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Your Word Against Mine

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Abstract

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Each essay alludes to notions of time, memory, and/or growth. They all hold various connections to family, and examine how families can impact one's development and perception of the world. The collection also investigates how memories shift as time goes on – for better or for worse – and how we are not solely responsible for what we remember. Rather, much of our memory is shaped by other people, as well as by natural occurrences. Overall, the collection addresses the importance of society and other people in influencing how we grow up as individuals.

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Chapter Two

I don't always understand the reasons people are mean. I can barely explain the moments when I fall victim to such temperaments, unable to pinpoint the cause even after minutes and minutes of scrutiny. I'll be talking with a friend, or with my mother, and suddenly the mood just sweeps over me, and I want to say something nasty. I'm not sure what I get out of it. I like to attribute it to the presence of some tension or stress in the back of my mind that I need to get out—something I've been ignoring until the moment when it simply can't be contained anymore.

Most of us choose to be mean for one reason or another, at certain times and in certain situations. But when I began noticing other people's unkind urges, I was not in a detached position. I was only ten years old. I hadn't yet recognized how or why these impulses came and went. Instead, I grappled with the insensitive words and degrading glances from other kids as they washed over me, cycle after cycle.

My first direct encounter happened on a Friday afternoon when McKenzie, Alyssa and Susan from my fifth grade class knocked on our front door and my mother answered. They had a foursquare ball in their hand and asked if I could play. I peered around the corner from the other end of the hallway when I heard their voices. This was the first time they had ever stopped by my house. Aside from their soft teasing and pestering at school (Susan once told me to stop "writing so loud" during an assignment), I thought they were okay girls. And while I particularly enjoyed the sound of my Number Two pencil scraping against the loose-leaf paper, I tried to tone it down after that reprimand.

We all gathered on my driveway that day and my mother brought out the bucket of sidewalk chalk I usually played with by myself. I liked to draw different roads and courses all over our driveway so that my brother and I could navigate our bikes through it. This was the first time I had ever used the chalk for something else.

I drew the usual four connected squares in the center of the driveway, aware of the three sets of eyes staring down my back as I moved the chalk. I tried my best to draw as straight a line as I could muster. It needed to be perfect.

McKenzie must have been okay with the size, because she immediately bounced the ball to Susan, and the game began. McKenzie and Susan seemed to have paired up, so I figured I would be playing with Alyssa. As the game went on, however, Alyssa seemed to be playing on a team with them as well. Meanwhile, I was sent running after the ball and into the street probably a dozen times before they decided to stop hurling it my way.

Then they left. It didn't seem like they had been there for very long. But by the time my mother brought out a tray of lemonade, she had to set it down inside the garage because she had brought three cups too many.

"Where did they go?" she asked me.

I shook my head, but smiled. I grabbed a cup of lemonade and she took another. I was pretty sweaty, I realized. It was hard work to keep up with friends.

Online instant messaging became a pretty large fad in fifth grade. I already loved typing stories; just the sound of my fingers tapping along the plastic keys was exciting. And as my tales piled up, much to the keyboard's exhaustion, I grew excited to share them.

Once, when I had been instant messaging my classmate Allen, he asked me what I was writing about. It didn't take long for me to start copying and pasting my newest piece into our chat box. The character limit only allowed for a small paragraph in each message, and a good ten minutes or so passed before he had the entire thing.

Later on, my mother scolded me, insisting that I should never share my work with anyone like that. It made it easy for people to steal, she explained. I didn't make that mistake again.

I found myself talking to Allen again the Friday evening following McKenzie, Alyssa, and Susan's visit. I was telling him how much fun it had been to play foursquare, and how I thought I was getting better at the game.

To my surprise, he already knew about it. The girls had been talking to him online earlier, he told me. I prodded him a little more.

They said they felt like doing something stupid, so they decided to stop by, he explained.

Given that this was an online conversation, I couldn't see Allen's face. I couldn't tell if he was joking or feel any sincerity in his tone. All I saw were the words appearing before my eyes.

I logged off and ran into my bedroom. My dollhouse was sitting in the corner. I immediately threw myself behind it and started arranging the plastic people and furniture inside. I felt my face heating up. My mother knocked on the door and asked if I was okay—she had heard the door slam.

I ignored her and continued moving the plastic mother doll all over the wooden dollhouse. The baby doll, Tasha, was in her mini bed, and I had the mother approach her door, slamming her head against it so as to create a hard, knocking sound. I continued knocking her head against the door, over and over again. The baby doll wouldn't answer. She kept knocking.

Are you okay? Are you okay? Are you okay?

On normal evenings in fifth grade, I usually found the door to the study cracked open. So later that weekend, I found my mother working in there, as expected. The big, comfy desk chair rotated right and left as she leaned over the computer keyboard, concentrating on something that must have been important to her—but not so much to me.

I crouched on my hands and knees. It was always a game. I prodded the door with my index finger so that it opened a little wider. Then again, and again. Pretty soon my petite frame fit through the doorway, and I was on the move. The goal was to get all the way to my mother's chair without her hearing me. Sometimes I succeeded, feeling at first a great triumph. This was immediately followed by guilt, after she jumped and let out a sharp "Ooh!" when I tapped her on the shoulder.

But I always found myself back in this situation sometime later on. The study held the only functioning computer we owned, and as a result I had to fight for my time to use it, whether it was for writing stories, or instant messaging. After that last conversation with Allen, however, I had taken a couple days off.

I moved forward, inch by inch, until I had made it halfway between the door and my mother, so far undetected.

I couldn't see what she was working on from down below, but I heard her fingertips tapping the keyboard in an unpredictable, but still rhythmic motion. I used to hear that noise and wonder if I would ever be able to type that fast. Now I was at the point where I could mimic the sound, but something still didn't feel quite right. When my mother typed, her hands were always placed in the same position over the keyboard. My fingers went everywhere.

I remembered to monitor my breathing as I crept closer. Sometimes she heard it when I neared her chair. But, just as I started to hold my breath and inch another knee forward, my ankle cracked. The game was over.

"I thought I heard you," my mother said, turning in her chair and smiling down at me. "Don't worry, I'm almost done."

When the game ended like this I was only sad for a moment. Then I didn't care. The objective was complete: I had made it inside and placed my claim on what was really important. Maybe next time I would also manage to frighten her.

After a few minutes, my mother gathered up her papers and reading glasses and headed out the door.

"All yours," she said over her shoulder.

I crawled into the desk chair, sitting up straight as I soared through the files on the computer, searching for my most recent one. I grinned when I found it and the words opened before my eyes. I didn't even glance at the first page, scrolling instead to page 73 or so, wherever I left off.

I titled this section *CHAPTER 14* and suddenly, I was no longer in the study. I had been granted special access to a different place. The place was mine; its value was in this miracle piece of machinery, and I added to that value each and every day. As I wrote, a girl with dirty blonde hair and a pale face appeared before my mind's eye. Her name was Marsha, and she was one of my first ever characters. She smiled, and I smiled back. It was almost as though she was asking, What do you want me to do today?

A patch of woods appeared behind her and she grinned, nodding her head as though she understood, and she hurried through the trees. Three other girls appeared and ran after her. The

four of them – best friends, youthful, vibrant – stopped at a creek and looked beyond it. They were familiar with this place. I kept typing. Within moments their shoes were off and Marsha dove in first.

I wanted friends like Marsha's, and a creek that was safe enough to play in. But I never wrote myself into the story—doing that seemed wrong. Contrived. Tacky. I didn't want to be tacky. Still, Marsha was my same age, my same year in elementary school. She had a mother and father, like me, and a little sister. The sister was a necessary change; we had to be different somehow, otherwise people might get suspicious. Her best friend Sidney spelled her name with an *i* instead of a *y*. She had straight, dark hair. She hurled herself into the creek after Marsha, sending the water up and over the grass, where it splashed the other two girls. I only knew a Sydney with a *y*, a friend of McKenzie's, and I don't think she ever jumped into any creeks.

My hands continued on the keyboard, imitating my mother's sounds for hours until her voice – not Marsha's – penetrated the room and I was yanked back into the study, only to learn that dinner was ready.

I returned to school on Monday, and implored myself not to look McKenzie in the eye. Or Susan, or Alyssa—or even Sydney. They all sat together at the same grouping of desks. Our fifth grade teacher, Ms. Fine, liked to change up our seating charts, but at this point in the school year, over halfway through, she had decided to let us pick.

I sat down at my place on the other side of the room, still determined to avoid all eye contact, and Allen sat down next to me. He said nothing about our online conversation – at this point I was certain he hadn't noticed anything wrong with it – and started chatting with Susan from across the row.

These girls were mean. I clasped my hands together as the thought squirmed its way through me. I had never placed a label on them before. And doing this didn't help me understand why they acted so awfully—I didn't care about that. I just wished that they wouldn't.

Ms. Fine gave us a journal assignment. I loved doing these. It was always our first activity of the day. We were supposed to write about anything going on in our lives. I picked up my pencil and started as soon as she nodded and said it was time. I normally filled up three or four pages in the ten minutes she gave us to write. Whenever I glanced at Allen's paper, he had usually only written a paragraph or so. I figured he must have had an uneventful week.

I was in the middle of describing how I had bought new dollhouse furniture with my father, when I noticed the sound my pencil was making. It was odd—I had taken no heed of it the entire morning, but now it felt as though a sound barrier had been broken, and it was all I could hear. Susan was nowhere near me. I didn't try to turn and look over my shoulder. I didn't know if she was glaring at me from behind. But I did stop for a moment, even though I knew exactly what I wanted to write next. Perhaps Ms. Fine had noticed the sound stop as well, because she was looking in my direction. I managed to smile, and she returned it. She probably figured I was gathering my thoughts.

I wanted to describe where I had put the new doll furniture—I wanted to give Ms. Fine the full details. But my self-consciousness was taking over. The pencil was too loud. As I tried to continue, nothing I did could control the noise. So, I summarized my final thoughts and worked them into two more sentences, written in the slowest manner I had ever performed. My journal entry was two pages long.

We handed them in and Ms. Fine made no comment about the length. She tapped the papers against the desk to organize them and set them aside to read later. We started our math lesson. I wanted to go home.

That night, my mother peeked into my bedroom, expecting to find me ready to be tucked in. Instead, she found my ceiling fan cranked up to full blast, the overhead light switched off, and a desk lamp plugged in on the floor beside me. I was shining it through the back of the dollhouse so that if you looked at it from the front, it appeared to be illuminated.

"What's all this?" she asked me.

"It's raining," I replied. "Tasha's mom is tucking her into bed, but she's scared of the storm."

My mother stared up at the ceiling fan, which was meant to make the sound of wind and rain, and then looked back at me. I would turn off the fan before I went to sleep, I promised her. The reassurance worked; she said goodnight and closed the door. The fan stayed on for another hour or so. It prolonged the amount of time before I would wake up and crawl out of bed, forced to prepare for Tuesday.

As the few remaining months of school dragged on, I racked up more and more chapters of Marsha's series each evening. She got a D on her math test; she had a fight with Sidney; she went exploring by herself in the creek behind her house. It felt effortless as I went. I never ran out of things to write about.

Marsha's hair also grew more unruly; she got taller and lankier, all on that little computer screen. She might have even been taller than me. Writing the stories was like playing a

videogame, only the controller was my keyboard, and the goal was not to win the most points, but to create something that felt real—something I would want to read over and over again. In fact, I frequently stopped writing mid-sentence and scrolled all the way up to the beginning. I wanted to enjoy what I had written. I wanted to go back to my favorite spots as often as possible.

Marsha and Tasha were not like McKenzie and Susan. They weren't like Alyssa or Sydney with a *y*, either. They did whatever I told them to, when I told them. They didn't resist me. They didn't have mousy faces that were always smirking. They were prettier than that.

My mother checked in on me every now and then, prodding the study door open with her finger. But she didn't try to sneak up on me. I sensed her presence, acknowledging it while I continued to type. I knew I sounded more like her on the keyboard now—I wondered if it made her proud.

My back always remained turned as I heard her linger by the door. I couldn't sense anything else she might be doing—I didn't see the worry on her face, if there was any, nor could I detect any sort of pleasure. But that was completely irrelevant. I kept typing until I heard the door click shut. Her footsteps disappeared down the hallway. I typed faster.

The school year ended the first week of June. Elementary school ended. So did sitting in one classroom for seven hours a day, and going outside for recess. McKenzie moved away before middle school began; her parents had divorced. I didn't have new classes with any of the other girls, and they started leaving me alone. Perhaps they were tired of being mean because McKenzie was no longer there to incite them. Either way, I continued writing.

Midway through that first semester of sixth grade, I asked my father to print out a hundred or so pages of my most recent story at his office. The subject was this new school

environment, of course, and the stories were told by two new characters, Kristen and Samantha. They were sisters.

My father brought home the story in a crisp new manila envelope. I had never felt so official.

The papers followed me to school, tucked away in my book bag during all my morning classes. Lunch period dragged on midday, and I left my table of classmates, wandering over to the wall by the vending machines. I pulled the manila envelope out of my bag and peeked inside. I had a few minutes.

I start reading over the first page. Kristen and Samantha took turns telling their own stories in the format of separate diary entries. I had chosen a messy font for Samantha's passages, and a neat Ariel for Kristen's.

I had reached the third or fourth page when I sensed someone walking up to me. It was a classmate, Anna, who usually sat at my lunch table. She had attended a different elementary school than me.

"What's that?" she asked.

Anna played soccer. Her father coached somewhere nearby. She was very sporty and not that interested in writing. We were in the same Language Arts class.

I told her I was working on a story, and gathered the papers close. She took a seat on the floor beside me. I thought of my past conversations with Allen—Allen, whom I no longer saw more than once or twice a week in the hallways. The nights of instant messaging felt like so long ago, but I still remembered what my mother had said about sharing my work with others.

"Is it for class?"

It was just for fun, I explained.

She nodded. “So what’s it about?”

I glanced at the pages that were now halfway forced inside the manila envelope. I spotted the sentence I had just been looking over, from Samantha’s diary—a line about how she didn’t make the swing choir, but Kristen did. I thought about our own school’s swing choir auditions earlier that semester. It was a new type of experience, I learned, not seeing your name on a piece of paper when you desperately wanted to. My mother was equally disappointed, but not in me.

I never would have shared my writing with McKenzie, even if she asked. It was personal, and she would have laughed. She would have been mean about it. She might have talked about it with her mother, or her father, but no longer the two of them together.

The story was about a lot of “stuff.” I decided to explain it to Anna that way. Stuff was a good word to use in middle school. It applied to virtually everything: too much “stuff” to do, seeing “stuff” all over the place.

Anna’s face brightened because she, too, could relate to too much “stuff.” The conversation shifted, and I relaxed. Anna started talking about how she had soccer practice after school. She asked me my plans, and I realized I had none.

“You ever played sports before?” Her question caught me off guard.

I offered up my dance lessons as a response. They were a large reason I had auditioned for swing choir. I didn’t know if they qualified as a sport.

Anna laughed, but it wasn’t a mean laugh. She didn’t have a smirk on her face, as Susan usually did when she laughed around me. Something felt different. Anna tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. She had brown hair, not as dark as my tangled waves, but it was short and straight. She almost looked like Sidney with an *i*.

“How long have you been playing soccer?” I asked her.

I had always been taught to ask people about themselves when you were engaged in conversation. It was polite and friendly. I wanted to be friendly.

Anna started describing the league she used to play in during elementary school, and the club team she had joined this year. She was tall and athletic-looking, I observed, even though we were sitting down. As we chatted, I stopped noticing the people walking past us, even the buzz of the cafeteria. When the bell rang, signifying the end of lunch, it cut through me as though I had been completely somewhere else. I looked down at my book bag and realized that at some point during our conversation, I had completely pushed my manila envelope inside and zipped it closed.

We gathered up our belongings as the crowd of students moved past us. Typing was my next class. I was finally learning how to place my hands on the keyboard, the way my mother did.

As we made our way down the hall, still conversing, we passed the choir classroom, and I glanced at the window where the swing choir list had been posted a couple months earlier. When I didn't make it, I told my mother that maybe I wasn't cut out for it. She told me I should try again. I didn't think I would.

Anna and I parted ways and I sat down at the computer in my classroom, where I began my typing exercises. As I worked, I knew that when I got home in a few hours, the routine would be the same. I would check to see if the computer was free. I would keep writing. I wouldn't anticipate the amount of homework middle school would demand, as compared to years past, but I would make time for it.

Then Anna's soccer practice crossed my mind. I wondered when it would end—what her plans were after. The middle school had just delivered its contact book with all the phone

numbers and addresses of its students. Even so, I found myself worrying about the possibility that her mother might not welcome phone calls from strange kids. I was always nervous calling people out of the blue. Maybe I shouldn't.

As class continued, however, I felt my interest in auditioning for swing choir again start to rekindle itself—but only a little. This tended to happen when I walked by the choir classroom and saw students rehearsing. I knew my mother would urge me next fall, prod me a little, probably more than she did even this time around. I wondered what made it so important to her. She used to sing in choir. For some time, I thought that must be it.

The New Black

I was never truly exposed to death until I was twelve. Grandma Betty's funeral was my first, cognitive memory of experiencing such a loss. Before that, my only recollections were comprised of a brief image of a group dressed in black, standing inside the cemetery close to our neighborhood. My mother was holding me, probably because I was restless, and I don't remember whose funeral it was. My father was standing next to us and had his back turned. I reached out from my mother's arms and tapped him on the shoulder, only to discover that it wasn't my father when he turned around. I buried my face into my mother's neck, hoping the man wouldn't notice me. My father had been standing on our other side.

That funeral could have been Grandma Phil's. Or it could have been someone else's. I don't remember much of anything about Phil's death. But according to the obituary, and to my family, he died three days after my fourth birthday. So that at least must be true.

At Grandma Betty's funeral, I was no longer sitting in my mother's arms. I was nearly a teenager. I stood next to my parents and slightly in front of Brian, my older brother. I wore black, and I was cold because it was February. I knew most of the people surrounding us, so I didn't mistake anyone for my father. However, I still buried my face in my mother's neck.

This was my first real encounter with death, and my family wasn't quite sure how to prepare me for the proceedings, how to help me cope. I knew Grandma Betty and I had a reason to miss her, but at times the rest of my family seemed to be having more difficulty processing it

than me. I inherited much of my emotional qualities from my mother, but hers still seemed far more developed than mine would ever be. Maybe I was still too young for this.

I have no doubt that in Grandma Betty's lifespan of 104 years, she could have been a trendsetter. When she was born in Russia at the turn of the century, her family dressed her up in rags and called her *Granny*, so as to fool the spirits. They had already lost children before her, and their tactics worked. I later learned this was a common practice in that culture, to treat newborns as though they were old, and I credited Grandma Betty with having been one of the first to partake in this tradition—whether that was true or not.

Grandma Betty probably started a few other trends as well. She grew up in the United States after the Russo-Japanese War forced her and her family to immigrate, so that her father could escape the draft. Perhaps she was one of the first to use a sewing machine – she always did make nice pincushions, much better than I could – or one of the first in our family to work in a theater. My mother once told me that Grandma Betty had opened and closed the curtains from backstage during the St. Louis Municipal Opera's very first season. That would have been 1916. I auditioned for its 90th season, and didn't make it.

Yes, Grandma Betty might have been a trendsetter, in whatever she did. But the last trend she set is not something I could be happy about. It was a posthumous trend—her death, which sparked many more in our family.

Her son, my great Uncle Ted, followed her the same year. I was nearing thirteen. Ted never seemed like much of a follower – always hardheaded and domineering – and I don't think he would have followed Grandma Betty if he could have helped it. It just happened. None of us saw it coming so soon.

My paternal grandfather died a couple years later. He was very tall and quite heavy. I wondered how many people they would need to carry his casket. Grandpa Seymour had been a well known doctor in St. Louis—so well known that if you walked around with our last name, you were asked at least a few times a year by various store clerks or mailmen if you were related to him. My father reported these occurrences at our family gatherings, before and after his father died, as did his two brothers and their wives. The first time I was asked about my relationship to Grandpa Seymour, I was buying a birthday card at Hallmark. The cashier had read my last name on my rewards card, and explained that she used to see him for her annual visits. I waited anxiously for the next family gathering, when I could finally share my own experience—when I could declare that I, too, was recognized as related to this well-known doctor. I felt as though I were ten years older, more mature, nearing the older generation's level.

At Grandpa Seymour's funeral, we sat beneath a tent while they lowered his casket into the grave. I hadn't known him in his medical days. My only memories were of him sitting in his armchair next to my grandmother in their den, being looked after by an aide. He needed help using the restroom and cleaning himself. His mind was unstable. Brian once asked our father if he thought Grandpa Seymour still retained some of his medical knowledge. If, perhaps, an aide wasn't administering medicine to him correctly, could he call her on it? None of us came up with a confident answer.

It was the beginning of the summer when my father and his brothers began shoveling the dirt on top of Grandpa Seymour's casket. I had never seen my father cry before. I wasn't sure if I should stare or find something else to focus my attention on. After the three sons had placed their dirt atop the dark, shiny wood, someone positioned a shovel in my hand as well. The tool was heavier than I thought it would be, so my father helped me from behind as I attempted to scoop

out a small pile of earth and turn it over into the grave. He held most of the weight of the handle, but as I stood in front of him, I detected a different type of weight. It came from behind me, putting pressure on not just my hands, but also my legs and my back. It felt heavy, but not so heavy that I would drop it. Perhaps it was my father's grief, and I was keeping it from falling on the ground. But I couldn't tell if he sensed this – I might have even imagined it – and I stepped back when we were done. I was already overheated in my black sweater.

Early summer in St. Louis also meant a lot of humidity and rising temperatures. As they began to conclude the ceremony, my Aunt Carol's father passed out. He had insisted on standing during the service, in his dark, heavy suit. They rushed him to the hospital, out of the heat, and he was fine. He died the next year instead, and his wife followed after only a few more.

At that point, I knew how to sit *Shiva*. It was always the same: sitting around a loved one's home all day while various strangers stopped by to offer their condolences. But I was also fifteen, hormonal, and tired of so many funerals. I understood how the mourning process worked, how quickly Jews buried their dead. Yet it seemed like someone else, higher up, just wasn't convinced—that I had to keep experiencing it over and over again. But the process never grew on me; I hated it all the same.

Aunt Carol was related to me through marriage—I had no blood relation to her or to her father. But I knew him well enough; his full name was Rabbi Alvin D. Rubin. He liked joking around, poking fun at Brian and me. He always wore a suit, even if he wasn't attending services or at a funeral. He had presided over Grandma Betty's burial.

When he died, we sat *Shiva* again. But it was different than past *Shiva*'s, because he had always led the prayers. I didn't recognize the rabbi who stepped in. I figured he came from our temple. I gave Aunt Carol a hug and told her I was sorry, because my mother had told me to. It

was awkward, and I wasn't sure how sincere I sounded, but she squeezed me back and said thank you. Her voice sounded more sincere than anything else.

We finally reached a block of time when there were no more *Shiva*'s for a while. Instead, I started noticing how often my mother read the obituaries in the newspaper, on any ordinary day. I asked her if she had always done that, and she said yes. Sometimes during dinner she would say, "Did you see who died over the weekend?" and my father would reply, "I did, what a shame." Reading the obituaries was a trend that never quite caught on with me—I figured there was no good in reading names I probably wouldn't recognize.

I never had time to ask myself how I would have reacted to these deaths had they not occurred so close together. I wasn't afraid of death—I was tired of it. And when the surge had come to a halt, the transition back to my daily life was seamless. I worried about school and friends. Of all the relatives we had lost, I think I missed Grandma Betty the most – her cooking, her stories, and our weekly visits that made me know and love her so much – but life was moving too fast to process even that. When I thought about Grandpa Seymour, I only felt relief—relief that my father no longer had to worry about the aged doctor's wellbeing.

The deaths stopped until I was halfway through high school, when my mother's good friend from college lost her husband. It was a distant death, and finally not a relative's, but it was still hard-hitting for my parents. Lisa's husband had committed suicide, we learned, and my mother and father drove down to Nashville for the funeral. They wouldn't tell me how he had done it. Brian and I were left at home.

Suicide was a new concept. Of all the deaths I had experienced, each was due to natural causes. None of the victims had been under the age of sixty or seventy.

But Lisa's husband was under that benchmark, and he had not died naturally. It bothered me even more that he had inflicted death on himself. I remembered visiting their family in Nashville on a few occasions, far before his death, and he was always laughing and cracking jokes. He was highly esteemed at Vanderbilt. His humor reminded me of Rabbi Alvin D. Rubin's. I didn't understand why he would want to do such a thing.

Eventually, I came to terms with the fact that sometimes people became unhappy with themselves later in life. And I dismissed the thought of suicide for the time being.

Toward the end of my junior year of high school, I went to a cast party at a friend's house. I wasn't involved in the play (I was still struggling to succeed in theater), but it was also her birthday, and she had combined the two occasions. I felt awkwardly out of place at the party, as I wasn't quite part of the drama group, so I kept to myself for most of the night.

As the hours grew late, I decided to leave, but as I made my way to the door, my path was blocked by a man whom I didn't recognize. From the look on his face, I could tell he was distraught about something, so I sat back down.

I heard people in the other room whispering someone's name, the room this man had just emerged from. I thought I heard some of them say *Le'ad.*

Le'ad. Not many other names could be mistaken for that one. Le'ad was from Israel, a senior, and in my Creative Writing class. He was a very talented writer, actor, and artist. I knew this mostly because he had been granted admission to the Rhode Island School of Design for the following year, as had his fraternal twin brother, Edo. I didn't know much else about him. He had performed in the play earlier that afternoon, but it wasn't until now that I realized he was absent from the party.

On hearing the man's somber declaration that *Le'ad was no longer with us*, I wondered what had led to the accident. I didn't consider any other causes. Had there been alcohol involved—had he been run over? My questions were quite limited in the options I came up with.

I walked past my friend crying on her porch minutes later, surrounded by everyone at the party. An impulse came over me and I tried to hug her before hurrying over to my car, but she shook me off. I lowered my head and raced away from her house. Everyone on the lawn had known Le'ad.

The principal announced the news over the intercom the next morning, and I decided I would attend the funeral. I still didn't know too much about Le'ad, but he was a good writer. I thought he ought to be honored, even if it was just for his creativity. I couldn't believe how close he had been to RISD.

I brought a pair of black pants and a top to school with me the day of Le'ad's burial, and changed into it before driving with the rest of the students to the same cemetery by my house. I stood politely in the back, and only realized toward the end that I was a mere two yards from Grandpa Seymour's grave. I turned my back on the service for just a moment to read his name on the stone. Then I searched for a rock somewhere on the ground nearby, and placed it on top of the marble. A Jewish custom. My father would appreciate that.

When I returned my attention to Le'ad's service, his brother Edo was speaking. I imagined he would say a few loving words about his twin, so I stood uneasily by my grandfather's plot, trying to detect the grief in Edo's voice. He was strangely calm.

I didn't know Edo planned to reveal how Le'ad had died. The sentence caught me off guard, and I suddenly wished I hadn't come here alone—that perhaps someone like my father was standing with me, able to explain why some people died when they were older, like his

father, and why other people died when they were still so fresh in the world. I felt my breath leave me as Edo told us, and I staggered back a little, only to push myself forward so that I wouldn't be standing on top of my grandfather. In that moment, I was grateful to be anyone but Edo. I didn't understand his calmness. I didn't understand how someone could be so composed after venturing into his basement on the day of his brother's successful run in a school play, only to find him hanging by his belt from the ceiling. No, I was grateful to be anyone but him.

As the service drew to a close, I felt quite ridiculous in my black outfit. Was it even necessary to wear black to a funeral? I had seen variations in the past.

My mind grew bleak. It cast my current surroundings from my immediate thoughts, but it was not numbed to the fact that I was still in the cemetery. I did not feel numb here at all. Rather, that sense of unfeelingness only applied to my relatives' deaths as they rolled out, one after another. I had grown to expect them, to embrace them as natural and as something to move on from.

But Le'ad was nineteen years old. He wasn't 104 like Grandma Betty. He wasn't reaching the end of his life; he wasn't even married. He was only a year older than me. I didn't feel numbed to his death; I didn't feel agony, or physical pain. Instead, I was experiencing something else: I felt shock.

The closer I got to my car, the more I felt like a poser. I could perhaps compare myself to the actors you would see in a movie as they mourned the loss of a loved one—a loved one who probably died for some great cause.

Le'ad had died rather than going to RISD. He was depressed and unhappy enough to throw a new stage in his life completely away, in spite of all he had already achieved. He was so

close to starting over—had that been what he wanted. Something was wrong with this, and I was shocked, and I couldn't see myself ever understanding it.

By the time I graduated high school, I could no longer see death as something distant and inconsequential in my life—although I might have tried to anyway. And I still couldn't comprehend its essence, why it picked certain people but not others—why certain people picked it. I wanted to know what made it so appealing.

It was clear now that death would never be a trend set by one person, in one given family. It was both arbitrary, and completely rational. Not many things are like that.

It's not always a conscious choice to think about whose funeral you'll attend next; it's a necessity. The thoughts creep into your mind even when your attention is focused entirely on something else. You ignore them until you can't. You live with the possibility always on your back but never quite prominent enough to notice. You think about how much you love your friends, your family. I wonder if next time I'll wear black.

"Don't look too good or talk too wise."

- Rudyard Kipling, *If*

I always loved Halloween. I liked the feel of it, the fallen leaves that soared through the air as cars and people rushed through them. Even the crispness of the air didn't bother me. I never minded the cold, but my mother always made me wear a jacket and leggings under my costume before I went trick-or-treating. That was a feeling I didn't enjoy. Had she been here this night, I can hardly believe she would have recommended anything different for my cheap, revealing cowgirl costume.

Now as I stand here in the midst of the freezing night, years beyond begging for candy, I watch partyers dressed head-to-toe in costumes while they stumble up and down the block—and I can't help but wonder if this is considered normal here. It depends on how you define the word. Normal could mean something you're used to, something you have always observed. My childhood Halloweens were normal in that way. Or, normal could refer to what is seen by society as ordinary, but not necessarily by the individual. By that definition, being stuck at a block party with a group of inebriated college friends makes me long for the feeling this night used to give me.

I can't stand in the chilliness much longer; my exposed legs shake visibly, and my arms are folded tight across my chest as I hug myself. Someone runs down the street and bumps into my shoulder as he passes us, forcing me to unwind. I feel a rush of cold air, and I immediately replace my arms. Melissa, Rebecca, and our other friends start moving, so I follow. I think

Melissa needs a bathroom, and is investigating the houses on the block to see if she can find one. The entire street has been closed off for the party, and no one here seems normal to me. It's a hard test to pass, that of normalcy, seeing as I don't consider drunkenness to be in that category.

I'm fairly certain I'm the only one who's sober. But I'm not a good judge. Melissa points to another house, but its front door is closed. We go around the side and I watch as a few girls in our group attempt to climb a small fence to get into the yard. I see the backdoor is open. It might mean a bathroom for them. Almost every one of them has made it over when they look at me expectantly. I back off. They look unsurprised. I must, too.

Many Halloweens ago, when I was around four or five, I might have been more cunning than I am now. Whether it was a holiday or not, I was always able to plan and execute a way to get where I wanted to be. There was a child gate in my bedroom doorway that closed me off from the rest of the house at night. It was supposed to keep me from running into the hallway as a toddler and falling down the stairs.

My mother would tell me frequently, years later, that she was quite convinced I would do time. I was too cunning. I wondered if she meant it, if she joked about it with her friends because she thought her dark prediction might come true. This seemed like a reason not to joke about it. Perhaps she recalls it now, only because she can do so from the safety of knowing it's never happened.

According to her, I must have been sitting up in bed on my fourth or fifth Halloween, far past the time I should have been asleep, staring at the gate, wondering what I was missing on the other side. I slid out from under my sheets and crawled to the door, where the gate fenced me in. I sat with my back against it, looking around my room, thinking. I grabbed the trashcan first,

based on the evidence my mother found later. It was the sturdiest. I turned it over and placed it against the center of the gate. Then I found my little play chair from the tea table in the corner. That went next. But soon I realized it was sturdier than the trash can, so I reversed their placement and put the chair underneath. I stepped onto the chair and began to balance myself on the trashcan. I could almost reach the top.

I checked my room once more, like a manager checking his inventory. I spotted a few board game boxes by my bed, scurried over to them, and added them to the stack. Quickly and without much noise, I hoisted myself up and over the gate. I landed with a soft *thud* on the carpet in the hallway. I looked around, content. I wasn't sure where to go next, what to do, what could be explored. It was my house after all; I had been everywhere before. I crawled to the top of the staircase. The light from the bathroom behind me only reached halfway down the bannister. The staircase culminated at the bottom in one great, black abyss. I was intrigued.

Melissa and Rebecca have made it into the house. I stick around outside, attempting to ignore my chills but distracted by them all the same. I try to control my shock at how everyone just climbed the fence. I've never seen girls our age do something like that. I take into consideration their current inebriated state, but it's still a strange thing to witness. The fence is probably twice the height as my child gate was. I don't step any closer to it. It's metal; it looks like it could prick straight through my skin, pierce my denim cowgirl skirt. It's not meant to be climbed.

I think about this past summer when I took charge of cleaning out our basement. I found the child gate leaning against our old trampoline that probably should have been thrown out two yard sales ago, rather than saved. As I stood against the gate, I realized how tall I was now. I

could almost step over it without even going on tiptoe. It must have looked like a giant to me when I was five, just like this fence in the yard does now. But I'm not a climber anymore.

As I emerged from the darkness of the downstairs hallway, I found myself in the kitchen. The light was on over the sink, and I felt relieved to be out of the obscurity that was the rest of the house. I remembered that my mother had put some candy in the cabinet above the microwave, leftover from trick-or-treating that day. I wasn't supposed to have any more that night.

I hurried to the kitchen table and pushed one of the chairs over to the counter. My climbing skills had been warmed up by then, and with surprising ease I pushed myself onto the counter itself. I stood up and opened the cabinet, the slight fear of falling disappearing quite rapidly as I found my treasure. There it was: a bowl of candy left just where I thought it was. I fingered through it and picked out a few chocolates and some fruit snack wrappers. Then I sat down on the counter, swinging my legs back and forth as I enjoyed the unexpected treat and listened to the quietness of the house.

Melissa comes stumbling out the front door. I don't see them from the backyard. I happen to look left and see Rebecca following her, so I run to catch up. I feel uncomfortable admitting it to myself, but they might have otherwise forgotten and left me. All I want to do now is go back to my dorm. I want pull on a pair of pajamas, microwave a frozen meal, and sit in bed with the television on.

But I can't leave the group. I don't even know how to get home, and I don't know who else would be in good enough shape to walk with me. We're close enough to campus. But I'm

stuck wandering with them until they, too, tire out and want to leave. The block doesn't seem to end, but somehow we finally reach the last house. I feel a slight relief, until Melissa motions to the group and we start walking back in the direction from which we came.

I'm on a search for normalcy, and I'm not finding it anywhere. The fronts of the houses glow, but not in the ways I remember, like at home. They don't glow because of the line of carved pumpkins set up and down their lawns. The glowing comes from lighters being passed around from smoker to smoker, potheads amongst others. The blinking lights inside are not welcoming; rather, they send a message to go away. I was always told never to enter anyone's home when trick-or-treating, and each time I cross a threshold in this neighborhood tonight, into these widely-deemed "open houses," I wonder if it should feel ordinary.

I never would have thought about coming to a party like this a year ago. My mother always tells me what a difference a year makes, and I think about that now. What an incredible amount of change one person can go through, that makes you so different from October of one year to October of the next.

So it's logical to also consider how much of a difference ten years can make, or fifteen, or twenty. Even something as small-scale as six months, a week, five minutes. Anything can happen in any amount of time that can change you.

I don't know what has changed me, from age five to now. I still like chocolate; I still like Halloween. But I won't climb a fence anymore.

I threw away the candy wrappers and made it upstairs without disrupting anyone in the house. Realizing I had nothing to climb over to get back inside my bedroom, I hurried into the bathroom and immediately returned with the little blue plastic trainer toilet I used to occupy

rather frequently. I dropped it onto the floor against the gate and climbed up, reaching as high as I could to pull myself up and over. The frame wobbled a bit as I forced my weight on it. It was only made of wood after all, with plastic-covered wires forming the middle.

With one swift movement, the gate steadied and I tumbled onto the other side, knocking over the chair and the board games and the trashcan. I rolled over on my back, staring up at the ceiling. I smiled. I still tasted the chocolate in my mouth.

I want to leave the block party. I want to be surrounded by the warmth of my own bed, the covers pulled tightly over my body. I don't even need the frozen food anymore. I just want to go home.

Melissa, Rebecca and the other girls choose another house. Someone else needs the bathroom. This time the desire for heat surpasses everything else and I follow them inside. I can't even tell if we've been there already. Despite my sobriety, the interiors have started blending together. Perhaps my mind is freezing now.

The girls hurry through the crowd of people congregating by the kitchen area and the couches. Some partyers nurse their beers while others down the malty liquid as though it's the last one they'll ever have. When I look back to find Melissa, she's gone. Rebecca and I squeeze our way through to the other end of the living room and find an open door on the right. The other girls in our group are inside, waiting. I walk in and realize it's a bedroom. The sheets are scattered all over the place, as well as mismatched socks and an array of red solo cups and dark glass bottles with labels I don't recognize.

I feel warm; I feel safe. Melissa is in the bathroom on the other side of the room. I notice I'm still hugging myself, and I let my arms drop.

"Um, excuse me?"

We whirl around to find a guy standing in the doorway. He steps inside and I see he's holding a key in his hand.

"This isn't a public restroom," he said. "This is my room."

Our eyes meet, and I know all he sees is a young girl who doesn't know what the hell she's doing. But I want to tell him that I understand. I want him to know that I realize the importance of your own space, your own warmth. He doesn't see it in my eyes. All he sees is my failure of a makeshift costume: the denim skirt, my plaid shirt, and no trace of a jacket or leggings whatsoever.

My senior year of high school, our English teacher asked our parents to write us a letter. There wasn't much direction with the prompt—only to speak their minds and give us insight as we looked forward to college.

"Jamie," my mother wrote. "Here is the advice I would like to offer you as you begin the next stage of your life…. A very bright girl I know has her own saying, 'Things happen for a reason.' Once you figure out how to handle each little situation life hands you, you usually figure out the reason it happened to begin with. And you grow a little more."

I grew out of being four, five, six years old. I broke into the later single digits, the times when you looked forward to being older. The gate disappeared from my door at night. My parents added to my room a fancy table with a glass covering on top, as well as a long blue tablecloth that glided to the floor. It added some class to the look of my space. It meant my parents trusted me with something fragile.

But the moment when my mother would write that letter was still years away. When I was around eight or nine, Brian was helping my mother with something in the basement. My days of climbing had long been over. I was wandering around the first floor and heard them below. Curious, I sat at the top step for a few minutes before a funny idea entered my mind. I stood up and slammed the basement door shut. I was just tall enough to lock it, hearing the satisfying *click* as the bolt latched inside the doorframe.

I ran upstairs to my room, just able to hear my mother's footsteps as she raced upstairs to the door she had no way of getting through. I surveyed my space quickly, locking in on the table with the glass on top. I tossed the long blue tablecloth aside and hid underneath it like it was my asylum. I giggled and held my hands over my mouth. It seemed like only a few minutes had passed – but it may have been longer – when the tablecloth was whipped aside and I was staring into my mother's angry face.

I can't bring myself to drink anything tonight. I can't keep barging in on people's homes, as much as they seemingly welcome it. It doesn't make sense to me. I don't understand how someone can welcome the feeling of being violated. To me, a house is your own space, your zone that only belongs to you.

"I want to go home," I say to Rebecca.

She nods. I'm not sure which "home" I'm talking about.

My mother had hoisted Brian out of the high-up basement window so that he could go around the front of the house and unlock the door. Sometimes I wonder how long it would have taken me otherwise to unlock it.

But I never did time for these types of actions. They don't arrest you for stealing toys from kindergarten and telling your parents that you were told you should take them. Even when you put them back at your mother's request, but neglected to tell your teacher you stole them in the first place, nothing really happened. Yet, I understood what my mother knew little misdemeanors like these could lead up to, later in life.

When I went off to college, my mother told me to expect that there would be rough spots. She said it was impossible to find perfection anywhere. She instructed me to picture myself riding a wave in the ocean. It would lift me up and it would let me down—and maybe turn me over in the sand a couple of times.

"But," she wrote on in her letter, "I do not know of any person more up for the challenge than you. You are so completely independent. You have always been mature beyond your years, and this year you have blossomed beyond what I would ever have imagined you could."

I don't climb the gates anymore; I don't take pride in locking people out or forcing myself in. I'm leaving the block party, with Rebecca by my side. I notice how she doesn't stumble—rather, she walks in step with me. Our group follows close behind.

I don't think I could gauge how much I've actually grown, had my mother never been there to call me on it. I don't think I would have remembered how cunning I really was, how intelligent I can be now, had she not told me years later that she knew I used to climb the gate—or had she not recalled the day when she asked my kindergarten teacher if I returned the toys I took, only to be given a confused, puzzled expression in return.

"If," she quotes her favorite poem by Rudyard Kipling in her letter, "you can trust yourself when all men doubt you / But make allowance for their doubting too. / If you can wait

and not be tired by waiting. / Or being lied about—don't deal in lies. / Or being hated, don't give way to hating. / And yet, don't look too good or talk too wise."

I know I don't look too good in a makeshift cowgirl costume. I wasn't too wise by agreeing to come out with my friends either. But now I've seen something new, something perceived as normal in this college culture. Maybe I'll get used to it. Maybe it'll help me grow in some way that I wouldn't have suspected before. These girls know my limits for now.

Or perhaps the existence of limits has been the culprit all along. That being said, I still don't think I'll wear a jacket next year.

Deconstructed

When I was seven, I built my first fort. It was made entirely out of our living room sofa. The sofa had three large seat cushions that emitted a musty smell if you got too close, but they stacked perfectly next to one another if you turned them perpendicular to the base. I used a couple for the wall of the fort and then the other for the roof. The thick, removable back and arm cushions filled the remaining gaps.

Then, I stared at it. I took it in; I felt the pride of a job well executed. Next, I strolled past the structure, tracing the roof with my index finger, checking its stability. Finally, I crawled inside. I liked to spend time in there once the construction was finished, so that became my first move each subsequent time I recreated the fort. Sometimes I added one of my baby blankets from the linens closet if I saw there were more gaps than the last time I had built it. No light could seep in through the cracks once I covered them. As I lay inside, I could only fit in one position—and it was certainly not my natural one. I wasn't a fan of sleeping like a plank.

Despite the tight fit, I enjoyed the enclosed space. It was one of those few instances when you could actually go inside and explore something you had created. I couldn't do that when I made dollhouses out of tissue boxes. Rather, I would need a few old television boxes to make that work. And there still might be a few kinks.

I stayed in there for as long as I could. If I had a flashlight handy, I brought it along. The light beam was narrower than the space, but whenever the gray cushions were illuminated over my head, I felt like I was in a cave. It certainly smelled that way. The dark speckles in the

cushions could have easily been prehistoric drawings. Sometimes I wished someone else could fit inside with me, to share in the fun and interpret the cushion's patterns, but the sofa was far too slim. And I liked the seclusion, I decided. It was like having your own little secret.

Then, my mother walked in. Each time she saw her living room sofa had been replaced, yet again, by the same cushiony fort (which I built in the exact same manner, every time), she would immediately walk to the left end, where she knew my head was.

"You know you can suffocate in there, right?" she asked.

I could tell she was smiling, but there was still that presence of sincerity in her voice.

"I can breathe," I told her.

Being able to breathe was my mother's favorite subject whenever the fort showed up in our house again. She discouraged me from covering the air gaps with my blanket, but I insisted. Perhaps I could stick my head out the other end, by the opening? She sometimes suggested this, too. But I remained obstinate. I wanted to see the deepest inner workings of what I had built.

Eventually, my mother would give up and the fort's longevity increased by a few days at most. Then I either got bored with it, or realized that there were other conventional uses for a living room sofa, and I proceeded to take down the cushions. Each time I deconstructed the fort, I always took the roof off first—starting with the cushion that rested over my head when I lay inside. It felt like something was tearing at me each time I pulled it up. But after the first removal, the rest came easier.

Whenever my mother worried about me "suffocating," I wondered how my fort was any different than our house. We lived in enclosed walls, with no air holes that I noticed. We could breathe. What was she so bothered about?

The solution came to me a few months later, when I constructed another fort—but it wasn't made out of our living room sofa. It wasn't even inside our own house. My friend Becky lived a few blocks down the street, and I enjoyed our occasional play dates. Even more, I loved her upstairs hallway. It was like a maze, and I always got lost, much to my pleasure. It was fun to see which rooms I had somehow missed before. At my house, once you reached the top of the stairs, you could go right, or you could go left, but you would still know exactly where you were.

Becky was a very sweet girl who I could have hung out with more in those days. She loved to sing, and whenever she hummed a tune I tried to reciprocate. But my voice didn't sound anything like hers. I later realized that's what would eventually send me to a four-year university while she attended the New England Conservatory. We were both very happy with our choices.

But when we were eight and nine years old, Becky was just as short as I was, and just as playful in most instances. So we built a fort.

The idea came to me when we were sitting in her bedroom. She had a full-size bed set in the middle of the room, against the right wall. This left a huge half-circle of space on the other side. I asked her if she had ever built a fort before, and to my delight, she said she had tried but never done very well, at least by her standards.

I followed her into the hallway to the closet where her family kept all of their blankets. I knew if I tried to find them myself I would probably get lost, and now there was no time for that. When we returned to her room, she tossed the pile of blankets onto the carpet in front of us, and we looked at each other, wondering where to start. I always thought of the planning as one of the best parts.

Becky started on one side of her bed and I started on the other. We unfolded the blankets and flung the edges onto her mattress, weighing them down with books from her shelves. She

didn't have a lot of heavy books lying around, so we usually had to stack up a few to achieve a good counterbalance.

The blankets would be easy enough to overlap as they projected out from her bed, but we had nothing to hold them up from the floor with. We surveyed her bedroom for a few minutes, before Becky's eyes brightened and she rushed out of her room. I decided not to follow this time—I was already pleased with what I saw, and quite tempted to crawl underneath and investigate the beginnings of the structure. But the blankets and books were probably more like the scaffolding in a real construction site, I soon noted. I saw the danger and backed off.

Becky returned moments later with a pile of cardboard poles in her arms. It was from their supply of wrapping paper, she explained to me as I wondered in amazement where she had gotten them. Her mother had meant to recycle them weeks ago once the paper was used up.

There were more than enough to hold up all the corners, and we eagerly set to work. Becky liked to wear her hair in a ponytail almost every day, so we used her surplus of hairbands to secure the blankets around the tops of the cardboard poles. In some ways they looked like the tips of a tent, rather than a fort. But it worked for us.

Once we finished, Becky and I stepped back and examined what we had made. Her carpet was nowhere to be seen, as the fort completely covered the span of her floor where her bed didn't touch. It only took a few more seconds before we were both inside, crawling around beneath the blankets, passing each other excitedly, seeing what else we might have inadvertently built. At one point, I realized her bed was high enough off the ground to crawl under, and so we discovered a new way to get from one side of the fort to the other.

I felt the seclusion from outside once again, but it was different this time. Becky was here, too, and there was enough room for us to lose sight of even each other. I wondered what

her mother would say when she saw it. We had heard her bustling around downstairs the whole time we were working, and she didn't seem to have noticed what we were up to. Becky left the fort and called down the stairs to her, in her pretty soprano voice.

When Mrs. Clearman followed her daughter into the room, she took a step back, amazed.

"Wow!" she exclaimed.

I had crawled outside as well and was busy preparing my answer that would explain how we could breathe under there. It was the first potential obstacle that popped into my head. But instead, Becky's mother got down on all fours and poked her head under the blankets. Becky and I glanced at one another, unsure what to think. Her mother stayed under there for a little while longer, and eventually, her head resurfaced.

"Let's take a picture," she said, heading out of the room.

Becky smiled at me, and I returned it.

We built the mother of all forts that day, so naturally, I could never replicate it. My mother and I got a copy of the photo after school one afternoon, and I was pleased to see how well it had come out. You really couldn't see Becky's carpet anywhere.

She told me they had to take it down almost immediately after I left, since she needed to be able to reach her bed that night. It seemed like a practical enough reason, although I still felt the way I always did when I first removed my living room fort's roof. But those emotions quickly disappeared. I knew the photo would never go away.

I planned to take a picture of my own fort the next time I built it, but I don't think I ever did. In fact, I can't recall ever rebuilding that living room fort again after the one I made at Becky's. Maybe I was getting too tall for it. The sofa wasn't that long, after all.

Architecture was never a subject on my radar when I got to college. Instead, I've learned to create things in a different way. You can't physically live inside of what I've created, nor can you knock it down with a bulldozer. It takes a different kind of force to experience and destroy those types of creations. So when I come home, I sit with my father on that living room sofa and share my most recent news and discoveries. I don't notice the musty smell, or think of the bare base that lies just beneath the cushions. And I'm certain that as Becky stands onstage and sings opera in front of her fellow students, instructors and critics in Boston, architecture has never crossed her mind as an interest either. Nor has the fort we once made. It was just fun.

But when I was eight, I still didn't understand why we could breathe inside our house, yet not in my fort. My nose had always felt a little stifled in there, but I never wanted to admit it to my mother. Becky's fort had been a lot more open, since the blankets didn't always reach the ground as they fell from the cardboard posts, and they weren't musty. I decided that there was always room for modification, different ways to build the same thing. There were different ways to do a lot of things—more than I could have thought when I was that age. The discovery was overwhelming, and it was challenging, but it always made me grateful for a little fresh air.

Line of Dirt

I am a planner. I got that from my mother. I like to plan things far in advance and know exactly what I'll be doing—even if I'm aware that those arrangements might change. Planning runs in my family, but as it crosses generations it starts to take on different forms. My great-grandmother, Nanny, planned to never keep anything for too long. It was her idea that any object that emitted even the slightest hint of dirt had no place in her house. For that reason, you didn't find burnt logs and ashes in her fireplace; you found a vase full of flowers. Everything was decorative rather than practical: her dishes and bowls, her furniture, her shelves. She didn't buy a washing machine when they became available either—I suppose wet clothing made a mess as well.

My grandmother, whom I grew up calling "Meme," was born into that house, where you had to take your clothes out to the Laundromat in order to get them cleaned, and where one simple piece of paper placed in the wastebasket was immediately emptied. They didn't recycle much in those days.

My first memory of being in Nanny's house was after she had already been moved to the nursing home, suffering early bouts of dementia that only worsened as she aged well into her nineties. No one currently owned the house, and we retained the right to examine it if we pleased. This was years after Meme had gone through and found nightgowns folded into boxes inside Nanny's dresser drawers, something that must have astounded her as she attempted to clean out her mother's things. There wasn't much to take with Nanny to the nursing home, as an

estate sale had taken care of most of her quaint belongings. But Meme brought her the nightgowns.

Meme believes she doesn't lean one way or another on terms of cleanliness, when she thinks about her mother today. Nanny was a "neat freak," and Meme just liked things "neat." There's a difference, she tells us, nearly a decade after Nanny has been gone.

My thoughts then linger on my mother and I wonder why she's so different from Meme and Nanny. Nanny meant "no clutter," just as Meme remains synonymous with "clutter in an organized fashion." But there is no organization or shortage of clutter in our house, which is twice as big as the one-story home in which Meme grew up with Nanny—and for good reason. We have too much stuff.

It's because we're planners. Nanny planned to keep nothing, and Meme planned to give my mother a bunch of her old belongings to keep in our attic after she married my father. My mother planned to not give up anything.

But Meme still doesn't lean one way or the other, she insists.

Nanny's old house looked empty enough without anyone living there. I had always imagined it filled up with the typical furnishings and supplies you would find in any household. Yet as Meme walked through and I watched her survey everything, possibly imagining what the house used to look like, I didn't think she saw much more than what was right in front of her.

When I go trudging through our basement at home, what I find is boxes within boxes. But the arrangement is not quite like the boxed-up clothing system in Nanny's old dresser drawers, rendered useless because the nightgowns were already organized without the added storing aids. Rather, we need the array of cardboard protectors because it's the only thing that keeps our basement from looking like a flood of clothing, toys, and papers.

My mother insists on occasion that she would have gotten rid of our baby clothes much sooner than she did, but she wanted to make sure she wasn't going to have another kid. It happened to a friend of hers, she contends. Got pregnant after she had given away all those mini overalls.

Obsessive compulsiveness runs in our family, too.

I used to add to the mess, I must admit. I liked to keep my bedroom clean, but my mother always explained how it was only clean "on the surface." I hid clutter under my bed, in my closet, and in my plastic bins. The rest went into the basement. But I was following by example.

Perhaps part of my rebellion as a teenager came in the form of wanting to become "cleaner" than my mother. I knew plenty of girls who wanted to be what their parents were not. Until then, both my mother and I were quite organized above the surface. This was my opportunity to be different.

My bags of clutter soon deviated from the basement and went straight to the giveaway pile, or outside to the garbage cans. When I began college, I liked to come home and clean whatever else I could, to pass the time and also to channel my stress. This past summer, for example, I decided to take another go at the basement, so I did. These instances happen in surges, and serve as the only reason my infrequent ventures into our basement don't lead to the same picture of clutter every time. Rather, the clutter twists and morphs into something else. The basement might look emptier to some degree, but it's still considerably filled.

That summer, I got down on hands and knees and started sifting through, seeing what I could find. It was the most recent cleaning surge to date, and it would certainly not be the last. But it managed to separate the mounds of 1980s maternity clothes from the sea of both the recognizable and the unrecognizable. As I finished up that section, I made mental notes of what I

would immediately give away once I had a house of my own. I envisioned my basement completely finished, with a cream-colored carpet instead of this hard concrete floor, and only enough furniture and papers to fill up one room. Not seven.

After I started on another box, I realized it was full of not clothing, but toys and dolls that I had forgotten I played with as a youth. Memories of early Hanukkahs were thrust at me in full force, and thanks to luck I had a pile of maternity clothes behind me to pad my fall, had it occurred.

But I kept my footing in the squishy maternal pond, and pulled out a doll with a heavy head and purple gymnastics outfit. With a grin, I placed her headfirst on the small space of floor I had cleared up, and watched her perform a headstand. It was an exciting Hanukkah when I had received her. I loved dolls that could do tricks.

Back in middle school, I never would have parted with this doll. Despite being years past the age of playing with her, I couldn't give up the physicality of that memory. I would have, instead, simply transferred her to the basement. So here she was.

That summer, however, I just wanted the clutter to be gone. It was rationality taking control—a quality I had been honing even more while I was away at school. I knew I had forgotten I owned this doll, and I knew in a few days or weeks, I would soon forget again. Sometimes it was better to be objective, especially if you had to be for someone else. I placed it in the giveaway box.

My mother is a self-proclaimed "over-sentimentalist." I was relieved she could at least admit it to herself when she first said it. But now it seems to have become something she takes pride in.

"It's a fear of getting rid of something you might want later," she explained after she had defined herself in these rather direct terms.

I didn't need explaining. I had seen our basement.

That August, as she picked through the toys I had finished boxing away, pulling out little plastic cars that I had no recollection of playing with, and placing them to the side, I asked her if she had ever, in fact, gotten rid of something she later regretted.

"No." It was her honest answer. "Because I probably never got rid of it."

I wonder if dementia runs in our family, too. Nanny is the only relative I can think of who suffered from it. Maybe she had it coming, for giving up all her physical belongings. Maybe they are what her memory needed. Dementia could have just been her missing those papers in the wastebasket. If that's all it was, we could have prevented the ailment altogether. I wish it were that simple.

My mother likes to tell me there are a lot of things I won't understand until I'm a mother, and I constantly fear the day I become one, because I know she's right. I'm at the bottom of the generational spectrum right now—in a way, it's a shame it can't stay like that for longer than it will. But I don't see why becoming a mother means you have to keep everything—nor do I think I'll be cursed with dementia if I decide to take advantage of my wastebasket.

At school, I grew fond of recycling. I recycled all the papers I would never need again. I reused notebooks. I maintained a filing system in a plastic white crate that I held onto all four years. I kept the books I wanted stacked neatly on my dorm room desk and sold or donated the others. I never let anything become too cluttered.

When I came home from school for my final winter break, having completely forgotten about my summer quest in the basement, I decided not to think about the future. I didn't imagine

what this house would look like in ten years, or twenty, or whenever my parents finally moved out. I didn't anticipate what I would want to keep and what I would want to throw away when they were no longer around. I was still in college, and not quite done. Other things seemed far more pressing, yet under my control.

But I still lean one way over the other.

My parents are no different than other families who decide to donate on New Year's Eve. It's a simple matter of tax refunds and suddenly the entire neighborhood has a new favorite hangout spot at the local Goodwill. By that New Year's, however, I had blocked from my memory the boxes of maternity clothes with shoulder pads, as well as the toys I had semi-convinced my mother to let go of. I also tried not to remind myself of the doll that did the headstands, and I succeeded.

The Goodwill mania returned, though, and I soon had to acknowledge the clutter once again. It was always difficult when these cleaning surges came, my mother admitted as we loaded up the boxes of clothing, dolls, and other toys to take to the donation center. But she liked to think that she was getting better about it—even if she did procrastinate. I started to wonder if there had even been something wrong in the first place. Guilt has been passed down to me through the generations as well.

My mother's memories are still formed by having a relationship to "stuff." Physical "stuff" that she forgets she has, but knows will always be right below her feet. She obviously didn't grow up in a house with Nanny.

I understand where she's coming from, basking in the comfort that comes with knowing things are just *there*. I used to be the same way, of course. After all, I grew up in her house, not Nanny's. But now I let my memories come in surges, too, and I hold onto the more recent things,

the items that usually mean the most to me. It's like following myself around with a dustpan, and only leaving behind the small line of dirt on the floor that won't sweep inside. The rest is easier to get rid of.

The obsessive compulsiveness didn't make Nanny a bad person, nor did it make my mother one. It affected them in different ways—quite opposite ways, in actuality. Meme and I stand in between her mother and mine, staring at them and wondering how they could have become so extreme. But perhaps our sympathies lie differently. It must have something to do with whom we grew up under. You always see someone differently, and at times more negatively, when they're the one who raised you.

"Nanny asked me to keep her old photos before her dementia set in," my mother told me, weeks after that trip to Goodwill.

That summer and winter break had led me to believe she still couldn't give up anything entirely—even after the boxes were signed off for. But my mother pressed on.

"She asked me to keep them because she knew I would. She knew I valued our family just like she did. It wasn't because she knew I was a pack rat."

No, neither of them are bad people. They simply chose to appreciate things in different ways. But they appreciated the same things. And I finally learned that Nanny only kept what was important.

Nanny was in her eighties when she finally bought a washing machine for her house. She was too old to go to the Laundromat. Meme had to come over and wash her clothes for her. Later on, it was difficult to clean out Nanny's room in the nursing home after she passed. Meme said there wasn't much to get rid of. Less of a physical strain for her, I suppose, than it was emotional.

My mother doesn't think there's any correlation between her and Nanny, in terms of keeping or throwing, and that could be true. Of the various qualities that run through our family, I don't think hoarding is one of them. Instead, we each adopt it to the extent that we see fit. So as a planner, I might not start out with as many things as my mother did when I buy my first home. I might refuse to house anything of hers in my attic.

Yet, I can't help but think that when that time rolls around and I have a place of my own, if she decides to ask me, I might make an exception.