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The Naked Note Taker: Creative Nonfiction Essays

Senior Honors Thesis

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A Note on the Format

My thesis is divided into three components:

I. *Princess Pascal and the Moldy Sleeping Bag*, a children's story

II. *The Naked Note Taker*, collection of creative nonfiction essays

III. <http://thenakednotetaker.wordpress.com/> a writing blog, also titled *The Naked Note Taker*

I divided my thesis into three parts because I wanted to explore different forms of creative writing—children's writing, creative nonfiction and writing for an online audience—during my senior year.

Princess Pascal and the Moldy Sleeping Bag

Princess Pascal is not an average princess.

She doesn't like castles.

She thinks dancing at balls is silly.

Big frilly dresses are not her style.

And she certainly doesn't want to marry a charming prince. "Princes are dull," says Princess Pascal.

Instead, Princess Pascal likes riding through the countryside on her horse.

And dancing in the rain.

And daydreaming about grand adventures in far away lands.

But more than anything, Princess Pascal likes sleeping outside in the old, moldy sleeping bag that her father gave her when she was just a baby.

So you can imagine how unhappy Princess Pascal was the day that her parents, the King and Queen, told her that she must marry a prince.

"Pascal," the Queen said, “someday the Kingdom will be all yours and you cannot rule an entire kingdom by yourself."

“But why can’t I rule the Kingdom alone?” Pascal asked.

“That’s just the way things are,” said the Queen.

"Yes," her father added. "You must find a prince."

Pascal agreed to marry a prince on one condition: He must spend one night outside in her old, moldy sleeping bag.

Her parents agreed and the very next night, a prince came knocking on the castle gates. He wore soft velvet slippers and a large floppy hat that covered most of his face.

"I have come to marry Princess Pascal," the prince announced loudly. Pascal told the prince that she would marry him if he spent one night in her old, moldy sleeping bag.

“That sleeping bag is filthy. And I think it’s covered in mold,” the prince said. “I will not spend the night in that disgusting thing.” The prince readjusted his floppy hat and left the castle.

The next night, another prince came to the castle gates demanding to marry Princess Pascal. Pascal again asked the prince to spend the night in her old, moldy sleeping bag.

The prince agreed, but moments later he returned, dragging the sleeping bag behind him. “It’s far too cold to sleep outside in just a sleeping bag,” he said and dropped the sleeping bag at Pascal’s feet. Before the prince turned to leave he paused and said to Pascal, “You should really wash that thing. It smells terrible.”

Night after night, prince after prince came to the castle gates hoping to marry Princess Pascal, but night after night, each prince refused to spend the night in the old, moldy sleeping bag.

Finally, the King and the Queen gave up. Pascal told her parents that no prince could pass the test. “Princes are boring and they don’t like the rain, or sleeping outside, or my sleeping bag.” She declared that she would leave for a grand adventure the next morning.

That night, a great rainstorm began. There was a knock at the castle gates. A young man came in sopping wet, and said that he was a prince from a far away land.

"I suppose," said Princess Pascal, "that you have come to marry me?"

"Why no," said the prince. "I simply came to the castle to dry off. I’m exhausted

and it’s raining awfully hard tonight."

"Well," said Pascal, “we don't have any room in the castle tonight. I can only offer you this old sleeping bag. And you'll have to sleep outside."

"I’m already wet,” said the prince, "and the sleeping bag might keep me a bit warmer."

The next morning the prince returned the sleeping bag to Princess Pascal. He thanked her but told her he had to be going.

As the prince turned to leave, Princess Pascal called after him, "Wait! You are the only prince to spend the night outside in my sleeping bag. Will you marry me and rule the kingdom with me?"

"I'm very sorry," said the prince," but I cannot marry you. You see, I'm out on a grand adventure, and I do not want to rule over a kingdom with a silly princess."

“I am not silly,” Princess Pascal told the prince. “And you are not very charming.”

The prince paused. “My parents said the same thing. I’m supposed to be out in search of a princess to marry, but instead I’m searching for a grand adventure in a far away land,” the prince said sadly.

“I am leaving for a grand adventure this very morning,” said Princess Pascal.

"In that case,” said the prince, “Perhaps we can go on a grand adventure together? Princess—I mean Pascal—I will marry you. That is, if you’ll still marry me?"

"Yes."

Princess Pascal and the not-so-charming prince were married and went on a grand adventure. When they returned from their adventure, they ruled the kingdom together and

lived happily every after.

The old, moldy sleeping bag is still in the castle. Queen Pascal finally decided it needed a good washing. But only after taking it on a few more adventures.

Because It Happened

It began in my early twenties, my fascination with and devotion to travel. It started to settle in, to really take hold, on a stretch of blistering concrete between the Lebanese and Syrian border. My sister and I had arrived that morning at the Syrian border without visas—they were difficult to get Stateside, and we'd heard that Americans could sometimes get them at the border. The pacing back and forth between the duty free shop and the border didn't hook me. And my pleading in shaky Arabic with the border guard didn't make me want to devote my life to wandering. It was the feeling, after six hours of bargaining with border officials and waiting in a hot terminal full of screaming babies and noisy chattering—purgatory for travelers—that came from finally getting the stamp. Syrian visas in hand, my sister and I galloped across the border and hitchhiked to Damascus, the road behind us disappearing in a puff of dirt.

Or maybe it began in my late teens, my preoccupation with the knowledge that I could be not only be *somewhere* else, but be *somebody* else while traveling. At eighteen I got a job with a nonprofit in Switzerland and began to test the waters of my identity. At home, I had an identity. Daughter of Jain and Ed. Sister to Chelsea. Good at reading, bad at math. A tendency to schedule every moment of life with some extracurricular activity. But the people I met in Switzerland—the nuns I shared candy with on a train, my Korean roommate with a relentless love for *Jurassic Park,* the farmer two mountains away who played his Alphorn every morning at dawn—knew nothing about me. Traveling somehow made the possibilities for my life seem bigger, grander. Everything was magnified in this new space: my sense of adventure, my future, my appetite and even, as silly as it sounds, my understanding of the world and my place in it.

To my surprise, my parents constantly praised my choice to chase down whatever I was pursuing at the moment. They didn't provide money for my adventures; they provided a sounding board. Every time I applied for a new job or program my mother would tell me, "If you don't ask, your answer is already no." When my stint in Switzerland ended and I returned home, I applied for a sail training scholarship and got it. The ocean scared me, but I wanted to keep chasing this new person, the person who could be anyone, anywhere.

No, it began in childhood, my ability to move from place to place—to travel—and maintain a sense of comfort, a sense of curiosity. At six, my family moved from a small town in Kansas to Germany. The food was different. Our home was different. The playgrounds were different. I had to be different too.

My mother tells me now that I worried a lot before our move. She says that I was an uneasy child, always close to her side, cautiously peering out at the world from behind her legs. I wonder now why I have no memory of this. I remember darting after pigeons in Paris (my mother told my sister and me we could keep one if we caught it. We failed). I remember eating giant pretzels at carnivals in Germany, and taking a ferry across the English Channel. But I have no memory of being so cautious and scared. Most of all, I wonder how I became a person who loves to travel, who loves to be out of my element and under the stress that accompanies any travel experience.

It began as a baby, perhaps, my desire to travel. My mother was pregnant with me the first time I flew. Maybe, during this first trip in the air, she somehow gave me the sense of wonder that fills me each time a plane, emerging from the clouds, settles on the surface of uncharted territories, of unknown lands as I gaze out the window. I know

these places aren't uncharted and unknown to others, but they're strange and wild to me all the same.

Whenever it happened—I can't place the moment that I began to love traveling—doesn't really matter, because it happened. The 16th century essayist Michel De Montaigne famously asked, "What do I know?" When I ask myself this question, I do not know why I love to travel or when this love took hold of me; I only know that it did.

The Naked Note Taker

"Did you write it all down?" Oumi looks at me expectantly, shampoo covering her hair like a hat of clouds, a bucket of water in each hand. A crescendo of water, voices and steam fills the hammam. Moroccan women seated on small plastic stools are bathing and enjoying this precious time to themselves; they are happy and relaxed. I am hot and uncomfortable.

"Oumi, I'm naked," I say, taking my bucket and scooping it into the basin of water next to her. "Where do you expect me to write it, under my left breast?" Oumi giggles at my joke, causing the water to slosh out of her buckets and smack the tiled floor. "Yeah, I wrote down everything from our last interview while I was in the changing room," I say.

"I started talking to someone else," Oumi says, gesturing with a swing of her bucket toward a large, naked Moroccan woman sitting in a corner of the steamy hammam. Oumi marches over to the woman, and I follow charily behind.

Oumi and I are in this hammam, or Turkish bath as they're called in the West, to conduct field research for our anthropology class. Other members of our class are collecting data on local schools and street vendors, but Oumi and I are talking to Moroccan women in hammams. This hammam is only one large room with blue tiled floors; the walls are stucco and its high ceiling is curved like an upside down teacup. Light drifts in through holes in the ceiling as steam collects on the stucco and slips down the walls. The sounds in here are like those of a child's bedtime bath magnified: Water smacks the tile with staccato slaps, women chortle with their companions, and children's voices whistle and squeak in the fog of steam clouding the room.

I trail behind Oumi like an obedient child as we head toward our next interview; women stare openly and make comments as I pass, but I keep my gaze directed down at my buckets of water. While there are hammams that tourists go to in big Moroccan cities like Fes and Marrakesh, the small Berber city of Sefrou in the Atlas Mountains doesn't see tourists. I am a sight, my skin raw and glaring against the dark, rich variation of color among the Moroccan women around me. Oumi plops her buckets down next to our next interview and begins chattering in Arabic. Although I speak some Arabic, I only catch snatches of what is being said. Oumi and the hammam patron, whose name is Fatima, are using some words that I have never heard, but then I begin to get the gist of what's being said. Oumi and Fatima are discussing how pale I am. "Impossible," Fatima says. She is so large that the little plastic stool she sits on is barely visible; a bucket is placed in front of her, and she washes her hair as they talk. Her hands are big, but chubby like a baby's and they work methodically over her hair.

"I know," Oumi says in Arabic with a smile directed at me.

"I have seen pale people, but she is red *and* pale," Fatima says and shakes her head in my direction. She pauses for a moment then asks, "How can that be?" Oumi nods slowly, dividing her attention between Fatima and translating for me. Oumi's long, dark hair has been rinsed of its bubbles and suds; only a few traces of soap cling to her face as she speaks. She listens for a moment longer and then launches into our questions: How often do you come to the hammam? *Once a week*. What do women talk about in the hammam? *Everything*. Does being nude make you feel self-conscious? Fatima won't even dignify this with a response; she only shakes her head with a laugh and begins shaving her legs. Oumi nods. "Pass me the soap," Oumi says to me, reaching across me and

grabbing at our bag of toiletries. I smile and hand her the soap.

She pushes me over in an effort to reach the soap and giggles when I slide off the bath mat and onto the floor. I grimace. I am not a squeamish person; the three-second rule doesn't apply to me, and I wear tee shirts for more than one day between washings, but sitting naked on a wet, hairy floor has pushed me over the edge. All day long as we've hopped from hammam to hammam, Oumi has been pressing me to be scrubbed down with the black, volcanic soap that the hammam attendants use on patrons. I am about to give in.

Since some Moroccans don't have running water, hammams are both a necessity and a form of social bonding. The highlight of any trip to a hammam, according to Moroccan women, is the exfoliation process, usually preformed by a friend or a hammam attendant. First the black, volcanic soap, which is more like a paste, is slathered on the skin. Then a bristly exfoliation pad is worked in small circles over nearly every inch of the skin. No nipples or delicate backsides are spared, which made me reluctant to participate. But after watching this process throughout our day in the hammams and noting that no one was screaming in pain, I relented.

Oumi gestures to an attendant, who waves for me to come over. I do not, and she saunters up to me. When I do not immediately stand to greet her, she grabs my arm gently and pulls me across the hairy, wet floor. Although I am mortified, my body glides easily over the slippery floor, and I know somehow not to struggle against her. The attendant, who is young with her hair tied up in a green headscarf, tells me to lie down on my stomach. I listen to her. There is no avoiding the hair now; when I lie down, I place my right cheek to the tile and try not to look too closely at the floor, which to be fair, is

very clean, but in a room full of naked women, hair can never be completely banished. The attendant, Selma, begins working on my legs, which is not painful, but pleasant. Layers of skin come off my body and this elicits a reaction from Selma. She tells me with a laugh that foreigners are dirty. I tell her that some Westerns think Moroccans are dirty because they only bathe once a week. Selma only smiles at this and points to the layers of sloughed off skin, which seems to be clear evidence supporting her claim.

My scrub stops being fun when Selma commands me to turn over. She scrubs the skin on my forearms raw, and I look around for Oumi to interrupt my session, but I have lost her in the cloud of steam and skitter of voices bouncing around the room. Selma finally tosses her pad in an empty bucket and, without warning, throws an entire bucket of water over me. I feel like a house pet that's just gotten a bath, and I probably look like one too; my hair is in my eyes, and I try to stumble to my feet. "Oumi?" I call.

"*Yela,"* Oumi calls to me, *Let's go*! "We've got to find another hammam." We are trying to visit four hammams in one day to collect samples from different parts of Sefrou.

We have trouble finding another hamman. Hammams in most parts of Morocco don't have websites, or telephones; some of them don't even have names. Oumi and I step back out on the street and enter the old, walled quarter of the city, known as the Medina, and start asking around for a hammam. Hammams are segregated by gender and often operate for men and women at different times of the day, which presents another problem. After hunting around for thirty minutes, we only find hammams that are operating for men. An elderly woman finally takes us to a hammam deep inside the warren of tiny Medina streets; its entrance is a low, passageway next to a tomato stand.

This part of the Medina is a patchwork of dappled light and dark corners. Laundry lines hang above the streets along with wooden support beams that push apart the ramshackle buildings like a mother breaking up a squabble between children; the buildings seem to lurch toward each other in an effort to gobble up the contents of the busy streets: Pedestrians, donkeys, venders and all. As Oumi steps inside the unmarked archway to the hammam, she slips into darkness, leaving me alone on the street. Part of me wants to stay out on the street and in Morocco indefinitely; a nagging desire to be more permanent in Morocco has begun to bubble and jounce around in my gut. This place has grabbed hold of me in a way that no other country or destination has during my travels, despite the discomfort I feel almost every day and in nearly every situation in Morocco. I linger on the street for a moment longer, before Oumi's voice calls my name from somewhere in the darkness just beyond the doorway. In answer to her call, I step inside the archway, my hands groping the darkness, not sure of what I will find, but outstretched and ready.

So, I Shot a Man Last Week

While hiking the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, leaving the woods and hitchhiking into towns was a necessity. The trail was uncomplicated; each morning after taking down my tent and eating a granola bar, I would leave the tangled underbrush where I had slept and step onto the trail's narrow dirt path. Then, I'd walk until I could walk no more. In opposition to this, calling me loudly, urgently, was civilization. It lured me out of the trees and onto the small highways and dirt roads that intersect the Trail. Its pull was strong: Town had food, fuel, ibuprofen, and always, always a payphone with my parents' and sister's voices—disembodied, yet clear and far more steady than I felt—telling me to keep going, to keep walking north.

In Erwin, Tennessee, 338 miles into my 2,175 mile trek, I filled my belly and restocked my backpack with fellow hikers, Mary, Sarah, and Sarah's dog, Toby. Our packs were splayed out in the parking lot of an ailing Piggly Wiggly grocery store when an elderly woman approached us. She was nursing a severe limp that lent her gait a strange, off-kilter pace. Her limp was accentuated by braces worn on each knee and a cast on her right arm. She was a mess. Hobbling toward us, she began talking before we could look up from our piles of peanut butter, dried fruit and Ramen Noodles. She guessed aloud that we must be Appalachian Trail hikers, based on our grubby clothes, tangled hair and dirty backpacks. Although her appearance was troubling—she stood a little too close and talked a little too loud—we were elated to have a ride back to the Trail.

Cramming four people, three backpacks and a large mutt into her tiny, red hatchback took some time, but we squeezed in. Dog hair that had been matted against the car's seats now clung to my sweaty, hairy legs. My legs, covered bruises and pocked with

mosquito bites, hadn't been shaved since I'd started hiking the Trail two months before. KFC wrappers, RC Cola cans and empty Marlboro boxes covered the floor; the whole car smelled like fried chicken and dog. I leaned against the car door and looked down at my pack in my lap. Silence settled in the car as we pulled away from the cracked grocery store parking lot, its yellow lines faded like the washed-out remains of a chalk hopscotch board.

Our driver, who introduced herself as Marguerite, broke the silence by saying, "So, I shot a man last week." Without waiting for a response, Marguerite explained that she had seen a man trespassing on her property, "So I shot him in the juggler," she said. Sarah, sitting next to me in the back seat, corrected Marguerite, "Do you mean 'jugular'?" Sarah sat with one arm around Toby, while the other hand clutched a jar of peanut butter she'd been unable to shove in her pack. I began to giggle and tried to stifle it by looking at Sarah instead of Marguerite. Sarah's appearance was funny too, which didn't help. Although we had just been in town, Sarah looked like she was still firmly rooted on the Trail. Her bright orange hair and freckles had taken on the dingy hue of an old photograph. She wore Keen sandals—without socks—while hiking and when she took them off at night, the dirt from the trail left grimy zebra stripes across her feet and toes.

"Yeah," Marguerite said to Sarah, "I shot him in the *jugular*, but he was okay. I fell off my roof in the process. That's why I got this cast on my arm," raising her arm like a chicken, she flapped it once slowly, then let it settle against her side. Marguerite lifted her good arm—her left arm—off the steering wheel and shifted gears. With her right arm immobilized in the cast, this left the steering wheel unattended. The car began to sidle

into another lane, but Marguerite finished shifting gears and returned the vehicle to the center of the lane. “Girls,” she said, turning around to address the backseat, “I haven’t had a driver’s license since 1983, and I don’t plan on gettin’ one anytime soon.”

From my place in the backseat, I caught Mary’s reflection in the rearview mirror. Her eyes widened and met mine with a mixture of panic and amusement. Mary, although dirtied from living on the trail, seemed to maintain a level of neatness that Sarah and I could not replicate. Her hair was neatly held in place by a bandana, and her clothes hadn’t taken on the same tattered look that mine had. But her tidy appearance was deceptive and changed as the months wore on: Mary counted every shower she took while on the Appalachian Trail, and after six months of hiking, the tally was less than a dozen showers total, a number she is still proud of.

Leaving the houses that made up Erwin, we turned onto a two lane highway, with a name vaguely weapon-like name—BB and M16 are both names of rural roadways I encountered on the Appalachian Trail—where Marguerite told her captive audience of a life of woes. According to Marguerite, she had stabbed and shot numerous people—all of whom were surely asking for it—as well as lost both of her grown children in accidents too terrible to recount. While riding at breakneck speed through the Tennessee countryside, I wondered what my family would think of me hitchhiking. I had hitchhiked in Europe, but I had never talked about it with my family. This part of me wasn’t a secret, but it was hidden under the layer of events that had happened since I began traveling solo at seventeen.

*

“I learned about you hitchhiking for the first time on the Appalachian Trail. If you had

told me about a year before that, I probably would have had a different reaction, but you were already taking part in a daring adventure." My mother told me this recently, when I called her to ask how she felt about my interest in hitchhiking. I found her reaction hard to believe after telling hitchhiking stories to people and always getting a "You're lucky to be alive" response. Didn't my mother, the person most invested in my wellbeing, feel the same way? "My gut reaction was to trust your judgment. You educated me about the risks you take and don't take and that made sense to me. You told me you sized people up before you rode with them and that confirmed my opinion about your choices." Her voiced echoed a bit as we talked; I had caught her at the library near her apartment in Portland, OR, and she had stepped out into the lobby to talk to me. I pushed her further, reminding her of the personal goal I announced after completing the Appalachian Trail: To hitchhike on all seven continents. What about that; isn't that crazy? "Mackenzie, I trust your judgment. Regardless of how careful you are in life, bad things can happen. You might as well live the life you want." The steady tone in her voice echoes the conversations we had at various payphones in towns along the Appalachian Trail. Her voice said then, what it still does today: Your goals are not crazy. I believe in you. You can do this.

*

We finally reached the trailhead and clamored out of the car. Wishing to give one more piece of advice before bidding us farewell, Marguerite rolled down her window and said, "Girls, I got one more thing to say to you: Never pull a knife on someone unless you intend to stab 'em, and," she paused and raised her eyebrows for effect, "never point a gun at someone unless you intend to shoot 'em." She smiled; pleased with the advice she

had imparted, she threw the car into reverse with her good arm, and backed onto the highway before driving away.

Able to finally let loose, the three of us sat down on the gravel shoulder of the road and laughed while Toby sat by, tilting his head side to side and watching us with interest. Sarah opened her jar of peanut butter and ate a couple of spoonfuls before cramming it in a side pocket of her pack. The Appalachian Trail here was marked with a small white blaze of paint at the edge of the shoulder. I got up, brushed the gravel off my butt and started walking north.

Thank You, Thank You, Thank You

We had been driving for nearly three hours when my Kyrgyz cab driver hit the brakes, and let his Mercedes Benz sidle onto the side of the highway. We were somewhere in the mountains that ripple between Toktogul, in the Northwest of Kyrgyzstan in central Asia, where I had been visiting my friend Sarah, and Bishkek, where I was scheduled to catch a flight to Turkey that night. Michal had been driving 120 miles per hour since the beginning of our trip together. He listened to thumping German dance music the entire journey, his only movement the tap, tap, tap of his right index finger on the car's steering wheel.

The car stopped and Michal hit the power button on the CD player. He turned around in his seat and looked at me. His upper lip was covered in few hairs that looked like they were thinking of joining forces to form a mustache. Most of his hair was on his head—short, black fuzz, like the surface of a peach. He couldn't have been older than his late teens. We were alone in the car. Taxis usually haul six people at a time between Toktogul and Bishkek, but after hours of waiting for other passengers in the Toktogul taxi lot and finding no one, Michal had agreed to take me as his only passenger to Bishkek.

Now his expression worried me. He looked upset and confused, like he was taking and test and didn't know any of the answers. He sighed.

I didn't speak a word of Kyrgyz, a fact that Michal and I had established when I'd gotten in the taxi. He'd tried to speak to me in Russian, and I had tried to tell them that I only spoke English and Arabic—two languages that did me no good here.

I'd just spent a week with Sarah, a Peace Corps volunteer and close friend, during which we had happily played mother and helpless child; Sarah with her fluent Kyrgyz cast as the mother, and I, excited but clueless visitor played the role of helpless infant. During our week together, Sarah bargained, bought tickets and food and explained my presence to those we met. As someone who often travels alone and therefore does most of the planning, haggling and navigating while on the road, I was happy for the change of pace and let Sarah take the lead. I settled easily into my newfound haplessness and stayed there for the remainder of the trip. It was easy to do—Kyrgyzstan was a wonderful place to watch and learn from.

I began loving Kyrgyzstan the morning after my arrival. Upon waking up, Sarah's friends—her initial host family in Bishkek who kindly let Sarah and I stay the night—brought out a delicious noodle dish, leftover from last night's dinner, and a bowl of candy. *An entire bowl of candy. For breakfast*. As I ate candy—little hard candies wrapped in colorful foil—and listened to Sarah and her friends attempt to teach me some Kyrgyz words, I knew I was going to like this place. Kyrgyzstan continually wowed me during my visit: Tiny roads dipped and slipped between mountains and rolling fields of green in the countryside. In the cities, markets offered noodles, cookies and spices and the streets were oceans of traffic and people. I was in love.

But now I was out of Sarah's protection, with her wild red hair, Keen sandals and careful Kyrgyz. Michal sighed again. He rubbed his peach-fuzz head. It was time for some pantomime.

Michal was up first.

Me, Michael said by pointing to himself with a jabbing motion, *sleep.* He demonstrated this by leaning his seat back, dropping his head to one side and closing his eyes.

What? I asked by shaking my head and raising my hands and shoulders. *I don't understand*, I said in English. I was losing this game of charades.

Michael repeated his jabbing and passing out performance, but this time with more vigor, looking like a drunk teenager dancing at a house party: all limbs and no control.

I shook my head again. *I don't understand*, I repeated in English and then in Arabic, only because it made me feel better—I knew it wouldn't get me anywhere.

I, I said by mimicking Michael's one-man show and jabbing my hands at my chest, *must go to Bishkek*. I pantomimed this by doing my best impression of an actor driving a car in a movie, circa 1956: hands gripping an imaginary wheel and wildly swinging from side to side. Then, *I must fly to Turkey,* I said, shooting my hand across the space between us in my best airplane impression.

After my performance, Michal shook his head, still not understanding what I was trying to say, still wanting to get his message across. But he was a man on a mission. He tried again.

This time, I got it. Michal wanted to take a nap. We were several hours away from Bishkek and from my plane taking off and Michal wanted to take a nap.

He fished a sheet of paper from the glove box and wrote down times. *8:15,* he told me by writing the numbers and then pointing to the ground. *It's 8:15 now.* Then he wrote 8:45 on the paper and did his passing out routine again, followed by what was supposed

to be waking up but looked more like someone jumping out from behind a corner—*surprise!* I hoped that wasn't really how he greeted the world when he woke up each morning.

He wanted a 30-minute nap. I looked at my watch and did the math. He definably had time to take a nap and get me to the airport on time. And who am I to tell a sleepy man—especially one who's making a special trip for me—not to take a nap?

So Michal took a nap, leaning his seat back and falling asleep moments later.

He had inadvertently chosen a pretty spot to stop the car—a river chugged along side the road and flowers dotted its banks. I wasn't sure I wanted to leave the car—Michal seemed nice, but part of me worried that he might drive off and leave me. I figured to trust my gut—that he was just a sleepy teenager—and I left the car for the river. After 30 minutes, I returned to the car.

But Michal was not ready to get up from his nap.

Five more minutes, he responded by holding up five fingers each time I woke him up.

This game of impatient parent—me—and grumpy child unwilling to get out of bed—Michal—continued for almost an hour before we finally started driving again. The roles that Sarah and I had played were seeing a new, reluctant cast.

By the time Michal reclaimed his spot behind the wheel, the sun, low and looming above the line of mountains, had almost set.

I fell asleep to the tap, tap, tap of Michal's finger and the rush of road around the car.

I awoke when the staccato beats of honking cars began entering my dreams. It was very dark—there were no streetlights on the highway and no lights of homes jouncing past as we drove. The only light came from the occasional headlights of cars passing us, their lights skittering across the windshield of the Benz.

I suddenly realized why the cars were passing very close to us and honking—Michal was driving on the wrong side of the road.

His nap had not been enough: He was letting the car creep from one side of the road to the next, cars honking wildly, headlights bouncing in and out of view.

The next hour crept along slowly, and I realized something else: Michal was lost.

He began to mutter is Kyrgyz. I tried to start another game of charades with the theme, *Where the hell are we and where are we going?* but I couldn't begin to think of how to act out such questions. So I just started talking to Michal in frantic English, to which he responded to in frantic Kyrgyz.

Our broken conversation continued intermittently for hours, growing more and more desperate on each side as the night stretched out behind us. My seat belt didn't work, and Michal's diving threw me from one side of the backseat to the other. I finally took the broken seatbelt and looped it around me in an attempt to stay seated in one spot. Just when I began to worry that I was about to die—Michal's driving had become more and more erratic—and I was beginning to think that hurling myself from the car was my best option, Michal erupted in shrieks of joy, followed by silence as we drove into the Manas International Airport parking lot. He pulled the Benz up on the curb and turned around to look at me, the smallest glimmer of a smile settling across his lips. It was

nearly 2 a.m. now and my flight, like many flights departing Kyrgyzstan, was leaving in the middle of the night, at 3:48 a.m.

Yanking my backpack from the seat beside me, I pressed the last of my Kyrgyz Som into his hands and hauled myself from the cab. Michal got out of the cab and stood to wave me goodbye. As I left the car and ran toward the airport, I threw my head back in Michal's direction and repeated the only word I remembered from Sarah's attempts to teach me Kyrgyz: *Rahmat, Rahmat, Rahmat—thank you, thank you, thank you.*

Birds, Singing

The call came at 1:39 a.m. The ring woke me up slowly with its soft buzz, not a jarring clamor like the late night calls of my childhood, a sound that could stir an entire household. No, this sound was quiet, but persistent.

I did not know the name lighting up the screen, lighting up our dark bedroom, but the caller called once, twice, three and finally four times, so I woke him up.

Who is *Abcdefg*? I asked.

Abcdefg? He echoed. *Abcdefg* he repeated. Confusion swam across his face.

When the phone flipped open and her voice—high, sad, desperate—leaped from the phone, I knew who it must be: The Ex. *Abcdefg*, a name that means little to me aside from its designation as pit stop on the map of my boyfriend's life.

Now her voice bounds through the dark apartment like a feral cat indoors, reckless, frightened.

His voice: *Confusion, confusion.*

Her voice: *Pain, pain.*

Him: *Question?*

Her: A*nswer. Pain. More and more pain.*

And it continues like this—accusations years old that have nothing to do with now, nothing to do with our life and us. Then there are accusations of now and of him with me. Comparisons, good for prices at the grocery store, but not good for life, for love, are thrown from the phone too.

She knows this is wrong; she knows that she's drunk, but she can't stop now, not at 2 and then 3 in the morning, her voice ringing more and more desperate as the minutes wear on.

But she is slowly coming to the truth, a truth that she does not want to acknowledge: that she no longer has a hold on him, can no longer manipulate his life, his emotions with her actions.

Finally, it is over, her words settling into the carpet like Chinese takeout from last night—filling when it first arrived, but now disgusting; something that must be removed from the apartment, taken out long before trash day.

As morning eases its way into the apartment, birds begin to sing their song of morning not long after her song of mourning.

When I finally sleep, I dream not of her voice, but of him and of birds. Birds winging high above us across the sky with no care for our steps below.

Veggie: A Personal History

1994-At age ten, I decide to become a vegetarian. This is prompted partially by ethical reasons—I am upset when I learn exactly where meat comes from—but also by a Girl Scout patch I am earning that requires scouts to try something new. Vegetarianism is new to me. I don't yet know that it will cause strong reactions, both positive and negative, in those around me. My vegetarianism officially begins at Taco Bell, where I order only refried beans. They are delicious.

1995—I like being a vegetarian, so I stick with it. My mother tells me this can continue if I visit a nutritionist and research vegetarianism. I do both. I learn the difference between vegetarianism and veganism: Vegetarians eat don't eat meat, poultry or fish, but do eat animal by-products such as dairy and eggs; Vegans don't eat any animal products or by-products.

1996—My mother begins working after a seven-year hiatus, and I begin preparing meals for my sister, Chelsea, and myself. I struggle to cook meals at first, but then remember what the nutritionist told me: Create meals that have protein, fiber and fruit and vegetables. I begin to understand what protein means for me: beans, seeds, nuts, grains, soy.

1997—By age thirteen, being a vegetarian isn't easy. Other kids think it's strange, and I spend a lot of time explaining what I put into my body and why. I am also homeschooled and a Girl Scout, which, combined with vegetarianism, doesn't make me very popular.

1998-I'm in high school and being a vegetarian is suddenly cool. When people ask me why I'm a vegetarian, I tell them it's for ethical reasons. In truth, I'm sure not even

sure what “ethical reasons” means anymore; it’s just something that spills from my lips, a canned speech.

Chelsea becomes a vegetarian. My parents are still, for all intensive purposes, carnivores.

1999—I start taking ballet classes and get into a good ballet school in downtown Kansas City where I spend most of my afternoons, most of my evenings. I stop eating Skittles because they are candy and because they contain gelatin.

2000—I'm sixteen and think a lot about the conditions animals live in. I feel guilty, *really guilty*, that anything should suffer for my eating habits. I can’t really explain my guilt, or its source, to other people, but I feel it all the same. I know some friends think my reasons for being a vegetarian are silly. My vegetarianism acquires more fervor.

2001—I am still a vegetarian, but wonder if it makes sense. Aren’t people *supposed* to eat meat? Not eating meat for ethical reasons often seems selfish, like I am putting a burden on those around me with my choice to not eat what others are enjoying.

2002-I lose interest in the reasons I became a vegetarian. I lose interest in a lot of things. I stop dancing. I have now been a vegetarian for eight years. It's become a habit, so I don't stop, but I try not to talk about it.

2003—I try to see how long a can know a person before they discover that I'm a vegetarian, and that I was homeschooled. When new people learn these facts about me, I enjoy the surprised look that sometimes skitters across their faces. I become a “French fry vegetarian” and don’t focus on getting the nutrients that my body needs. Words like *protein* and *vegetable* lose some of their meaning for me. I gain weight.

2003—I move to another continent, and over the next few years I will travel to countries where I am sure I regularly ingest meat despite my darnedest efforts not to. I end up working on a sailboat where I occasionally eat a piece of fish caught from the stern of the boat. I just try to do the best I can, to make the best decisions for my body with the options I am given.

2004—I work in the kitchen of a Girl Scouting center in Switzerland where I prepare meals for up to 140 people each night, including a meat dish. I meet some of the cows that I will eventually be serving, which surprisingly doesn't bother me. The cows live in fields surrounding the chalet, and when I look out the window, their faces stare back at me, calm and quiet.

2005—My father decides to change his diet. He Googles the words, "super foods" and discovers that meat is not super; he begins eating more fruits and vegetables. I have been a vegetarian for eleven years.

2006—While living outside for six months on the Appalachian Trail, I rethink most of my life, and the way that I want to live it. When I return home, I start thinking about vegetarianism in environmental terms. I am no longer a "French Fry vegetarian." I lose weight.

2007—I read "Power Steer" by Michael Pollan. Reading details of the torturous lives of livestock causes me to rethink my rejection of the ethical argument for vegetarianism. I begin to talk to friends about vegetarianism again. I try to tell them that I don't think eating meat is bad, but that we should eat less of it, and that animals should be raised in an environmentally friendly and humane manner. Why can't people eat animals that led healthy lives before they died?

2009—I start learning more about veganism. Dairy is difficult for your body to digest, I learn, and being a vegan seems to entail eating foods that aren't processed, which seems like a good idea.

My mother tries being a vegetarian for one month; she only gives into temptation once (chicken is the culprit). My father rarely eats meat now. Sweet potatoes are his new favorite "super food." Chelsea, who now lives on another continent, is still a vegetarian.

2010—I read Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*. In it, Foer details his personal history with vegetarianism and discusses the culture of raising and eating animals in the United States. This book gives new life to my vegetarianism. The thought of people judging me for being a vegetarian still worries me; I don't want friends and new people I meet to think I am judging them for eating meat, and I don't want to be judged for my personal choices, either. Like most people, I am trying to make good decisions for my life, and myself. I still can't fully articulate why being a vegetarian is a good choice for me, but somehow, I know it is.

2011—I am a vegan at home most of the time; it's much easier than I had originally thought. I'm a regular 'ol vegetarian when I'm not cooking for myself, although I'm often able to eat vegan without most people noticing, or making a fuss. When asked why I'm a vegetarian I say it's for environmental, ethical, and health reasons, but I never try to push this; I try only to be myself. I have been a vegetarian for almost seventeen years.

Pittsburgh to Duncannon: A Narrative of Sorts

I didn't know what I was doing. As I drove across Pennsylvania, I listened to the radio. I danced to pop songs that are the musical equivalent for junk food, a bag of chips, a pint of Ben and Jerry's for my ears. Green mountains lulled by and I thought, "What am I going to do once I get there?"

I only stopped once on the way from my tiny basement apartment in Pittsburgh to Duncannon, PA. In the gas station, I asked the woman how to get back on highway 22. "Where ya going?" she asked, her head cocked to the side, her teeth twisted in her mouth like they're trying to escape, "I don't know the names of the roads, only know the end result and how it looks gittin' there."

"Duncannon. I'm going to Duncannon. Twenty-Two is that big highway I just came from," I say, pointing over my shoulder toward the smudged gas station windows, as if this will make everything clear. Then a guy walks into the gas station. He's big in every way: big head, big hands, big gut. He's even got big teeth.

"She's going to Duncannon," the lady says pointing at me without any other explanation.

"Go right out of the gas station then keep goin' straight. At the stop sign take a left and then keep going all the way 'til you get to Duncannon," he tells me. I usually write down every scrap of directions on my hand, on a receipt, on anything. But this time I don't. I figure I'll manage.

It really is beautiful in central Pennsylvania. Sure, it's not beautiful the way the beaches of Hawaii are, but one form of beauty negate another. Maybe I only think this because I'm from Kansas, and I think it's beautiful there with its miles of horizon as

straight as a line somebody drew with a ruler and its waving wheat licks the skyline. A skyline that usually goes unnoticed as drivers plow across the State on their way to more interesting places like Colorado where everything is bigger from the horizon to the cost of living.

Duncannon is not the town that I remember it to be. Compared to my life now, it's tiny, not really even a town, but just a strip of houses with a post office.

The first time I was in Duncannon, I walked there on the Appalachian Trail. Duncannon is just past the half -way point—about 1,100 miles into the 2,174.5 miles of trail that make up the path that travels from Georgia to Maine. When I walked to Duncannon, I don't remember the town being run down or dilapidated; it seemed nice. Duncannon offered all the things I needed—food, a bed, a phone to call my family and a little diner that made biscuits. Now I have different eyes when I look at Duncannon and its hiker hotel—the Doyle Hotel. The building in is shambles. The ceiling droops and is covered in the brown spots of water damage. Now it looks like the beginning of a low-budget horror movie, a place where the protagonist really shouldn't be.

It was evening when I arrived. I'm sure I looked out of place—I was wearing a black Patagonia tank dress; my bangs were pulled back and my hair was wild and un-brushed around my shoulders. I didn't look like a hiker. But part of me still felt like one. I k*new* I belonged there even if no one else did. I inched up to the bar and waited. The bar was full and the woman behind it scurried to and fro helping hikers. She finally came over me; I stood at the edge of the bar. I told the woman—Vicky—that I needed a room. "You

a hiker?" she asked. Her glasses drooped down to the tip of her nose and she looked at me, tying to size me up.

"I thru hiked in 2006," I said.

"What's yer name?"

"Mackenzie"

"No, yer trail name" she said and rolled her eyes in a way that suggests she could have taught teen girls a thing or two about eye-rolling.

"Oh, Hitch. My trail name's Hitch," I said slowly. It's been years since anyone called me that. Although I made several close friends on the trail, we've all switched to our real names by now. Vicky ambles away with my credit card and my ID—still from Kansas, not yet from Pennsylvania—and heads for the other end of the bar.

When she comes back she's holding a three-ring binder. "Did ya hike with Bluebird?"

"Yes"

"Now I remembers ya" she said and flopped the binder open. Inside are hundreds of pages filled with photos of hikers. Each hiker has a photo—some look like they've been taken without much warning—the hikers often looked surprised: surprised to be inside, surprised to have food in front of them, surprised to have walked more than 1,000 miles. Most of piles of food look like they could give a person a heart attack just by being in the same room; there are huge burgers, and mountains of fried foods that are not always easily identifiable. She held up the book and points: there I am.

In the photo, my hair is in the signature two French braids that I wore for the entire hike; each braid starts somewhere near my temples and then travels down the back

of my head ending in two brassy plaits that rest near my breasts. My eyes are closed because of the flash—something that always happens to me—and I'm wearing the same blue shirt that I bought somewhere in Virginia and wore for the next five months until I reached the end of the trail in Maine.

Dashes, Dots and Bullets: A Life Filled with Lists

I am an avid list-maker. Each morning begins with a list of what to do, of where to be. My daily list brings structure to my day—I always know what's ahead of me—the string of items that remains uncrossed—and what's behind me—that satisfying little line passing through the heart of a completed task. And I don't just make daily lists; I make weekly, monthly and yearly lists, lists of what to pack, places I want to see, adventures I want to have. Lists punctuate my life, creating a steady warp and weft of tasks that form the fabric of my days.

I'm not the only person who loves lists; in fact, humanity has made lists since we began sketching out drawings on caves nearly 32,000 years ago. Some of these early lists—rows of images, really—are found in Chauvent, France. The cave drawings depict animals in rows. Henri Breuil, the 20th century priest and archeologist, guessed that some early drawings were not only reflections of the animals humans hunted, but were also a type of magic intended to bring a fruitful hunt. It might not be a list in today's terms, but we had to start somewhere.

The genesis of my list making began in middle school when I started juggling school, a job and several extra curricular activities. A calendar, yet another kind of list, wasn't enough; I had to have something else to guide me through each day, something to give my days shape and focus. I started keeping my daily lists in a little notebook I called "the listbook." My mother was also a list maker, so perhaps I got some of my need to track and tick off my daily activities from her. However it started, once I began making lists, I couldn't stop.

What, exactly, is a list? Although the word might have it's source from earlier

times, the form of the word *list* that we use today likely has roots in the French word, *liste* which means "a border, hem, bordering strip," according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Its first known appearance in English is attributed to Shakespeare in *Hamlet* in a line that refers to "a list of landlesse resolutes." Today the Oxford English Dictionary says the word means, "A catalogue or roll consisting of a row or series of names, figures, words or the like." Merriam-Webster notes that early written lists are often found in association with war— the need to inventory weapons, soldiers and other supplies prompted list making.

We don't just need lists for to catalogue the physical; we need lists as framework for the abstract, for rules and guidelines. The Bible uses a list for its commandments, the Quran employs a list to construct the five pillars of faith, and the Eightfold Path is a key tenet of Buddhism. In 1517 Martin Luther used a list to write, *Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences*—a text that's often credited with prompting the Protestant Reformation.

Simply put, lists have a powerful presence in history and shape the way we live our lives. They are a way to record where we've been, and what we should—and should not—do with our lives.

If I don't make a list I'm afraid I might miss something—an appointment, an assignment, an opportunity. I might miss out on something great that life has to offer. Or at least, that's how it feels. While some may view my relationship with lists as stifling, I feel lighter and less obligated knowing that I've made a list. Once my daily to-dos are down on paper, my mind is free to wander, and free to write.

Writers and poets often tackle lists. Think of Wallace Stevens' "Thirteen Ways of

Looking at a Black Bird," or the list essay "The Things I've Lost" by Brian Arundel. Arundel counts both the physical and the abstract among his loses. Among the physical: "Round, purple glasses: in an Atlanta pool hall over drinks with Ashy whose wife was determined to save their marriage by having a baby," and the abstract: "My virginity: in 1980, a couple of weeks short of 16, in a ritual so brief, awkward and forgettable that I have, in fact, forgotten it." Dinty W. Moore constructs a narrative on fathers in list form in "Son of Mr. Green Jeans: An Essay on Fatherhood, Alphabetically Arranged." Lists are a way to catalogue the collective experience of our lives, to show us what we've missed, what we've been through and what we might face in the future. Khalil Gibran's 1923 work, *The Prophet* consists of a list of topics such as love, family and death. Each part of the list addresses a different struggle, and the ways in which to overcome each struggle, in life.

Lists can also be reminders of successes and failures. My list of fellowship and scholarship applications reveals that I'm good at getting organizations to give me money. But my Excel spreadsheet of my writing submissions, reveals failure after failure. The occasional success is buried between dozens of lines of rejection. Somehow, though, this list of rejections (and the odd success) is comforting to me; it provides a record of my efforts and seems to say to me *Look at all you've accomplished,* even if the accomplishment is simply more practice and more writing that probably won't lead to publication.

An agenda is just a fancy name for a list, so every president makes lists too. President Barrack Obama's agenda includes twenty-three issues listed alphabetically on the White House website including civil rights, education, poverty, social security and

many topics in between. A list can tell us a lot about the importance of each item to the list-maker: The While House website lists issues such as Defense and Taxes under their own paginated category, while issues like Faith, Art, Child Advocacy, and Science are all under one category titled "Additional Issues." Even the founders of the United States of America thought a list was the best way to compose the country's founding legal document, the Constitution. Lists tell us a lot about the person who made them and what's important—the stuff at the top of the list that always gets accomplished—and what's not important to the list-maker—the stuff that doesn't even make it on the list.

Lists, above all, help us create order and make sense of a world that is often out of our control. This is what I love most about lists; I make lists because I like control. This, according to the counselor I visited in my early twenties, is because my life as a young child constantly spun out of control.

My parents, both Army officers, moved from place to place, uprooting my family on an almost yearly basis. My father went to war. My mother, struck by depression, retreated from much of life. All of this loss of control around me proved to be too much in my preteens. I began making daily lists, adhering to a strict workout schedule, succumbed to obsessive-compulsive disorder, and later, struggled with a bout of bulimia. If there was no structure in the world around me, there was structure, dependable and steadfast, in my list keeping.

Every childhood is disrupted by change and events beyond one's control, but the way I dealt with that loss of control involved imposing a ridged structure upon my life, a framework for living that still follows me today.

But—and there is a but—my father safely returned from war. My mother successfully clawed her way out of depression. I visited a wonderful counselor who helped me identify the source of my issues. I eventually learned to move beyond my eating and exercise disorders into a healthy and happy adulthood, but the list making stuck. My list habit clings to my life like a favorite childhood toy, stuffed in the closet, and out of view, but still part of one's life.

There are books upon books of lists: The dictionary is list of words, *The Genis Book of World Records* is a book of, well, records and then there are books like *1000 Places to See Before You Die* and *500 Cupcakes.* What if we just stopped making books full of lists, or simply stopped making lists all together?

What if I stopped making lists?

I have attempted to abandon list making at various points in my adult life with varying degrees of success. While working on a sailboat I kept making daily lists until I realized that each day looked much the same as the day before:

1. Perform galley chores
2. Eat
3. Clean deck
4. Report to the Bosun
5. Sand, varnish, paint, scrub, clean
6. Eat
7. Repeat numbers 4 and 5
8. Eat

9. Perform galley chores
10. Sit and stare at the sky and the ocean
11. Drink
12. Sleep

A list was pointless, so I gave it up. But I started to feel restless with each day's routine. There was plenty of structure in my day, but something was missing: dreaming of the future, something I had always done via lists. After months of skipping my to-do lists, I started making new lists, lists of adventures and of dreams.

So whether it's good, bad or indifferent, I will continue making lists, just like the rest of the world has since we begun drawing on cave walls. I'll keep imposing these borders and hems on my days, sketching out my future as best I can with a pen in my hand and a plan in my head.

Afterschool Rules

I. Listen to Adults

On my first day of work as a tutor with Earthen Vessels Outreach, one of my students, said to me: "I'm not working with you. Get the fuck away from me!" Christian was ten years old and most of what he said sounded as if it came from the mouth of an inmate. I had taken this job because I needed the money, it fit my schedule, and was it close to my apartment, all reasons that suddenly seemed silly to me. My supervisor, Ellen, told me that three other second- and third-grade boys, NaQuan, Jalante and Donyae, were also in my group. I stood in the doorway of the rambling stone church that housed the afterschool program and peered inside. “Where are they?” I asked.

“They’re on their way in the other van. Don’t worry, you’ll know when they get here,” she told me. I looked around the room, but wasn’t sure that I’d be able to pick out my group: The fifteen children who’d just arrived were running amuck in the basement of the church, their tutors following close behind. Two dozen mud-colored folding chairs with each child’s name Sharpied to their backs were pushed and scraped against the title floor as the children screeched and squealed, darting between the chairs and running from their tutors. Work had only begun ten minutes ago.

Ellen pointed to Naquan and Jalante as they got out of the van that had just arrived from Arsenal Elementary School. NaQuan stood a head taller than the other children in the other second-graders. He pushed past them and began chasing a fourth grade girl. He didn’t stop to acknowledge me when Ellen told him that I’d be working with him. When Jalante emerged from the fifteen-passenger van, he didn’t come toward the church; instead, he crawled up a retaining wall near the parked van and then jumped

on the roof of the vehicle. Once on top, he began screaming “Suckers!” repeatedly and grabbing the crotch of his pants. Ellen and several other tutors began yelling for him to get down. “Jalante, this is your final chance, or I’m taking you home,” Ellen finally bellowed. Jalante hopped down from his perch and skipped inside the church. I followed them inside where Donyae was waiting with Christian. I was relieved to see both of them sitting and laughing in their chairs. Ellen told me this was Donaye’s first day in the afterschool program, a program aimed at children with poor grades and no where to go after school each day. The children took their places in their chairs, which were arranged around a low stage with a projector set up on it. It was “Pastor John Paul Time.”

The first thirty minutes of the afterschool program involved a group Bible study led by the church’s pastor, John Paul. The program is free for children and although they don’t have to be Christian, or even religious, to enroll in the Earthen Vessels Outreach program, everyone—kids, volunteers, and staff—is expected to participate in “Pastor John Paul Time.” During this part of the program, children repeat Bible verses in a mixture of screams and bored monotone voices. Jalante choose to use this time to remove every game and puzzle from the cabinets lining the walls of the church. NaQuan kicked and pushed the row of chairs in front of him—all filled with fourth-grade girls. Donyae and Christian, no longer laughing, began choking each other. I realized then that most of my decisions at work would be choices like this: Which child is about to injure himself or someone else, destroy church property or run away? Or all three at once? I yanked apart Donyae and Christian—which would only be a momentary fix, but it’s all I could manage—then pulled NaQuan’s chair away from the fourth-graders and parked it next to

several kindergarteners and then went after Jalante. Pastor John Paul was leading a song and I tried to sing along as I chased Jalante around the church.

We lift our hands in the sanctuary, the kids sang. Well, all of the children except mine.

"Jalante, it's Pastor John Paul time. You've got to sit in your seat," I pleaded.

We lift out hands to give you the glory

"Jalante, I mean it!" He laughed. I chased.

And we will praise you for the rest of our days

Jalante circled back to the pile of games and puzzles on the floor; he began to tear them apart, laughing wildly. I finally caught him.

Yes, we will praise for you the rest of our days

"Jalante, you've got to sit down right now," my voice no longer nice.

"Fuck that, man," he said, doing his best impression of an angst-ridden teenager. "Fuck that," he repeated as I dragged him back to the group. His body had gone limp, but his mouth kept moving, forming the words again and again. He was heavy for a ten-year-old.

After "Pastor John Paul Time," the children dragged their chairs over to tables where we had a snack and completed homework. The snack was enough incentive to lure the boys to their seats at the table, which I was thankful for. Their attention started to wane quickly and in desperation, I pulled out a pencil and wrote the boys' names in Arabic, which I studied in college. Christian let out a high-pitched squeal and said to himself or

maybe to the room, “Look, this chick is *cra-zy*. She can’t even write!” But Donyae pulled his chair closer to mine and lowered his face to my writing. “What is it?” he asked.

“It’s your name in another language. In Arabic,” I told him.

“What’s that?” He clutched a piece of string cheese in one hand and a grape-flavored juice box in the other.

“It’s a language people speak parts of the Middle East,” I told him.

“Middle *what*?” he asked turning his head to the side.

“Here,” I said taking down a globe from atop a cabinet of games. “Where are we on here?” I asked and gave the globe a spin. Donyae carefully watched the spin of colors: the browns, oranges and yellows of continents, and the wash of blue surrounding them. When the spinning stopped he placed his hand gingerly on Canada and looked up at me.

Close enough, I thought. I moved his finger to the U.S. and then showed him the Middle East lurking on the other side of the globe. I’d recently read that U.S. students are nearly illiterate when it comes to geography—according to a National Geography survey of U.S. students, only 36 percent can find the Middle East on a map—but sitting with Donyae that first day, I thought that maybe this lapse wasn’t for lack of interest. Donaye was captivated by the globe even as Naquan and Jalante locked each other in a grappling match, their screams rising above the tap and scratch of folding chairs being put away for reading time.

II. Use Polite Language

Before we headed upstairs to read, Christian took his homework out of his bag and looked up at me, "Can I have a pencil?"

"What's the magic word?" I asked in my best kid-friendly voice, high with rising intonation.

"Gimme a pencil, *bitch*?" Christian's lip snarled at the corner and his eyebrows furrowed into a deep V. He looked around at his classmates with an expression that said, *Can you believe this bitch is asking me to say 'please'?*

"That's not the magic word I was thinking of, Christian," I said and handed him a pencil. Donyae remained quiet. No longer intent on the globe, he stared up at the small basement windows of the church, and remained oblivious to the noise around him.

After snack time, we went upstairs to read in the pews of the church. As soon as we got upstairs the boys began running around and screaming like men just released from prison. Jalante knelt at the altar, pretending to weep, and screamed, "Praise Jesus" and "Hallelujah." NaQuan headed straight for the organ and began pounding away. Christian, with his book clutched tightly to his chest, followed me and repeated over and over again, "I am not reading with you. I am not reading with you. You probably don't even know how to read." While this was going on, Donyae wandered slowly and silently among the pews, his face up turned to the high vaulted ceiling, a hand lightly gliding across the surface of the pews.

We finally settled into a pew in the back of the church and began reading. Christian, Donyae and Jalante read in halting sentences that started up quickly, only to die moments later like a neglected old car. But they managed, and I read a few pages too. They suddenly became intrigued by the book, which told the story of two boys who write a comic book called "Captain Underpants." Jalante dropped to the floor in laugher every time 'underpants' was read aloud. When the book finally made it to NaQuan, he stared at

the page. He tripped over the words, only managing a few two- or three-letter words before stopping to stare up at me. NaQuan couldn't read. I helped him read his pages, and then the boys bounded back down to the basement to write a book report. I shut off the lights to the church. The big room was quiet and dark without the boys there, and part of me wanted to stay there. I had, admittedly, only taken this job to get myself through college. Unlike most of the tutors I worked with, I hadn't started with the hopes of changing lives or building a better community, which made me feel selfish, cynical. I had spent hours volunteering in high school; had my desire to be a good citizen disappeared? The screams and hoots of the boys called me back down to the basement.

Downstairs, I told Ellen about NaQuan's reading and she told me that he was supposed to be in fifth grade, but he kept getting held back. I scanned the room to find him; it didn't take long: towering over the kids and chasing a pack of girls, he clearly didn't belong in this group. His homework sat unfinished on our table for the rest of the day.

shrieks and cursing filled the basement as we attempted to get the kids back in the vans to take them home. A radio blasted from one of the vans, playing Lady Gaga's "Love Game." One of the smallest children, a kindergartener, asked about the song's lyrics: "What's a 'disco stick'?" she wondered, referring to the lines *let's have some fun/this beat is sick/I wanna take a ride on your disco stick*.

One of the fourth-grade girls offered this explanation: "It's something you dance with. Like a hula-hoop" and then began giggling. This explanation did not suit Christian.

"She's talking about a dick." Christian said. "A penis," he added, as if he hadn't been clear enough.

In Rosemary Mahoney's *Whoredom in Kimmage: The World of Irish Women*, she carefully details the lives of women and girls in contemporary Ireland. At one point, Mahoney works with a group of girls in an afterschool religious program. The girls are rambunctious and foul-mouthed, and when Mahoney bids farewell to the group, the nun running the program provides this explanation of the girls' behavior: "They are seeing things and hearing things they shouldn't be seeing. They know more than they should about the world." This is how I'd begun to think of the boys I worked with at Earthen Vessels Outreach.

III. Respect God, People and Property

After several weeks of chasing the boys and politely telling them to stop cussing, we began to settle into a routine. The four boys rarely, if ever, listened at the same time, but I learned to negotiate with them. I gave them candy and monopoly money to buy toys at the church "toy store" when they were good, and tried to speak with them honestly and to punish them fairly when they were bad. Many days, the boys told me they hated me, and that they wanted me to go away. I responded by telling them I liked them, and that I wanted them to stay. Some days I knew this was true; I really wanted the boys to stay. And other days this was a lie I told them and told myself to get through the day.

In a report from John Hopkins University on the efficacy of afterschool programs, the researchers state that, "Every child has the capacity to succeed in school and in life," but many children are "placed at risk by school practices that are based on a sorting paradigm in which some students receive high-expectations instruction while the rest are relegated to lower quality education and lower quality futures." It seemed to me that the

boys I tutored could be something great: smart students, good citizens and someday, productive members of society. But the cards of life seemed to be stacked against them.

Each day I greeted the boys by saying I was glad to see them, and then I ‘d ask them about their days. Christian, Jalante and NaQuan either ignored me as they raced through the door or only uttered a quick, “I hate you!” as they passed. But when I asked Donyae about his day, he said the same thing every day: "Bad." His day was bad because his mom was mean and she hit him, his day was bad because school sucks, or sometimes, for reasons he couldn’t articulate, his day was just plain bad. No explanations needed.

Donyae was like a miniature Incredible Hulk in cornrows and a child-size wife beater. He was kind and attentive most days that I worked with him, but if another child provoked him by calling him weak or insulting someone close to him, Donyae’s transformation was quick and difficult, if not impossible, to reverse. After his cousin, Gabriel, taunted Donyae by calling his mother fat, Donyae first insisted that his mother was not *fat*, she was *pregnant.* When that didn’t stop the name calling, Donyae got up from our table and threw Gabriel to the ground. He grabbed the puzzle box we were working from and began beating Gabriel on the head with it. It took two tutors to pull Donyae—who can’t weight more than sixty-five pounds—off Gabriel. Donyae wiggled free and ran out of the church screaming and cursing. I followed behind. When I caught up to him his fists were clenched, he was breathing heavily and tears were running down his cheeks. Some icing from our afternoon snack of cinnamon rolls was still around his mouth. He looked just like what he was: a little boy.

When I tried to talk to Donaye about beating Gabriel, he started running away and screaming again. So I talked about my day. I told him that it had been long, and that after

work I still had another class to attend and a paper to write, before heading to my second job. He stopped walking at the corner of South Pacific and Friendship Avenue. It had been a snowy winter and a few piles of dirty ice clung to the curbs and the gutters along the street. Donyae kicked a pile of snow and then looked up at me. His tears had run into the icing on his cheeks. He licked his lips.

On the way back to the church, Donyae and I talked about one of our mutual interests: candy. When we got inside, I pointed to the "Afterschool Rules" signs posted all over the church: *Listen to Adults; Use Polite Language;* and *Respect God, People and Property*. "Donyae, you broke all three rules today. You didn't listen, you cussed, and worst of all, you weren't respectful."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not okay, Donyae. Sorry isn't enough. When you're mad you have to use words. You can't hit. Can you use words next time?" I asked. Donyae fingered the list of rules on the wall. The paper sign was torn and yellowed like an old newspaper.

"Maybe," he said slowly. "Can I have a piece of candy?"

"No. Donyae, you don't deserve candy today and you know it."

But when it was time to go home, I gave him a piece of candy. I shouldn't have, but I did. It was a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup, one of our favorites. I'd like to think that eventually, all of my smiles, talks and handfuls of candy worked, and that the boys became less difficult versions of themselves. I think it's possible, I really do. If I didn't, I wouldn't have been able to look them, or my coworkers, in the eye each day.

In my last few months at Earthen Vessels Outreach, I often rode with Ellen in the fifteen-passenger van to pick the kids up from school. We parked on a big hill a block from the school and then waited for the children to come streaming out of the building like it was on fire. One day, while walking down the long hill from the church van to the school, I passed a fenced-in basketball court. The court was filled with boys much too big to be in the afterschool program, but I noticed them. They moved in energetic bursts; their size and strength seemed colossal and a bit scary to me. As I approached, I saw that their game of basketball had crumbled into a fight; two boys were grappling with each other while a few others stood by watching. When I passed closer, I realized that the boys couldn't have been much older than fourteen or fifteen—only a few years older than Donyae was at the time. I looked down at the pavement and kept walking toward the elementary school. I didn't know it at the time, but when the semester came a close, I got a job at a newspaper and told Earthen Vessels Outreach that I wouldn't be returning the following semester. They were disappointed—turnover was high—but I was a student, after all, and this departure was expected of me.

That day, after passing the boys in the basketball court, when Donyae emerged from the double doors of the school he looked smaller than usual to me; the hood of his oversized coat fell down across his face and his backpack dragged across the ground as if carrying it required Herculean strength. He didn't immediately respond when I called his name, but looked up at me momentarily before his gaze fluttered to the snow and sludge-covered sidewalk. His temper and his fights had dissipated at that point, but they were still there, lurking behind him like a pickpocket, ready to pounce. But that day he smiled at me.

"Donyae! How was your day?" I asked. "I'm glad to see you."

"Good," Donyae whispered so softly that I almost missed it among the melee of children, caretakers and coats. "My day was good," he repeated. Surprised, I reached out and patted his shoulder as we trudged up the hill to the van. He reached out his hand and for a moment clutched the edge of my jacket, his fingers curling tightly around the coat's bright yellow wool. Then a child's voice rising above the clamor of the others' called out his name, and he was off, running up the hill and laughing, leaving me trailing behind.