

Lessons in Love

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Love is life. All, everything that I understand, I understand only because I love.
~Leo Tolstoy

It's the sweet aroma of a baking apple pie mingling with the pungent smokiness of the fireplace, while football plays on the television and trees release their orange and yellow leaves to a lazy descent to the frosted ground. It's the warmth as the sanctuary lights are dimmed and *a capella* voices sing "Silent Night;" the flame is passed as one candle tips to the next and the hot wax drips and burns. It's the butterflies in my stomach when I drive through the gates of this college after a three month summer with the anticipation of the shrieks and hugs and stories and laughter that are sure to follow. It's the smile you can't hide, the giggles rising up from your belly, the emotion in your throat when words can't express what you feel within. I feel it... it's when my heart inflates like a balloon or blossoms like a flower within my chest. It can't be held within four walls; it is not a building or a place; it can't be represented by the tangible. It is all these things—the feelings evoked by the indescribable blessing of love in all its forms.

It may be love from a family, a significant other, a church family, roommates, teachers, coworkers, or friends—everyone longs to give and receive love. It may even be the love felt for a community or place or the love we hold for our homeland. Yet all of us know the love of that specific person or people that have loved us even at our most unlovable, sacrificed for us, showed us patience and generosity, or dispensed to us jokes, hugs, and kisses—and through this virtue of love, taught us lessons about ourselves, about the nature of life, and about love.

I've found that these last semesters of my college career have spawned much contemplation about who I am, why I am this way, what my purpose in life is, what God's plan for my life holds, and what this next year may bring. In recent weeks I've pondered our

ultimate purpose in life as children of God: to glorify Him in all things—which trumps money, education, and career in importance. Even earthly love is secondary to God’s primary purpose for us. But I think that through these love relationships, God has given us an earthly taste—momentary samplings—of what heaven will be. The love of a family, relatives, or friends is representative on a smaller scale of the immeasurable love of the Father for us. Much of the time we are blind to the manifestations of His love which is written across the entire world, but we long for it—to see it and experience it—from the deepest part of ourselves, for what is a greater desire of the human heart than to love and be loved? And with these earthly gifts of love, God has given His children physical experiences that express His unconditional ultimate love.

This world is a fallen place, but I think that at times—in brief sweet moments—we can see the world as God originally created it to be. In moments when we genuinely care, cooperate, work together, live, love, laugh, and weep with our brothers and sisters, our parents, our friends, our lovers...we are glimpsing a bit of the Eden God wanted us to be able to experience. Within the sweetness of love, despite its shortcomings of quarrel, jealousy, impatience, and selfishness may be our only earthly glimpse of the sweetness of Paradise.

These stories are a tribute to love and a reflection of the lessons that love has taught me. They are a celebration of the love in my life—the love of my parents and my sister, my quirky Grammy, the lessons in love I’ve learned from my overweight and frightening Vietnam Veteran uncle—all people I love, who love me, and have unknowingly given me priceless instruction and appreciation for God’s gift of love. These teachers have revealed the beauty of earthly love to me, have shaped me, molded me, forgiven me, prayed for me, sacrificed for me... have loved me...and I have learned so much about life and love from

them. Through these reflections of love, I hope that readers may see a common bond and find within these stories a celebration of love in their own lives.

I have learned much about myself in this endeavor by reflecting on the loved ones who have helped shape me into the woman I am today. I hope I have honored them and expressed my thankfulness to them in these writings. I hope these stories honor and celebrate love and all goodness in this age that doesn't tend to see the value in these good things. I hope readers can learn a little bit about love in these stories, and remind them to cherish this precious gift, given to us by the Author of Love.

Love Letters in the Attic

The best thing to do at Grammy's house was to explore her expansive, musty attic. She would release me for hours among the boxes and trunks, cobwebs and shadows, free to make what discoveries I may. Under the dusty eaves I spent hours in solitude, unearthing forgotten treasures, relishing in discovery.

I tried on her furs and hats from the 40s and 50s, looked at old high school yearbooks, and examined ancient record albums. Mostly I delved into the chest that belonged to my grandpa when he served in the Navy. All I knew about my grandpa I knew from what Grammy and my mom had told me. He died before I was born, and I delighted in stories about the man I had never met. Grandpa was famous for his generosity and his booming, contagious laugh. He was witty, gentle, kind, and godly. My mom says I would have loved him. She says he would have laughed with me. She says his eyes twinkled. She says I have his sparkle in my eyes.

So I would sit in shafts of light, pulling the contents of his trunk out into the sun for better examination. A grass skirt from Hawaii. A boomerang from Australia. I read entries in his war journal from the South Pacific. He wrote of his thoughts, his fears, his daily life aboard the ship...his dreams for the future, not knowing that they would one day revolve around a girl named Annie. I savored the words on the page, memorizing the slant of the script, smelling the faded pages—getting to know the man who was my grandfather.

I loved to hear the story of the first time Grandpa saw Grammy. The way Grammy tells it, she says, "It was love at first sight... for your grandpa," and giggles. She was walking down the dirt road on the way to town, her red hair glowing copper in the sun. A car of college boys raced down the road, raising dust, and slowed just before they passed her.

And Grandpa was bewitched by the girl with the spirit in her step and the shine in her hair and he told his friends that one day he would marry that girl. It was the stuff of fairy tales, coming even more alive for me with the smells of half a century's dust and memory in that attic.

I found a new trunk one day, one that I had never seen before. It was far back under the eaves, black, with rusty hinges. It looked like it hadn't been opened—maybe even remembered—in decades. I pushed aside Grandpa's Navy trunk and pulled the mysterious chest out of the shadows and wiped a few clinging cobwebs from it.

I was on the brink of a new discovery. I loved the mystery of not knowing the trunk's contents, and with excitement I creaked open the lid. The trunk had surprisingly little inside for its size—only a small packet of discolored envelopes bound by old white string. I picked them up, reading a new script—not Grandpa's. They were addressed to Annie, my Grammy. I sifted through them, studying them. They were spotted with water, blurring the ink. They were postmarked first from California, then from North Carolina, and finally the last letters were marked from somewhere overseas, maybe France. I carefully pulled a letter from its envelope and read the first words on the page: “To my sweet Annie.”

I felt my cheeks flushing and my heart drop. My eyes scanned to the end of the page: “Love always, Gilbert.” These were love letters to Grammy... and they definitely weren't from Grandpa. I glanced toward the stairs, conscious that I was invading Grammy's privacy, but I couldn't make myself stop reading. I was enthralled and I was frightened. I hungrily read all of his letters, consuming a story I'd never known, along with a part of Grammy's past I didn't know and wasn't sure I wanted to.

Gilbert was in the Army and after training, was deployed to the European theatre. His words were intimate and poetic. He wrote of his desire to be back in the States with his Annie, his excitement for the future they would share, and the pride he felt in serving his country. *“Your face is the last thing I think about before I fall asleep at night and the first thing I see in the morning,* he wrote. *It is your face I see when I am scared and alone.”* I wondered if Grammy had written similarly impassioned letters back to this young soldier and if she was heartbroken when the letters stopped. The final letter was postmarked from France; its contents showed no warning that it would be the last.

Sometimes I think I know everything there is to know about those I love. Sometimes I forget that Grammy had a life for sixty years prior to my birth... that it could have been very much like mine, that she could have been very much like me. She was my age once, receiving love letters from a beautiful soldier boy who died somewhere in France.

I don't know why I waited months to ask my mom about Gilbert. Maybe I was scared that the image I had of my grandparents' beautiful romance would be shattered. Maybe I didn't want to lose the only memory I had of my grandpa—the memory I had created in Grammy's attic of the man I so longed to know.

“Mom, who's Gilbert? Grammy's Gilbert, I mean.”

I tell her what I'd read. “Did Grammy really love Grandpa?” I wait, partly craving the answer—my curiosity thirsting for more information about the young soldier whose lyrical love for Annie pulls at my heart, yet partly dreading her response—clinging to Grammy and Grandpa's fairy tale love.

“If you could have seen how Grammy looked at your Grandpa... if you could have seen them dancing in the kitchen... if you could have heard them laughing together, embracing life together... Yes, she loved my dad very much,” she says.

I’m not sure why I’m choking back tears and finding myself inside my mother’s hug. Now we are both crying. She’s crying because she misses her Daddy. Maybe I’m crying because their love was true. Maybe I’m crying because I’ll never meet the man who twirled Grammy around the kitchen and admired the shine in her hair. Maybe I’m crying for Grammy, who loved and lost, and found the courage to love and lose again. Maybe I’m crying for Gilbert, who lies buried unmarked on a French battlefield... whose only remaining mark on the world are love letters in the attic.

A Kiss from Uncle George

I've been afraid of my uncle for as long as I can remember. His size alone is foreboding—I'd wager he tips the scale at nearly four hundred pounds—and his demeanor is equally fearsome. At twenty-two he still makes me nervous, but when I was a forty-seven pound first grader, he was especially intimidating. Uncle George is a Vietnam veteran. He seldom discusses his experiences in the jungle, except when he references the Vietnamese as the “ugliest race of people God ever created.” His humor is crude; his manners absent; his sensitivity hardened.

Often have my sister and I contemplated the phenomenon that our mannerly and refined mother emerged from the same womb and pedigree as our rude and socially inept uncle. When we were little girls, we loved it when Mom told us stories about her childhood. We begged to hear our favorites again and again although we practically had them memorized. We gasped anew when she told us about running from the momma bear that pursued her out of the woods and every time she recounted her own surprise at finding a brand new bicycle in her room on the morning of her eighth birthday, we, too, squealed with surprise. The only story we remembered about Uncle George as a boy was fodder for our fear of him—the day when, during a game of hide-and-seek—he shot her in the rear with his BB gun. It didn't matter to us that it was he who grabbed Mom by the hand, pulling her behind his flying feet from the mother bear that had chased them, or that it was he who had used his paper route money to surprise her with the shiny red bike for her birthday. The BB gun story was enough to scare the dickens out of Bethany and me when we saw Uncle George twice a year, on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Visits to his house, though rare, always caused much anxiety for me. My fear of Uncle George necessitated that I stay as far away from him as possible, so I refused to hug him in greeting or in saying good-bye. Mom would gently urge me toward my huge uncle, saying, "Rachel, do you have a hug for Uncle George, too?" The heels of my feet would stubbornly dig into the floor, my eyes would grow wide, and I would lean back into my mother's protective body; I was not to be budged. I could muster out a "Bye, Uncle George" or a "Thank you, Uncle George." But a hug? It may have appeared rude to those not privy to my rapid heart rate and wild imagination, but I was not foolish enough to approach danger so casually.

As a little girl I granted my Aunt Christina and cousins many hugs and kisses at our gatherings. Uncle George, however, received no hugs from me until I was old enough to realize that my behavior could be perceived as impolite and my mother's patience with my fear had run thin. From then on, I indulged my mother with a short obligatory hug for Uncle George every time I saw him. These hugs were brief and indifferent; he wasn't interested in showing affection for me, and I wanted to get out of his reach as quickly as possible.

I was thirteen before I remember him conversing with me. Waiting in the buffet line at a family reunion, we had our first legitimate conversation. This conversation that could have potentially established a budding uncle/niece relationship resulted with his offer to shoot my cats.

Eventually, during high school, I stopped fearing him and instead became fascinated by him. He *did* have some good Vietnam stories that I had heard secondhand, from my mom and my grandma. While serving in the Army, he had helped a Vietnamese woman through labor in an abandoned burning village and once was depicted on the pages of *Life Magazine*,

wading shirtless through a rice paddy with a gun slung over his shoulder. I was intrigued by the pictures of the slim handsome man who was Uncle George before he morphed into the large fearsome man he became. I even began to look forward to seeing him on holidays, when I could spend several hours in an ongoing character study of my uncle.

In the middle of Christmas dinner one year, Uncle George wordlessly heaved himself from the food-laden table (clearly, a rarity, judging by his physique) and disappeared. Several minutes later, we were roused by numerous rounds of gunfire coming from directly below the dining room window. Apparently Uncle George felt that the middle of a holiday feast in his small suburban backyard was prime time to break in his new Christmas present, a new rifle that he, an avid hunter, had purchased for himself.

The next Thanksgiving, we were welcomed by the news that my cousin, Amy, had gotten engaged that morning. At the sudden ruckus of feminine squeals—my mom and Amy hugging and shrieking—Uncle George thundered down the stairs, around the corner, and into the family room, profanities ushering from his mouth. Judging by the screams, he must have expected a situation of urgency—noting Mom and Amy’s joyous shrieks and giggles, he turned away, perturbed. (Personally, I was surprised he hadn’t made his grand entrance with a gun or Bowie knife, having assumed someone was in danger). Muttering to himself, he retreated back upstairs, leaving knick-knacks on the mantle shaking even after his exit.

His wife says that Vietnam changed him. My mom claims that he was always crude and rough. After all, he did shoot her *before* he went overseas to the jungles and rice paddies to shoot the enemy. Uncle George embarrasses my mom, I know. She winces at his rude comments and humor and glares at my dad if she happens to catch him chuckling at one of Uncle George’s jokes.

During one visit, I cringed at a particularly grating off-color comment, typical of my uncle. I scanned the faces of my family to see if Uncle George's appalling behavior affected others as it did me. Instead, I found Aunt Christina's eyes on me, observing my perceptible dismay. She smiled at me slightly, apologetic for her husband's deficiency of etiquette.

When we were leaving that evening, after we exchanged hugs and good-byes, after the limp obligatory hug from Uncle George and the soft hug from Aunt Christina (she was an ample woman, herself), I overheard a conversation between my aunt and uncle. Laden with just-opened gifts, I pulled the door of the house shut behind me and headed for the car. Aunt Christina's high pitched voice reached me at the threshold of their home: "You really shouldn't act that way around those girls, George. You scare them. Around us, it's okay, we know you're a good man, but they don't know that. They don't know you love them. They are scared to death of you, *George*, and it's *no wonder*..."

I heard her stalk away, apparently to emphasize her point, so I shut the door quietly and hastened to the car. It was already toasty warm in the December chill; my dad had had it running for almost an hour to heat it for the trip home. I suspected he'd really been hiding in this quiet sanctuary for forty-five minutes, not to heat the car, but to flee from his eccentric in-laws and the zoo inside that are holidays with my mom's family. In the backseat on the way home, I whispered to my sister what I had heard.

Aunt Christina's words not forgotten, I saw Uncle George sooner than I had expected, several months later, at the baptism of his first granddaughter. As a freshman in college, I no longer needed an encouraging nudge from my mom to give Uncle George a hug. I gave him a quick hug, but as I was pulling away from him, I felt pressure on my cheek and heard a definite *smack*.

Had Uncle George just kissed me? “How do you like college, Rachel?” he asked. *Was Uncle George talking to me? Did Uncle George actually know my name?* For the first time in my memory, I heard my uncle call me by my name.

“Uncle George *kissed* my cheek!” I said to my sister when I joined her. Bethany was equally shocked and probably equally thankful that her cheek hadn’t been the object of Uncle George’s pucker.

My sister soon forgot my strange encounter with our uncle, but I pondered this historic moment even more. My initial surprise began to wear off to a budding feeling of some kind of affection for the man. The gesture that this crude, rough man had performed made me consider the possibility that perhaps he did love me. Even though he wasn’t involved in my life, even though he had once offered to kill my beloved cats, even though he had once shot a BB in Mom’s butt, and even though he scared the dickens out of me at times, he knew my name. Strangely enough, he might even love me. I guess that love can be displayed in all kinds of ways. That little kiss on the cheek from that big gruff man was probably the biggest gesture of love I would ever get from him... but it was enough. And I kind of hoped it would never happen again.

Lolly Dolly

In 1975, Fisher Price introduced a line of cloth dolls marketed as “baby’s first doll.” “Lolly Dolly” was washable, soft, and safe for infants. In 1984, just months old, I crawled into my sister’s room on a mission. I had seen Lolly Dolly among my sister’s belongings. I saw her; I wanted her; I had to have her. Though Lolly was part of Bethany’s collection of dolls and stuffed animals, her presence went unnoticed and she was unloved by my older sister.

My mom watched from the doorway as the heist was completed. She testifies that I crawled to the crib, pulled myself to my feet, and reached between the bars. I clamped my hand onto Lolly Dolly, never to let go for years. I crawled away, mission completed. Thus my love affair with Lolly began.

My new companion was a small pink gingham doll with a rattle inside. She wore a pink dress with a matching pink bonnet that revealed stray orange yarn hairs that peeked from beneath it. Her round eyes were blue. Her red stitched mouth was in a perpetual grin. We were inseparable: my infant fist was nearly always clenched around Lolly’s neck, dragging her behind me as I crawled about the house.

I was ruthless in my capture of Lolly and I was possessive of her once she was mine. I didn’t realize that she was a mass-produced doll, one of many Lolly *Dollies*. To me, she was one-of-a-kind and precious: an individual just as much as I was. She loved reading and snuggling just as much as I did. Even her favorite foods—grilled cheese sandwiches and hashbrowns—were my favorites as well.

Julie Wilson came to Sunday School only once with her own Fisher Price Lolly Dolly in tow. After I barreled toward her and reclaimed what I thought was my Lolly by wrenching

the doll free of Julie's fist, I ran to my mom with my plunder, relieved that I had retrieved Lolly and confused as to how Julie had pilfered her in the first place. Julie sobbed and Mrs. Wilson glared.

Mom rectified the situation. Julie got her Lolly back and Mom explained to me that many other little girls had Lolly Dollies exactly like mine. My Lolly was safe at home. The knowledge that my Lolly had hundreds, if not thousands, of identical twins in the world did not faze me. I knew that my Lolly was different. Her broken rattle and the ragged holes above her blue stitched eyes were testament to that. My Lolly was so treasured and loved that she had become real.

The next summer Lolly accompanied me on our family vacation to the Canadian Rockies. I was five years old and about to curl up for a nap in the backseat when I realized that Lolly was gone. Mom helped me search the backseat and floor of the car and tried to comfort my rising panic when I realized that she was not to be found. I remembered that I had taken Lolly into the gas station restroom where we had stopped a few hours earlier. I had seen her last on the bathroom sink. After a thorough search of the entire car, it was determined that there Lolly remained—two hundred eighty kilometers in the direction from which we had come.

It was a grievous situation. My parents couldn't bear the big quiet tears that rolled ceaselessly down my cheeks. The state of affairs warranted a parental conference outside of the car. Through my tear-blurred vision, I observed my mom and dad's discussion about what should be done. My mom thought that Lolly might have been confused as a rag, she was so tattered, and had been discarded with the trash. To journey back two hundred eighty kilometers, with the possibility of not even recovering my lost doll was a big risk. She

advised that we telephone the station and request that Lolly be mailed home to Pennsylvania, if she was even still there.

My parents returned to the car and I awaited Lolly's doom—my doom as well, for I loved Lolly with an unparalleled passion in my young life. I was sure by observing Mom's gestures that Lolly was lost to me forever. My heart was broken and my sobs began anew. And then I heard Daddy's voice.

“Peaches, it might be a lost cause. You have to know that we might not find Lolly, but we're gonna go back for her.”

I was filled with the hope that Lolly awaited me at the gas station as we retraced our journey two hundred eighty kilometers west. My hope was tempered by my parents' admonition that we might retrace our steps only to find that Lolly was gone. The two hundred eighty kilometers passed slowly, in silence, the silent tears returning occasionally when I considered anew the possibility of a life without Lolly.

The hours passed, the wheels rolled, and we arrived at the station. I raced inside with Mom on my heels. I was frantic with hope that we'd find my Lolly and with fear that we wouldn't. To the bathroom I ran: Lolly wasn't on the sink where I had left her. I felt the sobs rising again. But Mom quickly steered me toward a station attendant to whom I described Lolly after Mom disclosed my desperate situation.

The attendant smiled and reached below the counter. Her hand returned holding a small pink gingham doll. “Is this your doll?” she asked. Mom sighed with relief and I squealed with delight. I snatched Lolly back into my arms. “I found her when I was cleaning the bathroom and I could tell that this little doll is greatly loved. Well, I sure am glad she found her owner,” she said. “Thank you!” I squealed. Grasping Lolly tightly in my arms, I

joyfully skipped back to the car, where Daddy and Bethany were waiting. I vowed I would never leave her anywhere again. I was overjoyed. Lolly had been found.

Daddy refilled the gas tank and pointed the car eastward for the second time that day. I settled into the backseat, snuggled up with Lolly, and fell asleep for the nap I had tried to take hours ago. I slept while Daddy navigated again the thin ribbon of highway from which we had just come.

Since that day, when I vowed I'd never again be separated from Lolly, she has been relegated to a shelf where she sits with a few other treasured belongings. Every once in awhile when I'm at home, I take her down from her shelf. I eye her faded fabric, her ripped bonnet, and the ragged holes, evidence of the hours and love I invested in her. When I look at her now, I don't just see the doll I cherished as a little girl. Now she symbolizes something deeper—she represents a father's love for his daughter. Lolly was probably just a rag doll to him. But because he knew how much I loved Lolly and because of how much he loved me, the five hundred sixty kilometers we lost traveling, those years ago, to reclaim her, was of little import.

Lolly has faded in my esteem over the years, but the sacrifice Daddy made for me to rescue Lolly has not. His action essentially had been simple—he turned the car around and wasted gas and wasted time. But that simple gift was representative of the love Daddy had for me. A man who would waste a day driving through Canada because his daughter left a doll hours back down the highway at a gas station would surely love and support a daughter through the insecurities of her teenage years. And he would tell her she was beautiful when she felt awkward and ugly. He would see the potential in her when she couldn't see it in herself and love her when she didn't know how to love herself.

With those words, “Peaches, it might be a lost cause, but we’re gonna go back for her,” he had repaired all my hurt so many years ago. He can’t mend my world now and he can’t take away my pain like he did when I was five. But he put my world back together then and that’s what matters to me now. I have a father who supports my education, urges me to pursue my dreams, and has bought me almost every book I’ve ever owned. He still loves my mother after thirty years of marriage. He has been a model of humility and generosity. He taught me how to throw a football and has shown me that true strength is gentleness. He has taught me pride in my family name. In all these things I recognize that I am truly blessed.

Now when I look at Lolly’s faded face, I sometimes reflect on all the memories I have with her. All the books I read to her, the naps taken together, the grilled cheese sandwiches shared. But when I remember these things, the dearest memory I have, by far, is the day when I abandoned her on a sink at a gas station in Canada and learned my Daddy’s love for me.

October Night

He's talking to me as I'm resisting his embrace, staring over his shoulder, vacantly noticing the trees on the hill across campus shaking as October gusts whip through their leaves. He's telling me not to be scared, that I can trust him, that he loves me. The wind chases dark clouds across the horizon. Tears sting my eyes and I close them, not allowing them liberty to flow.

"You can trust me, babe. I love you," he says.

"I'm so scared," I whisper, hoping that I can hold back the sobs that threaten to prove testament to the fear that I feebly speak of, but am too proud to display.

Through the tears welling in my eyes, I can see the hurt mirrored in his—the pain I am causing him because I'm scared to trust. I'm too scared to release control and make myself vulnerable.

I can picture us standing here, as we are, a silhouette of two bodies against the backdrop of the turbulent sky. To me, it seems a dramatic moment that tastes of all the dreams and heartbreak of my life. It's a moment that everyone who has risked and loved has experienced, but somehow I feel that no one has ever felt the way I feel right now, ever, except for me. No other girl has struggled between the fear she clings to and the arms outstretched toward her. I've never felt this fear so keenly, but I've felt it before. That is what is so scary... I know what this feeling of fear results in, I know how it ends—my heart broken.

The person I believe myself to be is not the girl I see silhouetted against the horizon—fearful and scared. The girl who had dreamed of love and adventure since childhood and swore that whenever she found love, she'd risk anything to pursue it. That

she'd live passionately in pursuit of her dreams, and hopefully one day they would lead to her prince. I wonder if I am who I believe myself to be, or rather hope that I am, or whether it has been a lie to protect myself from disappointment and loneliness. Am I the girl I wish to be—who pursues life and adventures and love and beauty? Or am I the girl I see now, cowering with vulnerability and fear at the prospect of a great adventure.

I'm so selfish. I'm sure I'm not alone in these feelings. He's thinking perhaps much the same thing, or maybe even more intensely, since he's the one allowing himself to be vulnerable and I'm the one pulling away from him. The sting of the cold autumn air swirls around my face, my nose runs, and I sniffle. He's opening his arms to me, offering me warmth and protection. It looks so welcoming. But with this feeling, with the vision of his outstretched arms, I'm scared, because I've allowed myself to feel protected before... it stirs a memory within me that left behind bruises on my teenage heart...

He was the captain of our high school football team. I had watched the jersey bearing number 34 cross into the end zone again and again over several football seasons. I had cheered his touchdowns from the sidelines, waving my pom-poms in the air. But this time, this October night, he'd taken off his helmet, found me among the rest of the dance team, pointed at me and winked. Like that touchdown was for me. I knew he was cocky and I knew he was arrogant. But he thought I was special. I forgave him his faults because he told me I was beautiful and he told me he loved me.

He had chased me for a decade—since we were innocent first graders and he pursued my long blonde braid across the playground—across years, until that summer night when we were eighteen at Sara's graduation party. I'd scampered, shrieking, from his stealthy chase

around the pool, until he caught me, scooped me in his arms, and tossed me into the water in my pink sundress. Storming from the water in mock indignation, my dress soaked and my hair dripping, I ran after him through the orchard, following his taunting laugh. I ran, sopping wet, trying to match his gait, faster than mine. Finally, underneath the sweet scent of apple blossoms, he stopped, panting, letting me catch him.

“All right, you’re trying to get me soaked. Just hug me, I deserve it,” he said, the words smiled from his upturned mouth.

“I don’t really even want to anymore, I just wanted to see if I could catch you,” I laughed as I turned and walked away.

“No, come here...” and he grabbed my hand and under the branches heavy in bloom, pulled me to him. He smelled of cologne and I pressed my nose to his chest; intoxicated by the spicy heady scent, I hugged him back. His hand caressed my damp hair and I could feel his heart beating wildly. His hands on my shoulders, he shifted me back a step, looking at me. “*This is it,*” I thought, “*He does love me.*” I gazed back, waiting... And then, in an instant, he pulled away from me and walked back to the party. And I stood there in the sweet smell of an apple orchard in summer bloom, soaking wet, reeking of chlorine. Mascara smeared my cheek.

I watched him walk away, my childhood playmate, my friend, the person who held my heart. And in that moment, my feet moved to chase him again, but my heart held me back. He faded from view between the trees, and I knew in that moment that his vanishing back represented a good-bye that he was too weak to pronounce.

I felt a sudden grief as I stared at the vacant spot in the orchard where a moment ago he stood. He had said those precious words to me and I had allowed my heart to believe

them. I knew that wasn't how those words were meant to be used, but I'd believed him. Those words were promise and commitment, but I realized then, in the orchard, that when he had spoken them to me they were empty and false. Suddenly I was even gladder that I hadn't said those three words back to him—I felt that they were to be valued, and I was saving them. I knew, all of a sudden, and with wisdom I didn't know I had, that he wasn't strong enough to love me. And I knew that someday someone would be.

...And here he is. Someone who loves me. He makes me laugh. He tells me I'm beautiful when I have no make-up on. He calls me to say good night just to hear my voice. He has a quiet confidence, but his demeanor holds no arrogance. He takes me to bookstores and the theatre just because he knows I like them. He doesn't hold my heart callously, but with tenderness, and promises he will always treat me the way he'd want a guy to treat his sisters.

His arms are holding me tight. Yet, I'm pondering the blisters on my heart that have been awakened in my mind by this simple gesture: the memory of a hug when I was a teenager that I had thought was a beginning, but was really a good-bye. Now I'm resisting an embrace that holds within it warmth, friendship... and love.

"I'm just as scared as you are, babe. But we can be scared together, okay?" he says, and finally I pull my eyes away from the cloudy blue of the sky and look into the clear blue gaze of his eyes, his gaze that show he is pained by my pain.

I can see in his eyes that he loves me and the sadness he feels that he can't chase my fear away and assure me of his love. I rest my head against his chest, inhaling deeply into his shirt. He smells good. He smells clean like soap and like laundry detergent. He is not the boy

in the orchard with the heady cologne who broke my teenage heart. His words aren't empty. When I look at him, he smiles gently at me, the lopsided grin that I adore.

I let myself lean into his embrace. If I could freeze my life, I'd pick this moment: his arms around me, protecting me from the world, protecting me from myself. I don't know what will happen between us. I know that I may be heartbroken again. But I know that I have to take a risk because I've never felt this way before and I know how I feel inside his arms. And right now we are alone in this world, against the backdrop of the turbulent sky, and for a moment, the turbulence in my heart is stilled.

Rocky Mountain High

When I was in elementary school, the teachers and administration stressed the importance that students learn how to handle peer pressure. I was educated thoroughly in the art of cleverly and even humorously rebuffing strangers who would offer me drugs or alcohol. Videos, puppet shows, and pamphlets warned me that peer pressure would be the greatest obstacle I would face over the next ten years. Videos displayed teenagers engulfed in clouds of smoke, leering menacingly at unsuspecting innocent students. The blue puppet refused beer behind the gym and escaped the taunts of the jeering green puppets with finesse.

I left elementary school equipped to handle the compromising situations involving drugs and alcohol that I would inevitably face in middle school and high school. However, much to my surprise, I was never approached behind the gym by green puppets proffering beer. No strangers tried to lure me with the clichéd, “Come on, are you chicken? Just one puff,” that I was told to anticipate. I must admit that I was a little disappointed when no teenagers tempted me with tobacco so that I could test the witty comebacks suggested to me.

Finally, when I was nineteen, I was offered my first illegal drug. My sister and I had always been fascinated with the West—Laura Ingalls Wilder was our childhood hero, and we had cultivated a love for mountains, prairies, and cowboy lore. Bethany was twenty-one, and I had just finished my freshman year of college when we headed westward on Interstate 80 for Yellowstone National Park to work for three months. I was embarking on a summer with my best friend—my sister—into the wild freedom of the west, in the footsteps of Laura, and in the mountains that were the muse of John Denver. It was to be a summer of nature, wilderness, and freedom.

We weren't expecting to live in a dormitory with over a hundred other student employees of the Park who were actively pursuing a different kind of wildness and freedom than we naïve small-town girls were. Here, though my peer pressure training was ancient history, my elementary school teachers were finally right—I would get offered drugs and alcohol by teenagers and strangers alike.

After long days at work, Bethany and I giggled and chattered in our bunks about our daily adventures before we fell asleep. We soon came to realize that our greatest danger in the Park would not be the volcanic eruptions of the geysers, paintpots, and mudpots, nor the various wildlife species of which we were warned. We determined that the greatest danger to us was our fellow employees—the human species. We created nicknames that characterized our suspicious coworkers who came to work intoxicated, offered us drugs, and reported their carnal encounters daily in the employee dining room: Mountain Man, Georgia Molly, and Richard Rotty-Teeth. At night, we swapped tales with each other about these strange characters with lifestyles at odds with ours.

My position as a busser in the Grant Village Dining Room was neither glamorous nor lucrative. But when I bussed for Sebastien, a French Canadian Casanova, I knew I would make more than the standard fifteen percent of waiters' tips. Sebastien usually tipped me a generous twenty-five percent of his tips, as compared to Georgia Molly, who almost always came to work under the influence and who almost always forgot to tip me out.

One night, as I turned away with the tips that Sebastien had just given me, he called me back and beckoned me closer.

“That last table we had,” he said quietly, “didn't have any left-over cash, so they tipped me with some 'shrooms instead. Do you want fifteen percent of them too?”

He laughed. I stared at him. But he was serious. *What the heck are 'shrooms?* I thought to myself. No puppet show I had ever seen depicted a blue puppet that had been offered 'shrooms, which, after racking my brain, suddenly occurred to me, must mean *mushrooms*. "No thanks, I don't like mushrooms," I told him and walked away with my cash.

That night I laughed and told Bethany that someone had left mushrooms as a tip for Sebastien. "Isn't that funny? Maybe next time he'll get a tip in broccoli or Doritos."

She was silent for a moment and then giggled, "Rae, I don't think he's gonna get a tip in broccoli or Doritos... Do you know why they gave him mushrooms? You can get high from them. You can't get high from Doritos."

She rolled over and nestled into her covers. "How do *you* know this and I don't?" I persisted. "How do they work? Do you smoke them? Smush them up and snort them? Inject them? Eat them?" Later, I realized that Sebastien continued to ask me to do drugs with him all summer because when I said that I "didn't like them," I thought he meant portabellas and shitakes, but he thought that 'shrooms just weren't my drug of choice.

Schemes were invented to ensure our protection. Bethany and I laughingly thought of ways to defend ourselves if a wayward waiter or cook in the restaurant cornered us with unwanted advances. Fortunately for us, and lucky for any potential wayward waiters or cooks, our plans of dousing eyes with Tabasco sauce or emptying the contents of the nearest fire extinguisher on predators were not needed. We continued to turn down all offers of illegal drugs and questionable activities non-violently.

At the end of the workweeks that were consumed with long double shifts and unusual interactions with our coworkers, we sought solace on the weekends camping in the mountains and with each other. The peacefulness of the terrain was mirrored in the peaceful

camaraderie we had as sisters. Every Sunday night, we reluctantly packed up our tent, rolled up our sleeping bags, and returned to the Grant Village Dining Room for another long grueling week of work with our crazy coworkers.

Monday mornings would consistently reveal that several employees had been fired over the weekend—finally Georgia Molly had come to work intoxicated one time too many—and that new employees had been hired.

Eating dessert one night in the employee cafeteria, Bethany and I were approached by two new employees, Goatee Jared and Hairy Chest David. Seeing them eyeing us, their prey, I mumbled to Bethany, “Watch out. Gross boy alert.”

“Hey girls,” Goatee Jared practically purred. I rolled my eyes. Should I just tell him we’re not their kind of girls right now, and save him the breath? No, this might be funny... After my encounters with Sebastien and his ‘shrooms and Richard Rotty-Teeth scaring me in the kitchen cellar earlier that day, I was prepared. I was tired: I’d been on my feet for ten hours with a five minute lunch break, and I’d had to pick up other bussers’ slack all day. I was ready for any advance they presented.

“Have you guys tried Huckleberry?” he continued.

I could barely contain my snickers. Huckleberries essentially are the “blueberry” of the Rocky Mountain region and are incorporated into various foods and products in the Western states. In the restaurant we served them in sauces, ice creams, desserts, and salads. I’d purchased huckleberry lotion and huckleberry chapstick. Have we tried huckleberry? How *embarrassing*.

“Um, huckleberry what? Ice cream? Or do you mean chapstick? Huckleberry chicken? Or huckleberry pie? Yes, we’ve tried lots of huckleberry things, what do you mean, ‘Have we tried huckleberry?’?”

I thought that my retort would help them get the hint, and allow them to bow away gracefully, egos in tact. But no, they were apparently already doped up on something, because the hairy duo continued.

“Uh, no. Huckleberry Hot Springs. We just wanted to know if you guys wanted to go there with us tonight... soak in the springs, maybe go skinny-dipping, drink a little, maybe smoke a bowl...”

Bethany sneaked a peek at me and I could tell she was amused. We had always assumed that we sent off a “good-girl vibe” that discouraged these kinds of advances, but apparently they hadn’t picked up on the wavelength that we don’t drink, smoke, *or* swim naked.

“No, we don’t. I’m not of legal age to consume alcohol and I don’t know what a ‘bowl’ is, but I assume it’s illegal and we don’t smoke *anything*. So... no,” I concluded.

They finally got the point and muttered something like, “All right, that’s cool.” I stopped them as they walked away, “Hey guys, where is that hot spring, anyway?”

We hiked to the hot spring ourselves, the next night, without alcohol or a “bowl.” After approaching it warily and determining that our hairy suitors were not inebriated and soaking in its warm waters, we plunged in—wearing our swimsuits. Leaning back against the grassy bank, we relaxed in the steamy waters. The silence between us was comfortable—it was the silence between sisters that speaks more than words. The silence that means “there’s no one I’d rather be here sharing this moment with.”

The summer passed quickly. Our last weekend at Yellowstone before heading east arrived. Bethany and I loved this wilderness, but we were ready to go home to Pennsylvania. We didn't want to leave this wild Wyoming beauty, but we were anxious to return to our sleepy little town where no one ever asked us to eat or snort or smoke 'shrooms, (or however you get high from them—I never figured that out), and where we felt accepted and comfortable with our family, our church, and our little community.

That last weekend we camped at Flagg Ranch, between Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks in a sparsely populated free camping area. Our tent pitched, we explored our campsite. I followed a deer path downhill and was surprised to find the Snake River meandering past our campsite. I walked to the water's edge and shouted for Bethany to join me. "Let's go skinny dipping!" I cried, expecting that my proposal would be rejected immediately. I was poised to offer my logic—Hairy Chest David and Goatee Jared were nowhere near, and while we may not be wild like our coworkers—we can still be crazy sometimes. "Anyway," I continued, "The only living things that will possibly see us naked are buffalo or moose! We won't even look at each other." I was surprised when Bethany said, "Okay... but we better get our towels first."

We clambered back up the hillside to grab them, took a furtive glance around, and rushed back down the trail, giggling. We turned our backs to each other, disrobed, and on the count of three plunged shrieking into the freezing rapids of the Snake River. Gasping for air, I realized that I hadn't expected the current to be so strong, and quickly began to be propelled around the bend of the river.

Visions flashed through my head: they'd find my dead body next week, washed up on the bank, half gnawed by a hungry wolf... or there could be a grizzly bear fishing just around the corner... or worse, a fisherman fishing, who could spot me in the nude!

“Bethie!” I gurgle-screamed, “Help! Save me!”

I thought again. I didn't want her to see me naked either.

“Wait, no! Don't help me!”

I glanced back to shore; Bethany was already wrapped in her towel, standing on the sand, shivering. I swam with all my strength against the current until I grabbed weeds along the edge and anchored myself once more to firm ground, free from the danger of the swirling, freezing water.

“Don't look at me! I'm coming out! Toss my towel over here. And don't look at me!”

I wrapped myself and kneeled next to her in the sand. Wrapped in our towels, shivering, we laughed and laughed and laughed. Naturally, our attempt at being wild had gone awry. I swore to her I thought I had been about to drown. I looked over at Bethany and her teeth chattered in between her giggles.

What a sweet memory, these fits of hearty giggling at the edge of a thirty-eight degree river in Wyoming with my sister. The moment was rich—with the beauty of the mountains that served as the backdrop to our naked dip and the grasses by the river that rustled softly in the August breeze—and with the beauty of this sisterhood. I cherished this solitude and the sweet presence of my sister. We might have been the only humans for miles. And the quiet was just the way I liked it. I thought that this was probably what John Denver meant in his anthem “Rocky Mountain High”—it was moments like this one: swimming naked in a

freezing mountain river, our sleeping bags laid out in our tent above us, with logs stacked nearby to light our night and roast our marshmallows.

When I think of our summer in Wyoming, it is this day that I treasure most—our Rocky Mountain High—found without the benefit of illegal substances and within the most treasured relationship of my life. Our coworkers may feel that they experienced the ultimate “Rocky Mountain High” with their “bowls, ‘shrooms, and such, but I know that I captured it fully, there, naked on the banks of the Snake River with Bethany.

Thirty-Six Days in Paris

“*Bon matin, Mademoiselle!*” “*Bon soir, Mademoiselle!*” The voices of friendly French men address me as I explore their city. I love this word—*Mademoiselle*. It is an alluring term for a single young woman. As opposed to the American titles “miss” or “young lady,” *Mademoiselle* suits me and I am greeted with it everywhere I go. I’m *Mademoiselle* to the construction workers on the street, *Mademoiselle* to the clerks in stores, and *Mademoiselle* to the commuters I sit next to on the metro. I feel welcomed into this city by the very people about whom I was warned are wary of Americans. “*Excusez-moi, Mademoiselle.*” “*Merci, Mademoiselle,*” I hear as I encounter Parisians on my daily adventures. *Mademoiselle*. It’s a beautiful word. Paris. It’s a beautiful city.

Paris is the City of Light—the most romantic city in the world. Or so she is heralded in novels and tour books. I had been captivated by the city long before I set myself free on her streets to explore; finally here, I haven’t expected the power of the magic, beauty, and romance of the city and her people. I’m enchanted by the beauty of the language spoken here. I’m entranced by the mesmerizing cadence and the poetic vocabulary of French. I eavesdrop often, into dialogues I can’t comprehend—wondering what story is being told and what gossip I could be learning. Around and about me, the magnificence of the architecture is overwhelming—columns, spires, gilded bridges, and myriad statues. Pleasant aromas waft from bakeries along narrow streets. They offer enticing delicacies, equally appreciated by the native Parisian as well as the tourist with a penchant for sweetness.

When I see Notre-Dame Cathedral for the first time, my eyes fill with tears. I stand before the most famous cathedral in the world—on the same weathered stones that thousands of worshipers and thousands of tourists before me had also stood. The massive oak doors

guard the cold sanctuary within from which organ music emanates into the warm summer evening. The bells toll eight o'clock; across the city I hear the echoes of bells pealing from the towers of other cathedrals, chapels, and churches. It is humbling to stand on these stones that offer such rich history. History that represents the stories of the Christian faith and of France; history of revolutions, martyrdoms, kingdoms, and democracies. And humbling to find that my dream has been realized: I'm a student in Paris and I'm in love... with the lights, the magic, and the people of this city.

In front of Notre-Dame I become acquainted with another girl from our small group of students attending the American University of Paris, and in her I find a kindred spirit. Together, Martha and I traipse the boulevards and avenues of Paris for the next five weeks. We make memories eating chocolate, walking along the Seine, and eluding French men. We engage daily in what we term "cultural experiences"—opportunities to taste the French life and Parisian flavor.

These two words become our mantra: "cultural experience." Should we consume yet another pastry from our favorite *patisserie* today? The answer of course, was that to refuse ourselves the flaky croissants filled with oozing chocolate would be to deny ourselves an educating and rewarding cultural experience. By the same token, we treat ourselves to tasty frozen chocolate drinks at *La Maison du Chocolat*, for twelve euros each; we buy perfume smelling of the lavender grown in the South of France on the Champs-Élysées; we sit while a French man sans beret and mustache paints our portraits in artsy Montmartre; we even attend an evening show at the raunchy Moulin Rouge. The latter, we decide, was one cultural experience we would have preferred not to experience, and from thereafter stuck to pastries, shopping, museums, and the opera.

Thirty-six days I spend in Paris—thirty-six days in which I’m drunk with the grandeur of this place and the diversity of its citizens. Daily, I’m moved by my interactions with her people. Though I cannot communicate effectively with most of the people I encounter, I discover that the human connection we share speaks louder than any words. Kindness and courtesy, smiles and laughter are universal.

A man in the line at a café initiates a conversation with me in French, as he said, to help me improve my “*très mal Français*.” The young man serving me coffee thanks me for ordering in French, as most Americans, he says, refuse to attempt French and order in English, expecting him to understand. A young mother of twins is stranded at the bottom of a flight of stairs in the subway. After I help her carry her stroller to the top, we stand and smile at each other, she venturing to express her thanks in my language as I try to remember how to say “You’re welcome. Have a good day,” in hers.

I sit along the stone wall by the Seine and munch a baguette with Martha, our legs dangling over the muddied water while we recollect the adventures of our day. I think I will never want to leave this city and its people who value the unhurried life, savor good wine and good food, and have an acute appreciation for beauty. I think I can move here after I graduate and become fluent in French. Enjoy a thirty-five hour work week and drink wine in the evenings. I think I may never return to the United States; I think that it’s true love.

Sometime during the first week of July, I realize I will not be watching a fireworks display over the lake at home for the Fourth of July. I won’t be eating hot dogs with my family at a barbecue. Instead, I realize I will be celebrating my nation’s independence in a foreign country that doesn’t acknowledge this day, and by all reports, doesn’t even like America. Suddenly I feel alone and distant from that which I hold dear. Though I am

completely enchanted by this city, I find I miss my home—not just my family’s farmhouse in Pennsylvania, but America. My previous speculations of spending the rest of my life here are washed away by my tears of longing for home.

In honor of our nation’s birthday, and to alleviate our homesickness, Martha and I decide to celebrate in as American a way as we can contrive—by eating hamburgers, French fries, and milkshakes at the Hard Rock Café Paris. Entering, I feel as if I have been transported back to the US. The café captures a distinctly American atmosphere. The sights, sounds, smells, and tastes are American. It is loud and bustling and it feels like home. The walls are covered with American pop culture paraphernalia and television screens showing American music videos: ACDC, Bon Jovi, a medley from the musical *Grease*.

A quick perusal of the room determines that we are in the sole company of Americans. We are a motley tribe of a hundred countrymen, congregating far from our homeland to celebrate this most American of holidays. Martha and I sip our milkshakes, barely containing our bolstering sense of patriotism. Joan Jett’s anthem “I Love Rock ‘n’ Roll” explodes from the sound system and the bass shakes our glasses. The cheers, singing, bright eyes, and smiles are testament to the epidemic of American nationalism that infects the room. A tattooed woman near us shimmies at her table. I look at Martha and we giggle. By the final chorus, nearly everyone is singing and dancing in their seats. Even Martha and I join our slightly intoxicated fellow patrons by swaying to the music.

We are interrupted by the boys sitting at the table next to us, “You guys are Americans, right?” We tell them we’re both from Pennsylvania. They are from California and are celebrating their college graduation with a European backpacking trip.

They ask if they can join us. We help them pull their table closer to ours. Apparently, Jason and Doug also found themselves homesick for the US on the Fourth of July and sought refuge in the Hard Rock Café. “It’s so nice to hear your American voices,” Jason says.

“It’s just nice to actually understand what someone is saying,” Doug laughs.

Martha and I agree. It’s nice to be able to relax and communicate effectively, instead of exhausting ourselves in the attempt.

Over the next hour we converse and share stories. We are four countrymen united overseas. Never would I have met these surfer boys, or even Martha, in the United States. Yet, here we are, disconnected from our country, and connected to each other. It’s a Fourth of July I will always remember. In this camaraderie of countrymen—two California boys and two Pennsylvania girls—I find a new love for America. The holiday means more to me than it has ever meant before, because we are here in Paris, making each other feel at home, in the spirit of our homeland. We don’t tell them our last names, we don’t exchange contact information; we will never see or hear from them again, but we have shared a special moment in each other’s company.

I’m ready to go home. For the past five weeks, I’ve thrilled in the discovery of the romance and beauty that I’ve found here. The palaces of Paris are magnificent and the pastries are mouthwatering, but I find that they really can’t surpass the gentle beauty of the rolling hills of Pennsylvania Amish country or the homey scent of my mom’s apple pie baking in the oven in our little blue-shuttered farmhouse. For all the hectic lifestyles, for all the gas stations and fast food joints and their impatient customers, I love America. My brief sojourn was sweet. Paris will forever hold a special place in my heart, but America will always be my home.

The customs inspector asks me the routine questions as I wait to enter the Philadelphia airport and officially re-enter America. He examines my passport and ticket while he questions me.

“How long have you been outside the country?”

“Five weeks,” I reply. I’m antsy to cross that line and officially be home.

“What was the purpose of your trip?”

“I was studying at the American University in Paris.”

He pauses and looks at me. “What were you studying?” he asks.

“Photography,” I respond.

“Do you have anything to claim before you re-enter the country?”

“No.” I had eaten my smuggled pastries in-flight.

“Just rolls and rolls of film, huh?” He grins at me. I smile back. He hands me my passport and says, “Welcome home.”

Road Trips, Brownies, and Friendship

My friend extends the Tupperware container of fudge brownies from the backseat to my position behind the wheel. She practically pleads with me to eat another, so that she too can have one more brownie.

“I already ate one. I don’t want another one right now. If you want another brownie... just eat another brownie,” I retort, losing patience with my friend who constantly asks what I’m eating so that she can decide to eat the same amount or less than I.

Impatiently, I watch the mile markers tick by on the interstate. I’m anxious to return to Canton and we’re still hours away in Indiana. I think about the preparations we made for this trip. I remember the months of planning and anticipation, our excited phone calls and daydreams. I remember us squealing with excitement as we packed up my little blue Chevrolet for the trip just a few days ago. We had frolicked by the car, the three of us entangled in one big hug. I was barely able to contain my delight at the prospect of a road trip with two of my best friends.

Just two nights ago we first saw its lights. We drove into the skyline of Chicago, speeding around the highway’s curves with the flow of weekend traffic. Becca stuck her head out of the open sunroof and sang off-key to the Shania Twain song blaring from the radio as the bass vibrated the windows and the coins rattled in the ash tray. Cold October air blasted into the cab when Becca dropped back into her seat. We were exhilarated to be here and to be together. I tasted our excitement and the security we felt in our friendship.

These girls are like sisters to me. For months we have encouraged each other, prayed together, roused ourselves from bed early on Friday mornings for our Panera Breakfast Club, and had sleepovers in each other’s dorm rooms. We have lifted each other up, cried together,

celebrated with each other, and laughed and dreamed together. I don't understand what has happened on this road trip. I had envisioned this weekend to include spasms of belly-aching laughter, singing our lungs out to Billy Joel classics, divulging secrets, and becoming three even more inseparable friends.

After the adrenaline subsided from that initial entrance into the city, the road trip did not live up to my idealistic daydreams. Shania had been rejected for Becca and Jenny's music of preference. They were lovers of mellow music and preferred the arrhythmic beats of husky cigarette-voiced coffee-shop singers to my upbeat favorites. Aside from their unfavorable music tastes, I soon learned that my friends hogged the covers at night, were impulsive shoppers—I think we went into every boutique on Michigan Avenue—and were afraid to drive in the rain, in the dark, or in heavy traffic, which pretty much meant that I became their chauffeur for the weekend.

“Are you going to eat three slices of pizza?” they ask me, practically in unison, at the famed Giordano's pizza shop on Cicero Avenue, while our deep dish Chicago-style pizza tantalizes from the center of our table.

They are still recovering from the psychological damage of eating disorders. My friends have become obsessed with weighing their own food consumption against mine. As the only road-tripper who has never struggled with an eating disorder, they make sure they consistently eat less or equivalent to my portions. I've listened to their worries for months, cried with them about the leftover wounds of their diseases, but I can't be their dietician. I'm sick of hearing about food—it's making me question whether I really should eat another slice of pizza myself. And I think, isn't there more to do in this city but shop and eat?

Exiting the pizza place (it turned out that we all ate three slices), Becca and Jenny spot a Gap across the street. Seeing the trajectory of their gaze, I quickly try to distract them, “Hey, let’s get a picture by the statue!” After the flash, they announce that although they’ve nearly maxed out their credit cards, it won’t hurt to check out the new winter collection.

I find a bench inside and people-watch and fantasize about being back on campus.

Sunday morning, after church, they insist we go out to eat. I’m itching to put the car in drive and be in eastern Ohio before dark. We say good-bye to the friend we were visiting, but still haven’t left, because “I need to get some souvenirs that I forgot to get yesterday,” Jenny says. I’m tired of reminding them that it’s a seven hour trip home. Before we left Canton, the only thing I requested was that we leave early on Sunday. The *only* thing. I’ve tagged along with these girls to store after store, helped them carry their shopping bags, informed them of every piece of food I was ingesting, and the only thing I wanted was to get home before dark.

Five hours later, we are only in Indiana. Aside from the tub of brownies our Chicago friend had bestowed on us for car food, we had stopped at a Starbucks and a Dairy Queen so far, and surprisingly, they had eaten at both, though I had not. They had conveniently been asleep at every toll along the way, and when they awake, Jenny exclaims, “Let’s put in my new CD!” Naturally, the new CD is husky-cigarette-voiced-put-the-driver-to-sleep girl. I’m just getting ready to suggest someone else take the wheel for awhile, when raindrops begin to hit the windshield and the traffic picks up.

I am tired, cranky, and sick of being questioned about every item of food I’m planning on eating for the remainder of the trip. I’m tired of driving, tired of mellow music

that makes me drowsy, tired of having to stop at every rest-stop where coffee or ice cream is served.

Jenny and Becca are reading a magazine and taking a personality quiz while I'm leaning against the wheel, peering out the windshield, trying to make out the white lines on the road through the driving rain, while coffee-shop music hums out of the back speakers.

"Well, the results say that I am impulsive and irrational," Jenny concludes.

"Yeah, that sounds like me too," says Becca. "Do you want to do the quiz, Rachel?"

I press the eject button on the CD player, remove husky-voice-girl, insert a good mix of oldies and eighties, and say, "I don't need to take the quiz. I already know that I'm non-impulsive and rational, and I don't like this CD. Unless you want me to fall asleep while I'm driving in this rainstorm, we're gonna listen to what I want to listen to. And unless someone really has to go to the bathroom, we are not stopping until we get back to school—not even for Blizzards or Frappuccinos."

My friends stop talking. My outburst has apparently stunned them into silence. My unexpected one-man mutiny has plucked the power from my dear friends who have so recently transformed into control freaks. I've finally asserted myself—we're gonna do things my way for the rest of the way back to school. The rain stops. The only sound is the CD cranking out The Beach Boys and Journey. We drive the last couple hours without speaking. I switch the CD to Tim McGraw and then The Supremes.

We pull onto campus and I silently rejoice. We're home. I remember the Hemingway quotation that I've recently read: *Never travel with anyone you don't love*. I love these girls, but I sure don't ever want to travel with them again. I still love them like sisters and I have a nagging worry in the back of my mind that this trip has damaged our friendship.

Almost a week goes by and I don't see or hear from Jenny or Becca. On Thursday night, I check my messages and hear Becca's voice: "Panera breakfast tomorrow morning—6:15 sharp! Meet ya in the lounge and bring your pictures from Chicago!"

The next morning, blinking the sleep from our eyes, we share stories and display pictures over bagels and coffee.

"Ya know that funny painting we saw in the art museum? I didn't even know that was a nude woman!"

"I'm so glad that cop didn't see us speeding, we so should have gotten a ticket in Indiana!"

It's as if we hadn't had any tension on our long weekend last week. Our memories of the weekend had been filtered through a sieve: the sour gone, we only savored the sweet. Though it went unspoken, I know we have forgiven each other. I love them despite their quirks and faults; they also love me in spite of mine. Perhaps it is only in friendships like these that we can share a quiet understanding and an unspoken forgiveness that allows us to pick up where we left off: three inseparable friends, laughing, crying, and sharing dreams together.

Blessed by Love

Mrs. Dobish picked up my sister and me from elementary school the first day we went back after the accident. We climbed into her mini-van. My waist-length blonde hair was falling out of the haphazard ponytail my dad had attempted that morning before school. Bethany's hair was in similar disarray.

She saw our up-dos and our miss-matched outfits. "I'll be over in the mornings to help you get ready, girls," she said. After that, every morning until my mom came home from the hospital she was there, with clips and curlers, and counsel on what shirts matched our skirts and scrunchies.

I couldn't remember much from the last few days and even less from last Thursday night. But what I remembered was so vivid, I wished I could forget. I remembered playing hide-and-seek with Leanne, our babysitter. Daddy was on a business trip and Mom was at Card Club with her friends. Bethany and I had crawled into my bed together and giggled and chattered for awhile before we fell asleep. When our parents were gone, Bethany and I slept together so that we could stay up past our bedtime, and hope that the babysitter didn't know we were still wide awake and giggling.

I awakened in the night to go to the bathroom. On the way I peered into the living room. Instead of finding Leanne reading magazines, where she had been when we went to bed, my parents' friend, Mrs. Miller, was asleep on the couch. The clock showed that it was a little after 2:00, and I knew that my mom always got home from Card Club around 11:30. She couldn't be home, because she always came in to my bedroom to kiss our foreheads when she returned. I knew my forehead hadn't been kissed in my sleep. And Mrs. Miller was here now, in the middle of the night, instead of Leanne.

Fighting waves of panic, I also felt a rush of adrenaline. I was sneaking around in the middle of the night and Mrs. Miller didn't even know. Finding the phone book in the drawer in the kitchen, I crept back into my parents' bedroom. Obviously, my mom just got caught up talking at Card Club, and didn't even realize it was 2:00 in the morning. I punched in the numbers I found—946-2036—not even considering the fact that I was making a phone call at 2:30 in the morning. As I dialed, it hit me. Something was wrong. I felt it churning in the pit of my stomach. Mom was always home on time. She always kissed me on the forehead when she got back. Something was wrong. Something's wrong, something's wrong, I felt over and over. By the time Mr. Cuff answered the phone, I could barely find the words. I already knew something was so wrong.

“Hi... this is Rachel Huey. Can I talk to my mom, please?” I said when I hear Mr. Cuff.

His voice cracked. “Rachel...” he paused and I heard the lump in his throat. “There's been an accident...”

I don't remember if I hung up the receiver. I only remembered screaming and screaming. Then I found that my bare feet carried me down the hall, past my room, to the living room where my screams roused Mrs. Miller. Bethany was on my heels and then Mrs. Miller held us in her arms. I hugged her and just screamed and screamed.

Daddy might have come home a few minutes or a few hours later. I don't remember how much time passed or how the time passed. He gathered Bethany and me in his arms and told us that a man had been driving drunk and hit Mom in a hit-and-run accident. Mom was in intensive care. I don't know if he held us all night or if we went back to bed at some point, but somehow, however the morning arrived, the sun still rose.

We went to the ICU that day. The strange hospital smell made the bile rise in my throat and my stomach did flip-flops. I stood in the doorway of my mom's room and was scared. And ashamed that I was scared. But I didn't recognize my mom, with her battered face, bruises, scratches, and stitches. And I was so scared. I heard Mom's voice feebly calling us to her. We stood by her bed and she held out her hand to us, reaching for her daughters, even though she couldn't open her eyes to see us and even though her hold on life was so fragile. She held our hands and comforted us. She called us by name and told us she loved us. Desperately, I clung to her hand, bawling, not wanting to let go, not knowing if it would be the last time she'd ever hold me, or the last time I would ever hear her voice—my favorite voice, the most familiar voice in the whole world—saying my name, saying “I love you.”

That night, Daddy hugged us and we all held onto each other in a long embrace. We prayed for Mom together. Daddy told us that it was important that we prayed for the man who had done this to her, as well.

“Jesus has forgiven us, it's important that we also forgive this man,” I heard Daddy say through my sobs.

I listened as my Daddy and Bethany prayed for Mom and then for this man. And I couldn't do it. I didn't want to pray for someone so awful, so cruel. Someone who was to blame if Mom died—someone who didn't care if he stole the life of an eight year old girl's mom. This man didn't deserve my prayers and I wouldn't do it. “You don't have to this time Rachel, but soon you need to find it in your heart. We don't have the option not to,” Daddy said.

While Mom was in the hospital, and for months after she came home, every day at dinner time someone from our church or community brought us a meal. Even our neighbors from the rowdy fraternity house held a pig roast in our honor. For months, my sister and I, finicky eaters both, picked through the mushrooms, tomatoes, and green beans in the dishes we received. We loved Mrs. McCoy, our new pastor's wife, for showing up on our doorstep with pizza and a smile. And we were thankful for people like Mrs. Dobish, who saw needs—in her case, our messy hair—and met them.

I think I was too young to recognize how special this was, how much a family my little town and church congregation were. Now I know that this isn't typical, that our town, our friends are special. But I knew at the time that I felt loved. And I knew that people were praying for Mom. And that people were praying for the driver who had hit her. And I knew that while I couldn't pray for him and I didn't want to forgive him yet, that there were people who were praying for him. And that everything would be okay, because we had so many people gathered around us, loving us.

Eventually I was able to pray for him. I might have just been going through the motions, but I forgave him and even prayed for him the next time Daddy asked me to. I didn't feel anger toward him anymore. Actually, I didn't even think about him. I just wanted Mom to get better, to come home to us, to be okay.

Mom stayed in the hospital for about a month. Aside from head trauma, a broken nose, and severe lacerations, she had a broken femur that was mended with an eighteen inch stainless steel plate. Now it's been more than ten years, and we still can see some of the marks of the accident. She walks with a limp and she sets off metal detectors in airports every time we fly. Because of her head trauma, she still can't remember certain words—

usually just *dustpan* and *dishwasher*. When she fumbles for a word, we laugh and automatically ask, “*dustpan* or *dishwasher*?”

The other day I got a package in the mail from my mom. She sent me newspaper clippings of engagement announcements of two of my high school friends and an obituary. The man who had nearly taken my mom from us thirteen years ago had died.

I called my mom. “I hope he found the Lord,” she said. I know she means it. “Me too,” I said, and I knew I meant it. The thought of praying for this man years ago had made me angry. Now, I feel only sadness for the pain that he caused so many and the joy that he had been missing. I’m so thankful that I still have my mom today. I know that I am greatly blessed. It was in that time of fear and sadness that I knew how much we are loved. And it was a time that I learned a lot about love. Not just the love of a beautiful community that held its arms tight around those who were hurting. Not just the love of my little family who, to me, are my haven from the sadness and hurt of the world. But the love, the forgiveness we have from the cross that teaches us to love, and to forgive, even if it takes awhile. These lessons in love I will have forever, and I know I will be blanketed in this love until I join the One who forgives me, too.