global issues with select use of detail and characterization, strategies I attempt as well.

In Chicago, influential narratives I saw on stage that informed my process include Arlene Malinowski’s *Aiming for Sainthood*, about growing up hearing in a deaf household, then nursing her mother through cancer; Julia Sweeney’s excellent argument for atheism *Letting Go of God*, where she shares how her controlling Catholic background left her no other options; and Michael Fosberg’s riveting personal journey *Incognito*, where a man with a Caucasian face, raised by his single white mom, finds out as an adult that his dad is black. All of these personal and three-dimensional chronicles provide excellent examples of captivating memoirs, and ways to tell the truth, and juggle seemingly disparate

ideas that eventually coalesce in the end. I appreciated the challenge of incorporating inspiration from my favorite practitioners into my own singular tales.

Twenty-five percent of the U.S. population now lives alone, and studies of loneliness seem to be on the rise. I've gained insight on communicating the single lifestyle from publications such as Jonathan Franzen's *How to be Alone*; Jacqueline Olds and Richard S. Schwartz's *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-first Century*; Robert D. Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*; and May Sarton's *Journal of a Solitude*. These explorations inform my own meditations on solo living, shown in my travelogues: my return to Chicago from Amsterdam titled "Halfway House," my Route 66 road trip in "Manifest Destiny," and my stressful D.C. homecoming told in "Bad Back."

Several books on creativity and madness also offered inspiration, and provided various insights on how mental illness functions alongside inventiveness, and vice versa. I believe that artistic impulses live side-by-side with internal demons, and I turned to these books to see how others have coped with this double-edged sword, and re-routed mental difficulties into productivity. These tomes operate on two levels: as practical guides on how to harness one's self-doubt when creating work, and as tangible examples of what can be written and published under mental duress. They include Kay Redfield Jamison's *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* and *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*; Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression*; and William Styron's *Darkness Visible*:

A Memoir of Madness. After taking Sandra Gilbert's incisive feminist literature class during my first semester at San José State University, I reference and incorporate her *Madwoman in the Attic* book when I process the effects of mental illness and marginalization on literary work.

Memoir craft books and excerpts were in mind as I wrote, too, including "Learning to Chill Out" by Frank McCourt, "The Site of Memory" by Toni Morrison, Anne Fadiman's *At Large and At Small*, Philip Gerard's *Creative Nonfiction*, Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola's *Tell It Slant*, Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz's *Writing True*, and *Inventing the Truth* by William Zinsser.

I've applied the above readings and research to my own creative output, which culminates in my nonfiction thesis *More Myself*. I endeavor to write with economy and honesty, and am grateful for the tutelage of San José State University's faculty and visiting artists, including Cathy Miller, Andrew Fleck, Nancy Stork, Andrew Altschul, Susan Shillinglaw, Barnaby Dallas, David Kahn, Julia Scheeres, Tim Cahill and Sandra Gilbert.

"My words fly up, my thoughts remain below.

Words without thoughts never to heaven go."

Claudius, *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare

Got Your Back

“Just try,” they always said in gym class, as if will power alone could make up for my stubby arms and nonathletic build. My extreme averageness.

“OK, if they say I can do this, then I can,” I thought to myself in the Washington Irving Junior High girls’ locker room. I suited up in the mandatory uniform of scratchy polyester, a zip-up onesie combo of baggy navy shorts and shapeless striped top. There were seven Karens in my class that year, and although I spelled my name differently, with an “i,” it all sounded the same. So many Karens. I was far from special. Especially in that generic gym get-up.

We were doing gymnastics that day, using equipment. I had only done tumbling, so I was scared. But I was just a wussy, right? Everybody could do gymnastics. Mr. Lovering, the slightly skeezy gym teacher in a matching sweat suit, gathered us Karens around the uneven parallel bars.

“Girls, today we’re going to do the penny drop. You hang off the high bar with your knees over the low bar. You let your hands go, swing down and through, then dismount out front. Easy.” He had one of the confident, limber girls demonstrate with ease.

I was terrified. I don’t like heights. I don’t like sucking in public.

The line moved ahead of me; everybody did a passable job – climbed up, assumed the position, swung 270 degrees around, then landed on the crash mat.

It was my turn.

“You’re going to spot me, right?” I asked Mr. Lovering.

“Of course. Just let go when I tell you,” he assured.

My sweaty palms could barely grip the top bar when he hoisted me up. The backs of my knees were slippery too, on the low bar. My balance is wonky, so flipping and flopping don’t hold much appeal. I get disoriented.

Lovering kept badgering. “C’mon, just let go. Let gravity do the work.”

I didn’t want gravity to do anything for me.

I finally convinced myself, Well, he’s got one hand on my back to guide me; one on my legs to guide the dismount. What could happen?

I let go. I trusted. I leapt before I looked. Lovering had gotten distracted by a cuter Karen and stepped away. I fell on my ass. On the skinny mat. My tailbone hurt like a mother.

“Walk it off,” he advised.

My throbbing ass hurt for weeks. It was especially painful to sit and my back stiffened. I was riding horses at the time, bouncing around every week for a few hours. Finally, I asked my mom to take me to the doctor.

“It’s a fractured coccyx. Broken tailbone. The immobility in your lower back is scar tissue forming,” Doc said.

“What can we do?” I asked.

“Well, it would have helped to see me sooner. But we can’t do anything now. We can’t put your butt in a sling.” He chuckled at his joke.

He handed me a white donut hemorrhoid cushion to carry around school for the next few months. I had been given the gift of extended public humiliation, instead of just that one day. My place as an outsider was secured.

I had become more than average. Because of my limitations, I became special.

Ötzi and Me

“Hours before he died, Ötzi the Iceman gorged on the fatty meat of a wild goat, according to a new analysis of the famous mummy’s stomach contents.”

National Geographic News, June 23, 2011

I’m not as exotic as Ötzi. I follow my “no meat, no wheat, no sweet” plan, along with limiting soy (as a phytoestrogen, bad for women), dairy (fatty for people, mean to cows), and caffeine, which figuratively and literally fucks up my shit. So what’s left? Beans, veggies, water. And rice and corn when I allow carbs. As a chronic self-flagellator, as somebody who constantly sets impossible rules for myself then swiftly chastises any infractions, dietary deprivation fits my M.O. I can’t forgive myself, and food forms my punishment.

I think my plan is called macrobiotic, or eating clean. And when left to my own devices, it’s easy. I don’t have crappy food at home. I eat organic, cruelty-free, sustainable. As a locavore, I stock up at farmer’s markets, or, if in a store, I shop its perimeter, as Michael Pollan advises. I try to follow his advice to “eat food, not too much, mostly plants.” When I consider anything processed, seduced by the bright and shiny focus-group’ed packaging, my belly brain cautions, “Why buy this? You’ll just eat it.” I work out almost every day, biking, walking, yoga, weight training. So why am I still tubby?

Ötzi was active too, stalking wild goats and all, and kept his girlish figure in life, and in death. Ötzi ate, but scientists didn't see that at first. "As a result of the natural mummification process, Ötzi's stomach had shrunk considerably." Mine has expanded, exponentially. I'm Rubenesque because of my inability to resist temptation away from home. I'm also on the "seefood diet" – if I see it, I eat it. So I try not to see it. Avoidance as prescriptive.

Add in a dash of people's penchant to use food as the currency of socialization. A cupcake is as good as a handshake. Can't show up without cookies or chips or casseroles. Folks think food-pushing is a way to be polite and gracious, to fit in. Coming from a family of fat asses, I know it's like putting booze in front of an alcoholic. We can't help ourselves. I never buy processed carbs to take home, but when placed in front of me at a meeting, a party, a class, I can't get it into my mouth fast enough. It's as if I've never eaten. My "off" switch is broken. The *verboden* has come within reach. It demands to be consumed, so I consume it. I have a lot of holes to fill.

I also drink white wine. Sav Blanc, my Savior. Medicine without a prescription. "Don't drink your calories," they say. I doubt they've ever drunk a French Fumé.

Ötzi's stomach contained no wine, but pieces of ibex and grain, so he clearly wasn't on my obsessive-compulsive plan. I don't want to eat meat because it's mostly bad for you, and definitely bad for the ibex, or ibex proxy.

I think I have a slight wheat allergy. Not full-blown celiac disease, but I feel puffy after gluten, so I try to limit its intake.

About a decade ago, my mom went into anaphylactic shock after eating a sandwich before shoveling snow. Wheat plus exertion. She came inside when she was done, then hit her head on the bathroom counter and almost died. The ambulance took over 20 minutes to make it through the winter storm. But now, when we go to a restaurant, she'll polish off the bread basket before the appetizers arrive.

“Mom, aren't you supposed to avoid wheat altogether?”

“Just one won't hurt,” she says, swallowing her third slice.

She has some holes to fill, too.

After the snow-then-sandwich incident, mom got her stomach stapled. They wouldn't operate on her arthritic knee until she'd lost some weight. “A knee arthroplasty won't work if there's a lot of weight bearing down,” they said. So the Western doctors cut and sewed her belly, then cut and sewed her knee. She never changed her eating habits though, and sometimes I'll look over and she's wincing in pain after dinner, after putting the same amount of food she used to eat into a stomach now the size of a thumb. I acknowledge my still-accommodating tummy when I polish off a tub of garlic hummus on a stack of tamari rice cakes.

Now, Ötzi's skin looks like tamari sauce, but, back in the day, he was more robust. He was an Alpine mountaineer and perennial outdoors(ice)man.

Maybe somebody brought him an ibex as a hut-warming gift. He probably wolfed down his chow too, because “strands of animal hair and fly parts also found in Ötzi’s stomach suggest the Iceman wasn’t overly concerned with cleaning the meat before he ate it.” He ate as if his life depended on it, because it did. He had a hole to fill like the rest of us, but it was probably just hunger; the real kind. But maybe this mummy had mommy issues. Maybe he inherited her compulsions, or chose to continue her obsessions on his own.

But perhaps he felt desperation, or fear. “The circumstances surrounding Ötzi’s death are not fully known, but the most popular theory – based in part on the discovery of an arrowhead in his back – is that he was murdered by other hunters while fleeing through the mountains.” *The Most Dangerous Game* – now that’s some vigorous exercise. Perhaps his rivals distracted him with grub, knowing his weakness, his privation, his voracious eating habits and his inability to walk away from free food. Maybe because he was a glutton while gobbling goat, or made too many lip-smacking sounds, like my bowling ball-bellied dad with a buttered *stollen* fruitcake, they took him down.

Nobody likes an overeater.

Food is a dangerous thing. When it’s restricted, the ensuing famine begets mania. Food is necessary for life, but, especially today, often a factor in death. You can’t quit food like you can quit alcohol. Food can control us, and our families; it can bring us to death’s door, as Elvis’s Fluffernutter sandwiches

can attest. For at least 5,000 years, our primal needs, our gaping holes, have been running roughshod over our relationships with others and with ourselves.

My hand is forever caught in a literal and figurative cookie jar. I can't forgive this transgression. Ötzi the Mummy's left arm is eternally frozen over his throat, against his jaw, as if to say "Enough."

Bull in a China Shop

"I am the storehouse and the shop / Of the whole body"

Menenius, *Coriolanus*, William Shakespeare

My first job was as Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer at Springfield Mall. I was 15. It wasn't a costume (that came later, when I was a Pink Power Ranger), it was an animatronic fuzzy head sticking out of a foam gingerbread box, about the size of a phone booth, which felt claustrophobic and smelt musty. Behind the Oz-like curtain, there were hand controls that moved the felt-covered, psychotically cheerful noggin from side to side, up and down. There was a "trigger" to flap the mandible open and closed; and a button to light up the nose whenever proboscic punctuation was needed. I wore a small microphone slung in a harness around my neck, in front of my mouth; like Bob Dylan's harmonica holder. Although instead of professing peace and love and meaning in the mid-1970s, I was the spokes-deer for capitalism. And I hated it.

* * * * *

I liked Christmas as a kid, but after serving time as Rudolph I thought about how Americans had appropriated pagan winter rituals as an excuse to acquire crap. I learned that most crap was made in Asia, in sweatshops. My capitalist judgment became focused on products China, where I had a chance to visit three decades later.

Before going to China for two weeks in 2011, I took a semester-long Chinese history class, and it bummed me out. I wanted to learn about the world, to be a vigilant and informed global citizen, yet it was miserable work. Some folks think I'm a hardass, but I'm actually an emotional wussy, and facing China's past had me weeping every Wednesday. I'm convinced the entire country has post-traumatic stress disorder, because its story is one of privation. Currently, they are concocting an amalgam of communism and capitalism, and America is illuminating their way.

* * * * *

In my third grade class, we were signed up to be mentors for mentally and physically challenged kindergartners at Springfield Estates Elementary School. I didn't even cry when the behavioral dervish kid named Pogo cracked me across the jaw with his *Six Million Dollar Man* lunch box. Metal, of course. From that experience, I thought I could handle kids. I was ready to be Rudolph.

My mom dropped me off at Mall Entrance 2, and I went to Santa's Castle (his *castle*?) on the lower level. I set up in the talk box, adjusting the mic so I wouldn't pop my "P's," rolling my wrists to limber up to have his jaw movements match my amplified words, trigger finger on the nose illumination knob.

The squirming kids and their haggard parents queued up for second-class Rudy when Santa was on a break, or his line was too long.

"Hello, my friend. What does Christmas mean to you?" I'd ask in my imitation television-animation voice.

Most supplicants ran through their lists by rote. Girls would say they wanted a Barbie Dream House or Corvette, and an Easy-Bake oven, and a Crissy Doll with the moving hair.

Boys wanted G.I. Joe with the kung fu grip or Hot Wheels Sizzlers or a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. Many were enthusiastic and bought into my ruse. Some were reluctant and petulant, and had to be prompted by parents laboring under shopping bags. After they finished their lengthy lists, I asked, "What does Christmas mean to you," giving them an opportunity to say something nice about mom or dad, slumped nearby. Perhaps they could chirp a happy holiday bromide to prompt "awwws" from the assembled.

Instead of hearing "I love my family" or "It's Jesus's birthday," the most frequent response to "What does Christmas mean to you?" was "more toys." The parents didn't correct them. They knew the score. My optimism evaporated when exposed to naked greed. I was forced to assimilate the capitalist orgy that we call Christmas.

* * * * *

All of our toys are made in China. It's been that way for years. There are over two billion hands there, so they've become the world's workshop. This outsource site was led in the first half of the twentieth century by jolly leaders such as Chiang Kai-shek, who malnourished his Kuomintang Nationalist soldiers and absconded with the treasury and national art treasures when he and his cronies fled from the communists to the former Formosa. Then came that happy,

chubby-cheeked Mao Zedong, who let forty million Chinese starve to death during his *Great Leap Forward*. He encouraged students to persecute and kill their teachers during the Cultural Revolution, which was about the same time I started playing the reindeer at the mall. Those kids were called the Red Guard, although I don't think light-up Rudolph noses were part of their garb as they were brainwashed to torture and murder intellectuals.

Next was that likeable elf Deng Xiaoping, who began with a healthy abandonment of Mao's lunacy, but then donned the red Machiavellian robe of totalitarianism when he ordered armor-piercing bullets – the kind that twist on entry and pull guts out of a body – be shot at the unarmed backs of students and seniors trying to voice an opinion in Tiananmen Square. We were all singing the same carol: *He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.*

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I couldn't take a second year as Rudolph. Since most teen jobs were at the mall, a friend of my dad's got me a job at Britches Great Outdoors. It was a regional chain, like Eddie Bauer, with lots of rugby shirts, Timberland shoes and rag wool everything. I was a cashier. These were the salad days, when gas was cheap and shopping sacrosanct. My boss Mark Gratton was handsome and cool, like Sam Malone from *Cheers*. He parked his red Corvette sideways over two spots in the parking structure. We were aggressive yet cheerful salespeople, frequently checking to see if we were meeting our financial goals. At closing,

after pulling the mesh gate over the store opening, we'd drink beer while we folded the Warthog shirts, Britches' rip-off of Izod's gator. It was all fun and games until ... Christmastime.

Starting after Thanksgiving, people became lunatics. Dead-eyed suburbanites became enraged and elbowed each other to get the last rag wool sweater. Even the sweaters without leather elbow patches. Even in the wrong size.

"Just grab that one, Bill. Your dad can exchange the size later. We need to have *something* in the box. He *has* to have something under the tree, dammit."

I'm a multi-tasker, and was a superfast cashier, but during Xmas the line snaked around the store. This was before scanners, so I had to key in each and every nine-digit stock number by hand. Fights broke out in line, where folks tussled over point of sale items like key chains and Vuarnet sunglass paraphernalia. These were desperate times. Gone was the goodwill towards men. I still have nightmares about it, replete with malicious, dancing numerals.

I'm pretty sure I coined the phrase *Merry Fucking Christmas*. I certainly gave it a workout. We'd say it a lot, starting on Black Friday and all the way through to mid-January. Usually *sotto voce* around the customers, usually to their backs as they left the store, after they requested *three* Britches gift boxes, *and* tissue paper, when they'd only purchased *one* item. We'd also say it quickly

to each other before answering the phone, where we were required to say “Merry Britches.”

I never had any interest in retail at all, but I worked at Britches for seven years, throughout high school and during college summers. I was thoroughly unprepared for any subsequent *real* job. I did learn to despise consumption and that Christmas is a manufactured holiday; a rip-off of ancient solstice celebrations that was hollow, devoid of soul. The winter period was merely a reason to buy, an attempt to fill some hole. Navigate some chasm.

* * * * *

In China, materialism and commercialism are replacing communism; *isms* that lack a comprehensive social awareness and spiritual navigation. People revile the *Made in China* label for shoddy workmanship. Yet American businesses with Chinese workshops sign off on this. U.S. companies are the bosses, so they ultimately sanction child labor, twenty-hour workdays, seven-day work-weeks, unhealthy workplaces. Chinese special economic zones in places such as Shenzhen are like toxic North Poles strewn across their nation, which is about the same size as ours, only with a lot more people. And we buy the shit. It's our shit; we just get them to make it, then buy it at big box stores like Wal-Mart, a huge intermediary of Chinese goods. We want it cheap, we want it made well, but we don't want to pay them a living wage to make it. It's a vicious cycle, especially during the economic downturn: because Americans have lost jobs and income, we demand inexpensive products, and those items can only be made

cheaply enough in China. Americans perpetuate this labor and product imbalance.

The Chinese never had an industrial revolution in the nineteenth century like the West. They didn't need to create labor-saving machines because they had so many hands to do the work. My class also teaches me that the unprecedented American growth of the nineteen-fifties, sixties and seventies – the economic “adolescence” growing out of our own turn-of-the-century industrialization – is happening to the Chinese economy now. We set the example for consumption, and now the Chinese are guzzling gas like our good old days. We've infected them with our car-lust too, and they're buying Hummers with abandon.

There's a lot of work to be had in manufacturing Christmas crap, so Chinese peasants are leaving their farms for these polluted special economic zones. But it's not Mr. and Mrs. Kringle here. Most families have to separate in order to earn a living, as Peter Hessler recounts in his book *Country Driving*. Children stay in villages with other relatives, paying for whatever meager schooling they can afford since education is not nationally subsidized. Mama might cut threads off of our jeans in one zone, as the documentary film *China Blue* explores, while Baba manufactures bra rings at a factory that is an expensive, four-hour train ride away. We are likely clothed at the expense of children – by parents toiling too far away from them to care for them, or actually by children. I remember when we did inventory at Britches, back in the days

before computers, and we'd use a tally sheet listing the actual cost of an item. Most \$45 shirts only cost about a dollar to make.

There is an emerging middle class in China, forever governed by a small, humorless oligarchy, but most citizens are still peasants who can only afford to get together with their families once a year. Only two weeks during spring festival to find spiritual connection. And that's all they have, for they can't afford to buy the products they make. Americans have the time *and* end up with the products. Literally and figuratively, we're big in our Britches.

I spend Christmases alone after I stopped working at Britches, partly because I loathe materialism mania, but also because I have no children of my own. Rites of passage don't resonate without an audience, so I follow no calendar.

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I had to go to San José's Oakridge Mall to pick up new glasses. Again. Glasses I purchased for computer work had to be recut due to shoddy workmanship. A different pair of glasses I ordered at another optometrist also took several tries but they never got the progressive lenses just right. Lack of quality continues to know no boundaries.

Going to a mall is always a throwback for me because of the hours I've spent there. It makes me nostalgic, sad, and a little sick to my stomach. The "motivational shopping" music, the smell of pretzels and Cinnabon and fried offerings from the food court. I see the *great unwashed*, fat asses packed into

designer jeans, pushing overloaded strollers. And an endless supply of teens, some holding hands, because the mall is the first place you get to show infatuation in public.

Britches is long gone, as is Montgomery “Monkey” Wards. The Orange Julius is now a Jamba Juice, and who needs the Time Out arcade when every video game you could desire is available on your phone? *Asteroids* and *Ms. Pac-Man* are faint joystick memories, along with my Rudolph rig. In the good old days, there weren’t clusters of cell phone kiosks, Apple stores, Target as an anchor store. There were *record* stores. Ah, the spirituality of vinyl. But somehow there is still a Spencer’s Gifts.

While waiting for my “glasses in under an hour” a month after ordering them, I wandered into Spencer’s. Yes, there are still black light accoutrements, *hi-larious* cock and tit paraphernalia, and “edgy” T-shirts. But the slogans have changed. At the front of the store is a Charlie Sheen “Winning, Duh” shirt in various colors. In the back of the store, I am struck by the black infant onesie, emblazoned with “Sorry to break it to you, but your baby is ugly as fuck.” Its neighbors include “Hung like my dad” and “Too cute to play with your ugly ass kid.”

The adult shirt offerings do include some youthful favorites of mine, like pictures of Hendrix, Marley and Morrison, but the other sentiments continue the kids’ theme, with “I’m not a bitch, you’re just a pussy,” “Talk shit get hit,” and the lyrical “Hide your kids, hide your wife, hide your husband, ‘cause they raping

everybody out here!" I don't know what that means any more than does the Chinese child who worked through the night making it.

* * * * *

Americans and Chinese are growing to resemble each other. China has institutionalized corruption, while we prefer the more entrepreneurial model, except in Chicago, perhaps. We all pine for moments of connection in a materialist world, yet I embrace my solitude as refuge from things that don't really matter. The Chinese are living by the one-child policy. I am accepting my personal no-child policy. They will do anything for their families, including being away from them most of the time, to provide the best for them. They love at a distance; I live in a loveless landscape. I work all the time, but for what, for whom? There are no holidays for me, there's nothing in that black bag for me, Wizard; nothing in Santa's sack. Should I go shopping to fill that void? A Chinese-made T-shirt, perhaps? One that says *Gung Hay Fat Choy*.

Or Merry Fucking Christmas.

By 2020

"Lov'd not wisely, but too well"

Othello, *Othello*, William Shakespeare

Michael grips the front seat on the bus. The city of Shanghai sprawls massively behind him. He's pale and slender with spiky black hair, cut like an 80s New Waver. He informs us through his tinny microphone that here, it's no longer *ni hao*, the Beijing hello. In Shanghainese, the regional Mandarin dialect, it's now *no ha*. I mentally update my Chenglish idiolect. Actually, my *idiot-lect* after a paltry three Saturday morning language classes. Michael is cute and young, maybe 28 or 30, and I consider what it would be like to date him. At my age, likely a trade imbalance. No Sino/Anglo-American merger here, or one-child policy for us. In his light blue oxford shirt and chinos, he looks clean and polished, but not quite thrilled to be shepherding our sweaty student group for four days around his city, China's largest.

It's June 2011, the Year of the Rabbit. Michael does a throwback Forest Gump imitation to introduce himself. I think his life could indeed be like a box of chocolates: nougat, caramel, obnoxious Americans. He introduces our bus driver as a *shifu*, a master, who's more like a god with his ability to navigate the intense city traffic. There are over 16 million residents in this port city, and I think we've encountered most of them during our first few hot and humid hours here.

Shanghai means “above sea,” but we can never get above our own ever-present perspiration. Whether in busses or buildings, I have learned that China has a characteristically rigid relationship with air conditioning. Our bus is either too chilly or too hot, never *just right*. The state-owned businesses we visit aren’t allowed to crank up the cool until it reaches 86 degrees inside. These AC-impaired moments are an apt metaphor for my overall experience in the PRC, the People’s Republic of China: never just right, uncomfortable but endeavoring.

In the 80s, then-Chairman and China-opener Deng Xiaoping called his reinvented government “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” I interpret what I encounter as a cobbling together of capitalism and communism, often ending up with the worst of both worlds. From what I gather, commerce is the most important, then the interests of the group, with individual rights running a distant third, if they’re in the race at all. Deng also said, “It doesn’t matter if the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice.” Here it seems outcome is paramount; a product is preferred over a person. You can’t make a conglomerate omelet without breaking some individual eggs, right? Yet, in this age of globalization, I sense that a spiritual kudzu is slowly subsuming the entrenched institution.

I think enigmatic Michael has a foot in each camp. He works in tourism, but keeps his distance. I want to entice him into our rabbit hole.

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Michael delivers a nostalgic yet solid “who’s on first” riff about Chairman Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. “Who? Hu. When? Wen.” For what it’s

worth: Hu's on first; Wen's on second. On our way to our next company – we are Global Technology Initiative (GTI) scholars, after all, here to have state-approved tours of a couple dozen businesses – we stop for Kentucky Fried Chicken. Again.

When traveling abroad, I don't mind having American food maybe once, to see how they localize the dishes. KFC looks the same here, but the chicken sandwiches are even nastier than those in the U.S., if that's possible. Colonel Sanders got the jump on fast food competitors in this burgeoning economy, and with 1.6 billion potential customers, it's ubiquitous now. And our group of mostly twenty-year-old Asian and Latino engineering students is clamoring for familiar food. As the only humanities representative on the trip, I want to encourage them away from predictable ugly-Americanism. And since I'm old enough to be their mother, I want to push them to explore this culture, and test their comfort zones. I also want to avoid their youthfully chattering cliques and claques.

I beg Michael for something local, so he takes our other local guide (who tells us to call her Theresa), our university chaperone Dr. Chung, and me to a stand serving duck and barbeque pork, rice and veggies. This lunch is only 20 Yuan, about three bucks, and yummy. We eat it in the only place there is to sit down—the KFC.

I like to spend time with Michael. I want to have an “authentic” Chinese experience, not the manufactured one that's been orchestrated by our university and the tour fixers. I try to talk with him about his family, but he says he's not

comfortable sharing personal information. But he knows a lot about the States, which I find surprising for a man in a country still sequestered behind the Great Firewall. I won't be able to get to know him, but he knows all about us and our pop culture, culled from various decades (Forest Gump, Who's on First?), despite his lack of Google, Facebook and YouTube.

At the Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corporation, Ambrose Gano, the company's cute-as-a-bug's-ear American representative, tells us about wafers—the silicon kind, not the Nilla ones I was hoping for. Before Shanghai, he had worked in the Gobi Desert, and observes that until he lived there, he “had never seen it rain sand,” that “the Yellow River is brown,” and that his favorite local beer was advertised as “now without formaldehyde.” He confirms that Chinese water is primarily clean, but the pipes are so old that they grow pathogens. Their efficient technology of water purification is negated by antiquated and insufficient infrastructure. Needless to say, for our daily ablutions we brush our teeth with bottled water, and clench our mouths shut during showers.

On our first evening in Shanghai, our Gang of Twenty-Four walks along the concrete boardwalk called The Bund, which is Hindi for embankment. A large film crew shoots a man and a woman, doused with light, in the center of a wide area of pavement, splitting passersby into two human streams. When I aim my own camera at the actors, a burly guard steps in front of me and waves me away. No reciprocity here, in the micro, reflecting macro relations.

The Huangpu River reflects the imposing Shanghai skylines while carrying garishly lit tourist boats. Across the water is the Pudong district, with its purple “Oriental Pearl” neon spire and other skyscrapers. The monolithic World Financial Center tower, the third tallest building on the planet, looks like a bottle opener with a space at the top. Maybe someday it will open up more balanced global trade. For now, it makes me crave Tsingtao beer, founded by Germans and currently China’s second largest brewery, made in its namesake city in Shandong. Although it tastes more watery than the U.S. version, it’s still cheaper than bottled water, so the familiar green glass appears on most of the group’s Lazy Susan, family-style dinner tables, alongside liters of Coke and Sprite.

The other side of The Bund promenade features historic French, German and English structures. It’s the booming financial district, comprised of ostentatious colonial dwellings, anchored by the customs house. Every fifteen minutes “Little Ben” chimes the Party song “The East is Red.” This former British neighborhood, or concession, was taken over – Michael quickly corrects his spiel to say *liberated* – by the Communists in 1949.

Standing in front, and apart, from our group, Michael adds that, in Shanghainese, when expressing pleasure – a subject in which I’m deeply interested – instead of *hěn hǎo* (very good), it’s *ding ding ding hǎo*, the number of *dings* equating the amount of goodness. If you’re only doing so-so, then it’s *ma ma hu hu*, or “horse horse, tiger tiger,” for some reason.

Because of The Bund's crush of humanity, the humidity and Michael's insistence in keeping his chats business-only, I am definitely *ma ma hu hu*.

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On the bus the next day, Michael quizzes us on Chinese national symbols and stats. Their animal is the panda bear: the living one, not the Jack Black version, although they do like the *Kung Fu Panda* movies here. China has 56 ethnic groups, the majority being *Han*. Their sport is ping-pong, and it, Deng and Dick Nixon are mainly responsible for our, or any, foreign group even being here. The flower is the peony. Shanghai, which is nicknamed *hu*, a bamboo fishing tool, has its own signature flower, the magnolia, which pops up on signs around the city.

Michael informs us that the U.S. national flower is the carnation, the "car/nation." Ha. Michael's got standup skills. But since he tells us this in bumper-to-bumper traffic, I think that this flower has growing resonance in Shanghai too.

He continues this routine for his captive audience by letting us know that the Chinese national bird is the crane, and the crane. Bird *and* construction variety. We observe the latter on our long commutes between businesses, where construction projects sprout like mushrooms alongside new highways, within the 23 Chinese provinces, and multiple autonomous regions, municipalities, and special administrative regions. We also learn the red of the Chinese flag represents the blood of sacrifice, the one large star symbolizes the

Communist Party, and the four smaller stars stand-in for the farmers, workers, soldiers and petite bourgeoisie, the small businesspeople.

I deduce that the Chinese national pastime is to create and deliver deady dull PowerPoint presentations, endured at our every stop and chock full of nationalist swagger. Just like my own country, as I've noticed during my sojourns into corporate America. Superlatives roam free in China too, and everything from programs to buildings is the very best, or soon will be the top, as Michael repeatedly promises, in under a decade.

“By the year 2020. The largest, most prestigious, number one in the world, by 2020.”

Self-proclaimed newly bourgeois Michael is even proud that the planned Shanghai Disney Theme Park will be the company's *smallest*.

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Our GTI group stops by the Jiading campus of Tonji University's School of Automotive Engineering, on the outskirts of Shanghai. While the boys salivate over car parts and *Iron Man*-looking robot assembly arms, I buttonhole Michael in a corner of the vast garage space to show off my pre-trip Chinese.

“Happy New Year is *Gung Hay Fat Choy*, right?”

I learned that from a menu. Or was it a T-shirt?

Michael looks more uncomfortable than usual. His clear, broad face clouds and tightens in contained exasperation.

“Actually, in Mandarin, it's *Xin Nian Kuai Le*,” he corrects.

“So, what do you do on your off time, Michael?” I notice that he’s been with us throughout our interminable days.

“I like music. My favorites are Jay Chou from Taiwan, who was in the American *Green Hornet* movie, and Hong Kong singer Andy Lau.”

He walks away. That’s that. Despite his constant presence, he is as separate from us as I am from my own group.

In the United States, when I ask people about their interests, it’s usually a good icebreaker and they become effusive. But here in China Michael’s not playing. At running interference, he’s *ding ding ding hǎo*.

* * * * *

At computer graphics company Nvidia, I am more charmed by the Hello Kitty-themed Suzuki car parked out front than over the geek-fest inside, with incessant talk about gaming systems and video resolutions. My favorite part of this tour is a name on one of the upstairs cubicles: Pudding Wang.

Seeing the word pudding makes me hungry, yet, sadly, an American fast food lunch happens for the third time. My appetite wanes. This globalization lesson has been repeatedly, and uneasily, digested. Michael jokes that his Chinese friends call McDonald’s “the American Embassy.” This revelation terrifies rather than amuses. KFC is considered “fancy American food” and is often the destination of choice for blind dates set up by matchmakers. I wonder why many of these “restaurants,” plus other eating establishments like hotels, appear modern and recently renovated at torso level and above, yet the floors

and carpets and corners remain worn and unkempt. The underpinnings don't quite support or match the shiny sightlines, which is a shorthand for what happens to unbridled growth without thoughtful groundwork. The carpet doesn't match the curtains.

For some reason, somebody tells me about "night soil," which is human excrement used as fertilizer. My appetite disappears altogether.

Back on the rain-splattered behemoth bus with antennae-like mirrors, Michael tells us about typical Shanghai marriages. The average age for a man to marry is 29, and for a woman it's 27. Why must you taunt me, Michael? China also has quite a few DINCes: double income, no children. The petite bourgeoisie is growing, even without reproduction.

We drive to the site of the 2010 World Expo, now an enormous ghost town. We look through a chain-link fence and a curtain of mist, or maybe watery pollution, at the red (naturally) and massive China pavilion.

Before the trip, during our Chinese history class, we were told that the Expo mascot was Haibao, a light blue Gumby-looking fella, shaped like a Chinese character. We see him in various places around town, as a statue or a sticker, a cultural icon like Mickey or Minnie or Bieber. Haibao is colored aqua to symbolize the ocean in Shanghai, which was a dirty greenish-brown when I saw it. He's a boy to represent the future, and, with female fetus abortions on the rise, a prescient prediction, and he sports a hairstyle that was fashionable in the early 1900s, which apparently was a Big Boy-style cowlick flip. Haibao has

psychotic, slightly crossed, googly eyes, accompanied by a slash of a smile, no nose or thorax, and puffy balloon hands at the end of stick arms. He's aggressively cheerful and it's creepy.

I prefer Michael to be my goodwill ambassador.

* * * * *

I used the term "Shanghai'd" to title one of my early travel blog entries, something I'd heard since I was little, as a reference to being abducted to serve on a ship, or forced into unpleasantness in general. Michael is annoyed that his town is used for this negative nomenclature, when various regions were responsible for "coolie recruitment." He reminds us to "believe what you hear here," and not to always blame Shanghai for all shipboard kidnappings.

I wish Michael would be my stowaway.

During our fortnight sojourn, our tour guides have all been solid, albeit while toeing the party line, a phrase that becomes more resonant here. The guides universally repeat key words and phrases, ostensibly because they are conscious of their accents. Shared facts are repeated; repeated. But as a compulsive repeater myself, I believe they, like me, do it just for good measure, for clearer understanding. I believe the Chinese are dying to be heard. I hear you, Michael. I see you with my googly eyes.

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The next morning we drive for hours through mist and rain to the Yangshan Deep-Water Port. I can only assume it's the largest deep-water port in

the world, or will be, of course, by 2020. We are on the Donghai Bridge for about twenty miles, which Michael claims is the longest ocean bridge, but my later research reveals as the second longest. Perhaps it too will grow by 2020. We're in a cloud by the time we reach the overlook near the port, and we don't tour any facilities. Instead we ramble a bit on stone walkways, unable to see very far, as gray waves lash the rocks at the foot of the hills, and my hair frizzes into a white girl Afro. This spot doesn't feel like China. We could have been anywhere.

But Michael is here; my beacon in the gloom.

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On the long ride back, Michael goes over how to count with your fingers in Chinese, akin to American Sign Language. I ask if I can film his demonstration. He says "OK," but worries, "You're not going to put this on YouTube, eh?" After he's done, he repeats, "You *promise* you're not going to put this on YouTube?" To which a student replies, "You will never know."

But I would never betray you, Michael. No video, just this story. But please, just share a little of yourself. Maybe tell me your Chinese name? Think about it. We're both consumers now; we all need things. Can you share yourself? Can you bridge what divides us during, say, the next nine years?

I want to know a Chinese person. I want to know you. I want to see who you really are.

* * * * *

On our fourth morning in Shanghai, we take the tour bus to Hongqiao to fly to Taiwan. For his final factoid, Michael points out the city's library, naturally the tallest in the world. China is a land of superlatives. Or will be by 2020. The Year of Perfect Vision.

Fag Hag

Dressed in a tailored linen suit, he saunters his tall, well-proportioned frame towards the boxy vintage microphone, in front of world-music orchestra Pink Martini and the San Francisco Symphony at Davies Symphony Hall. He interprets “But Now I’m Back,” a lilting Latin love song with his pleasing tenor.

I better go now
I hope you know now
I love you, that’s a fact
Gotta hurry
But don’t you worry, babe...
Cause I’ll be back.

During the instrumental break, handsome Ari Shapiro stops his coy patter to seduce sultry singer Lucy Woodward with a *lambada*-like gyration. He’s light on his feet. He is at ease.

Fuck you, Ari Shapiro.

* * * * *

I’m an asshole. Impossible to get along with. If I haven’t pissed you off yet, wait for it. I will. I always do.

Each phase of my life is punctuated by tremendous fallout. I became *persona non grata* to my high school best friend Kelly McKinley upon graduation. I can’t pinpoint why. Never saw her again. In college, it was Pat Van Horn. I drove away from our shared house in Harrisonburg, Virginia, with her throwing technical theater books at the back of my Toyota Woody station wagon. Haven’t

stayed in touch with my college and post-college boyfriends. I start out strong, then entropy kicks in. I have potential, have done things, made connections, brushed greatness, but can't make it work for the long haul. Drove from the D.C. area to Chicago, alone and knowing no one. Made acquaintances, but little more than basic human contact.

Did the same thing fifteen years later from the Windy City to Northern California. First fight, then flight. I cannot maintain a relationship to save my life. I shit where I eat. I bite the hand. I make the bed but refuse to lie in it. I keep trying to outrun my bad mojo, from the Shenandoah Valley to Silicon Valley. But I have finally realized it must be me. Despite my other charitable acts, nonprofit work and penchant for rescuing stray animals, I am facing my jerkitude. Plus the way I endlessly compare myself to others, despite my despising them. Suffering caused by desire. Trapped on what I call a "bipola rollacosta" of my own design.

It's lame. Something is wrong. All I want is a good conversation, but I can't find it, or it's not good enough, so I get pissed and retreat. I don't date, I can't date, I won't date. I'm antisocial in a world exploding in social media. I hate social media because it tries to connect me with those I've purposely abandoned. Facebook erases the distance I've earned. I keep moving, also spending time living in London and Amsterdam, because the grass is always greener. But, with my scorched earth policy, green grass is getting scarce.

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I'm an NPR whore. It's all I listen to, dawn to dusk. NPR gives good conversation. It's my friend surrogate, the only chatter I hear on a regular basis. I even got a Zune instead of an iPod because Mr. Gates' product had radio, while Mr. Jobs' did not. My love for public broadcasting makes up for my embarrassing lack of Apple products. I can imitate all the public radio correspondents, and love their names, from Ofeibea Quist-Arcton to Doualy Xaykaothao.

I've always liked listening to Ari Shapiro on public radio. He's got it all. He always has something interesting to say because he's smart. He graduated *magna cum laude* from Yale, then started on public radio as a justice correspondent. He reported on important Supreme Court rulings, on topics like Guantanamo detainees, Abu Ghraib prison abuse, and Scooter Libby's perjury trial. Ari Shapiro was the first NPR correspondent under the age of 30. He doesn't have a face for radio. He's hot. He's smart. He's influential. And, in his spare time, he sings like an angel. Fuck him.

You know I love ya
Dream only of ya
So please, please cut me some slack
I went away
Just a couple of days...
But now I'm back.

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I'm a fag hag. Ari's not the only gay man that I love and love to hate. I'm straight but I gravitate to gays. It's easier to hang around gay men because

there's no pressure. They offer good conversation about shrewd stuff, and our politics align. When I was cute and young and skinny, there was no awkward sexual tension with my theater gays. They were into (what they knew of) my personality. And, since we only worked on shows for a period of a few months, there was no time for them to come around and dislike me. For my heart of darkness to emerge. When I became old and chubby, my occasional queers still appreciated me for my brains and sass. Looks don't matter. The only people for whom looks don't matter.

My first gay contact was in elementary school, when I took a weekend theater workshop for a month or so. His name was Joe-Jeff. I don't remember much about him, but since he taught theater and his name was Joe-Jeff, I'm assuming he was gay. I also recall him being fabulously supportive of my work. He asked me to memorize a poem, which I can still recite, *Incident* by Countee Cullen, who was also thought to be homosexual:

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, 'Nigger.'

I saw the whole of Baltimore

From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.

I remember that poem. Not only did this experience give me my first gay pal, it was also one of my first exposures to African-American culture, with which I have an abiding appreciation. I remember Joe-Jeff, and me being the cheese that stood alone. I was always different. My mom's an anthropologist, and I grew up at the Smithsonian, where she worked, where I first inclined towards diversity. Where I began my endless search to find the place that welcomed weirdos and outsiders.

* * * * *

In 2004, Ari Shapiro married his longtime boyfriend Michael Gottlieb at San Francisco's City Hall, somewhere and sometime between Ari's exceptional work at the Supreme Court and the Symphony. Fuck the both of them.

I've always supported gay rights, including the ability to get legally married. My dog was rescued by a lesbian couple I introduced to each other. My two new orange tabby cat brothers are from a same-sex pair too, although I never met them. But gay marriage still pisses me off. Why should they get married when I can't get a date? It's frustrating to fight for gay marriage when a heterosexual one eludes me. Who's stumping on my behalf? Sure, I know a chunky, aging spinster cat lady with Asperger's and anger issues holds questionable appeal, but it's hard to put effort into relationships that revolve

around, well, relationships, and sexuality when I haven't seen any of that in a long, long time.

Still, I fight for equality, and consequently don't seem to alienate outsiders as much as regular folks. Theresa, whom I called Reese, for I was known for my razor-sharp nicknaming ability, was a friend from Girl Scouts, then at West Springfield High School even though she was a year older. Solid chick, and she could tolerate my parents. Italian, with long brown hair and premature grey highlights, Reese wore pants and boxy shirts, no make-up. She was friends with Mike Monroe, who drove me to school each morning in his giant boat of a car. Mike and I smoked his minty menthol cigarettes and listened to AM radio cruising down Rolling Road. I called him Fag Machine; he didn't seem to mind (another one of my lame nicknames, and an early attempt at *fag hagitude*). Theresa and Mike went to prom together. In retrospect, I guess you weren't allowed to be gay in the late 70s/early 80s. Reese and Mike were just themselves, and fine friends.

We went off to different colleges, but Reese and I would get together on breaks to catch up. We'd meet at Victor's Pizza, next to MotoPhoto where she used to work. One time, sitting in the sticky vinyl booth, she hesitated, hemming and hawing between bites of breaded mushrooms.

"I want to tell you something."

"What?"

"I'm, um, gay."

“Took you long enough.”

I suppose I should have been more effusive, but I guess I had always known, and was glad she finally caught up. She added, “I went to Mexico with a friend. She was my, friend, my girlfriend. She died in a motorcycle accident there. I knew I had to come out because of that.”

So she did. Reeseey was dating somebody new, then, after graduation, and moved to Atlanta. Actually, to Decatur, which she reminded me was pronounced “Dick Hater.” She could tell a good lesbian joke.

Reeseey moved away while we were still amicable, before I screwed up that friendship too.

* * * * *

Ari Shapiro covers the White House for all the NPR shows, like *All Things Considered* and *Morning Edition*. He also shows up on The PBS NewsHour, The Rachel Maddow Show, and CNN. He’s won awards like The Daniel Schorr Journalism Prize for his story on methamphetamine use and HIV transmission, the Columbia Journalism Review's "laurel" recognition, the American Bar Association's Silver Gavel, and the American Judges' Association's American Gavel for reporting on courts and the justice system. Ari Shapiro works hard, and he is recognized.

I worked on the PBS show *In Performance at the White House*. I did PR for WETA TV after undergrad, and I staffed one of the episode tapings during the senior Bush administration. I wished the President Happy Father’s Day, because

it was Father's Day, which he said he appreciated as he grinned and double-grasped my hand. Barbara, who was having thyroid problems at the time, was chillier.

I've met people, I've gone places, I've done things, but I get bored. Or I worry I won't be the best, so I need to get while the getting is good. Comparing myself to others from dawn until dusk. So I shift gears, and become a beginner all over again. Which is just as bad as the boredom, and the self-judgment. I haven't kept on the same career path so I haven't gotten as far as Ari Shapiro. Plus, I'm an asshole and he seems swell.

Out magazine called Ari Shapiro one of the 100 "most interesting, influential, and newsworthy GLBT people" in 2008. The next year, *The Advocate* listed him as one of its "Forty under 40." MSNBC named him 26th in the "power list of 35 people under 35 who changed D.C. in 2010." *Paper Mag* included him in its annual list of "Beautiful People," noting that he "must have a clone. No one man could have so many talents and be in so many places at once."

Ari Shapiro is out, and out and about. Less so for me. There are a few people I talk with on the phone every once in a while, but I spend most of my time alone, in my new, probably temporary, home in San José. I'm writing now, a solitary pursuit, and still doing some theater, naturally the solo genre.

In 2010, the year Ari Shapiro was being recognized for being gorgeous and amazing, I took a solo performance workshop at the California State University's summer arts program in Fresno. Fresno, home of the Fresno Pox, a

nickname I coined for the itchy red skin rash I developed from the combo of heat exhaustion and agricultural pollution. I took a three-week workshop with mostly twenty-year-olds who had never left the state. But there I met guest professor Bill, a gay mime.

I invited him for a glass of wine after his fabulous solo show about growing up gay in Montana, and, to my surprise, he came along. I was comfortable for the first time in a long time, talking about history and literature and the creative process, about his home and work in New York. He told me about one of his physical theater pieces, the Heyokah/Hokahey Project.

It's a Native American concept, regarding the Heyokah contrary clown, an upside down and inside out trickster storyteller. A Twin Soul, where every person has a higher self of the opposite gender, and they communicate. Hokahey was the Lakota tribe's battle cry, which means it's a good day to celebrate, or perhaps a good day to die. It can also mean "clear the path."

Bill and I fit together like those two words. We are outsiders meeting away from home yet finding a common language. Outcasts somehow finding each other, because the marginalized are diverse, and become the same because of their diversity. Bill became my gay lifeline in my isolated interpretation of my current iteration. But Bill is successful, doing theater for most of his life, as a performer and teacher. Professional and established. He has a longtime partner, he's fathered a child, he has a lake house, and now has me as his fag hag, probably one of many. He's my own personal Ari Shapiro, the one who

have everything, the one that I envy. But I'm not angry with him. Because Bill's my higher self.

Now he's back
Cut him slack
Now he's back.

* * * * *

I rarely remember the good. Mostly the bad. The Summer Arts Program was another notch in a long series of disappointments, because it was mostly rudimentary and lame. Not good enough for me, but then I'm never good enough for me.

"I feel like I'm going backwards," I told guest lecturer Heather Raffo after a class, as she was gestating her first child, and had recently completed playing to sold-out audiences and winning numerous awards for her critically acclaimed solo show *9 Parts of Desire*. "I think I'm Benjamin Button even though I've never seen the movie." Those that put in the hours and years are reaping the benefits in their careers, and are building their own families. I worked at the White House in my early twenties, and now I'm back in school in my late forties, having abandoned my public relations career and sold my condo. I have nothing to "show" for myself except memories. And I still can't get a date, or don't want a date. I can't figure that one out. Either I hate everyone, or I compare myself to the "good ones," those with success in business and personal realms.

Recently, one of the few on-the-ball Fresno workshop participants Facebook'd me. Goddam Facebook and social network still following me around.

Out of the blue, Philip messaged “going back to your Summer Arts statement about ‘good conversation’ being what it’s all about (to roughly paraphrase). What is a good conversation? To K. McKie?”

I responded, “Intelligent thoughts – theater, museums, culture, Shakespeare, history, science, you name it – as long as it’s thoughtful.” I added “That’s wild you remember what I said – I never remember what I say.”

Philip replied “Yeah, of course I remember what you say. A Great Woman. Not to mention, You are sharp, funny and powerful...I echo those sentiments.”

And he’s not even gay.

Crime Story

I started having sex when I was sixteen, and was unimpressed.

Maybe because Tom, my boyfriend at the time, my Halloween Eve virginity-taker, would stalk me in the Springfield Mall parking lot when I would leave my retail job. One night he kidnapped me when I wanted to break up. Drove me to a remote country road, locked the doors on his muscle car, and tried to convince me to stay and love him.

After Tom, I deflowered my nice Catholic French-Canadian boyfriend Alan, with whom I went out during our senior year in high school. The fall after graduation, he split for college in Montreal, and I left for central Virginia as a single undergrad.

I hated frats and frat guys, but I was also sick of my dramatically moody theater friends, so I went to some lame Greek Row party with Tammy, my “civilian” (non-theater) dorm mate.

There was a keg surrounded by requisite pumping rituals, blasting music, giggly girls, and boys with burgeoning boners. I wasn't dressed provocatively. I was of a regular size, pleasant-looking, not terribly concerned with looks, unlike today's Botox and hair extensions crowd with their “Who are you wearing?” questions. College in the 80s was mainly a jeans and T-shirt affair. Tammy went off somewhere, so I ended up talking, just talking, to some guy while chugging several red plastic cups of Natty Boh beer. We were “consuming mass

quantities,” as we theater folks said, mimicking SNL’s Coneheads. This dark-haired guy had a unibrow, a skinny nose and build. Eastern European redneckish. I don’t remember his name. He had a “wing man,” a chubby blonde friend with whom he kept whispering. Pheromones were thick in the air.

I got drunk.

At some point I ended up in Unibrow’s dorm room. I didn’t even want to make out with him. But he wanted to make out with me. So he did, getting under my shirt pretty quickly, too. He smelled bad, like watery beer and desperation. His technique was crappy, all flustery and fluttery and far too urgent. If he wasn’t a virgin, he sure acted like one.

I told him to stop. He didn’t listen. I hadn’t starting taking karate at that time, and I was short, under 5’3”. You don’t know what to do in those situations. You could make a big fuss, but it’s just easier to go along; to not make waves. I had decent body strength, but I was underrepresented in the self-esteem department, so things continued apace.

I told him I wasn’t comfortable. He didn’t listen. His resolve was steely, his eyes were somewhere far away, his hands were all over me. He pulled off my jeans. I told him I had my period. Not a lie. He pulled off my underwear. We were on an unmade lower bunk. I thought I heard snoring from above, or next door.

I gathered some strength and said, “I’m wearing a tampon.” That didn’t stop him. He smashed the Tampax deep into my cervix. His dick must have

been pretty small. He was done quickly. I dressed in the half light, and took the walk of shame home.

I never saw him again. In those days, campus rape was a rite of passage, not an entire subgenre of student awareness and activism as it is today. Date rape just happens. Men get their rocks off and the women go on, appreciative if they don't get a disease or pregnant. It's just a body, after all. It's just sex. It's easier to go along and not make waves. It's not the way you want it, but how often do we get what we want? You just have to get through it; get to the other side. Just lie back, close your eyes, wait for it to be over. You don't think of England.

The next time it happened, again after college, I knew what to do.

Lie back, close your eyes, wait for it to be over.

Most Wanted

**"As an unperfect actor on the stage / Who with his fear
is put besides his part" *Sonnet 23*, William Shakespeare**

Terry Wayne Hart shot himself in the head after seeing me. I went through his brain, followed by a bullet. I played his girlfriend, Peggy Carothers, on an *America's Most Wanted* reenactment in September 1992.

The real Peggy and Terry had a bad fight in Oklahoma City a year earlier. While she went off to a bar with a girlfriend, he raped a 15-year-old girl in their housing complex, tried to kill her, then took off. Peggy got drunk and forgot about their fight, and so returned home to their empty apartment.

* * * * *

My first acting job was as Narrator Number Two in the second grade production of *Sir Kevin of Devon*. I stood in front of the cardboard castle in the Rolling Valley Elementary cafetorium. I still remember my lines:

"He sent for his king, he sent for his sages, his silversmith, armor smith, sword smith, and pages. There was hurrying, scurrying, shuffling about, then *CLANG* went the drawbridge, and Kevin swept out."

I stood and delivered, I recall, sweaty palms and all. I liked telling stories, and being paid attention to.

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Criminals are often called by three names, I guess so they're not confused with law-abiding citizens. John Wilkes Booth. Lee Harvey Oswald. John Wayne Gacy.

Terry Wayne Hart, age 30, called the girl "Peggy" as he raped her. Then he dragged her to a stream, and tried to drown her. She kicked him in the nuts and got away. A wet Terry Wayne Hart went on the run. The FBI issued a "wanted for rape and attempted murder" warrant for him. He ended up in Lebanon, Tennessee.

* * * * *

My first *job* job was at my local mall, as Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The amplification rig was cheap, and if I turned my head too much, I couldn't be heard.

Kids who didn't want to wait for Santa came to my sparse line. Rudolph was the Garfunkel to Santa's Simon, the number two.

Once, a little blonde girl approached, leaving her exhausted parents fighting over bag duty near the thinning pile of glitter-covered cotton snow.

"Angela, let's go. Let's GO," her dad bellowed from the Candy Cane Junction fence.

She screamed, "I NEVER GET ANYTHING. I HATE YOU," and tantrum-stomped off.

* * * * *

I didn't look anything like Peggy Carothers. She was big and had long hair. I was short, with short hair. At the audition, director Gary Myers asked why I didn't read her lines like a victim. I replied, "A victim doesn't necessarily think they're a victim."

* * * * *

At West Springfield High School in Northern Virginia, I was what they called a theater fag. We were all fags – outsiders – gay or not. Kelly McKinley was my best friend. She was an only child, and a tall, skinny dancer. They called her Cricket because her legs were so long and flexible. She starred as Princess Winnifred in the musical *Once Upon a Mattress*. From the back of the auditorium, I followed her around stage as her spotlight operator.

Kelly was president of the Thespians, I was vice president. Number two. Her birthday was on Christmas Day, so she got double presents. I had my driver's license but she didn't, so I would drive her around. After school some days, I would drive her to the Annandale Rocking Chair Movie Theater, where the speech teacher Mr. Oates worked part time. I would sit in my light blue Chevy Impala as she went upstairs to the projection booth to fool around with him.

* * * * *

Peggy had gotten so wasted that she had forgotten about the fight, forgotten that she had broken up with Terry and told him that she was moving out.

* * * * *

Right after college, I did improvisational comedy with the group Gross National Product, performing in the Georgetown section of Washington, D.C. We also did Scandal Tours on buses around the city, taking locals and tourists to infamous sites. I would tell what happened at each spot, dressed up as political characters like Barbara Bush, wearing her trademark pearl necklace, or Lynn Armandt, Donna Rice's friend who blew the whistle on the Congressman Gary Hart affair. We started at the Washington Hilton Hotel, where John Warnock Hinckley shot Ronald Wilson Reagan. We drove by the Vista Hotel, where the video was shot of Mayor Marion Barry smoking crack with his hooker girlfriend Rasheeda Moore.

"Bitch set me up," he said.

He was reelected mayor after he got out of jail.

I also played parts in murder mysteries at rich people's house parties. One time my character collapsed on the imported travertine floor. Somebody's husband was playing a doctor. He stood over my body and slurred, "I'm a doctor. I'll give her CPR." He knelt down over me and licked my mouth. He squeezed my tits.

"Gotta start her heart," he said.

I lay still because I was playing dead.

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In Tennessee, Terry Wayne Hart got married. Apparently, he found religion too. His wife knew nothing of his past. He thought he could begin again, and have a second chance.

* * * * *

I left the smaller pond of D.C. for the bigger pond of Chicago, to do theater and take comedy classes at The Second City. I saw an ad for a performing martial artist from a party planner who presented costumed characters. I had gotten a red belt in karate in Virginia, and didn't have a *job* job yet, so I took this one.

I was Kimberly the Pink Power Ranger, in a tight Lycra suit and papier-mâché helmet. I went to a pizza pool party. I did my katas up and down the concrete. It was hot, and sweat stains spread along the polyester fabric. Second-graders were starting to swarm around me as if chum had been dropped in shark-infested water. One boy stepped in front of me and yelled "Halt." He punched me in a tit and laughed.

I think I got \$40 for two hours.

* * * * *

Terry Wayne Hart was a fugitive. He hadn't been discovered. In his new home, he was watching TV, and saw a promo for *America's Most Wanted*. He recognized himself, his story. He sent his wife out to get pizza.

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I worked a lot of jobs in Chicago, mostly in the creative fields, as well as acting on stage and in some films, and doing some radio and voice-over work. I liked being an actor, but you often feel like a piece of meat, a “meat puppet,” I called it. So I also pursued jobs where I had more control, and where my intellect, and not just my body, was valued. For a few years, I was communications director for the International Interior Design Association, and then was wooed away to work for high-end furniture manufacturer Teknion as a meeting planner and events coordinator. The number two under old IIDA colleague Mary Callen.

There were a dozen women on their architecture and design marketing team from all over the country, led by go-getter VP Georgy Oliveri. They were high-end business women – tall, slender, meticulous highlights, French manicures, pinchy shoes, dark tailored suits, noteworthy engagement and wedding rings.

At one meeting, we all took the Myers-Briggs personality test, which tells you whether you’re judging versus perceiving, thinking/feeling, sensing/intuitive, introvert or extrovert. It was my job to send out the results. All of the team, along with Georgy and Mary, were lumped into one quadrant. I was exactly opposite. They were *people* people; I was the loner.

After 9/11, Teknion reduced staff and laid me off. My commercial acting agent called to offer me a holiday job, with few details. Sounded like perfume spraying or the like, something I’d done at Springfield Mall years ago. I showed

up at Marshall Fields. I was directed towards a table of green tights, felt smocks and curled-up elf shoes. I hesitated for a moment, then took the costume to the locker room to change.

There were dozens of us elves, including some local actors I knew. They gave us baskets of candy canes with the Fields logo on them, to hand out on the street. We joked that it would suck if any real actors, if anybody we knew, saw us.

Around lunchtime, we were stationed near City Hall on Randolph Street downtown, not far from the Fields flagship store. Georgy and some of the tailored Teknion women walked by. They slowed when they recognized me under the mob cap.

Georgy said, "Hi. Karin. How are – so happy holidays." She took a candy cane from my basket and they went away.

* * * * *

After his wife went out, Terry Wayne Hart killed himself outside his apartment complex. He was the first known *America's Most Wanted* fugitive suicide. He was a violent and abusive man, yet the only person he killed was himself.

He probably hoped to change in his second life, hoped to leave his past behind.

I often wonder if he saw me in that promo, or just focused on himself. Was I the last thing he saw? Did he pay attention to me? Did he call me Peggy?

Was it her story, or his story, or our story?

I wonder if I did something, if I changed a life, if I caused a death.

Terry left behind a suicide note for his wife. Part of it said “This is the best that I have ever had in my life. The church, you, and the family. I have prayed not to bring shame on any of you.”

Halfway House

It was a typical Chicago three-flat apartment building, with a U-shaped courtyard that kept out most light. This yellowish brick structure stood on Lyndale Street, straddling the gang turfs of Insane Orchestra Albany and Latin Disciples, between deeply distrustful and well-armed Puerto Ricans and Mexicans. Not quite Logan Square, where there's a stately plinth, yet too far north and west to be hipster gentrified Wicker Park/Bucktown. Even inside, I could hear, and feel, the clattering California Blue Line L-stop half a block away. I could probably do better, but it would suffice. I got used to the noise, mostly. Leap before you look, I always say.

I found the 800ish-square-foot place when I returned from a year doing a comedy show in Amsterdam. I was in a hurry to find a rental because I was crashing at a friend of an acquaintance's wee place with my three cats. I thought it would be a good transition to live in a place where mostly Spanish was spoken, after leaving a place where mostly Dutch was spoken. It was cheap, and easy, like some would characterize me, and it would just have to work out. It was on the second floor, sandwiched between tiny twenty-something girls with loud stereos and clunky shoes.

The hour I arrived back in the Windy City from the Netherlands, all of my material possessions, all three suitcases, were stolen out of my car when the cats and I stopped in to see Phill, the weird red-headed improv guy who had an

uncomfortable crush on me. So I didn't have too much to unpack in the two-bedroom Lyndale unit since all my clothes and a year of souvenirs were now gone.

I wasn't exactly sure why I came back to the States. I had been living as a paid actor and sketch writer in a kick-ass European city: wooden shoes and windmills, museums and canals, hookers and hash. I had a boyfriend, a hot dope-smoking musician/composer named Gerbrand. But it wasn't enough. It's never enough. I wanted to do Shakespeare and "real" plays. I thought I deserved a non-high boyfriend.

Just like when I moved there from the D.C. area for the first time, in 1993, I didn't really have a job in Chicago, again in 1997. I only went back because it's where improvisers go. A place to belong; a mecca with a central church, the school/space called The Second City. While performing overseas, I did have one theatrical public relations client who asked me to come back, and that's all it took. One person, Carmen Roman, said she needed me – and this was before email, when it was difficult to reach out to tell someone you needed them. So I went back to do occasional PR for American Blues Theatre. 1. Leap. 2. Look.

So I left the man, the acting job, the continent, with barely a prospect and accompanying angst, to arrive at an old, un-air-conditioned flat. I had started taking anti-depressants about a year before I went to Europe, but I couldn't take them in Amsterdam – they slowed my synapses too much to be able to think on my feet during a show. But now I tried many more types – Zoloft, Lexapro,

Effexor – with dubious results. “The thief of all emotions,” I called them, so I drank to feel something. I’d usually polish off a bottle of sauvignon blanc each night while writing press releases for a living, chain-smoking Merit Ultra Lights at the huge particle board insurance office desk I had found. While I couldn’t afford much food, over the next seven years I gained about 30 pounds but never noticed it because I was medicated and/or drunk. No boyfriend to get after me. And I performed in theater, mostly, where size mattered less than content of character.

Late one summer, I decided to refinish some furniture, three slightly mismatched, basic pine dressers handed down from my grandmother. I worked on the ratty, grey-slat back porch facing the alley laced with rat poison and “Beware Rat Poison” signs. Over the long weekend, a skinny teen kitty tentatively joined me between rounds of hand and machine sanding, and sealing. She eventually made it into my lap, and started nursing my earlobe. I told her if she continued, then I’d have to take her inside and she could never go out again. I advised her that I already had three cats, with two currently battling for alpha. The green-eyed kitty persisted, so I took her inside. I named her Lyndale after her home turf. I named my PR business Tree Falls Productions, because I wanted my clients to be heard. I carried my fat in my belly.

So Lyndale was not only the name of my street – well, technically, Insane Orchestra’s street – but also my cat. She was so loving outside, but once in the noisy, hot apartment she was not so into me. She didn’t like to be cuddled, like

my sibling brown tabbies Shika and Totem, acquired in college; nor endlessly scratched like my adopted orange tortoiseshell Peggy. Lyn remained aloof and apart. On rare occasions, she did approach me and would tentatively let herself be touched. Yet when satisfied, instead of just walking away, she would bite or slash. Although she first appeared sweet, she was hard; a hard street cat. It was hard to love her.

So 2827 W. Lyndale Street got me back to the States. I reached the middle part of my life there. I grew my business and my belly there. Now the business is all but gone, but the belly remains. The business is gone because I let go of that handhold before I had another one (see *leap/look*), when I moved to California (the state, not the train stop). I got a cat on Lyndale. She mellowed a bit, in her dotage, but still liked to be touched only on her own terms.

I am like Lyn. I never had another boyfriend after Gerby; I thought I could do better. Find somebody less medicated. What I have is never enough. I never had a boyfriend on that street, or in my 15 years in Chicago.

I am Lyndale the street, bifurcated inside, at war.

I am Lyndale the cat. Almost untouchable.

Yet she always looks before she leaps.

Manifest Destiny

"My grief lies onward, and my joy behind"

Sonnet 50, William Shakespeare

The “yes, ma’am’s” come on fast and hard when I hit Tulsa, Oklahoma, home of Oral Roberts University, a Christian college. Supposedly it’s polite, these Sooners were “raised *right*,” in more ways than one, but on the receiving end it usually sounds sarcastic if not a little derogatory. I heard someone once say that when Southerners say “Well, bless her heart,” they’re actually saying “fuck you.” I get that vibe here. And these effusive reminders that I’m above, and not below, age forty often tumble out of throats that have certainly seen their fair share of Marlboro Reds. In addition to a pleasant if not stereotypical twang, gravelly seems to be the regional dialect here, as well as the condition of many of their side roads. And it’s a red state, so what the hell is my artsy-fartsy liberal ass doing here?

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Driving cross country, natch. The quintessential American migration from east to west, my *manifest destiny* spread out over long intervals. This is a trip to facilitate my urge to fly, albeit really slowly. I grew up in northern Virginia, just south of Washington, D.C., and drove to Chicago in 1993 with three cats, one screaming the whole way, to do improvisation and acting. I paid the bills doing

public relations for theatres. I grew weary after 15 years, so decided to go somewhere warm and pretty, and to write as a new way of being frustrated artistically. The dart landed on San José, California, so off I went, this time with a relatively silent, 45-pound husky-mix dog and a supercilious tabby cat, both rescued from the mean streets of the Windy City. I hit the road on Christmas day 2008, with Dionne Warwick's smooth pop "Do You Know the Way to San José?" on shuffle mix in my head.

A few acquaintances were incredulous when I announced my launch date, as if holidays were any different than other days for those, like myself, that operate solo, those who only have family that are still back in Virginia. It's just another day, and one with less traffic, most likely, so a good day to get the hell out of 20 below with the wind chill. I was sick of the town and couldn't wait to see it in my rearview mirror, which was difficult due to the salt and grime residue from the continual snowfall that December. Goodbye to the home of those loveable loser Chicago Cubs, numerous but expensive museums, gobs of transcendent and shitty theatre, hot dogs without ketchup, three slim months of warm weather (the joke is "What are Chicago's two seasons? Winter and Construction"), and piles of my own personal and professional rejection. The town wasn't big enough for me and those piles, and it was me who blinked.

I love the road trip, partly because I do my best writing in the car. My primary attention is at the middle distance, so the back gears of my brain can grind out the great American novel, or at least some witty snippets to explore

later. I write down thoughts that pass muster on multi-colored three-by-five index cards that I keep in a manila envelope in my glove compartment. I scrawl a few words to clue myself later, trying not to press too hard on the center of the steering wheel so I don't beep the horn and piss off my driving peers, all while racing down the freeway and listening to NPR. Always public broadcasting, which conveniently lives at the bottom of the dial in every state you cross.

I rarely use my cell phone, nobody to call really, and I don't even know how to text, and it doesn't matter, as that's a two-way activity, too. As I head southwest on my first leg to St. Louis, I call the family in Virginia to say *Merry Xmas*, and talk to my mom and dad, dry-humored Uncle Tommy, my sister Deb, whom everybody thinks sounds like me on the phone. The signal cuts out as I'm talking to my nephew Iain, who has Asperger's Syndrome, a mild form of autism that gives a name to the extreme social awkwardness everyone in our family possesses. (We're all book smart yet way inelegant.) I hope he doesn't take it personally. So far, it just seems like another day, and not one that's going to change my life entirely. It's weakly sunny, not the zero degrees it was when the movers came a week ago, when it was so frigid that my hands were cracked and bleeding from the cold and dry. Outside it's a respectable low 20s, so no real weather I could hurl a "fuck you" or a middle finger at. Which I had really looked forward to doing.

I don't know where I'm going to stay exactly, but the GPS I've borrowed from the parents can look up hotels. Five hours outside of Chicago I look for

somewhere to land, yet another eyes-off-road task accomplished at 65 mph. I'd say I started the trip at a reasonable clip. I've never been a speed demon. I don't have that testosterone drive for speed and roller coasters, but I'm not slow either. My 2002 tan Toyota Corolla, dependable but not zippy, gets the job done. I never want to push her too fast, and she doesn't seem to feel the need, either. And I'm so worried about how Mickie Moe the mutt and Lyn the kitty are adjusted to life in a car that I keep it close to the posted speed limit for the first few days. Ennui and a left shoulder cramp caused the pedal to drop with more frequency during the last three days, although the car can't actually get much beyond 80.

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My mom spent her high school and college years here in St. Louis. I am pleased to learn that the Clarion Hotel, which the GPS shows me in the *Show Me* state, is within walking distance of Scott Joplin's house. After my first night as a nomad, Mickie and I walk about 20 minutes to where ragtime was born. (My favorite composition is appropriately titled "Solace.") The aptly named "Gateway to the West" is about 20 points up the thermometer from Chicago, sans snow, so I'm thrilled to walk the dog without boots and with a lighter jacket.

I have a knack for picking the seedy sides of towns, and while a bit dicey right around the building, the hotel turns out to be near the newly revamped Union Station. I can't see this when I arrive at about 10 p.m. and walk the dog. Instead I only felt the dry winter grass crunch under my feet as I try to stay where there are streetlights. A strong wind blows down the avenue, making me recall

the Midwestern weather adage I created: “warm plus wind equals weather.” A front is moving in, bringing the unseasonable warmth I’d enjoy at my next stop down the line.

In my first furtive foray into town, I come across a dry fountain. There are fanciful sculptures of fish-people and mer-men and mer-women, lined up opposite each other, wielding tridents and other aquatic implements. The plaque indicates they personify the local waterways meeting each other, and it seems like an auspicious sign for change.

I sleep well past six a.m., the time our family road trips would start when my dad was in charge. I realize I was just a few blocks from the Gateway Arch, so I have to drive by that landmark on my way out. Traffic is extremely light this Boxing Day, so I circle the base of the graceful and leviathan arc, and observe just how small and dirty the mighty *Mississip* is here. It’s hard to imagine Tom and Huck and Jim poling and paddling past a nasty nest of Aquafina bottles. But, as the fountain had reminded me to do the night before, I thank the mother river for her bounty, truly, and say goodbye to radio stations that begin with a “W” and hello to those that start with my initial “K.” The entire 18 hours I was there I couldn’t get that damn “Meet Me in St. Louis” song out of my head, or the image of Judy Garland’s damn sausage-roll bangs from that movie.

* * * * *

From Joplin’s House I head towards Joplin, Missouri, through the land of Harry S. Truman, Dale Evans, Roy Rogers, and the blue-hair Mecca of Branson.

Billboards of Yakov Smirnoff's borscht-eating grin tower over the miles of mostly clear, it's-still-the-holidays roadways. The moment the furballs and I pass into Oklahoma, it's all about Will Rogers, who reminds me that I should like every man I meet. This might be a challenge for my eco-friendly self here, as the trimmer SUV's of the upper Midwest have given way to more gas-guzzling, fat-assed trucks, of which many have double sets of tires in the back. I guess they can be excused as I reckon most of these are actual working vehicles, used for punching cows or various beefy activities. Plus, gas prices are just about the cheapest I've seen in years, hovering at around \$1.40ish, so they can fill up these behemoths with abandon. Walking next to the giant trucks, I see several women on the sidewalk, squeezed into tight Wrangler jeans. There seems to be a penchant for generous back bumpers here.

No supermodel waif myself, I still feel like I don't fit in here. I eventually grew tired of Northern Virginia, Chicago, even Amsterdam, where I lived as a working actor in 1996. I keep moving, west, counter to the jet stream now, to find a place where I can operate, connect with people who accept my particular persona of intellectual curiosity and anal retentiveness. That place is not here.

I stop in Oklahoma City to get some fresh cat litter. Lyn the genius cat figured out how to poop in a speeding car in the tiny kitty litter box I've set up on the back seat floor. She dealt it, then I smelt it. It was pungent. I feel like my other senses have heightened since my eyes are exceptionally focused on their singular task of driving. After disposing of Lyn's shit, I also take Mickie for a pee

break in the empty lot next to the strip mall that looks like every other strip mall across America. A cluster of similar food outlets – Quiznos, Subway, Panera – connects with the look-alike apparel stores – Ross Dress for Less, Marshall's, TJ Maxx – which flows into the big box chains of Home Depot, Target and Walgreens. The splash of familiar signage is set on an asphalt island of parking with a scintillating view of the overpass. I could be anywhere, so I need to keep moving to find that right place, a new home.

I've got "O-K-L-A-H-O-M-A OK" show-tuning through my head, along with scurrying chicks and ducks and geese. But the wind is not sweeping down the plain here. Perhaps it's stopped by the chunky roofs of the PetsMart and Best Buy buildings. The earth here is deep red clay, and soon my shoes are caked, despite it being fairly dry. I can't scrape it off entirely and resign myself to carrying a bit of the state with me. The color reminds me of many Indian clay pots my anthropologist mom has, and it finally lets me feel like I'm in different country.

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I see new signs like *Do Not Drive Into Smoke* as I leave the city proper, which makes me think Cheech and Chong or Spicoli's *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* van, or evaporating into *Brigadoon*. But it's a harbinger of the climate, of entering the desert. I knew I was going to miss the rain and water out here. I had the Potomac and Atlantic in Virginia and Lake Michigan in Illinois to keep my chi flowing. I am saddened that I've already entered the drought lands. More red

earth lines the sides of the highway, but soon the landscape becomes scrubby and brown.

I see signs for the Sac and Fox Nation Indian reservations. Another billboard says that the Kickapoo Nation is offering a 72-ounce steak for free, if you can finish it in one sitting. In addition to sharing small pox and alcoholism with Native Americans, it seems we European types are also happy to dole out our gluttony and heart disease.

I don't stay in Oklahoma City, because I've been there briefly before. OK City, OK, was one of the random cities I spent mere moments in during an educational theatre tour. That visit, we had about 20 minutes to see the National Memorial, where the Murrah Federal Building was bombed. The site was quiet and still and a reminder that we don't need no damn foreign terrorists; we can grow our own just fine, *thank you, ma'am*.

I consider the despair that could breed such evil.

There's a Martin Luther King Boulevard near the memorial, as if the tolerance and goodwill should be corralled into one small area. MLK doesn't feel quite right here. The Garth Brooks Boulevard exit down the way seems much more appropriate.

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I hear an abundance of Wings songs on this six-day, cross-country road trip, as I tap the scanner button on my car radio. "Live and Let Die" repeats quite a few times, including the Guns N' Roses version. It seems an unusual choice

for a travel anthem, but it does describe my general philosophy rather well.

Texas's ZZ Top feels more appropriate, welcome and perfect. In homage to that power trio, I play my spinning white fur air guitar, and I stretch my legs to prove I know how to use 'em.

We're now "on the rez" for the Cherokee and Arapahoe and Cheyenne nations. Miniature donkey rides are advertised, and I picture tiny shows of stubbornness and bruised ankles from wee little hooves. I hit more open road again, and click on the rarely used cruise control. My car is named Bessie for many reasons, primarily for my worship of Queen Elizabeth the First and her patronage of the arts. I find the cruise control kind of creepy, like there's a ghost in the machine, anticipating my needs, gulping for gas in a bold, whiney overdrive manner that contrasts to my gentler acceleration. The cruise control actually feels like a loss of control for me, but becomes a comfort later.

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The landscape continues to change. Jesus is everywhere on billboards and, I assume, in roadside clusters of crosses. As is T. Boone Pickens and his wind farm promotion signs. I subscribe to the latter.

I had planned to take the "northern route" from Chicago to San José, but my mover, who specialized in that particular trip, advised me not to take Interstate 80 due to possible snow and impossible winds across Wyoming. He was prescient, as blizzards did close the roads around Denver. Right before I left I Mapquest'd the "southern route," which was several hundred miles out of the

way, but likely to have better weather. So Interstate 40 it was, the easier route. The road more travelled.

I was thrilled that I-40 was the old Route 66, as I realized when I drove by some original signage. The song rocked about my brain:

If you ever plan to motor west,
Travel my way, take the highway that is best.
It winds from Chicago to L.A.,
More than two thousand miles all the way.
Won't you get hip to this timely tip:
When you make that California trip
Get your kicks on Route 66.

I appreciate this road's history. All that had been before me, like Okies leaving the Dust Bowl, looking for the promised land. I held that same hope.

The soil is getting blacker and looking moister, like Mickie's nose, which occasionally pokes into my left ear, over the car seat. He's engrossed by the intense smells of farming and animal husbandry, and doesn't seem to notice I'm there at all when there's a window-crack of fragrance-packed air pummeling in.

A billboard announces the largest cross in the Western Hemisphere, which is anticipated after passing several offerings of makeshift Christian iconography made of painted telephone poles. I see more license plates besides Oklahoma, like LA, TN, MN, AZ, NM, AR, IL (besides me), and even ONT. I am

not alone on my quest west. Are these fellow travelers far from home; are they running towards something, or away from something? Which am I doing?

French- and Spanish-named towns start popping up, a refreshing change-up after a long stretch of white bread. To herald this, the Talking Heads come on the radio to remind me to “find a city, find myself a city to live in.” My favorite band is urging me forward too.

White line fever is creeping in. A constant stream of cows and windmills and overpasses. The black asphalt offers shiny mirages in the distance, although it’s cold again after the freak warm spell in Tulsa. The 72 degrees of the night before has plunged into the high 30s. We finally pass the largest cross in the Western Hemisphere. It’s pretty damn big, but still doesn’t compel me to accept Him as my personal savior.

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I dread reaching Texas. Bush the younger only had a few short weeks left in office, but I blamed his state for fostering eight long years of his national incompetence. Once in the Panhandle, the trees start to disappear. Those that are left are blown over into scary, twisted Halloween shapes. I am not surprised. I head towards Amarillo and pass the Deaf Smith County Line. Harsh name, harsh place.

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New Mexico. The Land of Enchantment and of no scannable radio stations. I do get the welcome tumbleweed pretty soon after crossing the state

line, along with a continued change in topography near Tucumcari. Some mountains, and the mountains' preferred topping of snow. The large and small silhouettes are different here; there are more cowboy hats in cars. I pass Coors Boulevard, and signs for fry bread, heading toward the Rio Grande. There's some song for that river, but I can't think of it and don't know if that's a curse or a blessing. But I do hum the Partridge Family song "point me, in the direction of Al-bu-quer-que." When I roll into town, I notice chunks of pottery-colored snow, this time brown. I stop to get a bite of eagerly anticipated local Mexican cuisine, guilty that Mickie could only walk around the warm parking lot for his mid-day exercise as I gobbled my decent camarónes y aguacate. As if reading my mind, after this restaurant stop, Bessie drives by an off-leash dog park by the highway exit, so I careen across three lanes to circle back, park, then let the dog out.

Who let the dogs out? I did.

Being surrounded by a group of friendly strangers and their pooches, I remember how I purposely didn't have a party or do anything special when I left Chicago. After my frustration with living there hit a fever pitch – a long time ago, around year five of fifteen – my weirdly constant daydream was to leave without telling anyone. A ritual suicide without the actual death. My typically passive-aggressive, silent-yet-pointed *fuck you* to all those who were never there for me. Passive-aggressive payback for a long list of crushing disappointments. Despite promises to the contrary, I was bailed on when putting my cat to sleep, as I battled a severe flu, and I ended up driving myself home after "female" surgery

when male friend Pat just didn't show up or call. These incidents were numerous, and carefully archived in my forgiveness-free brain. These acquaintances didn't really seem to care that I was there, so why would they care that I was leaving? Sure, my standards are high, so I was pretty much let down on a daily basis, and I just wanted to get the hell outta Dodge: *So long, suckers*. Plus, I was certain I would get a raft of excuses rather than participation if I had a going-away party, and I knew I couldn't face a final round of public rejection. I certainly couldn't top the groundswell of well wishes, gifts and numerous farewell events I received when I left the D.C. area.

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Things had changed, I had changed, and for some reason I had grown unlovable in Chicago. I ranked low on everybody's list, far below husbands and children and girlfriends and best friends. I never really had best friends, usually being the odd woman out, but there I didn't really even have friends. Only those who wanted to be my *plus one* on the numerous free theatre tickets I received. I discovered the reason for dating or marrying or shacking up: to not have to continually search for a seat partner. It's hard to know how you're progressing in life without reflecting off of others. It's hard to have a life in a total vacuum, and to go days without speaking to a single person. It was time to go.

However, running my own consulting business with theatres prevented total blind escape. I did have to let clients know what was happening, and figure out all those transition arrangements. So the spy-style exit wasn't quite as

secretive as I had hoped, and, of course, not very fulfilling at all. Naturally, in my pimp-my-expectations way, the reality didn't live up to the decade of scheming. In fact, since I work remotely from a computer anyway, most of the media and those outside the theatres I work with still have no idea that I'm no longer living in Chicago. It's as if I never left; an unfair result for all the energy, time and money put into packing, moving and resettling. Technology and goddam Facebook prevents disappearing anymore.

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The land grows big in New Mexico. I am amazed by mesas and buttes, and think of my childhood pronunciation "*butts*." In the mesas, you can see how the sea floor must be, and once was; wide-based strata tapering up to island tops. This very land has reinvented itself, from undersea into desert, creating its new purpose. It took millions of years; I hope my transformation is a bit more expeditious.

We're getting close to the Continental Divide, which my dad tells me during one of our nightly check-in calls means on one side the water flows to my dirty friend Mississippi; and on the other to the Pacific Ocean. I cling to the geography and its rules; I feel grounded even as the cruise control takes me away.

I see an entire train in one glance. Anywhere else, I would see a few, or at most, a couple dozen, of the hundred plus cars, but here I see the whole kit and caboodle, stretched out fully from multi-engines to caboose. This child's toy

is flying toward Gallup with me; and we cruise neck-and-neck, at a distance; keeping the same speed for many minutes. The impossibly large and the tragically small can play together out here.

The Wild West stereotypes are piling up. There are paints, dappled Western horses, on the prairie, and a pair of crows sit and squabble atop the Laguna exit sign. The road kill is getting exotic: coyotes, foxes, deer and skunk are chunky, bloody markers every few miles. These Native American totem animals are gods and spirit guides and hallowed and revered, and are now splattered reminders that metal and speed is the new religion.

My mom's anthropology specialty is Native Americans, so I've loved Indian culture since I was a child. Unlike my WASP upbringing, these tribes offer complex symbols, dense mythology and an awesome color palette. When I add this real landscape to their imagined stories, untamed mud piles morph into complete pots and vessels in my mind's eye. At the next stop, I notice the meaningful Oklahoma clay on my interior car mats somehow has disappeared.

Seeing the first of only two hitchhikers on this over 2,500-mile trip randomly reminds me that I have Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* on tape, one I've been moving around for years but haven't actually listened to. I pop in the first of six tapes, yes *audio-tapes*. I note that the protagonist, cocky young architect Howard Roark, answers all types of complex and loaded questions with a simple "yes." I decide that I shall do the same in my new life. No more couching and explanations and histrionics. Just "yes" to it all.

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In Grants, New Mexico, there's snow all over the ground, not just in patches as before. The frigid sprinkles cover the volcanic, lunar surface interjected by pavement. As I consider the differences between mesas and buttes, the sun sinks behind the thrusting landscape. I'm cheated out of some extra daylight, but the glorious Southwestern sunset rocks so hard it's worth the trade. To the west there seems to be a concentration of airplanes, which chase daylight by driving into the sun. Vapor trails comet around the expanse. In college, I bought a handmade wooden snake sculpture that I've hung on the wall everywhere I've lived. It has a yellow belly, just like me; but this folk art also has carved stick lettering that alerts "I'm looking at the big sky." I think of the snake wrapped up in the middle of the Mayflower truck, taking its own journey west, then I do what he instructs, and look at the big sky.

The contrails refract in the setting sun and look like slow fireworks. Outside Gallup this cacophony of plane exhalation lines come together to form a perfect "X."

Now *that's* the largest cross in the Western Hemisphere.

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There are white windsocks on many of the bridges here to alert travelers to gusts of desert wind that could blow small foreign cars over their insufficient railings. Cruise control becomes my autopilot, my pal, and helps me out when my left leg falls asleep again. The sun has set, and the moon has risen in the

vast, dark expanse above and below; a new moon promising a new life.

Enchanting indeed, New Mexico.

Nomenclature is getting simpler. The Dead River and Black River herald my entrance to Arizona, and to the Navajo and Hopi Reservations. I detour to the Grand Canyon, an hour north of the two-foot-deep snow in Flagstaff, to throw all my regrets and history deep down. It's quite sunny when I get there, and, to coin a phrase, it's grand. I want my hair to be the color of the snow mud here; a burnt umber with a mica sparkle, sort of a chocolate mousse (or here, maybe a *moose*).

I keep muttering "Holy Crap" about the vast view as Mickie and I walk along the south rim for about an hour, dodging hordes of multi-national tourists dangling their kids over the edge and taking a million snapshots. I didn't take pictures there; in fact, I don't take any photos anymore, really. It's not good to linger in, or capture, the past, especially now. To do so is weighty, and bulky, and I have too much of that already from the move. I got rid of so much stuff, yet still have so much left. I think about how engineers can string phone wires across these many hills and gullies, and how the weight of snow on the lines can interrupt communication. I think about *Thelma and Louise*.

I stop at the edge to conduct my pathetic purge ritual. I mumble a few cleansing mantras, like "I leave the bad, and take in the good," visualizing my anger leaving out the top of my head, and the good coming inside via my breath. A version of my end-of-yoga class ritual, right before the *Namaste*: "good

thoughts” (touch forehead), “good speech” (touch lips), “good intentions” (touch heart). And, because most of my communication springs not from real-time conversation, but from a computer keyboard, I add “good words” (and I wiggle my fingers).

I doubt whether the canyon is actually deep enough to contain all my accumulated angst. Mickie does not possess my fear of heights at all, and I have to prevent him from lunging at a wiggly evergreen bough growing out of the sheer face several dangerous feet below the ledge. I hear bits of the park ranger geography tour around the bend, and nod knowingly at the key concepts of sandpaper (pebbles against stone), velocity (narrow Colorado river), angles (river flow drop increases gorge-making power), plate shift (hip shimmy by mother earth), natural events (monsoons, yes monsoons, lightning strikes, freezing, snow melt and run off), plus how “just water” made this crazy hole. Rock never seemed that special in *rock, paper, scissors*. I wish I had the luxury of relentless and powerful external motivation, plus eons of time in my own work, my writing. I think of weight and heat and pressure, and I remind myself that’s what I enjoy when Mickie chooses to lie directly on top of my belly, which he does rarely because he likes to be my *pack* and circle up at my side or feet.

After getting an expensive black bean burger at one of the many lodges – it’s really a whole town, a complex up there, perched on the rim of the abyss, with stores and shops and lodging – I drive back the same way I drove up, which I

hate doing, as I always want to do something new. Always. *Routine is for jackasses* is another one of my mantras.

I get back on the westerly path. There are a lot of cows in this part of Arizona, and they seem to be out in the middle of nowhere. You can't see their barns or affiliated houses. How are they called and collected back? To whom do they belong?

What are they doing so far from home?

At Kingman, we're at 5,000 feet, so *Watch for Rocks* signs populate these roadsides. And it's a worthy warning, for the land is strewn with boulders like careless giants' marbles. The mountains continue to hide what's left of the sun. There are more plane vapor trails, like high-flying sperm this time, more streaky now, like the bug smears on the windshield. It reminds me of how I draw, which is shitty; confident, sweeping lines in place of technique, punctuated by a smudge of charcoal or pastel. Sassy yet awful. Like how I see myself.

Cruise control is a more constant companion now; and she's in charge when I see a quizzical sight looming – a distant truck ahead in a haze of ice pellets and fog, as if on fire and smoldering. Perhaps the precipitation and weather from the truck's past, carried on the truck's skin, has found a strange friction when crossing into where we are now. A visible resistance. What we bring with us changes who we are now.

Or maybe what's on the inside has created this bizarre, micro weather pattern. The truck is making its own rain, like a traveling ecosystem.

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I want to see a moose, or elk, but instead the Juniper Mountains rise to greet me. Oklahoma and Texas had way cheap gas, and were also Jesus-y and gimmicky; no art, only artifice there. New Mexico and Arizona offer land, and these mountains charm the eyes of a former flatlander. Stevie Nicks' raspy voice is here a lot too, both as a soloist and with Fleetwood Mac. One of the few non-Spanish-speaking stations here kicks it pretty old school. Foghat brings their "Slow Ride." Mrs. Cox shut down our eighth grade record party after I put this track on, because I had no idea what a slow ride was at the time. My current ride is going about 80, but I still have miles to go before I sleep.

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I speed over Holy Moses Wash – is that a name, or a command?

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I catch up to another, or perhaps the same, four-engine train, and although our speeds are close. I think I have the slight edge at 78 mph. McCruisey Control and I have gotten faster each progressive day. Planes and their white-tails are flying again in the west. What's their point of origin? Do all journeys lead there? Where do they go after the vanishing point?

The one station my radio search can weakly tune to here keeps playing Chicago (the band) songs. The *Lucky 98* DJ knows the first names of all the request callers as soon as she hears their voices. This is a small town.

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Outside of Needles, California, home of Snoopy's cousin Spike, I see my first palm trees. I drive through Hinckley, and think of environmental activist and movie-inspirer Erin Brockovich, so I fling invectives at heartless electric company PG&E. I rally my ire around *The Fountainhead's* Howard Roark too, when he proclaims from the audio tape, "I will do my own work, my own way, and let myself be torn to pieces if necessary." He adds, "I hate incompetence." I subscribe to his philosophies, but I regret I can't separate Roark from this dated story.

One of my favorite playwrights in college was Sam Shepard. He set almost all of his gritty, incestuous and murderous plays in a seedy motel at the edge of the Mojave Desert. I think I stay at that hotel on my sixth and final night of the drive, only this one also didn't have the promised Wi-Fi and weight room. I've resurrected a painful knot deep within my left shoulder from driving about ten hours each day. I'm concerned about the poor pets, subjected to new smells and textures at each different hotel. Lyn is a trooper, and I remember what an awesome responsibility I have with her, since she's an indoor cat and I'm the only regular mammalian contact in her life. She and Mickie barely have détente and the dog is showing the strain. While he's learned to love the back seat, his only link to all his favorite old scents, he's taken to scratching up the carpeting on the floor by the hotel door when I dash out in the morning to grab the meager, but free, breakfast offerings.

We hop on the road for a final push from the bottom of California to near the top. There are more north/south roads than east/west, so I have to follow a Tetris-like up-and-over pattern to get to where I'm going. Did the urban planners and civil engineers just get tired when they got out this far, and didn't want to pave over the top of the mountains anymore? I'm tired myself, and can understand these broad strokes. As America expanded west, the states got bigger, and the roads got sloppier.

Gas prices jump at least a buck over the state line, so I'm back to familiar gas price-gouging territory, just like corrupt Chicago. But they don't have those convenient automatic *on* switches on the pump handles to prevent gas sloppage, here in the more eco-friendly Golden State. I see motorcycle cops speed by, like Erik Estrada in his tight tan *CHiPS* uniform and knee-high leather boots. I pass Barstow and remember how my hero Hunter S. Thompson followed the Hells Angels here for his breakthrough book. I talk through clenched, Thompson-esque teeth to the dog. I'm making this artist's trek from Joplin's ragtime to Tracy Letts' Osage County, Oklahoma, viewing Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe's New Mexico, all the way to Steinbeck's Cannery Row and San Francisco's City Lights bookstore.

Journeys look romantic from the outside, after they're done.

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Mojave is a wind town, *pardner*, littered with airfields, small planes and windmills. All those rows of wind turbines look like the *most* crosses in the

Western Hemisphere, for many of them are as motionless as dormant pinwheels. My cracked and dry fingertips remind me that we're in the full desert now.

Pushing north, suddenly it's green ground again. A lush layer wraps the base of the mountains, which are topped with toy houses on their peaks and toy trains running through the arched tunnels that were blasted through their bases. Smog rises nearby, as a shadowy, translucent brown mountain peak. Mickie rams his nose into the window crack again, and tries to decipher the contents. The birds of prey don't heed the "gusty winds" warning signs as they ride the thermals near a red barn surrounded by incongruous palm trees.

I turn on Merle Haggard Drive in the fecund Central Valley for a quick bite. I'm getting more than anxious in the final stretch. I never eat the flaccid and mealy fast food tomatoes as a rule, but here in big agriculture country even on cheap food they're robust and tasty. A bright and sunny day disappears into thick fog towards the Bay Area, partially obscuring a factory farm for cattle up the highway. Even the dog hides from the dreadful smell, and I avert my eyes away from the condemned, packed into acre after filthy acre. Reaching Hollister and Gilroy, the death scent is finally purged by the smell of garlic everywhere in my favorite spice's holy land. Fresh vegetables are my favorite perfume.

When I finally make it to San José, it's late, and sprinkling. I'm exhausted but I have to stay in a hotel one more night because my permanent place isn't ready yet. Will there ever be a place that's ready for me, or me for it? I can never get the timing right.

I park by the front of the HoJo's to run in and get my key. It's a tiny office, with just a small open space between the brochure rack, breakfast area and front counter. There's a handful of people in the lobby, off to the side, surrounding an elderly woman. I think she's reading somebody's palm as the clerk clacks into the computer behind the desk, looking for my reservation. But then a middle aged man and woman stand in the center of the room, and the two 'tween kids and young adult straighten up in their chairs. The desk clerk loudly whispers, "We do weddings too."

My solo sojourn of over 2,527 miles ends at the start of a marriage. I stay to watch the brief, basic ceremony, partly out of respect, and partly because I was already in the middle of it, in my week-unwashed jeans, wrinkly shirt, and soil of America's heartland on my shoes. The simple vows are punctuated by full voice "Thank you for calling Howard Johnson's" whenever the phone rang. As one of the kids lazily snaps the couples' post-ceremony photo on his cell phone, I grab a twenty out of my wallet, go up to the newlywed Irene (I had heard her name used several times), say congrats, give her a big teary-eyed hug, and crinkle the bill into her palm.

* * * * *

The granite countertop on the sink of the HoJo's room is exactly the same pattern as what I left in the snazzy rehabbed condo I sold at a loss in Chicago. What have I left behind, and what has followed me here?

The Brown State

It's hot and dry, as it is most days in San José, California, where I recently moved for graduate school. This area is known for microclimates, which could be true, especially if they're all gradations of hot and dry. This is a lot of hot for a formerly four-season person. But, heat be damned, I aim to utilize my \$80 Santa Clara County all-parks pass to satisfy my Scottish sense of thrift. I'm trying to understand and embrace my new environment, this Golden State.

I visit a crispy collection of small slopes southeast of where Highway 101 meets Interstate 680. There is nowhere to park in this park, so I pull off to the side of Yerba Buena Road, and pop open a Mylar shield in a vain attempt to keep my Toyota's dash from reaching bacon-frying temps.

This sixty-acre triangle is named for fellow Scotsman, John Joseph Montgomery, who experimented with manmade flight at the same time as the Wright Brothers. According to a faded hilltop sign, he was less well-known because he was "hesitant to leave behind drawings, notes and other written records of his flight studies." He was the "father of gliding," now only remembered for this parched promontory in Evergreen Valley. Fatefully, the crash of his glider "Evergreen" took his life in 1911. Perhaps, like Icarus, he flew too close to that hot sun.

This valley is not Evergreen. This area is *everbrown*, like a post-Lollapalooza parking field, with tan stalks of foxtails flattened into a mass grave,

along with amber beer bottle fragments and a crushed Camel Wide box. Turkey vultures ride the thermals rising off the earth, turning temperature into flight, scoffing at manmade gliders as well as my heat exhaustion. The hills rising in the distance are dotted with scrubby shrubs and twisted trees. Their brownness looks gentler at a distance, like the stubbled cheeks of the Mexicans who used to own this state.

A cotton candy layer of tan smog rises above the city, partially obscuring the white-domed Lick Observatory, merely a nipple atop Mount Hamilton. Above it all a daytime crescent moon languishes, lonely without clouds, keeping half an eye on the steady stream of aircraft taxiing towards Mineta Airport. The chug-chugging of a bi-plane buzzing by perhaps pays homage to its glider grandfather.

Down the brown towards town, beyond the manicured spears of tall cypress, is Evergreen Valley Community College, which *does* live up to its brand. A scorching desert of blacktop student parking transitions me from the desolate peak into the lush campus. I hear water beyond the manicured lawns. A manmade lake appears, green with algae and ostentatious with two spraying fountains, the larger of the two harboring three relaxing cormorants in the middle. Their beaks are raised in salute to their spa day.

Like these birds, I am seduced by the shady, the wet, the green. No contest with the hot and dry. Some carry umbrellas here, not to block any rain, but to control the sun.

I look back at Montgomery Hill and now realize why California is called the Golden State. Not for its mineral nuggets, but for its arid expanse of tawny-colored terrain. In this microcosm of the golden or, more accurately, *brown* state, green means places that import water and require never-ending maintenance. This place *should* be brown, in a natural, dun-colored state, like the skin of most who no longer own this land, but now tend to these incongruous gardens instead.

I start back uphill. The parks I've visited in NorCal are usually situated near roads, as uneasy manmade and natural neighbors. Passing automotive noise nearly drowns out the piercing warning squeaks of the pocket gophers, as air-conditioned cars whoosh by.

I close my eyes and imagine it's a waterfall.

Me, Myself and I

"Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate"

Othello, *Othello*, William Shakespeare

I Googled myself. I was hunting for personal memories to exploit, to tell new stories based on old information. I wanted to reconstruct some song lyrics I wrote for my boyfriend's band in the eighties. I wanted to see if they were alive in the ether somewhere. Writers write to live forever, somehow, somewhere.

Back then, I had Yoko'd myself into the quintet Animal Logic, later called Party Akimbo, after they sold their original name to Stewart Copeland of The Police. Words can be expensive. I wrote songs for Rob to strum and sing, like the reggae "Heart Sandwich" and alt-pop "She's Halfway There." Now I can only recall snippets. The former was something about literally eating somebody's heart, as opposed to a mere metaphorical heartbreak. I think the latter went along the lines of "She's so pseudo, she's so blonde, she's kinda clueless, she's halfway there." Also something about remoras, fish that cling to host sharks to pick up the scraps. I was looking for meaning in my nascent snarkiness.

I'm a writer, former songwriter, thankfully, now making nonfiction, a more truthful music. I always wanted to write, and always wrote a bit, although never enough. Never enough to get all my stories out. I'm an actor, too, wearing masks to tell stories. I'm also the daughter of a cultural anthropologist, so I've

“tried on” many narratives through my mother’s work. I’ve always wanted to get out of my own skin, to escape my thoughts. I’m a perfectionist and imperfect at the same time. I can never meet my high expectations and cannot forgive my transgressions. Perhaps I borrow from others’ experiences because I can’t process my own.

I developed this attraction to *otherness* when I went with mom to the Smithsonian Institution on school holidays and summers before I began working. “Her” museum, the National Museum of Natural History, as part of the “Nation’s Attic,” was designed to allow comfortable walking in somebody else’s shoes, a place that belonged to everybody. That building had it all, from murals depicting soft tissue modification like sailor tattoos and Chinese foot binding, to the Hope Diamond and an elephant in the rotunda.

I danced in a traditional Indian Kacchi Ghori horse costume with Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the *Aditi: A Celebration of Life* exhibit opening. I told him, “Let’s rock.” I chatted with naturalist-cartoonist Gary Larson about his talking animals during an exhibition of his work. I aggressively sniffed the mummy PUM II’s ancient perfume from a scented, embalmed fragment inside a #10 envelope. It disintegrated and went up my nose.

But those who don’t remember (or occasionally snort) history are condemned to repeat it. Or search for it on the web, at the very least. So I searched for my lyrics by entering my name, Karin McKie, paired with the word “artist.” Navel-gazing, to be sure, but I wanted to encompass all my various

aspects, my possible outcomes. Up popped “African-American artist and storyteller Karen McKie, at the Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.”

I knew that I was some sort of a storyteller, but I had no idea I was black.

* * * * *

Although wholly WASP-y, growing up in a white suburb of Washington, D.C., I’m usually drawn to African-American stories. Starting in the first grade, I listened to Bill Cosby albums – *I Started Out as a Child, Why Is There Air?*, and *Wonderfulness* – and I memorized all of his routines. In between classes at Keene Mill Elementary School, I repeated his *Lone Ranger* monologue to anyone who would listen.

“I don’t want to go into town, Kimosabe. They’re going to beat me up again.”

“Tonto, you go to town.”

“You go to hell, Kimosabe.”

I recited the riff so many times that my nickname became the misspelled *Kemo*. My first boyfriend John Denise was *Sabe*, for some reason. His nickname stuck for about three months. Mine lasted about three decades. My first documented usage of somebody else’s story – African-American Bill’s and Native American Tonto’s – to identify myself.

At West Springfield High School, I absorbed footage of contralto Marian Anderson singing “My Country ‘Tis of Thee” on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial,

after she was kicked out of a Constitution Hall gig because of her skin color. I met her while I was working on a PBS documentary about her, and told her how I appreciated her creative resistance to racism.

I spoke with Maya Angelou about her poem “And Still I Rise” at a Clinton first-term inaugural event. I made a pilgrimage to civil rights icon Emmett Till’s grave on Chicago’s Southside, which was unacceptably ordinary. I choke up at any Martin Luther King speech. “I have a dream,” of course, with its “I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” But especially in “The Mountaintop,” when King says, “I may not get there with you.” Because he didn’t. He knew the ending to his story, even before he got there.

In the Chicago production of *Hellcab*, I played a rape victim. Instead of thinking about my own history with sexual violence, I thought about King’s words to reach the emotion required of the scene. Sort of the antithesis of method acting, to use another’s experiences, rather than your own.

But, on stage, I never cried too much, because good actors shouldn’t full-out cry. If you cry, then the audience can’t. Your job is just to deliver the text, to tell the story for them to feel it. You’re the conduit. You’re not the story; you’re the teller.

* * * * *

When I cry for real, I pay attention. Seems obvious, but my body is telling me what’s important, like papal smoke mystically sending a decision.

The last time I really cried was when I realized that, indeed, I'm a storyteller. That's my job, my title as an actor and a writer. My tear ducts confirmed it. As a performer, you interpret; you don't get in the way of the story. Like Colonel Kurtz said, in his story, in *Apocalypse Now*, "You're an errand boy, sent by grocery clerks, to collect a bill." Control your personal agenda. As a nonfiction writer, you take what's there and frame it, for clarity. Just like I used to do with photography. You don't invent whole cloth, like fiction; you select what matters. You use what's real but you decide what's important. Fiction writers play three-card Monte. Nonfiction writers are surgeons, photographers, keepers of history. I write nonfiction. I tell history.

The realization that I was a storyteller made me cry, so I knew it was true.

* * * * *

The year 2011 was a shit sandwich. Something went wrong every week. My Toyota blew three tires in as many months, my prescription glasses were ground wrong (also three times), I got hit by a car as I was riding my bike, plus I had hacked email, hacked website, hacked haircut, MIA dog sitters, rat in the garage, then a MIA *dead* rat in the garage. I smelled the decay, but didn't find the body for months. As Dorothy Parker wondered, "What fresh hell is this?" Except for having to put my unexpectedly sick cat to sleep, as she screamed in agony during euthanasia, generally, it was nothing too huge; piece-meal. But it was an aggregate shit storm. Death by a thousand cuts. My psyche was bruised, spirit wounded. (Ed. Note: Still is.)

So I took my Gemini, or perhaps bi-polar, half cynical/half wussy, personality-disordered self to the “spiritual cleanser” whom my acupuncturist recommended. I had smudged rooms with sage sticks before, but this was my first attempt at self-purification.

Rita is primarily a massage therapist, but instead she spent most of our two-and-a-half hour session doing “ThetaHealing,” which has something to do with “The Creator Of All That Is” according to the website. I didn’t tell her I am agnostic with atheist rising. Then she tried the Tapas Acupressure Technique, “A Portal of Grace.” I went along for the ride, and didn’t giggle when she started speaking in tongues.

Flat on my back, I was trying to purge my bad mojo but wishing I had requested deep tissue work instead. About halfway through the session, Rita pulled at some invisible strings with her hands as she touched and talked. After some mumbo-jumbo, she said something about “forgive yourself.” She wanted me to vocalize forgiving myself.

Out of nowhere, tepid tears oozed out of the corners of my squinched-shut eyes, over my emerging crows’ feet, into my ears.

She repeated, “Forgive yourself for any past transgressions,” or some other new age-y edict. “Say it out loud.”

I couldn’t. I couldn’t say the words. I spent a life avoiding just that, by wearing other skins. I can’t face myself. I’m not even halfway toward doing that.

I can't forgive myself. For what, about what, I didn't know. I only knew I couldn't do it.

I couldn't get there with Rita.

After a few minutes, my controlled keening abated. I finally mumbled some words of forgiveness, but I didn't mean them. Then Rita asked me who I was, and I blurted, from a primal place, "storyteller." The waterworks started again. I had finally figured that out. I can't forgive, but I can tell stories about forgiveness.

* * * * *

After discovering her online, I emailed my fellow storyteller and moniker-mate Karen McKie at the Berkeley Public Education Foundation, where she's a nonprofit board member. To my surprise, she responded with her phone number. To my delight, she agreed to have lunch. To my astonishment, she didn't cancel like so many connections I've attempted since my move to Northern California three years ago.

We had talked on the phone a bit before meeting in person. I found out she tells stories using puppets, so I asked her to bring one, since she doesn't have any upcoming gigs where I could see her in action.

We met at a hipster Japanese fusion restaurant, and after effusive and appreciative introductions, I asked, "Why do you make dolls?"

Karen wanted to share their family's multi-ethnic stories with her sons Moshe and Zaid, which are both Hebrew and Swahili names, representing each

parent. She had endured racism in college, near Philly in the sixties. Karen wanted to participate in her children's stories because she knows that history shouldn't be dictated. It is made by agreement. She wanted to use figures, representations, but she didn't want white dolls painted brown.

She bought modeling clay, and worked on making figures through the night. At first, she didn't like what she had created. But once she baked the bodies, they looked like women that she knew, like both her "beautiful and crisply intelligent" mom, and a woman friend named Etah.

Karen pulls a doll out of a paper bag, wrapped in a cloth. Seated, it's over a foot high, with a realistic miniature face, topped with frizzy black lamb's wool hair. The doll is clothed in griot garb made out of men's socks, "because the scale is right," Karen says. The body is soft, but the hands and feet are clay too, roughhewn and "large, like my mother's," she adds. This puppet clearly works with her body, and is roughly attractive.

"How do they move?" I ask, since no strings or sticks are visible.

"During a story, I seat them with their hands open and inviting, in case somebody in the audience wants to approach me with an idea on how to manipulate them. This allows me to collaborate with others."

Karen has been making these dolls of storytelling women for decades. They populate her home, and she sculpts them after people she knows. She likes the heavy eye folds that aging women have. She might build a nose for trouble, or lips that speak the truth. I tell her this process reminds me of blazon,

the poetic categorization of women by body parts. The world wants to look at us in pieces, by the names they give us.

Two white ladies-that-lunch at the next table, who inspected our ramen bowls when we got them, focus in on the mini-Karen.

“Isn’t this amazing? She made them,” I beam about Karen, proud of my namesake.

“Well, yes. But you’re much prettier,” one said to Karen, judging her by her lovely skin.

I want to know if Karen tells African stories, like about Anansi the trickster spider, who always causes mischief among people. She said she tells a personal story, but takes a minor character from a novel she read as an English major, like something from Faulkner, and has one of the five or six dolls sitting in a circle tell that peripheral person’s story. She knows women are culture bearers, and live in a community, a place of keeping and of growing.

She likes what I like, stories; she does what I do, tells them. She and I strive to educate. Karen McKie even shares the middle initial “L.” Hers is Leslie, mine is Louise. Instead of pinching myself, I just suck down my sauvignon blanc. It is thrilling yet disconcerting to even come close to facing myself.

Her family, unlike mine, doesn’t research their genealogy, so she doesn’t know exactly how she got her first or last name. I have an “i” in Karin because of my German side. Karen thinks her grandfather might have changed the surname Mackey, the clan name, to McKie when he moved north from the Carolinas.

Karen and I have both spent a lifetime correcting our last name. While McKie is common in Scotland, as I've found during visits there, it's usually McKee in the States. When folks attempt to spell my first and last together, I tell them the spellings "have two 'i's' – two eyes, just like my face."

I give Karen some pages from my family tree pages that my dad had researched and mailed for me to give to her, along with some narratives expanding on the ancestors in the charts.

"It's strange to see my name in so many places," Karen says.

It's strange for me to see another Karen McKie. The name that's usually spelled to signify who I am. When people misspell both of my names, which is all the time (including folks I've known forever), I feel like they're talking about someone else. That they don't really know who I am. I find it unforgivable. It's odd to meet someone with that shared experience. Maybe they were talking about her the whole time.

We share a name. We share a desire, a need to communicate. But, of course, we are not the same. She is black. I am hidden. She is the KLM closer to MLK. That Karen McKie is happily married with kids. I am not. She's vegetarian. I was for about seven years, but now I eat my ramen with duck. She lives in Berkeley, near meaningful cafés and home design and handmade paper stores. I live on a truck route, near a quarry and a train line, under a flight path. Transportation and industry detritus covers everything in my place with a strange

gray dust. The silver earrings in the wire tree on my dresser tarnish quicker than anywhere I've ever lived.

I am the solitary one; Karen is in a community. And continues to make more residents with her hands. At about halfway through our individual lives, she a little further along than me, we sound the same, yet remain divergent. She's moving forward; I'm treading water.

They say that we make art in order to find ourselves. We want to see ourselves in the work of others. I see my name in Karen, my appreciation of African-American culture, of telling stories to escape, to ease the pain. I wonder if these traits fit her better, or if it's OK that I kibitz. I am looking for myself, no further than my own backyard.

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Beautiful, gracious Karen McKie treats me to lunch. When we stand to leave, I notice that we're both wearing dark jeans, like loam, and deep brown boots the color of shared soil.



Photo courtesy of Ron Bieganski

Marlboro Reds

We were children headed to buy smokes. I was with Aurelie, who was invincible; if she decided to do something, it could be done, consequences be damned. “What could possibly happen?” she’d say. Me and fearless Aurelie Lafayette, my childhood best friend and the pal I’ve known the longest in my life, walked to the bowling alley, where we could buy cigarettes, no questions asked. This was Virginia, after all, with centuries as a proud tobacco-producing commonwealth, which practically mandates denizens to consume their foremost cash crop.

In this place and in the 1970s, neither walking long distances unchaperoned on busy roads nor purchasing cancer sticks seemed out of the ordinary for elementary school girls. At the time, these were regular rites of passage. The Springfield Fair Lanes Bowling Alley was a couple of miles away, so we head west of our I-95 exit, directly south of the Capital Beltway, near one of the so-called “most dangerous intersections” in the country. Where the north/south traffic hurtles up and down the Eastern Seaboard and merges full speed with circular commuter traffic heading to and from downtown D.C. The amalgamation called Northern Virginia, NoVa. Where we were from. What could possibly happen?

Back then, cigs were a dollar a pack, so we’d bring the dimes from our fifth-grade allowance. The Fair Lanes were adjacent to the monster parking lot,

where the rickety Springfield Carnival would land a few times a year. Right by the paper-and-paste-smelling Richard Byrd Library, where my bookworm mom would take my sister and me almost every week. As we entered the bowling alley's glass doors, the mulleted, pimply clerk in a Molly Hatchet T-shirt didn't even look up. He was bent over the shoe check-out counter reading a *Mad Magazine*.

Aurelie had convinced me to embark on this quest, and cajoled me for several months. "Let's go get cigarettes," she said. "We'll be cool." I forever longed to fit in, so this must be the way. My heart was racing; my palms were perspiring. Surely, we'd be caught and arrested. We were young, fresh-faced, tow-headed. And short. That must raise suspicion. But Aurelie strode confidently around the beer and snack counter to the Plexiglas-front vending machine, plain as day. She plunked in the silver, yanked the dirty yellow plastic knob – ka-chunk – and extracted the exalted prize.

She got Marlboro Reds. *We* got Marlboro Reds. The classic. The gateway cigarette. Every smoker I know started on this brand, the most harsh and unforgiving of the filtered options. Unmistakable, bold blood-red cap, with a white "arrow" pointing to where you should open the pack to access the "smoky treats," as we called them. The coolest cigarettes around, as the Marlboro Man proselytized. But, oh, right, then we had to actually smoke them.

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I've known Aurelie for four decades. Our parents were acquainted and lived close by, in suburban tract housing facing the deep woods, before the overbuilding began. She was my friend since before I could stand or talk, and remains my longest friendship. Aurelie was nine months older than I, and had one older brother Geoff (whom I called Gee-off). I have one older sister Debbie (then Debe and D.B., and now Deborah). I learned to spell my friend's name by morphing the ubiquitous-at-the-time commercial: "cuz Oscar Mayer has a way / with A-U-R-E-L-I-E."

I was always a wussy and Aurelie was forever fearless. A rebel. She was cute and blonde, but gave off a hard vibe. She'd wrestle hard with Gee-off, whose fingernails scratched a scar that looked like a "minus one" on her forehead. She was proud of it. She loved the paranormal, like ghost stories and horror shows, and when I'd spend the night in her dark wood-paneled basement, we'd watch *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* on their old TV. She loved being scared, while I was terrified, watching those shows through squinched eyes. I'd be unable to fall asleep in my red, white and blue nylon sleeping bag, imagining a black-and-white monster lurking in their laundry room. She liked being "tested" by scary shows, and situations, to prove she was untouchable by such things. I thought I was going to die, or get into horrible trouble.

One scary slumber party night we developed a "secret code," just between us. We saw Redford and Newman in *The Sting*, when they devised a complex system of "sign language" to make sure they understood each other. They

brushed their fingers alongside their noses to let each other know they were alright. On the downstairs shag carpeting, we'd look at each other and curl our thumbs and pointer fingers into an exaggerated OK sign; then actually say "OK; OK." Next, we'd purposefully squish an eyelid down and vocalize "Wink; wink." And then, for some random second-grade reason, we added the physical and verbal "Stomp; stomp;" a duet for foot and voice. If we wanted to cement an inside joke, share a private ritual, or be perfectly clear with each other, it was the slow, exaggerated triple threat of "OK, OK. Wink, wink. Stomp, stomp."

Aurelie led our prank calling too, with abandon. After a night of terrifying television, we'd wake up late on Sundays, her parents often out already. In their harvest gold kitchen, using the rotary phone, we'd annoy strangers. Others might perform the classics: "Is your refrigerator running?" "Yes." "Well, you better catch it." But Aurelie would add her own spin: "Is your refrigerator running?" "Yes." "Well, fuck you!" She'd laugh and slam down the receiver and "OK, Wink, and Stomp" herself silly. I was certain the cops would bust through their front door in short order, but Aurelie was invulnerable. She'd ask the strange voices, "Do you have Prince Albert in a can?" Instead of the scripted reply, "Well, you'd better let him out," she joyfully proclaimed, "He's going to fucking die!"

It was a long time before we realized that Prince Albert was a tobacco product.

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We had finally scored the Marlboro Reds from the Fair Lanes, so now we had to smoke them. We walked back to my house. She was giddy and I was terrified. Adult interference wasn't an issue, as I was one of the first latch-key kids in the 'hood, because both of my parents worked fulltime in D.C. While my sister and her freak friends cleaned weed on album covers (FYI - double albums work best, like Cheech and Chong's "Big Bambú"), Aurelie and I would light up in the backyard. We huddled behind a rhododendron bush and a redwood partition, by Chippy the chipmunk's hole. We used large kitchen matches, holding the brown filters wetly between our pursed lips, and calculated the right amount of suction to get them lit. We coughed, a lot, and forced smiles through watery eyes. It felt unhealthy, scary, wrong, yet native. The very Virginia soil, a difficult red clay sporting freshly mown grass, compelled us to our appointed task. And, after all, we were just playing at smoking, not really smoking, so what could possibly happen?

We were doing it! We were cool. Finally. But we held the cigs all wrong, between thumb and forefinger like a cartoon cigar. It was years, actually, before we mastered the how to casually drop your fingers, and use the smoke trails as conversational emphasis, for making a point. A cool point. When we were done, we used the garden hose to douse the smoldering cherries, throwing the organic evidence into the woods. Thinking back, I'm sure I didn't inhale for years, because I was "just playing," but I have a feeling that Aurelie did.

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OK, we weren't cool. We were in Girl Scouts. Always on the first Friday at a NoVa or suburban Maryland campsite, we'd make Girl Scout stew (random low-grade meat and veggies in a campfire pot) and Aurelie's next door neighbor Mary Helen Drew, with a Catholic-girl Afro, would throw it up somewhere between the platform tents and latrines. Every time. We'd talk about this perennial phenomenon as we'd lie on our backs, shivering, and listening to large, tarantula-looking wolf spiders plopping from the corners of the canvas roof to the wood planks near our heads. I was petrified; Aurelie was in her element.

Troop 738 ("The Great") took a weekend trip to the Hershey, Pennsylvania, amusement park. I had never been on a roller coaster, but Aurelie was a veteran. She convinced me to get on, and assured me she would get me through it. I white-knuckled it, first in line, then on the actual contraption as we ka-chugged to the top of the first hill. I sucked in air and held that breath – unlike my early smoking forays, I did inhale here – squeezing my eyes closed as we careened down the first slope. My guts rose and stuck in my throat during that fearful drop. I was miserable, afraid I wasn't going to make it.

As we bumped up into the next incline, Aurelie yelled to me, "You need to scream. To SCREAM down hills! And open your eyes! You're missing it!"

I resolved to scream on the next drop. At the top of the next crest, poised over the abyss, I opened my eyes and mouth wide, and shrieked. It felt good, and made all the difference. Aurelie made all the difference.

With eyes open wide, she could watch scary shows and make prank calls. She could stomp spiders and rule roller coasters. She could smoke, so I smoked with her. Smoking was the great equalizer, for those that aren't cool. A box of tobacco, shared with a bold friend, leveled the playing field.

* * * * *

Before we got to high school, Aurelie and her family moved to New England. We grew up and drifted apart, but through it all and for some reason, Aurelie and I exchanged annual Christmas cards. Almost without fail, no matter where, or who, we were. For a wild child, she had old-school correspondence etiquette. Although we had smoked only occasionally during primary school, we both stepped it up in ninth grade and beyond, albeit in different locations.

At West Springfield High School, theatre became my thing. Puffing was a tacit requirement, a bonding ritual within that group, especially when the established, "normal" cliques were hell-bent on tearing us down. They would devour by separating the weak from the herd. Over cigs, theatre folks bonded with the freaks, as the stoners were called. These two outsider groups built an alliance outside, when there still were high school smoking lounges. By then, I had graduated to the more sophisticated Virginia Slims, which I unsophisticatedly called *vagina slimes*, leaving Marlboro Reds in the past.

In my undergrad years, I moved to Merit Ultra Lights, occasionally smoking my boyfriend's unfiltered Camels to "test" myself, Aurelie-style, and to pick tobacco off my tongue for the next hour. The whole rigmarole remained

cool, a way to be noticed. After purchase, compacting the tobacco in each cigarette by tapping the pack hard into your palm, causing heads to swivel your way. Tearing off the cellophane like unwrapping a birthday present, then casually stuffing it in your pocket. Tucking your money and ID inside the box when you went out, when you could still smoke in bars and restaurants. Using a piece of the box to reinforce your joint. Turning the first tightly extracted cigarette upside down and smoking it last, a “lucky cig” for some mystical reason I don’t remember. Yet the ritual remained. Smoking was a culture, complete with its own liturgy, and I spent a lot of time at its altar. Twenty years in, with a sometimes pack-a-day habit, I finally admitted to myself I was a smoker, and not a “party smoker.” I have a feeling Aurelie was more honest, and embraced her habit.

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In 2003, I finally opened my eyes (and lungs), and quit smoking for good, cold turkey. One of my greatest fears was not being able to breathe – I have claustrophobia, and get sweaty hands just watching submarine movies – so stopping smoking was a prudent choice for ensuring airflow. This screwed with my performance career, ironically, because theatre casts develop deep bonds on smoke breaks, which are a huge asset on stage. I was out of that smoky loop now. That’s how I bonded with Aurelie. Plus, the “damaged voice,” the “voice by Marlboro,” as it was called in the voice-over business, was all the rage at the time. The subtle appeal and control of the “slow suicide” was also missed.

That same year, Aurelie visited Gee-off in Madison, Wisconsin, so I drove up, three hours northwest from Chicago. As I pulled into his driveway, a blonde woman came stomping out of the house, winking and OK-ing hard. We laughed, then drove around and settled on a strip-mall Chinese restaurant, where we ate and awkwardly caught up on the past couple of decades. We spent a couple of hours together, and knew we were different people now. I dropped her back off at her brothers' place, where we both exchanged a final, firm "OK; OK. Wink; wink. Stomp; stomp."

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In early December 2009, I mailed my Christmas cards, affixed with my new California return address sticker, which included my e-mail address. I didn't keep track of cards received (or not), as I figured I'd lost a number of remaining correspondents on this move. On January 1st, 2010, I got an e-mail from David Lafayette. I didn't know who that was. It took a minute to realize, oh, right, it was Aurelie's dad.

"Karin...I received your Christmas card for Aurelie today. I am very sad to inform you that Aurelie died on December 18th of lung cancer, spread throughout her body. She spoke of you many times to me over the years and remembered particularly your times at Girl Scout camp."

* * * * *

I sent Mr. Lafayette a condolence e-mail, plus a card to his Florida home via snail mail, signing my name, as well as my mom's, dad's and sister's. On

January 20th, I got an e-mail from Gee-off, which read, “thank you for being such a great friend to Aurelie! I went through Aurie’s home last week and there are two small items Aurie would like you to have.”

About a week later, I received a cardboard Priority Mail envelope with a bump in it. I opened it, and the note said:

“Enclosed is Aurie’s Girl Scout knife. I don’t know if Aurie ever used it in scouting – you would know more than I. Aurie used it as a letter opener and brought it camping as an adult. She asked that I give it to you. I also found this unopened letter in her desk drawer and thought I would pass it along.”

The letter was a Christmas card, postmarked 29 Dec 2004, which Aurelie had sent to my second-to-last Chicago address; returned to her as “attempted-not known.” She had kept it.

Only Aurelie could have figured out how to send me a letter from beyond the grave. She did love ghost stories.

Inside, she wrote about her mother’s pancreatic cancer and death; visiting her dad in Florida for Christmas; Geoff’s family update; and their joint vacation to Niagara Falls, where they “all agreed our favorite attraction was the ‘Maid of the Mist’ tour. They take you, dressed in rain gear, out into the Canadian Falls and idle there. If they got any closer, you’d get sucked into the falls. It’s all misty.”

She closed the card with, “We’ll have to get together again. Love,
Aurelie.”

I Facebook'd Gee-off to thank him, and tentatively asked what exactly had happened to Aurelie. He replied,

“Aurelie was a smoker and got lung cancer. After that who knows? She got early treatment and they reduced the size of her tumor in her lungs to the size of a dime and it looked like she might get 3 or 4 years. The next week they started finding cancer everywhere. Aurie had cancer in organs I didn't even know people had. The day before she died she told me she just couldn't take it anymore.

“We had a blast at the end of September together at Universal Studios Halloween Celebration. Brain cancer took out her right arm about 6 weeks before she died and she had to do everything one handed from then on. We visited the alligator park together in St. Augustine after they got her arm tremors under control. I would push her in a wheelchair, at that point. I know she had bone cancer bad too.”

Mr. Lafayette linked me to Aurelie's obituary on Legacy.com. She was 46 when she died. The posting told of the early years when I knew her in Springfield, plus things from her later life I didn't know: “In the last few years she grew an interest in parapsychology and was a member of The Atlantic Paranormal Society and involved in the hunt for paranormal activities at the Mount Washington Hotel in Bretton Woods, NH.”

What she once was, she remained. Fearless. Smoker. Friend.

* * * * *

I haven't been back to Springfield in years. There's no reason since my parents sold the family manse and have lived in nearby Woodbridge for almost a decade. I don't want to drive the new Fairfax County Parkway, which cuts across formerly wooded areas, or see what they've done to West Springfield High School. I know that Richard Byrd Library, where we watched July 4th fireworks on the lawn, has been relocated. I'll bet, I know, that kids can't buy cigs and beer like they used to. But I know that Aurelie now won't change; she's frozen in time for me, in her prime. When she died, she fearlessly leapt into the greatest unknown before me. Of course. I wonder if her life choices were better than mine. I'm still here, but still uncool, still afraid and still struggling, while she, as they say, "lived fast and died young, in order to leave a good looking corpse," true to form. What would she say about where I'm at now? Living a life still obscured by fear and doubt.

Oh, right, she'd say, "Open your eyes. You're missing it."

OK OK. Wink wink. Stomp.

Stomp.



Photo of Aurelie courtesy of the Lafayette family

Bad Back

"Every why hath a wherefore"

Dromio of Syracuse, *The Comedy of Errors*, William Shakespeare

There's something wrong with my back.

My spine is twisted like a question mark, jutting out to the right by my hip, then back to the left to align with my politics. I keep saying, "Yeah, my back is a question mark," a piece of punctuation that mirrors my mood, and makes my outside match my inside. I usually conceal my pain internally, but now the jig is up. I'm getting my Quasimodo on. The "my back is a question mark" quip also elicits some chuckles from the practitioners I visit. A menopausal acupuncturist, a massage therapist with a smoker's cough, a dismissive osteopath at the student health center, and an anal-retentive physical therapist all find my description humorous, but are unable to straighten out my crooked vertebrae before I get on the plane. "A question mark, dotted by an asshole," I think to myself as I leave each office, wallet empty and back still loaded with painful queries.

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There's something wrong.

The pain is shooting. If I twist one fraction out of a narrow pain-free zone, I feel like I'm being zapped by a Taser, or punched in the kidney. It takes my

breath away. I now realize there's a lot of twisting in life, as almost every move ignites a zap, causing my body to freeze and my face to grimace, accompanied by a gasp and a clutch for something solid to steady myself. I adapt to moving slo-mo, waiting for my boundaries to be sharply defined. He who hesitates is lost? She who hesitates is pain-free for a brief yet glorious instant.

I can't bend over, so I drop my pants on the floor, step into the holes, then shimmy them up using my toes as pincers, plus assistance from dresser knobs and wide stances. I have been wearing all my summertime slip-on shoes even though it's January. This situation has happened before, so I know what to do. Apply Bio-Freeze or Tiger Balm to the lower torso (don't forget to wash your hands thoroughly before touching your face). Stretch in a hot shower, usually the yoga cat/cow combo: first, back arched, Halloween kitty-style; then drop the belly and enjoy the bovine sway. The yang to the yin of omnipresent-sucking-it-in. Take the leftover codeine pills from some procedure ten years ago. Then throw them away when the stomach ache that ensues surpasses the back pain. Realize that prescriptions do go bad at some point.

Haul out the inversion table and hang upside down until my brain is full of blood, and enjoy momentary perpendicular-ness while the dog licks my face. He seems to believe it's the "kissing table." Get out the yoga tune-up balls -- rubber balls like racquetballs for targeting marma energy points -- then smash the hell out of them while rolling around on the pet-hair-infused carpeting. Quest for the *sweet pain* of relief.

Put the lumbar pillow in the car, where the pain is the worst. It takes almost five minutes to enter and exit my tan Corolla, as I grab the body frame to haul my ass to the side and then down, or up, grunting like a porn star. When I have to do this at my various destinations, I get looks ranging from “poor dear” to “freak show.” The homeless guy in front of Super Taqueria expresses deep pity for me as I gargoyle out of the vehicle.

I know what to do when my back goes out, but it’s not working this time, and time is running out. I’m going to have to sit on a plane for six hours, and knowing my luck, I will get a middle seat between the infected-ear baby and the glandular guy.

Usually my bad back comes on rather mysteriously, although often precipitated by certain yoga positions. (I know I should avoid the plow, but I forget.) For me, yoga heals most of the time, but sometimes yoga bites me on the ass, or near the ass, to remind me that I’m not svelte or size zero, as are most of its creators and devotees. When my back goes, it starts as a secret in my sacrum, a whisper across my psoas, or odd electricity in my erectors; then *whammo*, full-blown cripple stance, overnight, usually discovered when dismounting the queen-size. It’s agony for a week, moderate pain for another fortnight, then gradual disappearance until the next flare-up. But not this time. And I have to go to D.C.

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I always say I'm from D.C., but it's actually Northern Virginia, Springfield, about ten miles south of the district. I think every state of the union has a Springfield, so when I say "I'm from Springfield" I have to jump in to explain that it's not Massachusetts, or Missouri or Illinois, the same way I have to spell out my not-terribly-unusual German first name and Scottish surname every goddam time. I'm from the land of corrections, the "let me tell you" state. But actually, Virginia is a commonwealth, not a state. The motto is "sic semper tyrannis," or "thus always to tyrants," which is what John Wilkes Booth shouted after shooting President Lincoln, as he leapt to the stage of Ford's Theatre. Which is in Washington, D.C., where more interesting things happen.

In NoVa, Northern Virginia, because of the orientation on our stretch of Capital Beltway, we always drive into the sun during both rush hours, while those northerly suburban Maryland wussies don't. They also have more Metro subway stops than we do. We don't need no stinking Metro stops. We'd rather be blinded and drive in from Virginia.

When I say "NoVa" any place away from the Eastern Seaboard, I get blank stares; when I say "D.C." anywhere, I get nods of approval for being a "Beltway insider." I'm practically a pundit. And I was, too. Practically. My dad ran the Federal Communications Commission, my mom was a cultural anthropologist at the Smithsonian, and, post-undergrad, I worked for the PBS station WETA, taping specials at the White House and promoting Ken Burns and his Prince Valiant haircut and his seminal series *The Civil War* and such. I did

have clout, but left because I thought being an artist was better than promoting art. This remains to be seen. I also needed to get away from my family.

* * * * *

I'm going to D.C. for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference. My school's paying the tab; well, I guess I'm actually paying the tab since I finagled a crapload of reading fee revenue for our literary journal. I worked Craig's List early and often, shilling for submissions, and am reaping the harvest.

As a writer, I subscribe to all the literary *Wolves* – Virginia, Tobias, Tom, and, of course, Thomas Wolfe – so I know you can't go home again and I almost never do. It's not that I don't love my family. My parents, retired from their government jobs, have been married half a century and still live in the area. (They are now in Woodbridge, by the Lorton Reformatory workhouse where D.C. suffragists were once imprisoned, an early example of D.C. dumping on VA.) So does my one older sibling, Deborah, who resides with her husband and three kids in nearby Manassas, site of Civil War battles and D.C. sniper shootings (see what happens when D.C. comes to NoVa?).

I do love them, and they are good people, but they make me crazy. They made my buttons so they know how to push them. When an outsider asks, "What do they do?" I can't even explain how their behavior instantly reduces me to age seven, with no control over my situation. When dad tells me what to do and how to do it, or mom martyrs herself without a fight, I suffocate.

I can't figure out how to not let their madness affect me, so I stay away. I fled from NoVa to Chicago for fifteen years. Then I followed my personal manifest destiny and came west to the left coast, I guess subliminally seeing how much physical distance I could put between their mania and my own. But the very school I fled to is now sending me back to the belly of the beast. And I must go because it's my gig. And I must see them because how could I go there and not? But the logistics of the trip, like wrangling a passel of students and accompanying insidious details, then steeling myself to not let any of this affect me, has affected me. I've always had a bad back, but it's always gotten better. But not now. Oh. Yeah. Predisposition plus psychology. I understand.

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I come from a long line of bad backs. My mom slipped a disk giving birth to me, so her mother took care of me for my first few months, while the zipper-like scar on mom's lower back healed. I always had little tweaks and minor twinges throughout the years, but the first full-out attack occurred in college in the Shenandoah Valley of central Virginia.

My musician boyfriend Rob and I were living on the left side of a thoroughly Boho Federal Street duplex. I was pulling on pants, and dropped like a rock. Those damn pants. Wish I had the legs to be a skirt girl, or had the courage to be nude for more than a few seconds. But no, it was pants, and they got me. I couldn't move and Rob was getting pretty freaked out. I could feel the tension in his voice in my back, directly. My spine had become a stress

thermometer, pulsing with each external vocal waver. He ran to get our next door neighbor Bone to help him lift me to a car, to go to the hospital. But as soon as their fingers touched my legs and shoulders, I cried out in pain.

Bone always called me The Junkyard Dog, and this night I was howling. I couldn't be touched. They fretted and paced, stomping ratty Chuck Taylors and worn earth shoes dangerously close to my head. I had to convince them that I just wanted to stay where I was. I told Rob to get me some water and some Midol, the most potent pharmaceutical in the place at that moment. That didn't help. I wasn't a huge toker like almost everybody else in my life, but I finally decided to smoke some weed to relax. Rob needed to smoke some (more) weed to relax. After he couldn't figure out how to angle the bong to keep nasty resin water from splashing in my mouth, he rolled a joint and I smoked it. He covered me with a thin blanket on the worn, wooden floor and that's where I spent the night. I was still in pain, with a high on top of it, and still stuck.

A dozen years later, I was co-hosting a baby shower for Isabel at Angela's hippie house in Evanston, Illinois. We three had met doing a stage combat workshop. We choreographed ourselves as geisha who read too much Sun Tzu, became too artfully war-full, and commenced to wailing on each other in full kimono and obi, using sake cups and chopsticks. We rolled around rehearsal rooms and theaters for weeks, nary a scratch or twitch.

Now all Angela and I had to do was roll up a carpet in her living room to prepare for the party. I bent down to pick up my end of the tube, using my legs

as I should, then I stood up and fell right back down. It's as if a rubber band in my back snapped. Angela's little girl Maya padded over and started laughing and drooling in my face, saying, "Hi. Hi. Hi." I told Angela I would be OK, and to continue prepping without me. That once I was calm it would be OK. The guests started to arrive, and from the floor I waved them cheerfully into the other room, to the event I was co-hosting. After about an hour, I quietly called Angela over. "Uh, I think I need an ambulance."

While in the other room glasses were being raised to Isabel and future baby Sam, sirens approached the house. Two strapping EMTs in crisp white shirts lifted me to their gurney, and rushed me out. This was beyond pain, almost beyond register. I cursed Chicago winters as we bumped over numerous unfilled potholes towards Northwestern Memorial Hospital. I have never felt so alive. A fiery pinprick of a person. Once at the ER, I got IVs and painkillers, and four hours later was released on my own recognizance. I couldn't get a ride from anyone, so I walked three miles back to Angela's house, dark by then, got in my car, and drove home, listing to one side.

* * * * *

So I'm used to it, the bad back. I've taken care of it myself for years, and the pain has always gone away, eventually. But not before D.C. It got worse. My back was being prescient, twisting itself in preparation for my journey back home after a long absence. It wanted to be screwed up, to blend in with its surroundings.

* * * * *

I don't want to go back.

The plane ride is excruciating, but those sassy Southwest attendants were kind, and made me a makeshift heating pad out of microwaved moist paper towels. I change planes in Chicago, the first time I had been back there since I waved goodbye to the Tower formerly known as Sears in my rearview mirror, on Christmas Day 2008. I feel weird about going back to the Windy City. I hadn't told most people I was leaving when I moved away, and most didn't notice, since much of my PR work was online and remote anyway. When I thought about having a layover at Midway, my back somehow got even tighter. It too, had surprisingly fresh and confusingly mixed feelings about what had been abandoned two years earlier. I still hadn't processed my leaving the Midwest. I keep all those feelings close and inside. But once I got inside the terminal, I kept secretly hoping I'd see a familiar face, even though folks I knew were more O'Hare types. I was strangely disappointed when there were no encounters, but my back relaxed a bit.

My back was pleased when I ordered a pretzel from a concourse concession. My back appreciated the twisted, metaphorical choice, rather than picking a razor-straight hotdog or pickle. When the large-and-in-charge Southside lady behind the counter asked, "Wad chew wont?" me and my spine also remembered how much we loved, and sorely missed, strong black Chicago women.

* * * * *

I decided to lie on the floor of the conference sessions at the Marriott in D.C.'s snazzy, yuppie Woodley Park 'hood. I had spent the first four days of my dreaded eastern sojourn at my parents' house, so my back remained jacked. The constant corrections ("that's not the year it happened"), the nitpick drone (you should put that there, not there), the inability to be authentic ("I'm in good shape") had worn me down to my primordial nub, and my throbbing back threw jazz hands around what was left of me.

Forging a new family tradition, my sister gave me some of her old prescriptions of Vicodin and Percocet, and despite the fact that I was popping them like Tic-Tacs, I was still spasming and twisted. Yet I still hauled fifty pounds of literary magazines in two suitcases downtown, and commenced phase two of my own Long March.

I just had to lie down. After the first session in the overly plush and stuffy hotel, I couldn't bear it. Sitting continued to be my worst possible position; standing was bearable and prone was ecstasy. So, for my second ninety-minute session, I plopped on the floor in the rear of the room and got flat, with knees bent. Relief. I cast off the occasional "WTF?" looks from on high and stared open-eyed at the ceiling, telegraphing that I was wide awake, serious and here to stay.

I think I got more out of the conference this way. Like a blind person stereotype, my auditory senses were heightened and I could see the stories

through words, just the way a writers' symposium should be. It was like sex: to be on your back and to be penetrated, often intimately. Sometimes I felt stimulation, sometimes nothing. Much like sex.

I imagined what the speakers looked like, and tested my suppositions upon rising; rolling around then clawing up a gold-edged, padded chair to get upright. Mostly I encountered looks of sympathy, which was strange. Being a loner, somewhat estranged from family, I carry a lot of angst around, but privately. People usually interpret my melancholy as grumpy or bitchy-ness, when in fact it's often pain. Now my pain was on display, for the world to see, and the feeling was startling. Folks would offer me a hand up, or prevent their stuffed canvas convention bags from whacking me. My horizontal life garnered me consideration of the good kind. It was weird.

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I had procured a note from a doctor saying I was being treated for a bad back, and when I went to check in for my blessed return, those Southwest Airline folks gushed, "Oh, you don't even need a note. We believe you! You should get early boarding and priority seating!" Which I did. Star treatment. Extra crackers. The entire can of 7-Up. If I had known that you only have to wear your pain on the outside, rather than hermetically sealed on the inside, like a chump, I would have done this years earlier. My bad back equals my good life. Pain on the outside can be processed; pain on the inside is just lame. Nobody gets it.

* * * * *

I had almost survived the trip. I didn't add pat- or matricide to my C.V. The conference was over; the magazines had been given away. As I sat on my westward-bound flight, as people boarded and eyed my front-of-the-plane seats in the no-assigned-seats Southwest Airline world, I said, "I threw out my back. If you don't mind, I'd like to use these three seats to lie down. I'm only pain-free when I lie down." They'd smile and nod, and say, "of course" and "feel better" and "bless her heart."

After changing planes in Denver, I was in the home stretch. I pre-boarded and set up shop in a trio of front seats. A middle-aged woman came up to me and said, "I'm sitting there," pointing past my aisle seat to the window. I replied, "I threw out my back and ..."

"I don't give a fuck about your back. I'm sitting there." She barged past me, whacked me square in the face with her purse. Luckily, the Percocet I had taken with a bagel in the Mile-High City had kicked in, and kept my smarting tears to a minimum. "And you better not fucking bother me," she added, spreading out and staking her claim.

I spent the next three hours leaning to the side at a forty-five degree angle, wincing during turbulence, and remembering my place. No understanding, no sympathy. I was returning to my life as a question mark, punctuated by an asshole.

I was back, I was home.

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"Exit, pursued by a bear."

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