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In the House of the Wise Are Stores of Choice Food and Oil

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In the House of the Wise Are Stores of Choice Food and Oil

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

by

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University of Houston
Bachelor of Arts in English, 2014

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

This is a collection of short stories.
# Table of Contents

Rahway, New Jersey  \(1\)

Homeschool  \(9\)

Dresses  \(24\)

Letter to Romeo, My Neighbor’s Pitbull  \(32\)

Eight Wednesdays from Late April to Early July  \(39\)

Stand  \(53\)

Supermarket Sweep  \(69\)

Sailing Camp  \(84\)
My mother is always asking me about diners. Have I been to any good ones, met my friends after class for coffee, found good Matzah ball soup? It is a subject that people who are not familiar with the city bring up, between Broadway and the Empire State Building and how they have seen a segment on television touting the merits of a certain bakery. I am sure my answers disappoint her. There is the diner connected to the hotel where Nikola Tesla died, where Camille made us stop once last year after we’d seen a movie on 8th Avenue so she could buy pralines from a street cart out front. And there is that one off of 17th Street, near the flea market where I bought a painting from a man talking vaguely about sports with the vendor across from his booth. And the one near the art store on 57th that I only seem to ever wander by late at night when it glows like a movie set, silver, waitresses already too in motion to jar it for something as silly as pie for one. So I usually tell my mother that, no, I have not been to any diners lately, and after class we go for green juice, not diner coffee, and I hate Matzah ball soup.

I have been in the city for two years going on three, at a private Christian college where we take courses that teach us how to think but not what to. I miss Texas because it’s home, but I like my friends and my 15th floor apartment and being able to say things like “I’ll just run to the bodega.” My mother still imagines the city as a perpetual vacation instead of like real life, but she is content to misunderstand and I’m content to let her. I do want to understand, though, and I’m lucky because I got a scholarship that covers enough to make the cost of going to this school
equivalent to attending one in state. You can read Plato and write essays pretty much anywhere, so it’s best to do it somewhere you like.

Instead of participating in traditional Greek life, our college sorts everyone into a house with the namesake of a conservative leader. Camille and Lacey and I are all House of Margaret Thatcher along with Amelia, though Amelia has never come to an event, not even Cigar and Pie night with Churchill, which seems like something she would like. Even though everyone knows Margaret Thatcher’s favorite colors were light and dark blue, our house crest is pink and lime green, which is why I know Amelia is a good fit for Thatcher. We’re a little untraditional. House of Queen Elizabeth is wild, Barton girls are stuck up, and Truth girls take everything too seriously. Thatcher is strong-willed girls who like to take their own paths, but one of our core values is harmony, so we try to get along even though we’re all really different.

In our college’s philanthropic effort to better include students who commute, I have been asked by a faculty advisor to spend quality time with fellow third year Amelia. The instructions were vague in order to make it seem less forced. Amelia and I are in the same Religious Thought & Practice class and we’ve only spoken a handful of times. She usually arrives late—the train! sorry!—and her blue hair is almost always unintentionally disheveled, which is, I guess, a polite way to say that she is sometimes dirty. Still, she wears mustard yellow sneakers with a plaid skirt and polo—her version of our college’s required business casual dress—and she has piercings, so I approve of her level of panache even if I disagree with how she implements it. I, too, have listened to The Ramones, but I have never felt the need to share my love for them via patch on studded leather backpack.

After class, I corner her and we discuss universal things, like hair. I ask her where she gets hers done—it is dirty but it is dyed. Never ever ask a girl if she dyed her hair herself. This is
something I learned from my mother. Even if you suspect it, ask the question in reverse. Who
does your hair? Always assume they have gone with the more expensive option. The kind of girl
who dyes her hair at home will be proud to tell you she does, and the kind of girl who goes to a
salon will love to tell you how her stylist is better than whoever you have been going to. And the
rare girl who dyes her hair at home and isn’t proud of it will just lie.

Amelia tells me she dyes it herself, which is unsurprising. What is surprising is that she
follows it up with how she can dye mine, too, if I want. She used to do hair at a small salon in
Rahway, New Jersey, where she still lives. I have gone to the same stylist back home for the past
nine years but in the spirit of philanthropy, and Christmas, and against all discretion I have ever
had, I tell her okay. We exchange numbers. My weekend is booked, but why don’t I just take the
train and she’ll do my hair at her house? It is more of a statement than a question and she has left
me no room to demur. I tell her Wednesday will work perfectly and she heads to the train while I
hurry to catch Camille and Lacey, who have already left for green juice.

Camille and Lacey have ordered for all three of us by the time I catch up to them, and
they’re trying to decide on a location for next semester’s Spring formal with House of Reagan.
Lacey thinks we should host it in a hotel ballroom uptown, but Camille insists having evening
events in hotel ballrooms is too scandalous because of what it implies about then staying at the
hotel. I tell her this isn’t high school and that it wouldn’t be a big deal. She then suggests instead
a downtown loft with whitewashed floors and an open rooftop, which she’s already inquired
about to confirm availability. I think it would be fun to have the formal on Roosevelt Island,
which gets so quiet at night that it feels almost fake, but I don’t suggest it because I know
Camille and Lacey will be against anything that isn’t in Manhattan proper.
Camille and Lacey and I are all third years and all roommates, but they weren’t asked to spend time with any commuters. Camille’s father is mayor of some town in New Hampshire and Lacey’s mom is a lawyer for a company here in the city, so I might have been chosen because I’m more approachable. It’s not like they’re super stuck up, and it’s hard to put into words, really. There are just certain kinds of people who are used to hanging out with certain kinds of people, and certain kinds of people who aren’t. It’s hard to understand until you realize you’re a certain kind of person and then it all makes sense.

I have never been to New Jersey. Not the shore, not Newark, not even the turnpike on the way to states with better reputations. Amelia has sent instructions that lead from our school, in midtown, to Penn Station, also in midtown, but where I have only been once from having taken the A-train from way uptown, which I normally never take. Anyway, from Penn Station, I take a train that goes through Newark and in just forty minutes drops me on an outdoor platform in Rahway, New Jersey. Amelia is waiting, sans business casual attire, which shouldn’t surprise me—she didn’t go to school today—but does, because I have never seen her without it on. I reach for my weekender and then remember I don’t have it. I am only staying for the afternoon. She lives a mile from the station and we start walking. We talk first about class and homework and then about the professor we think is cute even though he is married and we both have no chance, which turns into talking about boys with whom we do have chances. We turn onto a wide street with tall trees, their branches bare, and reach her house from behind. In the driveway there is a decades-old sedan, which she says her dad doesn’t drive much but does use for hot-boxing sometimes. I feign unshock. My parents don’t smoke weed or anything else, but when you are in
someone else’s house it is sometimes best to let them set the tone for what is normal and for you to affirm.

There is a draft at Amelia’s so I leave on my coat, a lavender inverness cape I found at Bergdorf’s last year. The house is old and filled with things, a Grey Gardens level of things, and there are at least three cats. Amelia seems unfazed. Her mother is sitting on a bar stool when we walk in, jewel-tone turquoise glasses perched low on her nose, clipping coupons from stacks of Union County newspaper inserts on the kitchen counter. She offers for Amelia to hand me a square of Ghirardelli chocolate from a bag in the freezer. It’s December, but there are hearts on the bag—Amelia grabs two for each of us as her mother explains. The used food store, which gets close-out items, had received a shipment last month. Her mother tells me they might still have some in stock. “It’s the same chocolate,” she shrugs. “Might as well pay a dollar a bag instead of four.”

Amelia gives me a tour. Every flat surface has a pile of something on it, even Amelia’s room and even the stairs. There are three treadmills in the wide hallway, none apparently in disrepair but all covered with boxes of appliances and bags of seasonal clothing. I am fine with the mess because she is fine with the mess, but what does shock me is the very tall boy lounging on a futon in the game room on the third floor. She tells me this is Michael, and sometimes he sleeps here. Michael is her gay best friend. He goes to a local college, the one where Amelia started school before she transferred into the city with me, and he works at a gas station that apparently sells very good sweet tea, though I have doubts that any sweet tea produced in New Jersey and at a gas station is superior to the actual southern kind.

Amelia dyes my hair in the middle of the kitchen, where I sit on a Parsons chair fully upholstered in an ancient floral. To protect my outfit, I swap my coat for an oversized silk robe
that Amelia promises is not precious. We had decided earlier that a golden brown base with champagne blonde highlights would look best. Michael comes downstairs to chat and slides the pile of cut coupons off the chair next to Amelia’s mother, but the counter is too cluttered to rest the coupons there, so he holds them and riffles. Do we prefer Ritz or Club? Have we seen that episode of *Kardashians* where Kourtney becomes a couponer? It takes a long time for Amelia to foil my hair and let it process but I do not mind. Michael makes us punch from condensed peach juice and soda and we drink it in heavy glasses. We talk about Amelia’s twin sister, who got a scholarship to a college in Seattle, and about her dad, who does something vague and manual for the city. I think about how carefully I will have to word my answer if anyone at school asks me where I had my hair done, because Amelia is technically a stylist but we are also technically in a home.

We have eaten at least ten Valentine’s chocolates each by the time Amelia has rinsed and trimmed and blow-dried my hair. I offer her money for her work and she refuses, and I offer again—just a small tip—and she, again, says no. It is dark outside now and Michael wants a hamburger, which we do not have any coupons for. Amelia’s mother suggests we go to a diner. Michael has opinions about which. We get into her dad’s decades-old sedan, which he mostly lets her use since he takes the bus to work. Amelia and Michael take the front and I’m in the back. The car is well-maintained but smells stale. Amelia cracks the window to start smoking and Michael stops her to tell her that’s gross. They bicker about which diner has the best burgers as we drive up toward Cranford through Clark and Winfield and end up circling through a roundabout that leads us to Roselle. This entire drive takes maybe just fifteen minutes, because towns are stacked on top of each other in New Jersey the same way things are in Amelia’s house.
Our waitress sticks us in a back corner, between the side door and a jukebox that takes nickels. There is a mirror on the wall next to our booth and I cannot stop adjusting my hair because it looks good every single way I flip it. We have all had better burgers. We also agree, in tandem, that these are the best burgers we have ever tasted. We order a flight of pie and warm drinks and sit in our booth until midnight. We forget that anyone else is in the diner. We remember that others are in the diner when an older man gives Michael a stare-down for shimmying to “I Will Survive”. We solve all of Amelia’s boy problems, and then all of Michael’s, and then all of mine. We make plans to see Amelia’s friend’s punk band in Brooklyn in January, and to wear matching fur coats to dinner beforehand. Amelia will bring them for us, thinks her mother found a stash at an estate sale and put them in a hall closet a few years ago. We talk for an hour just about things we hate. Neither one of them has ever had truffle mac and cheese and I tell them it is like normal mac and cheese with cat litter sprinkled on. Michael hates strawberry flavored donuts but has ordered two pieces of strawberry pie. Amelia hates crickets and fire-roasted tomatoes and that she has to commute to school. I hate that, too.

The train home is slow. I get back into Penn Station at 1:30am but I don’t feel unsafe on the walk home. I linger to be sure that Camille and Lacey will be asleep when I finally get back to our apartment. I want the night to continue being mine.

On Thursday, the girls on my floor ask me where I had my hair done and I tell them Amelia did it in New Jersey. Jersey? they ask. Camille rolls her eyes and whispers “philanthropy” to Lacey, who gives a knowing look. I want to punch them, say that sure it was philanthropy, but I had a good time. Instead, I change the subject to Spring formal and propose that we buy serving trays from Fishs Eddy because they’ll look nicer than the cheap ones from Party City even though
they’re nearly the same price. Lacey agrees and Camille then raises the question of which pattern to use.

I finish the Religious Thought & Practice final before Lacey or Camille, and I wait by the elevator so we can all head for green juice at the same time. Amelia comes out after a while and we talk briefly about Michael—he has just been promoted to manager at the gas station, which means he has free tea privileges instead of just the discount. Lacey and Camille come out together as Amelia and I laugh at the idea of Michael juggling gallons of free tea from the store to his car. Amelia presses the elevator button and I think about inviting her to green juice but waver as the elevator indicator gets closer to our floor. When it comes, Lacey and Camille ask what I wrote for the short answer question, and Amelia hops on first. We ride in mostly silence and when we’ve reached the main floor, Lacey and Camille exit in front of Amelia and me. Before I can decide not to again, I ask her if she would like green juice. I like to think she almost says yes, but she doesn’t. She wants to catch the train. Trains are good excuses, I’m learning.

My mother calls to make sure my travel plans are set, that I’ve scheduled a car to take me to the airport, that I’ve packed the bracelets she asked me to pick up for my little sister’s Christmas. We don’t skimp on Christmas. My mother does not ask me about diners, I guess because of the commotion, but when it is January 3rd and we are grasping for conversation and she asks me if I have been to any good diners lately, I will be able to tell her yes, though I’m not sure I’ll go back.
HOMESCHOOL

Excerpts from the Journal of Bethany Gillam, written for dual goals of bettering English language and handwriting

It is 35.4 miles from our house in Ballston Lake to the German grocery just north of Glens Falls. Mom and Daddy have taught us that it is easy to get fairly priced produce in upstate New York if you are willing to drive a little. Mom’s mother, Nana, taught her this, and now Mom has taught me, too.

It is only 3.9 miles, though, from Ballston Lake to Ballston Spa, where Daddy buys cheese every other week and sometimes bulk flour, when it goes in the distressed bin, at the wholesale supplier. It is a government rule that nobody is allowed to sell you food that has actually gone bad, so by distressed they just mean that bags are ugly or crinkled or torn at the top. A dented can of olives works just as well as one that hasn’t been dented, for everybody except the little girls, at least, but that’s just because they don’t like olives yet. In the summer, we eat mostly from the garden except for milk and meat and whenever Abigail or Mary can convince Daddy to buy the ice cream flavor of the week on sale at Stewart’s Shop. It’s September now, though, and most of the garden is canned or finished except for a pile of pattypan squash on the kitchen counter.

We live in a house that Daddy calls a slightly-less-royal Queen Anne. It’s tall and old, simple—no landscaping—and surrounded by maple trees on the edge of town. He bought it because it’s close to Nana’s house, and Mom lived with Nana and Papa before she got married to Daddy. It was a lot of space for just Daddy but fits the six of us kids just about perfect.
Mom does our lessons on the first floor, on a twelve-foot table Daddy found at a garage sale. We sleep on the second floor, the little girls and I in a room to ourselves and the two boys in a smaller room with cedar walls. The third floor, though, is all junk. The hallways are stacked with boxes and furniture and there’s a whole room full of stuff we found for free and will maybe one day spruce up to sell or trade. Daddy can fix just about anything. He runs a musical instrument repair shop down the block and we are lucky that he can come home to eat lunch and supper with us. Not every kid has that luxury, nor do they have the luxury of staying home all day like us. I don’t know what I’d do if I had to sit for eight hours at a school—I can finish most schoolwork within two or three hours and I can temper it with baking so it doesn’t ever feel like too much.

There’s also homeschool group, which we attend every Tuesday. All the moms take turns teaching lessons and we usually do a craft. It’s at the Baptist Church, and we’re not Baptist, but kids from all sorts of denominations go. The Baptists are the popular kids, or at least what I imagine popular kids to be. Jeremiah, Judah, Gideon. Then, there are Methodists and Lutherans, who I don’t care for as much. We’re Calvinists, who have a reputation for being smart but bossy, which I’m not sure is true. The main group is evangelical kids, from non-denominational churches, and you can tell them all by their names because they’re unconventional names like Ribbon and Tapestry and they don’t follow any rules because their parents make them do un-schooling, which Mom says is a true shame. I like homeschool group, but I don’t like everyone there.

On the afternoons when I don’t have homeschool group, I like to walk back to the shop with Daddy after lunch, because he watches documentaries from the library while he fixes instruments and I like to watch them while I knit. Last time, I forgot to bring scissors, and
wouldn’t you know it, Daddy has about every gadget except a pair of scissors, so he gave me a
ejewelry saw, the kind with a tiny blade, and I had to saw my yarn from its skein.

It’s really funny that Price Chopper’s chopped prices are still usually the highest in town. Mom
and I go there each Wednesday, when the meat gets marked down. Sometimes we drop my
younger brother Matthew off at the nursing home on our way there so he can give reports on
birds to the senior citizens while we do our shopping. This week, we brought home seven pounds
of chicken that was almost out of date but not quite. Expiration dates don’t really matter if the
meat goes in the freezer right when we get home. The German grocery store will even sell meat
that has expired but that they’ve frozen just in time, but Mom doesn’t feel comfortable doing
that, I guess just because Nana never did it. An easy recipe for frozen chicken is to put it in the
Crock-Pot for three hours on high with a marinade of one part soy sauce, one part Italian
dressing. Serve with a side of rice, which you can also make in the slow cooker, but not at the
same time as the chicken.

At the German grocery store just north of Glens Falls, Italian dressing is 89 cents per
bottle when it goes on sale, or 99 cents normally. There is no noticeable taste difference with
more expensive Italian dressing. Our last estate haul included an unopened bottle of Olive
Garden Italian Dressing, which is how I know this. I also know that, at estate sales, for kitchen
food items, you should always offer a lump sum for the lot of it. Eating from someone else’s
pantry sounds wrong, especially when I think about how it’s usually from a dead person’s
pantry, but Daddy says that the stuff would go to waste otherwise, so we’re just being good
stewards. On a side note, it is a source of pride for Matthew that he has only been to five
restaurants, and one of them was Olive Garden in 2014. Luke missed that trip because of a Boy
Scouts meeting, so he’s only been to four restaurants, which makes it also a source of contention between the two. I think their game is dumb, because Nana takes me to restaurants when we go out shopping and I welcome the change of pace. Daddy insists Mom’s cooking is better than what they have at restaurants but I think that’s just because he hasn’t been to enough restaurants, specifically the restaurant in Maine where Nana and Papa and I shared a plate of French fries.

In the haul from the estate sale with the Olive Garden dressing, we also got half a bottle of Mexican vanilla, rye flour (unopened), a full set of Watkins spices, which really are so much more colorful than other brands, and a jar of saffron strands from La Mancha, Spain. When bell peppers go on sale, Mom says we will have marinated steak and peppers with saffron rice. We put a pin on La Mancha, Spain during the map-pinning ceremony last Saturday, too. Daddy puts a pin on places we learn about or places we receive mail from. He has a friend from college who moved to Australia and sent us a set of coasters with dotty-looking art on them. Luke thinks they’re ugly but I quite like them.

The boys use the map during their homeschooling more than I ever did. I think it’s enough for them to know every place, where things are, and be content, but I don’t care to know where every place is unless I’m there seeing it, smelling what it has to offer. Mom makes us each set goals in every subject book and then complete those goals by ourselves each week so she can work with the little girls more closely. My goal this week is to focus on adding evidence during argumentative writing. For instance, claim: my brothers are annoying. Evidence: Luke reads everything—labels, instruction manuals, books about reptiles—out loud, and if we try to shut him up, he accuses us of not wanting to expand our minds. Plus, Matthew joined the Civil Air Patrol and now listens to an old record of different kinds of airplane engine sounds on repeat. I guess my claim should have just been that my brothers are loud.
Sometimes Mom and Daddy will do pantry challenges for fun. A pantry challenge is when we stay away from the store for thirty days, or at least try to. We usually run out of milk, which the littler girls need, and sometimes to use up four or five items from the pantry, we need one more item from the store to complete a recipe, so we do make exceptions. I never thought this was an uncommon practice until I told Ms. Elma about it during church last month and she ended up leaving three bags of food on our doorstep. I guess, from the outside, it looks like we don’t have money to buy food when we do the challenges, but that’s not why we do it. If we know how to be parsimonious, why wouldn’t we? Nana told me once that she likes to let grocery stores do the storing, so she doesn’t keep a lot in her pantry, but Mom and Daddy like to stock up when things are on sale, so we always have plenty. Plus, it’s fun to invent new food combinations with what we have. I like it when Mom and Nana disagree on stuff because it makes me feel better about disagreeing with Mom sometimes.

Mom and I disagree about a lot of things, but we agree about more. But we still disagree. She thinks I don’t read enough, but I read the amount of hours recommended by the curriculum that has been approved by New York State Homeschooling Regulations and no more. We also silently disagree about whether I can start dating. When you’re the oldest child and you don’t exactly have suitors lining up at the door, the subject is awkward to bring up, but she can’t make me read *Pride and Prejudice* and somehow think I don’t *want* to fall in love. But when it does come up, she makes it sound like it’s something that will only happen in the far-off future. Lest I sound lascivious or unruly, I should make it clear that I still follow all the rules in most areas of life, even the ones I disagree with.

Except for recipes. Recipes are only general guides, and Mom and I both agree about that. The last one I tried, from a Peruvian cookbook I found at the library, was for beef stew pie.
The boys said it was a repeater but they don’t care about looks, and that pie was really not something good to look at. I just can’t do fluting the way Mom and Nana can. Mom insists that it doesn’t matter if food is ugly as long as it’s made with love, and any food we make in our house is made with love. Just because food has been made with love, though, does not mean that it will taste good. Daddy got thirty-five packages of matzos for 13 cents a box on clearance at the used food store and likes to make us mini pizzas with them. He insists they are made with love, but as any of one us will tell you, they taste terrible. If it was up to me, I would grind the matzos and make cocoa cookies from their powder, but I guess they do serve a healthier purpose in a normal meal than for dessert. Claim: dessert is better than normal meals. Evidence: none scientific, unfortunately. Anecdotal evidence is, according to my curriculum, insufficient in proving arguments. But I still use it.

Boys don’t always work well in the kitchen, and I’m not saying that because I am a theological complementarian or anything. It’s just true. Evidence: last Thursday, when Mom and I were working on baking Lucy’s lemon spice birthday cake, Luke brought in a lady bug that then flew into the batter and Mom had to fish the ladybug out and spritz it clean. That kind of thing just doesn’t happen when it is only ladies in a kitchen.

So, the boys usually stay out of the way but still close enough to hear what’s going on. Lately, they have been doing puzzles. Their best time is 44 minutes on a 1,200 piece puzzle. I call cheating, though, because it is the National Forest puzzle Grandma Oregon got them for Christmas four years ago and I know they have already put it together at least fifty times. That year, Grandma Oregon gave me ruby and emerald earrings in the shape of strawberries, which I still haven’t worn since I don’t have my ears pierced yet. Ever since Grandpa Oregon died, Grandma Oregon has been passing down her old jewelry as gifts, but I’m not complaining. As
Mama says, it’s much nicer than what we could get at Kohl’s or somewhere equivalent. I did find a Chap’s dress, knee-length with cap-sleeves in a navy blue, on sale for ten dollars at Kohl’s this week. What a good deal for Chap’s quality! Anyway, for Christmas this year, I have decided to knit slippers for everyone. Usually I do scarves for the girls and mittens for the boys, but I wanted to streamline. Plus, I got all the yarn at a sewing store in an old train station that was going out of business, so it might be my most frugal Christmas yet.

I am knitting some extra pairs of slippers for most people in homeschool group, too. It’s already October, though, and I have only just started, so I won’t have time to make them for everyone, but that’s not actually a problem because even though it’s not wholly kind, I don’t think everyone in homeschool group deserves a pair of my slippers. Most of the girls do, except for the non-denoms, because the slippers might be an invitation to talk more to me and I’d prefer they didn’t. I think I will make Jeremiah’s with all black yarn but I still need to know how long his feet are and I don’t want to ask him. It doesn’t seem like something that a girl with propriety would do. Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, will not stop talking about their feet. They both have plantar warts and are in a race to see who can eradicate his wart first. Mom and Daddy bought them each a glass bottle of wart remover from the medical shelf at the used food store. They were originally going to have to share but the first bottle rang up as only a penny so Daddy sent Matthew back to pick up another one. Daddy made sure to ask if it was an error, but the guy working the cash register said he was required to honor what items scanned as. It’s nice when rules work in our favor.

Saving money is prudent as long as you have standards. During a November homeschool group meeting, the Stewart girls told me about how their mother uses cooking milk instead of normal
milk in recipes. I asked Mom about it and she said cooking milk is just a can of evaporated milk and some water, mixed. It lasts longer than actual milk and is cheaper, of course, but there are certain things that are holy to our family and real milk is one of them. I’m not sure why it is—maybe because Nana made a big deal about it when Mama was growing up—but we have a lot of holy things in the kitchen, like using butter in pie crust instead of shortening and making sauerkraut homemade. Brand names, though, are not holy—any brand will do (as was confirmed with the Olive Garden Italian dressing), usually. Not holy like God holy, but holy in that it has always been done this way and so we’ll keep doing it this way. It’s like a rule that you don’t break because it means something more than breaking a rule—it’s crushing in some deeper way. Which is a weird thing to say about butter in a pie crust, but feels true enough.

We only use King Arthur flour, so you could say that’s holy, too. We toured their factory in the summer, during a day-trip to Vermont. The only snack we brought in the van was dried papaya, which Mom keeps on hand for heartburn since she’s pregnant right now. It tasted good on the ride up to Vermont but on the way home, after the warm cookies and pastries at King Arthur, the papaya became less palatable. We stopped to use the restroom at a Walmart in Bennington and Daddy took the opportunity to air up the tires across the street. While we were waiting for him to come back, Mom decided I should get my ears pierced. “Might as well,” she said. I always thought it would be a bigger production, but it only took five minutes. My ears stung in a good way on the rest of the drive back. We also tried to play math dice but it turns out it is tricky to throw dice in a moving van and, to be honest, math dice are only really fun in the context of normal homeschooling.

Daddy always wins at math dice. He says it is because, when he was a kid, Grandma and Grandpa Oregon offered to pay him one thousand dollars if he gave up watching television for
two years. He followed through and they gave him the cash and he insists he spent his spare time reading history books and learning how to do things with his bare hands. We asked him if he would let us test the method, if we could go without television for two years in exchange for one thousand dollars, but he declined, and besides, the television stays on the third floor anyway so it wouldn’t be as challenging. At least, it usually stays on the third floor, since the third floor is just storage and we don’t hang out up there. Sometimes, when it’s Olympics or the president’s speaking, we’ll bring it down. The Olympics are more fun to watch than when the president’s speaking, but not everything in life is fun and that’s fine.

The third floor also has extra clothes. All of my clothes get passed to Lucy and then from her to Mary, Mary to Abigail, and now I guess Abigail to the new baby, which will be a girl. The little girls still choose a lot of their own clothes, though, and get new pieces a few times a year with Nana or at garage sales. Mom says it’s good to invest in classic pieces, so that’s what I try to do. Lucy wears a lot of sweaters, and Matthew and Luke just wear whatever Mom buys them without input. Mary has the most standout style of any of us if I had to choose, and that’s only because she refuses to wear anything but gymnastics leotards, the kind with shorts and glitter, when we’re at home. Daddy thinks it’s just a phase. Mary’s never even taken a gymnastics class. Mom and Daddy picked up the leotards because they make more modest swimsuits for the little girls. We are not an athletic family but we do go on frequent walks. Mom brought home a pedometer that she won during a work party, back when she was a nurse, and Daddy wore it for a day and had over 30,000 steps. I wore it for a day and only had 11,000, but I read that anything over 10,000 is something to be proud of so I’m not complaining.

Matthew eradicated his wart before Luke was able to. In a living room interview, Matthew said his victory was because of a method involving consistency and diligence in
application of wart remover paired with prolonged soaks in the bath. Luke had no comment. I like pretending I have a talk show with all the younger kids when I’m in charge of watching them, because all it takes is a hairbrush turned microphone and a few questions and they’ll sit rapt forever. But it’s rare that we’re not all working on a project together, and those take up a lot of time, too. There are only a couple more weeks before we’ll start getting snow and ice and we won’t be able to do any outdoor projects, which means we’ve been having contests every day. Yesterday I won Most Quiet Worker. I usually win Most Efficient Worker, too, but Daddy has to give those to Mary and Abigail sometimes otherwise they become discouraged with too many Honorable Mentions in a row. Matthew switches which awards he’s going for depending on the day, and Luke switches to go for whatever Matthew goes for, as little brothers are wont to do.

Yesterday’s prize for Most Quiet Worker was an extra apple cider donut from the box that the neighbors brought by in the morning. I saved half of it for today, though, to savor. I have six pairs of slippers done, including Jeremiah’s—I had to guess on the size—and still need to knit eight more, but I do better if I have incentives throughout the day. Half the donut for today, but other days it’s getting to make cornbread or crackers, or giving myself a manicure with the Mary Kay set from Nana. All sorts of banal tasks can be incentives if you deprive yourself of them for an allotted time.

Grandma Oregon came down for Thanksgiving. Mom and I stayed up until two in the morning the night before to prep desserts and cook the turkey. “It’s a controversial thing to cook a turkey the day before, Bethany,” Mom told me. “And even more so that we’re cooking it in a Crock-Pot.” She doesn’t care much about being different, but like Nana, she seems to care that I know what’s proper and what’s not. The world is a big place and I’ll have to live in it.
I pulled a tray of lace cookies from the oven and burned my finger on the edge of the pan. There wasn’t anyone to be mad at except myself for knitting the potholder so poorly that it had holes big enough to allow my finger to peek through. I started to head upstairs for burn cream, but Mom grabbed a bottle from the fridge and squeezed a dollop of mustard on my finger instead. I’m not sure if my confusion about the mustard is what distracted me from the burn or if it was actually working, but either way, my finger stopped hurting. Mom’s good at knowing little things like that. When Matthew locked Luke in the bathroom from the outside using a chair, and Luke wiggled the knob so much that it broke the knob, Mom fixed that, too, without even having to get one of Daddy’s toolkits. I think the reason Mom is a good mom is that she knows how to fix bad things.

The most common bad thing is messes, but sometimes it’s attitudes. Matthew and Luke fight all the time because they both like to be right, which Mom says they get from Daddy. Last summer, they argued for three days straight about whether Army or Navy was better, until Mom said they couldn’t argue about it anymore until they’d written essays about it, and by the time they’d finished their essays, they were over it anyway. Now, any time they’re being bad, Mom just has to say “Army, Navy” and they’ll usually straighten up. Lucy and Abigail get into little tiffs all the time. Abigail touches everything and Lucy follows her around and tells her not to touch, and then Abigail gets mad that Lucy was being bossy, and then Lucy gets mad that Mom scolds them both instead of just Abigail. Mary and I almost never get in trouble, Mary because she’s so spacy and likes to be alone. The worst she’ll do is scribble over pages and pages, fold them, and then make you sit on the sofa while she flips through her pages and pretends to read it as a book while she’s really making up a story on the spot, which can take over an hour. And me because, well, I know better than to make a fuss about anything. People always ask if there are
rifts or if we get tired of each other, but all-in-all, for living in such close quarters and being together all the time, we do pretty good.

Thanksgiving itself proved uneventful, but that’s the point of Thanksgiving, I think. The making and making and making. The meal itself was fine and then we played vintage board games that Grandma Oregon brought to leave with us and then I fell asleep early because I ate too much food, which probably everyone writes in their journal after Thanksgiving.

It has snowed every day this week so we’ve been sledding on the hill behind the barn in the mornings. Matthew and Luke race to the line of maple trees, of course, but the girls and I go more slowly and stop before the swings. Abigail doesn’t like sledding but she usually endures because Mom always has a pot of Swiss Miss packets made, often with milk but sometimes just with water. Either way, it’s still cocoa.

Lucy keeps practicing a medley of Christmas carols on the player piano because she spent all of fall learning them and refuses to play anything else even though Christmas was two weeks ago. I still haven’t given Jeremiah his slippers, because he skipped the Christmas Eve homeschool group party, but everyone else who I gave slippers to liked them. Papa wore his too much already and got a hole in the bottom, but I already mended it. Knowing how to knit wouldn’t be that useful if I didn’t also know how to mend. Though, maybe if I was better at knitting I wouldn’t have to mend so often.

Aunt Pam arrived last week. She is staying for a couple weeks to help Mom get ready for the baby, but in the mean time we’ve been, as Daddy says, gallivanting around town. In Ballston Spa, there’s a 647 foot drilled spring from the nineteenth century right across the street from a real Artesian well discovered in the eighteenth century and when visitors come the boys like to
trick them into drinking the water by making them decide which tastes better. The trick is just that both wells have water that tastes like snail tracks and pond scum marinated in metal, which isn’t a very fun trick.

Mom bought a cantaloupe at the grocery store. Cantaloupe isn’t in season but she said it smelled too good not to. Daddy said he didn’t know what kind of chemicals could produce a melon in this weather but that he wouldn’t question the blessing. We decided to have an indoor picnic with barbequed chicken and melon and Mom’s broccoli salad, just like in summer. We’re lucky that Mom picked up extra bottles of barbeque sauce when it was on sale around the Fourth of July. They raise the prices on summer sauces in the winter. My goals for each week in December were all math related, so now in January, they’re history related, which I might dislike even more than English goals. I didn’t make any New Year’s resolutions. I’m not sure I believe in them. As a Calvinist, it’s easier to just know that my entire life is already predestined, so I don’t have to worry about the day-to-day. This is doctrine that Mom and I disagree on, and if she knew I thought this she would tell me to read my scriptures more often because I’m misunderstanding, but I do read my scriptures, and this is what I think.

There was a big freeze so we’ve stopped sledding and have started ice-skating instead. Daddy got a deal on ice skates a few years ago and bought a pair in every size from a rink going out of business. Before it hard-freezes, he floods a little bank in the backyard, between cherry trees, with just enough water to allow us all to skate. I help the little girls around until the boys turn it into more of an ice hockey rink or until the girls’ cheeks get too rosy and we have to go inside. Daddy’s unorthodox cleaning method is to make us watch an episode of *Hoarders* before we clean so we will “not be averse to throwing things away.” Mom always tells him that he’s the
true hoarder, and then he uses events like ice-skating in the backyard as proof that he’s not a hoarder since we actually use the items he hoards.

Mom collects—not hoards, because she only has three sets and two of them are heirlooms—fine china, and we eat on it every evening. What’s the use in having it if you can’t enjoy it?

I finally gave Jeremiah his slippers during this week’s homeschool group. He said, “thank you,” but he didn’t stay around to talk to me except for after the main meeting when we happened to be in line together for tea and cookies in the fellowship hall. He told me my earrings, the strawberry ones, were weird, and when I was telling Mom about this exchange afterward, she rolled her eyes and told me boys are weird and I agreed. Then she talked again about how she and Daddy met, which was by exchanging letters because a friend of a friend thought they’d like each other but, at the time, they lived 100 miles away. It seems idyllic, I guess, but I’ll have to keep working on my handwriting if I’m ever in a similar situation.

Matthew and I have a working theory that you can tell the type of homeschooler a person is by the type of bread he or she packs for homeschool group. Bianca Thompson brings her sandwiches on bakery croissants, which is one of the reasons Matthew likes her so much. “It’s just a classy choice, you have to admit, Bethany, right? It’s a classy choice!” Jeremiah brings Wonder bread, which Mom has never allowed in our house and which should have been a sign that he’s not right for me. Mom makes wheat bread at home and slices it by hand, or if we run out of time and have to buy bakery bread, we always buy something dark and grainy. I’m not sure what this says about us as a homeschooling family except for that we’re normal. But I guess I wouldn’t know much different.
Tonight, we’re making banana bread. “A bread for impatient people,” Mom says, even though it bakes for over a patience-testing hour and then doesn’t taste as good until the next day, which requires waiting even longer. As it bakes, the boys play old polka records and dance like fools in and out of the living room and hallway, but only on the rugs in order to avoid slipping. Lucy has stopped playing Christmas carols, finally. Mom, Aunt Pam, and I sit and watch as we wait for the timer. Daddy comes in with Abigail and Mary, and they all start dancing, too. The boys only began liking the polka records when Daddy thought that a good punishment for them having ignored their chores would be to make them listen to polka nonstop until their room was spick and span. Mom and Aunt Pam laugh about how every situation is just what you make of it. Daddy tries to get Mom to dance but she demurs because she is 38 weeks pregnant and has the right to demur, so he takes my hand instead and we twirl to polka until the bread is done and then we all have a slice even though we know it tastes better the next day and, wouldn’t you know, it’s still delicious.
If I died tomorrow, I don’t think my tailor would go to my funeral. I mean, I don’t even have my own tailor yet. I bought some too-long jeans on sale in high school once and Mom asked her coworker to hem them. The lady did a fine job, but she also had two daughters who went to my school, so I felt weird wearing the pants. One of this lady’s daughters could have walked past me in the hall and thought about the time her mom hemmed those pants in their living room while watching *Jeopardy*. It was just too personal. My pants had gone through an experience that I hadn’t, in a home where I hadn’t ever been. I guess all pants have experiences that their owners have not had because of factories and shipping and stores, but it’s jarring when you know the person who has shared a separate experience with your thing.

Aunt Judy’s tailor went to her funeral. She—Aunt Judy, not the tailor—died with almost no money and in the good graces of most everybody she knew. She wanted it that way. We are not Catholic and never have been, but we had to have the funeral reception in the annex of the Catholic church because the Methodist church wasn’t big enough and the Baptist church wouldn’t allow dancing, and if Judy wanted anything at her funeral, it was dancing. Not wild dancing, just jolly sways to classy music, the kind you can do while still holding a drink, light enough to make a dress slightly flounce at the knees. I should have left the reception early to beat traffic back to the city, to finish up work at my new job before it required more work of me the next day, but I stayed the whole time, like maybe if I didn’t leave I would never have to, like maybe we would all stay there dancing until we met Judy again.
It’s Saturday today. My Saturdays these days are mostly for catch-up, on laundry, on work, but also to get out in the world for at least the afternoon. See trees, smell street food or flowers. When I was younger, in middle school and high school, Aunt Judy always asked me to run Saturday errands with her. I missed it when I was in college, and I still miss it now. Aunt Judy liked to ease into the day, so I never minded going because it meant I still got to sleep in. I miss that, too—now, if I don’t wake up early, I feel guilty, like I’ve wasted the entire day. And today, I have to buy dresses, which Judy loved doing, and I have to buy one for a date, which she would have loved to hear about.

Aunt Judy drove an old Town Car that used to be Judge Lenny’s. He gave it to her when he got his new one because she was the kind of lady who inspired people to give her gifts. Not usually gifts as big as a Town Car, but small gifts, too. A little glass bird, a bookmark, a peony candle—anything could remind anyone of Judy because she was a universal lady. She could also play “Heart and Soul” on the piano, which we’d do together on Saturday mornings before errands, after she’d stopped in to breakfast and gossip with my parents. I liked that she never held back an opinion when I came into the room, too. I’m not sure Judy was ever sad about getting old and dying, not even after the doctor told her, not even when she said goodbye. It has been two months since Judy’s funeral and she would be disappointed to know of my sadness, so I ignore it and try to honor her the best I can, by running my own Saturday errands.

Aunt Judy wasn’t even my real aunt. She was my grandmother’s childhood best friend. Judy had no children and no siblings and her husband died before I was born. Mom says that the first solid food I ever ate was a French fry that Judy fed me while my parents weren’t looking. I am sure my mother lit into Judy for that, but I can’t remember because I was so little and just discovering. I don’t even like French fries now, so it’s not like it was scarring or led to poor
eating habits. Although, senior year of high school, when I went on a trip to New York City, my friend Alice and I went to this French fry place called Pommes Frites, where they give you fries in a cone and then you can walk around St. Mark’s Place, which is a street in lower Manhattan where they used to sell drugs but had then, we discovered, been appropriated by frozen yogurt bars and faux Rastafarians with trust funds. Before she died, Judy said that if I ever lived in the city I should live uptown, that I wouldn’t be a downtown girl even though I think I’d like to be. Judy grew up in New York City. I was born there, too, at Lennox Hill, which has always made my life sound fancier than it actually is. My parents had won tickets in a football fundraising raffle and flew up three weeks before I was supposed to be born. I arrived early and I don’t know why. First memories seem like they’re the most magical ones, and I think it’s cruel we all forget them.

It was raining on the last Saturday Judy and I ran errands together, which was maybe a year ago. We always liked rainy weather even though it created inconveniences. Way before then, when I was maybe seven, it started pouring rain when Judy and I were walking to the park. I had groaned and turned around to walk back home, but she stopped me and said the park was mine regardless of the weather. I remember that it made me feel important. Judy was always trying to make me feel important. On our last Saturday together, I had been in town visiting my parents. Judy asked me to drive, which was typical of Saturday errands. She said she never felt comfortable driving because she had learned too late in life. It was good for me that I had learned how to drive when I was fearless, she told me, but I suspect she was just saying that to pump me up. On that Saturday, we went to the flower shop first, but not for flowers. The flower shop was the only place in town that carried helium, and Judy needed a bouquet of balloons for Mr. Ralph’s 78th birthday. The shop owner Norma hadn’t charged Judy a cent for years because of
some bet they’d made in their thirties. Judy loved to gamble. It always worked out well for her, too, which isn’t fair but makes total sense. She acted humble, blessed, lucky, and she was, but she hustled—she created the circumstances that made all the great things about her true.

Our second stop that last Saturday was the hospice boutique, a squat brick building with tiny windows on the edge of the hospital’s parking lot. I think it used to be a pharmacy. This was always my least favorite part of errands with Judy, but it was always her favorite because of the dress rack. I’m suspicious of used dresses. What if someone had their worst day in one of these dresses? Ladies don’t give away dresses from their best days. They wear those ones over again hoping to repeat the luck. And what if I had walked into school wearing a dress from the resale shop and some girl noticed that it was one her mother had made her give away last year? Judy never thought about things like this, and I know, because I finally asked her one Saturday and, after considering things, she said that if she ever ran into a friend whose dress it used to be, they’d just laugh about it. It was like a compliment, really.

Judy’s mantra was that every decent gal should have at least one dress with the tags still on hanging in her closet. She would insist that it was never for pomp, but always for circumstance—when a boy calls around for a last minute date, a girl with a fresh dress can say yes. This subject came up often, and she always ended up saying, in one way or another, that she liked dresses from the resale shop instead of from department stores for one basic reason. The money could only go so far, and she’d rather have three times as many dresses. I could never argue with her, though I haven’t quite adopted her methods for myself. Plus, Judy went through many more dresses than I do. After her husband passed, she loved going on dates. With all sorts of men and to all sorts of places—weekend trips to the hill country, anywhere out dancing, for catfish in the town over on Friday nights. She had too much fun dating to ever settle down again.
I’m having less fun. It’s still Saturday and I’ve stopped by a dress store with a French name I can’t pronounce that has a velvet sofa in the dressing room. I immediately wish I had more stringently adhered to Judy’s advice about keeping tags-on dresses in my closet at all times. The tags on the dresses at the French store are expensive, and the fabric is sparkly and the cuts don’t seem right. I have taken Judy’s advice sometimes, but what was implied and, I suppose, the reason why she kept dragging me along while she bought more dresses, was that dresses with their tags on always seem to get used—as long as they’re dresses you actually like. Judy never bought aspirational dresses or ones that fit poorly. Even at hospice boutique prices, she only bought dresses that she would rank 8, 9, or 10 on a 10-point scale. I wore my last tagged dress before I left for this new job in the city. Also before I met this new guy Sam at my grocery store’s cooking class about how to integrate kale into recipes, which I had only walked into because I was looking for an attendant to ask about the difference between desiccated coconut and the other kinds. Did you know that one serving of kale has more absorbable calcium than a small carton of milk?

Judy bought two dresses on that last Saturday, one of them a Kelly green polo dress, with white polka dots and a monogrammed J on it, which is just the kind of lucky that Judy was. That a dress would be the right size, the right color, the right shape, and have the exact monogram of your name on it is a level of charm with which I have never been acquainted. Per usual, I bought no dresses that Saturday. Judy always told me which ones she thought would look good on me—usually all the short ones—but she never forced anything on me and I loved her more for it.

Judy liked to linger in a moment. The dress shop, the bakery, the grocery store line. She always seemed to like where she was even when she didn’t. She could make a game out of how long it took the cashier at McDonald’s to pour her coffee, or how many times we’d have to circle
a parking lot to find a spot. She only ever got mad at tiny things, like how our town’s local
grocery store stopped carrying Wondra Flour. She wrote a scathing letter to the newspaper
Editor, implying that our grocer did not value women or the time they spent in the kitchen, and
that if they truly did, they would keep convenience items like quick-mixing Wondra in stock.
The Editor published it, and Wondra Flour reappeared the following week.

I have been trying to linger in moments more, but it usually ends in me thinking about
Judy. When I walk by the art gallery that is on the block between my office and the coffee place,
I think about her painting landscapes upside down on canvas to feel the movement more than the
line. And I think about her any time I drink from a glass with a stem. She loved estate sales. The
estate sale at the Polke’s old house was our last stop on our last Saturday. She said she had
always eyed Robin Polke’s stemware and hoped it would still be there now that both Robin and
Roger had passed. It was no secret that Robin and Roger Polke had a tumultuous relationship,
and Judy said she hoped the whole set was still intact. I asked her if she cared that the stemware
would come from a house with bad memories, but she shrugged and said wasn’t going to worry
about it. We should think of it like a rescue. And once you wash the glasses, they’re like-new
anyway. Then she took a bag from the Mexican bakery and served us each a pale pink cookie, to
energize.

Back today, at the dress shop with the French name, I explain to the shop girl Claire that
the guy and I met three days ago. Claire has curated a rack of dresses for my date tonight. I
assume she gets paid by commission by the amount of interest she has taken in me, but I don’t
mind. His name is Sam, I tell her, and he works in new tech, whatever that means. I am in
financial systems consulting. She asks where we’re going and I tell her we’re meeting at a
microbrewery for tapas, his choice. Judy said it was always better to meet a boy somewhere
instead of making him pick you up. It would make the evening more clandestine and electric.

She was always giving me dating advice even though for most of our early Saturdays together I had only really dated Parker Thomas, who didn’t even have a car, anyway.

Judy did find Robin Polke’s stemware at the estate sale. The whole set had only been seven dollars—a steal, she’d whispered. I ended up with the stemware when Judy died, when Mom said I could go through and mine for what I wanted before Judy’s own estate sale. I don’t know why it doesn’t feel wrong to use someone’s old dishes in the same way it feels wrong to wear clothes that have been on somebody else’s body. But it didn’t bother Judy so I’ll try to let it not bother me.

I find two dresses thanks to Claire. One for tonight and one for the closet that she recommends hemming. Their in-house tailor takes forever, so she scribbles down the number of another tailor and I put it in my bag but will probably never get the dress hemmed anyway. But it’s an 8 with the current hem, and we buy 8s, 9s, and 10s. I asked Mom how many tagged dresses Judy had in her closet when they packed it up. There was only one, she told me, with the tags still on it—the Kelly green J polo dress—which would have meant more if my parents had decided to bury her in it, but they chose a boring floral one instead, and I didn’t think to ask until it was too late. I think Judy would have wanted to have been buried in that final dress with the tags still on it. She would have been pleased to know that she’d prepared, dress-wise, down to her final event.

My dress for tonight is sparkly—more sparkly than I’ve ever owned, but Claire at the dress shop insists that all-over sequin is the new neutral. And it’s short, so Judy would have approved. I waffle on hair and makeup but end up going simple, because I’m running out of time and Judy always used to insist that it was never elusive to show up late. It was just rude.
Sam is waiting on a wooden bench just inside of the door when I walk in ten minutes early. The bench is varnished to look oil-slick, and I notice it before I notice him on it. I open with what an ugly bench it is and then we talk like old friends, over small plates, about politics and religion and subjects you are never supposed to discuss on first dates, and then about how peculiar it is that we met over kale, a green neither one of us particularly cares for. The waiter stops by too often and it becomes funny. Sam orders all three desserts on the menu—a small gesture, really, that somehow seems grand. We are both unimpressed by all three desserts, which is better than if we had loved them. I ask if it weirds him out that hundreds of people have eaten on the exact same plates we’re eating on now. He says it doesn’t bother him because of soap and dishwashing etc. but that it does make him curious. Maybe the person eating before him threw up afterward, and maybe the person before that was celebrating retirement. Maybe the person eating on the plate next will chip it with his fork.

I stole Judy’s J dress from the clothing box at the estate sale. Sometimes I put it on to feel like her and think like her even though she never put it on and presumably some other lady had, at least once. It hangs loose but comfortable, the fabric stiff but in the good way, like the cloth is making me feel Judy. The mirror always reminds me that the polka dots and fit and J do not particularly suit me but I also don’t care, because the dress is still a 10 for me, and it’s a little too long so when I twirl, it flounces.

Sam has lived in the city for three years and says I have to see the Capitol at night, that we can walk there from where we are right now, and so we do. Or we start to. But then it starts raining, alligator drops, slowly paced but too large to dodge, and I think about Judy and dresses and Sam asks if we should stop in somewhere to wait it out and I shake my head no and signal us to stay on course. The rain is ours and the night is ours and everything is ours, at least right now.
LETTER TO ROMEO, MY NEIGHBOR’S PITBULL

Attn: Romeo

529 E. Maple Street
The Backyard
City, State 11011

Romeo,

I worry there has been some miscommunication.

It seems the best avenue you have found to talk to me thus far has been via bark, but please understand that I cannot understand your barks. Neither can I understand your lunges or stares or chomps. Actually, when you bark and lunge and chomp, even if it’s just because you’re excited to see me, as your owner suggests, those actions make me think that you are going to push me down on top of my grocery bags as I’m fumbling with the lock on my door and then bite me all over.

As a human with disdain for aggression, can I suggest another method to communicate? I respond best to cards, and am happy to tell you a little bit about them. Unlike barks, which seem, from you, to sound the same for me as they sound for other visitors to my home, cards come in
all varieties and for all situations. It’s customary to send cards on birthdays and the major
holidays, of course, and occasionally to express condolences, but I find there is unique delight in
sending a card when there is no formal occasion to be sending a card at all. I feel this category of
card would suit you best, and once you’ve practiced with me a bit, you could even write letters to
other dogs, perhaps the barkers on the street over, or even your owner, who has, for you,
something I can only explain as irrational love.

I know you spend a lot of time in your backyard, so I worry you will be attracted to cards with a
papyrus theme. This is a bit confusing, because there is a card company called Papyrus—which
is sometimes fine—but what I’m talking about here is the style of paper-washing called papyrus
(Exhibit A).

This kind of treatment to paper is wrong in all colorways. In elementary school, a boy I had a
crush on invited me to his hula party with an invitation card printed on papyrus paper. I took it as
a warning and did not RSVP yes, which was really a bullet dodged, because he started going out
with Macy but then we caught him kissing Danielle behind the dumpster, and I might have been
the only girl not surprised. You can never trust someone who uses papyrus.

Paper weight: for a card, heavyweight paper is always better. Envelope weight is equally
important and shouldn’t be so much thinner than the card that the pairing feels unbalanced, and
also shouldn’t be transparent unless it is an intentionally translucent envelope, which is trending
right now!
Simplicity is key. Humor cards are totally fine if their jokes are delivered cleanly. The Facebook card (Exhibit B) is maybe a bit too on-the-nose, but it’s at least clean. I picked up the Another Year Wiser card (Exhibit C) for my card drawer a couple days ago; it’s an ideal card to me. Simple, kerned well, proportional, and it says happy birthday without saying happy birthday. It’s clever like a literary short story whereas other, lesser cards are just beach reads. But don’t be fooled—there can be room for cards that are beach reads. Just not with the cards you’ll be sending me.

If you’re wondering who I am and what I’m about, it’s simple. I know cards and I fear dogs, and though I can’t control your barking, I can control my response to it. My birthday is coming up—I’m a Cancer, a homebody with a hard emotional shell, and you’ve invaded my turf. When is your birthday? I’m happy to send a card. If I had to guess, I bet it’s not for a few more months, because I bet you’re a Scorpio. They’re super moody and hot-tempered but always loyal, and you seem to be very loyal to your owner as well as to the mutual acts of aggressive barking and fence hopping. Perhaps we can be loyal pen-pals.

The best pen-pal I ever had was a friend from college who used to send hand-lettered cards with inspirational quotes on them. I don’t talk much with her anymore, but I still have the cards. It’s polite to keep cards. One of my friends sends a new pair of socks along with every card, and card add-ins are often nice, but watch out for confetti. I like it, because I’m not afraid of a little mess, but some people think sending confetti in a card is straight up malicious. You have to know your audience.
You’ll be tempted to choose novelty cards that play music when you open them, but I urge you to avoid these. You also might be tempted to send an e-card, since writing might be a challenge and cards do cost money to send, but avoid this, too. Though I have never seen you do it, dogs have reputations for traumatizing mailmen, and it wouldn’t hurt to support their business with a little postage every now and again.

We are not into Hallmark or the Hallmark aesthetic. Not into bicycles, owls, mustaches, or any other item that has been appropriated by alternative culture in a twee way. Not into any cards with animals unless the animals have been in some way made better by art, no offense. Same goes for nature. Octopus (Exhibit D) is poorly drawn and its colors are too sold-at-Target-vibe, whereas Go Wild’s animals (Exhibit E) are illustrated in a fresher way and the colors aren’t as bought-this-as-a-template-on-Pinterest-and-printed-it-out-vibe. Also, not into animals wearing hats. As a dog, you seem like you wouldn’t be into wearing hats, either, so perhaps this is something we agree on.

Extreme psychedelic prints are a definite consideration. Prints are tricky, but if you see the right one, you’ll know. Love simple but love weird. The Grandson card (Exhibit F) is an example of a print that tries too hard and fonts that are trying to appeal to a wacky, youthful spirit but just end up making the card look like it was made for Walgreens. The orange happy birthday card (Exhibit G) is better because the print feels more bespoke. Chalkboard card (Exhibit H) is juvenile and cheap.
I think the nature of any card you send me will call for a blank inside, but if a good outside happens to have an innocent greeting, you can work around it. Ultimately, I have complete faith in whatever you choose, because whatever you choose will be a mode of communication better than your current one. If all else fails, just remember: cards are like barking. Go simple and understated OR commit to something loud and weird. It’s the in-between cards that aren’t as good.

I will check my mail with anticipation.

Best,
Neighbor
Exhibit F.  

Honmark

Exhibit G.

Rifle Paper Co.

Exhibit H.  

Paper Source
EIGHT WEDNESDAYS FROM LATE APRIL TO EARLY JULY

WEDNESDAY ONE

I have finally reached that point in life where every item in my closet is something I genuinely like. Even still, I can never decide what to wear until right before I wear it. This is why I iron in the morning. Usually with steam, rarely with spray starch. Paul’s mother told me once that no one should wear a pressed shirt until it has cooled, otherwise wrinkles will set in the still-warm fabric, so I hang clothes to let them cool for at least thirty minutes before wearing. This is the only piece of advice that Paul’s mother has given me that I consistently follow. It helps elongate the process of ironing, which helps take up more of the day.

I usually have local news on in the background while I iron. Paul likes it. My board is near the window that looks out over Paul’s birdfeeders, too, so I can see the titmice flit around as the sun rises. I have read that the point of retirement is to embrace these small moments.

It is Wednesday, grocery store day. I look for Brussels sprouts. I like them roasted and crispy, or as Paul says, burnt. I prefer to go to the market late at night. Paul prefers to stay home. We haven’t saved enough money and Paul prefers to not see me spending what we do have on menu items like organic vegetables that I will just burn anyway. It’s actually not that we haven’t saved enough money, it’s that bad investments were made. Passive voice. The financial planner says we will bounce back. Either way, we have to eat. So does the girl who does the morning weather, Bridget Baker. She usually shops on Wednesday evenings, too. I like to peek at what she puts in her cart. She likes sweet potatoes, packaged salads, dark chocolate. Once I saw her with three frozen pizzas and jalapeno poppers, Oreos, chips—I didn’t say anything, after all,
Bridget doesn’t know me, but I thought about it the next few mornings while I was ironing and then brought it up to Paul. He loves a mystery. Maybe she has kids. Or maybe her kids were out of town.

On weekends, I make breakfast for Paul. He does not eat breakfast on weekdays because he let a link called “7 Reasons Why You Should Not Eat Breakfast” convince him it is a frill he can live without. We like dessert for breakfast when we do eat it together. Paul read on a different link that eating cake for breakfast is healthier than eating it after dinner, and he extrapolated that to mean that all desserts are healthy if consumed in the morning. This coming weekend is Baked Alaska, so I buy the ingredients today. I’ll let the ice cream set over a sponge cake on Friday night and will have the meringue prepared early, before the grandchildren come. They’ll be over this weekend—like most weekends—because my daughter and her husband use us as babysitters as often as they can. We don’t mind.

Ellie and her little brother Parker like to choose what we’ll have when they come over. Parker has recently learned about rum cake and has been requesting it every weekend with the hope that he will get actual-drunk instead of just sugar-drunk. Paul likes that the boy does not hide his curiosity from us. I’ll make the rum cake next week but soak it in rum extract and orange juice instead of actual rum and we’ll let Parker gorge until he gets sick, which is surely the best way to teach temperance.

WEDNESDAY TWO

Today, Bridget and I are in produce at the same time again. I start palming avocados because I notice two young men giggle and ask her for a photo. They give her high-fives but they are laughing too much. No one is this excited to see a local news personality, at least not openly.
It’s not like she’s a celebrity. We shop at the same grocery store. We buy the same brand of shampoo. I put two avocados in my cart and I roll toward her, stop by coconuts and grab one in case the boys decide to get handsy or pull a move. When I get home and discuss this with Paul, he presses me for descriptions of the boys because he has noticed a trend of young boys making bullheaded decisions in public lately. Paul is always noticing trends. He advises me to avoid throwing any sort of produce because that would mean we’ll have to buy it. I tell him that if I am ever in danger, I hope he will throw an unlimited amount of produce for me, whatever the cost, and he tells me that isn’t the point.

I burnt a hole in the bottom of a pair of white linen pants this morning. Why is linen so expensive? I understand paying more for a heavy sweater but why does thinner fabric cost so much, too? I cuffed the bottoms so the hole wasn’t noticeable and stitched a quick hem. There was no time to iron another pair of pants. Paul was voted Director of Finance on our neighborhood’s board, but he only agreed under the condition that I would go to meetings as his proxy so he can stay home and work on what he calls projects. He prints a small agenda for me and I bring up each item more gingerly than he might. I am the only woman on the board except for Hamilton’s wife, who also serves as proxy, for Hamilton, although for Social Chair. She has been less of a proxy and more of an actual member, though, since Hamilton’s stroke. Hamilton owns the largest house in the neighborhood and has also had the most wives.

It’s quite something that the board has more or less allowed two women into their group, especially two women with whom they do not share tee times. I was fine to let Paul serve as Director of Finance himself, but I enjoy that my being in the group ruffles Gerald’s feathers, and I enjoy that Paul doesn’t feel the need to hobnob or attend the meetings himself. Besides, it’s fun to report back about what comes up in the meetings. Paul loves to gossip.
Our board meets in the community pool house’s auxiliary room, which has no leather chairs and no conference table. There are balcony windows, which I often open. I brought snacks for the seven of us once, but Gerald gave me a disapproving look, so now I just bring snacks for myself. If Paul had been in the meeting, he would have whispered to me that it is potentially harmful to upset the president of the board. I would have whispered back that Gerald is crabby and needs to get over it. Paul still respects Gerald because he helped us build part of our shed years ago, but if that wasn’t coloring Paul’s memory, I suspect his opinion of Gerald would be quite different.

The board basically only exists for one reason, HOA dues—$100 per household per year, which is miniscule and hardly worth our time. But that money pays for landscaping community areas and for the Fourth of July block party, which Hamilton’s wife plans. The only reason we meet weekly is because it makes Gerald feel important. I’d prefer Gerald spend time manicuring his lawn. It’s unfortunate that the stereotype of older men becoming meticulous gardeners is inaccurate. Gerald’s house is almost always overgrown except for when Claudia’s boys get restless and she makes them mow his yard for outdoor time. Paul’s always reporting what those boys get into—their backyard butts up to ours and, because the fence is low, we can see right in.

You’d think a television girl like Bridget Baker would live in Rivercrest or Waterside and not North Falls, where we live. We are a fine neighborhood but we’re older homes, one story ranches on sprawling, flat lots with patches of weeds next to a golf course. Bridget lives in lower North Falls, on Glenwood, on a cul-de-sac that I have no reason to drive down but where I’ll sometimes powerwalk past her huge SUV, which has a KHOU-TV bumper sticker.

Paul jogs in the mornings and I walk in the evenings. Sometimes he will come along in the evenings, too, but usually only if reruns are on. He watches true crime television shows about
serial killers in his spare time. He won’t entertain alien theories or moon-landing denials, but he has started to believe that everyone is entangled in crime at some level, including Bridget Baker. She has a yippy dog that will sometimes whine from the backyard, and Paul has never trusted people with yippy dogs. He really doesn’t trust people in general, though. In retirement, Paul has become somewhat of a self-proclaimed private eye. Not just from the windows in our home, and not in a weird way, but he’s just started noticing more small things, and those small things have started to make him question people a little more. I suspect it’s because there are fewer big things, so the smaller things take on more meaning these days, but perhaps I’m wrong.

WEDNESDAY THREE

Parker ate four slices of rum cake this past weekend. Ellie pretended to like her slice because she was being kind and because they’re going through a manners unit at school. It was Paul’s idea to sugar-rim glasses and pair the rum cake with fresh squeezed orange juice. My idea was to take a nap while Parker played in the garden, but Ellie asked for help on a school project, which is where most of the weekend ended up going. She was assigned to do a poster report on Chester A. Arthur, 21st President of the United States, who, after twenty minutes of searching online, we realized was an unremarkable president except for that he had all of his papers burned two days before he died. Ellie and I couldn’t help but muse that maybe he would have had a more colorful legacy had he not burned the papers. Though maybe he was smarter than all the politicians now, who perhaps keep too many of their papers.

Gerald called the usual meeting for today. Hamilton’s wife and I drove together because her car was getting detailed, and she almost spilled her smoothie when she got into my car so I can see how the detailing of her own car might have been urgent. When I reported this to Paul
later, he said he suspects she’s taking pills. I said maybe so. She did spill the smoothie when we walked up the whitewashed stairs to the auxiliary room and she had to wipe the cup and her hand with a striped club pool towel. She then removed all five of her rings—garish cocktail ones that I’m surprised didn’t leave green marks around her fingers—and set them on a pool float near the window to dry.

Today we discussed two items of business. The first was members of our HOA who have delinquent dues. Protocol is to send letters until we receive payment, but that method, this time, is proving too slow. Gerald told us he would like us to review the list and see if there was anyone we could talk to in person. I looked at the list as I ate my snack mix, which was surely bothering Gerald even though I made sure to wipe any snack dust off my hands first. Hamilton’s wife knew a few people, offered to shake them down. I had no intentions of asking anyone on the list about anything until I saw Bridget Baker’s name and couldn’t help but say I would take her. Paul would get a kick out of it.

The second item of business was that Louise Pine and her husband were reported to have been swimming naked in the community pool last Thursday night. Hamilton’s wife though it was funny and that we should ignore it—a little nudity never hurt anyone. The rest of us agreed we would send a letter even though Paul and I know, from having dinner with Louise and her husband before, that the Pines will probably display the letter under a Cancun magnet on the middle of their fridge.

No grocery store today, so I can’t report anything to Paul about Bridget, which is perhaps good, because I don’t want him getting too carried away. Two months ago, he was convinced the paper boy had been involved in a hit and run because of red dirt on his left tire rim and a news report that said a hit and run had occurred on a dirt road outside of town. Never mind that the hit
and run was purportedly a white sedan and our paperboy drives a little blue truck. Paul was on
the case and, even after the cops found the suspect, still believes he might be right.

WEDNESDAY FOUR

This morning, the titmice had eaten all of the feed and Paul was still asleep. It would
have been cruel to wake him for a task I could do myself and probably equally as cruel to let the
birds starve. Although it’s not like it’s our duty to feed the birds that happen to fly into our
garden. But I guess it is setting them up for failure if we feed them every day and then, one day,
stop. There is bigger meaning here, I’m sure, but I didn’t explore it.

I set the iron upright and grabbed the birdseed from the cabinet where Paul keeps
outdoor-adjacent items. We don’t keep birdseed in the shed because too many other critters get
into the shed. I won’t say it’s because the shed is shoddily built, but I also won’t say it’s not
because of that. The price tag was still stuck to the press and seal top of the seed and it shocked
me—if we pay this much to feed birds, Paul should not be fretting over organic produce.

Bridget is at the grocery store again today. Just us, near a stack of round cheeses that are
technically for sale but also intended to look authentic in a way that this middle American
grocery store is not. She’s looking at brie. I’m pretending to look at fig jam while I decide
whether I should convey Gerald’s message about HOA dues. I hadn’t intended to do it at the
grocery store, but I would like a reason to talk to her. If I’ve noticed her here all of these
Wednesdays, surely she has noticed me, too. Paul thinks I should use the opportunity to befriend
her and find out more about her.

She puts brie in her basket and I wonder if it’s triple cream as she moves toward the
baking aisle, where I am also going, coincidentally. I approach the aisle from the opposite side as
she does so it doesn’t seem like I am following. The overhead music changes from something I hadn’t noticed to Paul Simon. I pick up a fresh bottle of rum extract—Parker has requested a second rum cake—and roll my cart toward Bridget, who is looking at two different brands of rye flour.

I reach for a tin of baking powder from above her and she smiles when my sleeve comes into view. I take this as an opportunity to tell her I prefer the bulk rye flour to the King Arthur she’s holding. She says, really? You think? And I tell her the bulk is better, too, because why would anyone need an entire package of rye flour? She laughs and I can tell thinks about explaining but just says fair enough, and we both move along. I’ll try the HOA-talk another time. I find it unsettling when people use “fair enough” as a cap to a conversation. It’s dismissive.

I end up hovering for a while by sprinkles as she continues down the aisle. I glance over every ten seconds or so. She’s looking at nutmeg. Paul was just telling me he saw online that a group of kids were recently caught snorting nutmeg to get high in a local park. Paul wondered if this had been because it is harder for kids to get drugs these days or if it was because traditional drugs are so easy to get that they have become boring. The next time I glance over, and maybe I am seeing it wrong, but I am almost positive I see Bridget slip the jar of nutmeg into her bag, a red leather bucket tote. I have to tell Paul.

WEDNESDAY FIVE

I tried to remember my dream from last night while I ironed this morning. From what I recall, Bridget asked Paul and me to help her smuggle illegal cheeses into the US. She was particularly trying to convince us to bring over this Sardinian cheese, Casu Marzu, which has maggots in it, and Paul didn’t want to put it in his bag because he’d bought a pair of plaid gloves
he was afraid the maggots would eat. Bridget had tried to reason with him and convinced him that with the money we would make from this cheese, he could import ten more pairs of plaid gloves. I can’t remember why I couldn’t put it in my bag and I can’t remember if Paul relented which is an example of why I do not like dreaming.

Hamilton’s wife talks more at the board meeting today than Gerald does. She is coated in fake-tan down to her fluorescent-polished toes and I wonder if this is what gives her confidence. If Paul were here, he would whisper that her confidence more likely comes from Hamilton’s bank account. Because we still have so many delinquent dues, she does not have full access to her allocated Fourth of July funds, and it’s an issue. She has collected dues from everyone she chose from the delinquent list. I haven’t, so I suggest we tighten the budget on the party—moon bounces are nice but not necessary, and face-painting clowns seem old-fashioned, anyway. Hamilton’s wife doesn’t like this suggestion and Gerald takes the moment to pivot us away from the party budget.

Louise Park and her husband have sent us a letter in response to the letter we sent them. Their letter details how, because there is no sign in the pool area to stipulate that proper attire must be worn at all times, they are in no way delinquent and will continue to swim nude at their leisure. Gerald lets us know he has already ordered a sign and that it is scheduled to be installed next Tuesday.

Ellie made a 100 on her project on Chester A. Arthur, which signaled to her mother that Grandma and Grandpa are great at projects and that Ellie should do all of her projects at their house. We don’t mind. This weekend’s project was to make a mosaic out of edible items. I offered a box of mini bowties from the cupboard, but Ellie requested more variety so we headed
to the market on the weekend, which I don’t like. We sacrifice for those we love, however, I suppose.

We didn’t see Bridget at the store, and I had to cut Ellie off earlier than she’d have liked, but Paul would be addled if he knew half of our grocery budget went to so many tiny, fun-looking bits from the bulk section. Ellie left a few inches on her mosaic for the jar of sand that her parents said they’d bring her from the beach, where they were this weekend. She knew it wasn’t edible but we decided together that if anyone asked she could just say it’s sanding sugar, but no one ended up asking.

Paul has continued to believe that Bridget is involved in some sort of crime but is not yet sure which kind other than owning a yippy dog and maybe having stolen nutmeg, which he said he doesn’t fully believe even though I clearly saw it! Regardless, he has been accompanying me on evening walks more, to watch the sunset and to also walk past Bridget’s house. We follow the Glenwood path most nights, which leads up a hill overlooking a small valley that will probably turn into a shopping center one day but, for now, allows a clear view of the sky. Anyway, the path goes right by Bridget’s house, where last night, we happened to see two men carrying duffel bags to a silver Mercedes with tinted windows. I had planned to knock on the door and ask about the check, but Bridget’s SUV was not in the driveway. And there were the men. They’re going to the gym, I told Paul. Or bowling!

Paul immediately took the scene to mafia underpinnings, to drugs, to Bridget as elite, drug-dealing murderer and kingpin. I told him he was being crazy. And he knows he is, but I can tell he’s just waiting or a time when he isn’t crazy. This is practice. We hurried home and he sat on the back porch and watched Claudia’s boys as they played in their treehouse. I’m sure he wished for foul-play, but they were innocuous.
WEDNESDAY SIX

From the television this morning, Bridget told us the week ahead would be hot and humid. Paul watched closely. He noted aloud that Bridget was wearing a black top, which seemed off for early summer. I asked him just when he became an authority on fashion and he gave me a stare.

I told him black is timeless. He raised his eyebrows, kept staring at me, silent. I asked him if he would prefer I tell him she is wearing black because she robbed a bank last night and didn’t have time to change before giving the weather report. He just stared for a while and then told me I was onto something.

It was too warm in the pool’s auxiliary room today. I opened the windows and, luckily, had brought cream popsicles for everyone but Gerald. I didn’t offer him one and he didn’t ask, but I could see him sweating. There is air-conditioning but it only barely cooled the room by the time the meeting ended because no one got there early to turn it on before the meeting. Gerald updated us on HOA dues. All eleven delinquents have been submitted now except for Bridget’s, which meant all eyes were on me. I told him I’d been trying and that I would get it done, and Hamilton’s wife thankfully cut me off to start finalizing Fourth of July plans. Bob Frantas, former board member, has volunteered, again, to barbeque all of the meat. Bob always wears a gold chain around his neck. He became flashier after his wife died and Paul suspects it’s because she left him quite a bit of money.

Our theme will be traditional Fourth of July ala 1776, bunting and all. Hamilton’s wife went on a five-minute tangent about how we could have done a modern Fourth again but that traditional is preferable. I’m not sure if she was trying to rationalize to me—keeper of funds, technically—or the room, but we were all in agreement about a traditional Forth.
Paul insists we walk by Bridget’s house again this evening, so I can knock for the dues and so he can snoop, even though it’s my grocery day and also Bridget’s! This time her car is there along with three other cars, so I don’t knock as not to disturb. Paul conjectures, but I offer that Bridget is surely just hosting a Mary Kay party like I used to. Mary Kay is such a regret. Marcia asked me to host a party and it all blossomed from there, but I never actually liked the makeup. All the colors are for pasty, boring women—pastels, mauves, nothing interesting.

Paul slows our pace as we get to the house before Bridget’s so it appears as if we have been walking this slow the whole evening and not just as we pass her house. Bridget’s house is a sprawling ranch that probably has a basement. The blinds are up and the lights are on but we don’t see anyone. Paul suggests they might be in the garage slicing bodies or weighing cocaine. Or in a master bath with lots of mirrors, to see makeup swatches, I tell him. We circle the cul-de-sac and pass her house again on our way back home and just as we have almost come to the end of her lot, I see a group of people walk into the living room and for a moment feel like I have seen something I shouldn’t have even though I am not sure what. Paul goes sinister but I remind him that some people like to have each other over. It’s not an unusual thing. Remember?

**WEDNESDAY SEVEN**

Ellie and Parker are selling gift wrap in a fundraiser for their school. Paul and I chauffeured them door to door around the neighborhood this past weekend instead of just purchasing a lot ourselves. We didn’t mind. Bridget was flustered when she answered the door, hair jostled and wearing a chintzy floral robe, and she bought $120 worth of satin paper and black ribbon. I thought about asking her about the dues, but didn’t want to impede her purchase in any way so I stayed quiet.
This just means that I have to go to Bridget’s house and collect her HOA dues today. Gerald finally just called her and after she said she would put a check in the mail, he offered for me to pick it up instead. Apparently she’d apologized and said that her son likes to check the mail and, when he filters through it, she doesn’t always get everything. She hadn’t received any of the notices. Paul found the explanation doubtful, but I’m inclined to believe it.

I walk over around four in the afternoon in a breezy linen frock Paul sometimes calls too tentish. Bridget answers my knock, has the check in the other room if I’d like to step inside while she grabs it. Our exchange is uneasy because she recognizes me and I recognize her and we’re both pretending that we don’t.

Her foyer is wallpapered in coral and white stripes. There is a still-life of a vase on the wall. I can hear her navigating a checkbook and know that if Paul were here, he would tell me to peek in the drawer of her entry table. She tells me from the other room that she’ll be just one more minute and without thinking, I slide open the drawer. It’s lined in velvet. There are matches, four votive candle holders, scissors, and a vacuum manual. I consider telling Paul I’ve seen something more scandalous, though I also consider telling Paul exactly what I’ve seen just to see him try to parse it into something maniacal. The point of retirement is, after all, to embrace these small moments.

**WEDNESDAY EIGHT**

Today’s pants are blue and I’ve paired them with a white linen top and a red neckerchief. It is the Fourth of July and I am nothing if not spirited. The linen top is finicky so I let the iron sit on it for long enough that the fabric could burn. Hamilton’s wife has put me in charge of the patriotic tattoo station, so I’ve been practicing on Paul this morning. He has three temporary
flags on his left arm and a USA! on his palm. Paul gently flexes his arms—tan, but not as firm as they once were—and reminds me that Ellie and Parker will be here in about an hour and that I can practice on them, too, so I let up. The birds outside are quiet. I walk over to the kitchen to prep an American flag Jell-O mold. I look at Paul and tell him I’ll need to re-iron his red shirt before the day is over. He doesn’t hear me because he’s looking out the back window and into Claudia’s yard. On the television, Bridget has just forecast an afternoon of rain.
By the time I was six, my mother had started reading to me from a book called *Sticky Situations*. Each night, she’d share a scenario and then four multiple choice answers, and I was tasked with picking the most morally correct one. I liked *Sticky Situations* because it wasn’t all about bullying or being a good Samaritan. It was sometimes as simple as whether or not to take a cookie from a platter for company while Mama wasn’t looking (no), or whether to speak up even when you’re just a bystander to someone being slighted (yes). Mama says that it should be required reading for all young children and now that I’m eleven, I agree.

My brother Sal says Mama never read it to him, and I wonder if maybe that’s why she decided it was required reading for me. I have never had kids of my own, because I’m too young still, but it seems like parents mess up most on the first kid and then correct everything with the second. This is why I’m better than Sal even though Daddy says Sal and I are equally sweet and good and all of those things that parents all say. What’s not equal, though, and what I’m really jealous of, even though I know being jealous is unbecoming, is Sal’s stand at the mineral spring.

The town clerk, Ms. Sally, died in December. When she died, she left her stand at the mineral spring to my brother Sal. The executor of Ms. Sally’s will sent notarized letters to each recipient of Ms. Sally’s items, and then he also published a big list in the *Ballston Journal* of everything she left and who she left it to. Even though Sal goes to college in Vermont, he was home for Christmas break when the letter came in the mail, and he opened it when we were all in the kitchen and when he said he got Ms. Sally’s stand, Mama made him hand her the letter because she didn’t believe it.
Apparently, before Ms. Sally died, she went through the phone book and earmarked something to give all the people with Sal- in their names until she ran out of stuff to give. Nobody really knows why. The only reason Sal even got anything at all is because when he was a junior in high school Mom and Dad agreed to let him have his own landline because he and his friends went through a phase of thinking the government was using cell phones as tracking devices and the boys wanted to be untraceable. From that, Sal was listed in the phone book, go figure. I don’t really know how phone books work, but Salmon Michter got all of Ms. Sally’s plates. Salinger Biss got her Buick and then sold it the day after without having even driven it once, which is no fun on his part. There are dozens of other Sallys in town, too, and they got Ms. Sally’s herbs, essential oils, books, jewelry, collection of Aboriginal art, and a bunch of other stuff that all got reported in the *Ballston Journal* in January but that I don’t remember now.

When I die, I won’t limit the recipients of my inheritance to names that start with the first three letters of mine. Or at least I hope I won’t. Maybe, when she was eleven, Ms. Sally thought that she’d leave her inheritance to her future children but then couldn’t when she finally got to dying age. Sal said Ms. Sally’s twin girls died in a fire when they were both twelve. I asked him where he found that out and he said he just heard it somewhere. Makes me wonder what people say about me that’s just floating around to be heard by somebody somewhere. I hope it’s that I would be a good entrepreneur and that my hair always looks silky after brushing. Mama’s always after me to brush my hair, but it takes so much brushing to get it from tangled to poofy to magazine sleek that I sometimes give up in phase one.

After Sal signed the paperwork and got the keys for the stand, we bundled up and walked down to the park as a family to take inventory. The stand is made of stone and has six sides and a pointy top, but it’s really just a roomy closet with a padlocked Dutch door next to where mineral
water comes out of a spigot. I’m not sure if it’s the minerals or the spigot that makes it this way, but the water is bubbly and tastes like soap, which was at first why people started coming to the spring but then, recently, why people haven’t been. Ms. Sally never opened it much, and I don’t remember anybody ever running it before her, and it’s been closed for at least a year and never attracted many customers when she did have it open, but I still wish Ms. Sally had left the stand to me. My name isn’t Sal, though, and I didn’t have that bond that names can give and therefore that Sal was able to have with Ms. Sally, so Ms. Sally didn’t leave me a single thing when she died.

I’m also younger than what you’d think should be running a stand like Ms. Sally’s. Sal’s a good age for it, but he only comes back here during breaks and summer. It’s only an hour’s drive to his college in Bennington and everyone here in upstate New York thinks that’s a long time, but no one in the south would think that’s anything but a nice Sunday drive. I learned about distances on summer vacations to Texas to see my grandma, but I keep my northeastern perceptions to fit in here at home. Middle school can be rough for my demographic when opinions veer from the crowd. Anyway, I just wish Ms. Sally would have left her stand to a girl at least. Girls like shopping more than boys, and girls are welcoming. She was a little sexist against her own sex. Or I guess she wasn’t really, because she left all sorts of stuff to women, but she did give the bigger stuff to men. I mean, a lot of people are sexist. I think I’m capable of doing whatever I want, but I’m fine making boys do things I don’t want to do so I guess I’m a little sexist too when I want to be.

I have four chores, all of which I am capable of completing by myself. I dust Mama’s milk glass each week. She doesn’t actually like milk glass, she just inherited it from her mom in Texas when she married Daddy and moved to New York, to the house where they had Sal and
me and where we still live today. There are at least 300 pieces, arranged rainbow in glass-front cabinets that you’d think would keep out dust a little better than they do. I made a joke that this summer, when Sal comes back to open the stand, he’s going to stock it with all of Mama’s milk glass, and Mama said she’d like to see him try.

Sal does still have to stock the stand, but it’ll be with items he orders wholesale. Daddy said he likes the idea of Sal running the stand, because Daddy used to go there when he was a kid, back when the county still owned it. Sal doesn’t have the liquid assets to stock it himself, so Daddy’s also going to help him out with that at first. Ms. Sally kept the stand pretty simple: candy bars, beeswax candles from a local woman in town, fresh lemonade from powder, and peppermints. Sal wants to expand, which is the business technique I recommend. I heard Daddy listen to a program on NPR about the benefits of portfolio diversification in business and that’s basically what Sal is doing here. I suggested mood rings the last time we spoke on the phone and he said he’d think about it.

Sal brought his college girlfriend to Easter lunch and she made a big faux pas. She brought Mama and Daddy a crock of spinach-artichoke dip, but she used the kind that’s made with no butter instead of the kind that’s made with lots of butter and a French roux, something Mama taught me how to make from a Julia Child cookbook. Sal’s girlfriend was so proud of the dip that it made me feel bad that I was eleven and knew about good versus bad dips and she was, what, twenty? and still hadn’t figured it out. Sal should have told her that Mama and I are particular about certain foods. I didn’t say anything to her about the dip or to Sal about how he should’ve warned her when she was making it. Not a battle worth beginning, especially with young love involved, as Mama would say. Besides, persistence in arguing in front of company is
not flattering. Again, that’s just what Mama says. I generally like arguing, in front of anyone, at least with Maura and the girls at school. I think if you can argue with somebody and still be friends, it means you actually care about each other.

Mama does say persistence is generally a good quality, as is evidenced by the Battle of Jericho. We have moved on from *Sticky Situations* to the *Bible* for our evening readings. I like the Battle of Jericho because it’s the story where a Canaanite prostitute—a prostitute!!—Rahab, helps Israelite spies and, in turn, they spare her life because she did the right thing even though Canaanites weren’t supposed to help Israelites. I’ve yet to read a Sticky Situation where a legally wrong action was the right multiple choice. I think God was really saying something there, though, and I plan to use it in defense of any future wrongdoings of my own.

Not that I partake in too many wrongdoings. Mama says I did all the usual stuff when I was a little girl, like sneaking outside during nap time and throwing a dozen eggs, one by one, at Sal because he wouldn’t let me play some game. Mama doesn’t know that I used to steal stuffed animals from the nursery at church, too. I hid them for a time and then I always brought them back. But I’m over all that, even though I’m not sure I need to be. The whole point of the *Bible* is that we’re incapable of being perfect because of Eve and the apple and the tree, so some wrongdoings are inevitable. That’s where Sticky Situations come in, because they can help mitigate bad decisions, can help us at least try, you know? Mama says this is the point of grace, but also that grace can only go so far, and that’s why we have rules.

Sal left me the key to the lock on the Dutch door when he was here for Easter so I can clean it out in my spare time before he opens it in June. Mama says this is an abuse of sibling labor but I don’t mind because it lets me stake a claim in things. I don’t all the time, but when I do I light some of Ms. Sally’s back stock of candles. This is a risk on my part since Sal could sell
these for profit, but I’m just hoping that what Sal doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Between the candle and cracking the top part of the Dutch door, there is enough light to read Ms. Sally’s stack of old books, which didn’t get inherited since they were in the stand and I guess nobody else knew about them. I bet she used to read in the stand. Some of the books are boring but I try to just skip to all the interesting paragraphs. Why does anyone read boring paragraphs?

Even though I cared a lot in the beginning, I have decided that I don’t actually care what Sal sells in the stand. My new theory is that Ms. Sally didn’t care about what she sold and that the secret to the stand is just being in the stand more than making money from the stand. Besides, I don’t really need money yet. And neither does Sal, because he has a full scholarship. We both could use a little extra, for date nights for Sal and for trinkets and snacks for me, but we get by. Sometimes Maura and the girls steal earrings at the mall, because earrings are small and easy to slide into a pocketbook, but I never have. Maura asked me if I thought I was above it and I told her that no, I just didn’t want any earrings, but I really do think I’m above it and that I’m a little better than her for not stealing, and I don’t feel bad about feeling superior even though, if this were a Sticky Situation, I should have alerted an adult about the stealing and subsequently distanced myself from the friends who were encouraging it. But if I distanced myself from every friend with whom I disagree at some point, I don’t think I’d have any friends. I just wish Maura and the girls could grasp that markets exist because of the exchange of goods and services, which is I think what Daddy calls the invisible hand, and when you mess with that, like if too many of us stole earrings, the store would close because they wouldn’t make enough money because we’d have stolen all their potential profit just to look cool. Besides, I already have tons of earrings.

Do you ever get the jitters when you try something new? I always do. In one of Ms. Sally’s books, which seem to really just be books she’d purchased at the library’s used book sale,
I read yesterday that when Jimmy Carter was governor, he filled out a report stating that he had
seen a UFO. I wonder if he got the jitters filling out that report. This morning, I was lying in the
bottom of the stand looking for UFOs out of the small opening in the Dutch door, or at least
looking up at the sky for the potential to see anything that passed by, and when I got up to push
open the Dutch door a little more, I spotted a shrimpy old man taking pictures of trees. I feel sad
for old men when I see them. Not for Papa or Grandpa, but for the really, really old men. They
seem so helpless without a woman next to them. I stayed sitting up and watched as the shrimpy
old man moved from trees to birds and then out of the park toward Howard’s Lunch. I couldn’t
see what he ordered or what he ate, but I bet it was sad. All I can do now is think about how I
should have gone to sit with him, but that idea gave me the jitters an hour ago even though it
seems like the right thing to do now. It’s annoying that even when I know what’s right, I can’t
always do it. It’s also just sad for old people to be alone because they’re about to be super super
alone in the grave so they should be around the living while they still can, I think. At least, that’s
how I see it.

Sal’s girlfriend came home with him for these last two weeks of May. Sal has brought
home a lot of girlfriends, so I try not to get too attached to them. This one seems nice and a little
goofy. They’ve been going to concerts in the town over and to the arcade, which seems to have
distracted Sal from the stand, but I’m fine with this because it means that I can spend time there
without having to think about customers or selling or anything since no supplies have come in
even though Daddy gave Sal the money to order them weeks ago. Right now, the stand is sort of
just a clubhouse for one when I keep the door closed and I’ve grown to think of it as my own. I
thought about telling Maura and the girls that I’ve been going down there, but I decided to keep it a secret. I think I value mystery.

Sal’s girlfriend bought a weird Japanese haircutting device from the mall. It looks sort of like a banana clip. You put all of the back of your hair in it and chop and then put all of the front of your hair in it and chop. Mama said that, though novel, she did not think it would work well. But Sal’s girlfriend tried it anyway, on herself, and we had to go to the salon on Main for Bet Bet to fix what she had done to herself. While we were there, Bet Bet said she was looking forward to seeing what Sal would do with the stand. A few of her other clients had also received items of Ms. Sally’s, but she assured Sal that his was the most interesting. She said he should offer face-painting, make it a real destination. Sal’s girlfriend said she loved the idea, and I started to get really mad thinking about little kids stopping by every hour to have Sal scrawl on their faces instead of keeping the stand closed and mine. Plus, I bet painting faces would give Sal the jitters, because I don’t think he has done it before, which means the face painting would be all wiggly and he’d never even get repeat customers.

The old man took a photo of me this morning. I was sitting on the stool and peeking through the Dutch door, as I like to do most days, and the old man just snapped a photo right! at! me! It wasn’t the bad kind of photo and he doesn’t seem like the bad kind of man, which Mama has warned me about. I’m not even sure if he could really see me, and he was probably just taking a photo of the stand itself. But it made me freeze. Not in a jitters kind of way or a scared kind of way. I just wanted to peek back out, but I didn’t want the man to snap another picture with me in it, so I have been hiding in the stand ever since. You can’t really pace in the stand, but I have been doing it metaphorically. Flipping pages in the book that talks about Jimmy Carter. Wondering what it would be like to own a peanut farm. Thinking about how much better peanut
butter, honey, and banana sandwiches are than the ones with just peanut butter and preserves.

Eventually, after I have thought as many thoughts as I want to think, I peek back out. The old man isn’t facing me anymore, no camera, just his back to me, on the bench facing Howard’s Lunch. But there is a lady with him now. An older lady in a lovely white hat with a billowy linen dress. And they are holding hands! I stare at them for a little bit, because they can’t see me back and I’m a little more brazen when I know I’m not being watched, but then I sit back down on the floor of the stand. Open the container of lemonade powder and stick my hand in like I am at the beach and this is sand. Think some more about Jimmy Carter, about how he probably didn’t actually see a UFO because Sal told me that UFOs aren’t real when I got scared of them one night. I decide that maybe the old man isn’t sad, and I wonder what Mama is making for dinner.

Sal’s girlfriend likes to do crossword puzzles, and so do I, so when I’m not in the stand or helping Mama with chores or at the mall with Maura, Sal’s girlfriend and I do crosswords from a stack of old Ballston Journals that Mama keeps in the laundry room. Sal’s girlfriend asks me about school and boys, and I can tell she is trying to bond, but I’m resistant. I don’t want to bond with anyone until I know they’ll be around for a while. But she did do one thing really, really right. By the end of her two weeks in town, Sal’s girlfriend managed to convince Sal to visit her aunt in Montana for the entire month of June and even though I’m not French and don’t make a habit of kissing anyone, girl or boy, I almost kissed her. Sal gone for a month means that I will be the one in town when the stock he finally ordered comes in and that I will be the one who can open the stand for him as long as I am really responsible, which, duh, I will be. Sal checked with Mama to see if it would be okay if I ran the stand with her supervision and she saw no problem with it mostly because barely anybody goes to the park by the mineral spring anyway, except for morning runners and that old man but I haven’t told anybody about him yet.
June is warmer than I’d like it to be, but the stand stays fairly cool. Even though I stopped caring about the selling part of the stand for a little while, the idea of being able to run it by myself has rekindled my interest. The boxes of stock that Sal ordered finally came and I lugged them all to the stand in a few trips with my wagon. Unloading them was easier than the moving had been. There were friendship bracelets but no mood rings. There were also blow-up beach balls, which was a clever choice for a stand in the middle of a park like this one. Sal had his girlfriend make up some souvenir postcards that look old but in a fancy way, and I want to hate them but they are actually a really good idea and I really like them and I really hate to admit it but Sal’s girlfriend is turning out to be okay between these postcards and getting Sal out of my hair for the month.

I don’t think she helped Sal with snacks, or maybe there was an order mishap, or maybe she did help Sal with snacks and I was right about her all along, but whatever the case may be, the snack situation is bleak. We have Ms. Sally’s leftover lemonade powder, which I put my hands in all the time but is probably still okay to drink, and we have the sugary kind of granola bars. And the only other food that was delivered was six 1,000-count boxes of clove candies, individually packaged in red wrappers, which I guess Sal chose even though it was a weird choice.

I empty one of the boxes of clove candies into a glass jar so that I can sell them apothecary style. I’m not sure how to price them—ten cents per piece of candy? A quarter? There’s so much to consider about pricing, and I haven’t taken Economics in school yet, but I’ve heard a few things here and there. Do we assume it’s a captive audience, like how no one ever whines about communion crackers being so dry because you’re in church and it feels wrong to whine about what some people believe is the transubstantiated body of Christ? Will people in the
park buy what I have just because they’re in the park and I’m the only place in the park? It’s a decent sized park, two city blocks by two city blocks, but it’s sleepy because there’s a newer park with a swing set and a merry-go-round, so it’s more of just a place people come when they’re killing time before they have to be somewhere else close by. So maybe I should price low with the hope that it will lure in customers who will tell their friends about my great deals and therefore make the park more of a destination. The Sticky Situations option would be to price as fairly as I can, but that doesn’t really seem like the choice that people with business acumen would make. I want to have acumen in all domains but it’s turning out that that’s kind of hard and maybe slightly against values Mama has taken so much time to teach me.

I didn’t get jitters making the price sign, because even though I had never made a sign like it, I practice my handwriting daily and Ms. Cooper says I have the best handwriting out of anyone in our class. I decided on moderate prices, prices that say I care about what I’m selling but I realize that not everyone has deep pockets. I don’t have deep pockets. Yet. I guess Sal will get the profits from the stand but I will keep some as a salary even though we haven’t yet discussed it. I like being able to choose prices, but it makes me wonder about choosing. Who chooses the price for a package of M&Ms or how many ounces of soda you get for however many dollars? I’d like to be in charge of more choices. Tonight, Mama made a blueberry pie for dessert, but she made white fish with asparagus for dinner, which is such a cruel barrier for a girl like me who would never choose fish and wants nothing to do with it but does want dessert. We keep fish as pets! Can’t we eat cow or turkey or something I don’t have to see in my home after eating its little brother? I had the same thoughts about an aquarium restaurant we went to on vacation, where fish swim all around the tables in huge glass cases while customers eat the same fish or some very similar to the ones that are swimming around them. I refused dinner and only
ate dessert during that trip, but when we’re at home Mama won’t take the same excuse. I don’t feel I should be punished for an eating sensitivity but there’s not much I can do except wait until I get my own house and my own kids and honor all the eating sensitivities they choose. When I ranted to Maura about this on the phone, she told me I was overreacting, and I took it as a personal offense, so we’re now in an argument.

I walked to the stand really early today, hung the sign, and then took a swig from the mineral spring and instantly regretted it. I wonder if Ms. Sally used water from the spring to make her lemonade or if she used normal tap water from the little sink in the back of the stand. It sounds more authentic to use mineral spring water but there is no way it tastes better. A lot of morning walkers walk right by the stand, but I don’t expect them to buy anything because they’re park regulars and here for exercise purposes only. All business. I never realized how many morning walkers there are. You can tell some of them roll right out of bed, hair matted, to start walking. But there’s this one lady who circles the park over a dozen times and she has bright red hair and a full face of makeup. I don’t think I’ll be a makeup girl. It’s too much fuss. But I will seriously consider telling Sal to wholesale order spandex leggings and sweat-repelling shirts, because our main market is exercise people and we have no products directed toward that market. I end up prepping the lemonade with tap water and put it in the mini fridge next to the sink. Still no customers.

Still no customers by ten in the morning, either. Or eleven. I told Mama and Daddy not to stop by today because it’s probably bad luck if my first customers are my own parents who are only there for guilt purchases even though I wouldn’t charge them anything in the first place. You’d think in a town this small, someone would have walked by just to see what I was up to. Or
that the *Ballston Journal* would send a reporter to cover the noteworthy reopening of this historic
town treasure, which surely many patrons remember fondly. In the spring, they covered when
Pat Ulla’s dog went missing and wandered into Bet Bet’s salon all the way across town from the
Ulla’s house. This opening is more important than that, but it occurs to me that I might have to
notify them that I’m open, so I close the stand momentarily, grab a quarter from the petty cash
Mama told me to bring so I can make change, and walk across to Howard’s Lunch for their
payphone. Mr. Howard lets me call from his phone, though, so I keep the quarter pocketed. I call
the number on the bottom of an old copy of the *Ballston Journal* and no one answers, I guess
because newspapers are dying, but I leave a message because it’s the best that I can do.

Morale hits its lowest point at 3PM because no one has come and so I close up. I will call
what happened today a soft opening and try a new approach tomorrow, I guess. Mama suggests
that I take the leftover streamers from Daddy’s birthday and hang them around the stand to catch
attention, so I put them in my bag after eating a piece of cold blueberry pie from the fridge and
then read my old copy of *Voyage on the Great Titanic* in my room because I feel like wallowing
in my emotions. Mama says she doesn’t know why I read this book over and over and it’s too
hard to explain to her or anyone really how the Titanic is such a perfect tragedy. Maura
understands it, but I’m still not talking to her, of course.

Day Two, the true opening, begins better. I asked Daddy about pricing last night and he
told me that I need a loss-leader, so I decide to price the candies at one penny each—practically
giving them away. One of the streamers falls off of the stand and onto the sidewalk, so two
women from the AM exercise crowd stop to help me reattach it, which is very kind of them.
They did not buy anything but they do know I am in business—progress. By 3PM, no one else
has come, but I am determined to make a sale. I don’t duck down to read any of Ms. Sally’s
books or run my fingers through the lemonade powder or light candles. I just sit on a stool with the top part of the Dutch door open and wait. By four, I am a little bored. I tie and untie the friendship bracelets, set one aside for Maura and then for the rest of the girls. And then, as I’m thinking about friendship bracelets and colors and how, when I get a boyfriend, I will make matching bracelets for him and me to wear, the old man walks up.

He says hello as he takes off his hat to rest it on his cane. The woman isn’t with him today. Seeing the old man up close, I realize that he has old man spots and deep wrinkles, and I probably could have guessed this had I ever thought about it, but sometimes you don’t think about things until they come up close to you.

I say hello back and ask him what I can do for him. I’m still working on the best thing to say when greeting customers, but for my first one, I think I’m doing okay.

Old people are so slow at things. He looks at the sign. I consider making small talk, telling him how I make the lemonade fresh and asking how his day has been, but then I think about how he took a picture with me in it that one time and how I felt so bad for him before knowing he had a lady and I worry I will say the wrong thing so I just keep my mouth shut and look out at the park and then past that to the street and focus really hard on a trash can.

Believe it or not, he asks for a whole handful of clove candies. I have to interpret what that means, so I give him six for a total of six cents, plus one extra candy because I miscounted and don’t want to ask for one back. He gives me a ten dollar bill and I have to give him nine dollars and ninety-four cents change, which I know how to do because I make As in school and find math really boring because it’s so easy.

As I count ones, he tells me a story about war and clove candies that I only half-listen to because I don’t want to miscount. After I hand him the bills and change, he just gets really quiet.
for a second and sighs. I feel unequipped to deal with this kind of awkward silence but I try to think of it more as a pregnant silence, which is something we learned about in social studies because Ms. Macy teaches social graces along with social studies, I guess for fun or maybe because she doesn’t like social studies all that much. Something will come out of the silence if the old man and I just wait long enough. It’s patience that I still need to work on, though, because I forget all my *Sticky Situations* stuff and I suddenly get the jitters a little bit and then just blurt out asking him why he took a picture of me in the park that one time.

The problem, though, is that he starts talking at the same time and because old people are slow, I don’t think he hears me. Instead, I let him keep speaking, and he’s talking about his wife this time, about how she’s sick and how she used to really like coming to the mineral spring not for water but just for walks and to watch the birds and the people going to and from Howard’s Lunch across the way. He says she doesn’t have energy to come out as much now, so he takes pictures of the park during the weeks she can’t get out and even sometimes when she is out, so they’ll both remember their time together, and it strikes me as kind of a tragedy smaller in scale to the Titanic but similar in that what was once this grandiose and special thing becomes survival and sinking and sad.

In the Old Testament, this prophet Elijah calls down fire from Heaven in a really intense showdown with prophets from Baal and after this huge fight and standing up for his beliefs, Elijah runs away and prays that God will just kill him because he’s so tired of the fight. God, being God, and though maybe a little scary, also understanding, just sends an angel down to bring Elijah bread and water, and that gets him out of the doldrums and back to his normal self. The same thing happens in my Titanic book—all these people are freaking out on deck and then this band starts playing and it calms them down. And I’m not God and I don’t know how to play
any instruments even though Mama makes me sit through piano lessons every week, but I pour the old man and me some lemonade and open a granola bar for us and we look together out at the park and across toward Howard’s Lunch in a silence that isn’t quite pregnant but is something close.

_A Ballston Journal_ reporter breaks the silence. She’s here to interview me and the old man, too, if he’ll let her. We do let her, and afterward, she buys some lemonade, which I don’t charge her for but she pays for anyway, I guess because of journalistic standards. Eventually, she leaves. So does the old man, though he says he’ll be back tomorrow, and now it’s just me again. I sit down on the floor of the stand and read a little more in the book about Jimmy Carter. I run my hands back through the lemonade powder. I learn that Jimmy Carter was the first president born in a hospital, which isn’t that interesting, and then I learn that he had a peanut farm that failed so bad the first year he ran it that he had to take out loans to try again the second year. I lean back so that all I can see out of the open Dutch door is the sky, and I think about how many more days are left in the month of June, and the summer, and the year, and I feel optimistic.
The game starts with a question about sugar content in peanut butter. There are six contestants, all adults, and only three of us answer it correctly. I did not realize it wasn’t common knowledge that peanuts are not naturally sweet.

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**Age 6—Scratch & Dent**

*Unclear What This Grocery Store Is Actually Called, But This Is What My Parents Call It*

I like it because nothing is off-limits. Sugar cereal, neon nail polish, pocket folders, Dinty Moore Beef Stew, Pop Tarts. I will realize later that these were lean times for my family and our dollars stretched further here, but in the present I do not yet understand why we are here instead of the other store or why my mom suddenly says okay to all the things I want instead of saying not today and I love it.

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Our host, a peppy store manager, introduces the three of us who will be competing. My competition is Bernard, a retired man who comes here every morning for coffee, and Sarah, a personal assistant who has lived in the neighborhood for over twenty years. The host introduces me as Lily, an accountant who is new to the area, clearly setting me up as the rookie, which I’m fine with. It’s not like I’m new to grocery stores, so I don’t see a disadvantage.

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Age 7—Flagship Randall’s

*In The Neighborhood In Houston Where I Grew Up Which Is Also The Neighborhood Where Beyoncé’s Mother Lives*

There are already four carts behind ours when the woman in line behind my mom taps her on the shoulder to tell us we’re leaking. It’s the milk, but we are only one cart away from checkout and my mom looks at me, looks at the leaking gallon, and in that moment resolves that I am now old enough to complete this challenge.

Lily, run and grab another gallon. Whole milk, red label.

I fast-walk down Aisle 7—Dog Food, Light Bulbs, Tape—and zag over to the far wall, grab a red label gallon (no leaks), which is heavier than I think it will be, and haul it back to the register. It won’t occur to me until years later, prompted by my brother-in-law, why grocery stores keep milk in the way-back instead of close to the entrance. There is cleverness behind putting an essential grocery store item in a place that demands its potential purchasers pass as many potential purchases as possible.

*The host explains Round 1 of the game. He will ask ten questions, and each question we answer right is worth one point. Question 1 is about on which aisle one might find Fixodent, but I conflate it with Fix-a-Flat and Sarah buzzes in before me anyway. There is an audience of maybe fifty people, all standing just inside the main doors of the store and in the small eating area, where the windows show that it’s raining hard outside.*

Age 8—Flagship Randall’s

*Because We Can Walk Here From Our House When Mom & Dad Aren’t Home*
My older sister, who is a senior in high school, is babysitting me today. We walk to the grocery store for Doritos and Orbitz, a soda that has little balls in it that we’ve seen on television. In the checkout line, there is a magazine with Leonardo DiCaprio on the cover, and my sister talks about how hot he is and I say that yeah he really is hot, too, but I feel weird, like I’m not allowed to say that kind of thing yet.

On the way home, my sister tells me about *Fraggle Rock*, a show that was on when she was a kid, that has puppets and little characters called Fraggles and I am stunned thinking about how there is so much I don’t know.

* By Question 9, Bernard and I both have four points and Sarah has one. The host slowly but clearly introduces Question 10, channeling Alex Trebek: Where might you find postage stamps in the grocery store? I buzz in immediately, as does Bernard, but I beat him. I know the answer to this question because I had to buy stamps last week, and the answer is surprising. It’s at Customer Service. Tellers don’t keep stamps in their drawers anymore because they’re considered high priced items. I pretend to be disappointed for Bernard, but make no mistake, I’m winning and I’m glad.

### Age 11—Brookshire’s

*The Only Grocery Store In The Rural Suburb Of Houston Where My Parents Bought A Farm*

Bill’s is only open until nine and we get out of Bible study at 8:50. Mom hands me a $10 during the final prayer and whispers for me to run over and buy a dozen eggs before the store closes. This task involves walking through an overgrown lot where 18-wheelers park and the weeds are wet with dew that sticks to my shiny gold shoes and makes them glitter in a way I wish they glittered all the time.
This is my first foray into solo shopping aside from occasionally hiding in clothing racks, but even then I am never *alone* alone. I choose brown eggs because they seem more exotic than my mom’s usual carton of whites. This egg purchase is the impetus for a trend of choosing slightly more exotic versions of normal items when my mother asks me to pick them up in the future. Top shelf olive oil, jarred ketchup instead of Heinz, anything with a lot of prefixes or qualifying adjectives. And when I bring the two quiches that my mother has prepared to school the next morning (in mismatched pie carriers, for teacher appreciation day) I have silent confidence that my mother’s quiches will taste better than Whitney’s mother’s quiches because I highly doubt her mother used brown eggs.

This is also the first time I become familiar with the act of silently keeping the change.

- The overall winner is the first person to fifty points, so it’s still anyone’s game at the beginning of Round 2. This time, the host will say a series of words that are supposed to prompt a brand, and we have to then guess that brand and product. Yellow, flat, processed: Kraft American Singles. Gluten-free, snap, crackle, pop: Rice Krispies. Morning, clean, blue: Dawn.

- *Age 14—Brookshire’s*

  *Because It’s Close To Church*

  I’m helping out with Vacation Bible School and we’ve run out of grape juice for communion, which is in an hour. Ms. Bethany brings me along to the store while the other helpers man their stations. She goes for a generic brand of grape juice cocktail, from concentrate, and I regret to this day not telling her that Jesus’s blood should be represented by Welch’s at the very least.
Round 3 begins the part of the game where we have to go around to collect actual products. I draw dairy, Bernard draws protein, and Sarah’s left with canned goods. We have three minutes to collect every item on each of our respective lists in order to earn an allotment of points, but certain aisles are closed, so we have to follow a super specific path. Sarah gets all her items first, Bernard second, and I come in last—hello, dairy is on the far edge of the store, not fair! Sarah wins by two items, and if I had a meaner spirit, I would contest that she had an extreme advantage having to only deal with cans.

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**Age 16—Brookshire’s**

*Still The Only Grocery Store In The Rural Suburb Where My Parents Bought A Farm*

There is a hurricane coming and my mom has sent me to buy bread, milk, and kale. Mr. Patterson, my chatty Latin teacher, has trapped Travis Hodem in front of the bread. I overhear words like *declension* and *Catullus* followed by slight chuckles indicating that these have been jokes that I am not getting and Travis Hodem likely doesn’t get either but I happen to know that Travis Hodem is hoping to date Mr. Patterson’s daughter Jane and so will endure for longer than others might. They are standing in Aisle 2 and I have sequestered myself right next to them but one aisle over, separated by the bread on their side and cans of creamed corn on mine. The milk and kale are already in my basket and I can’t risk being trapped in a conversation with Mr. Patterson, bless his heart. I hear Travis attempt to break away—he fake-laughs and, I imagine, reaches for a loaf of, oh, if I have to guess, I’d say pumpernickel, as he says he’s got to run this back to his mom but it’s been so great to see you!

Mr. Patterson has always had a light foot—one reason why cheating in his class is a slight challenge, though not impossible—but if you listen closely you can hear the slightest squeak of his rubber-soled shoes on every third or fourth step, which is how I know he’s moving
toward the back of the store, so I slide in the opposite direction and around the endcap and grab my loaf of 12 Grain just as Mr. Patterson turns toward dairy.

- The next challenge in this round is to, in two minutes or less, curate a picnic, and then the crowd will vote—blindly, since we turn our carts into someone in the back of the store, on who has the most ideal picnic, and that person will receive the most points. I head straight for the party aisle for anything that is red and white checkered, then toward pickles and crackers before hitting the deli for meat and cheese. On my way back, I grab macarons from a small display and then call it done.

Age 17—Blue Marlin Market

On The Small Island Six Hours Away From Galveston That Serves As The Finish Line For The Harvest Moon Regatta

The boat is set to dock around 4pm and the sailors, I’ve heard, want snacks. I am land crew, which is just what the wives and nieces and children of those sailing in regattas call themselves to seem important. Regattas are not as fancy as people who don’t go to them think they are. Most of the ladies gather on our rental’s upper deck to watch boats stagger in, but I like to watch from the first floor on the inside, where the entire wall is made of glass and even though the rental is old and probably cheap, the view feels expensive.

Joyce Howell, yacht club old guard in heavy, white linen and gold earrings, hands me a wad of pooled cash and instructs me to take the golf cart to buy cold-cuts and crackers and crudité to stock the kitchen. I have now spent over 15 minutes at the deli counter talking to the butcher about salami and varieties of turkey and how he has been selling more roast beef than usual. This is the longest I have ever spent at a deli counter because the situation feels high
stakes, and I only leave when the butcher points me toward a display of mustard in small, glass jars with a list of recommendations he has scrawled on freezer paper. The land crew failed to specify any particular accouterments but the amount of cash Joyce handed me suggests I be liberal with my choices.

When I get back to the cabana and begin to unload the brown paper bags, Joyce walks in to survey. She examines the cheese, the cherries, the varieties of meat I had the butcher display on two rectangle platters. I reach into bag four and pull out a jar of tarragon mayonnaise and Joyce catches my eye and winks.

I learn later that Boar’s Head roast beef sandwiches do not taste as good away from the beach, when bought from different butchers in different places. And Milano cookies are too smooth and rich outside of a vacation pantry. Time and place should not be variables on something as constant as branded food, but they are. When I share this with Mom, she says she can eat a Milano cookie anywhere, any time.

I win the picnic game and the host announces that it is now Round 4. We each receive an unsorted list of 75 items and are to get as many of those items as we can before the timer runs out. Bernard, Susan, and I all head toward different aisles, but I finish my aisle before Bernard finishes his and meet him on his aisle. I think he really might be cheating, or have insider help, because there are four of the items we need—Hellman’s Mayonnaise, a half-dozen eggs, Gossner milk, and Motrin—sitting right next to the Hamburger Helper that he’s grabbing. There’s no time to stare at him, though. I just keep moving.
Age 22—Whole Foods

_In Houston’s Fanciest Neighborhood, Which My GPS Leads Me To On The Way To My Boss’s House When I Search For Drugstores Near My Location_

Me and two friends snuck into the pool at a medium-nice hotel a few days before this and the chlorine has faded just enough of my nail polish that I notice it in the car and it is suddenly imperative I buy nail polish remover before the new hire party at my boss’s house.

This is an older Whole Foods with a tree-lined parking lot and I am the only person who isn’t moseying. I’ve never been pleased with the beauty section of Whole Foods, because it’s just as expensive as Sephora but the brands are more obscure and never work as well. And really, in nail polish remover, I’m looking for the strongest chemicals possible to get the job done efficiently, straight acetone that will dissolve all color in seconds. Whole Foods will not sell acetone. I settle on a bottle of papyrus-inspired soybean yada-yada polish remover and am, to no surprise, displeased at the amount of time it takes to get rid of the little red that has not already faded from my nails and then displeased that I made myself buy the Whole Foods nail polish remover in the first place.

My nameplate is right next to my boss’s teenage daughter Meredith, who has thick, winged eyeliner and a chipped manicure of her own. We bond over lemon bars and black coffee and she lets it slip that her friend Glow has charged a penthouse to her father’s account at Hotel Zaza, which she apparently does all the time because Glow’s father looks the other way as long as she makes all As, and Meredith and her friends will be heading there after the new hires leave and I am so quietly impressed with the ingenuity of upper middle class teenagers that it doesn’t even occur to me that it’s maybe somewhat of a scandal.

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When we get back to the front of the store, I look at Bernard for a long time. Really look him in
the eyes. As the host counts our items, he finishes Susan’s first. She has 45 items. He finishes
Bernard’s: 73. Then mine: 72.

- Age 24—Trader Joe’s

With Limited Parking In A Building That Was Once The Oldest Record Store In Houston

It’s 8pm on a Friday and I need to fill out the menu for the bridal shower I’m throwing
my best friend the next afternoon. The store is cold and I take the aisles slowly. I can’t remember
what was on the list that I left at home but curating a cheese plate is sort of in my wheelhouse so
I’m not too worried.

I waffle between an aged blue and an Italian truffle but toss both of them in the cart. I still
need a cheddar because it’s the most accessible cheese and I’m interested in making this an equal
opportunity cheese plate. The party is our friends and my best friend’s mother’s friends, picky
ladies who, like Frasier, enjoy events more when they can complain about them, which is
perhaps why I let myself take so long choosing cheese. If I can somehow make it take forever, I
won’t have to go to the party. There are lots of types of cheddar and I stare for at least two
minutes, long enough for a sleepy looking guy in a suit to wander down from the hummus
section and pick up a package of Apple Cinnamon goat cheese, consider, and set it back down.
We both repeat this process with four or five more cheeses and then he sighs and deadpans, to
the cheese but also, I think, to me, that cheese is weird.

In a movie this would be a meet-cute moment. Lily Aldridge, 24, single, recent graduate
in corporate finance meets Greg Miter, 27, single, third year law student and intern at Corbin-
Pope & Murphy. In the movie version his tie is less crooked and my ponytail is perfectly
disheveled, but the bones for the moment are here.
Actual grocery store version of this event is less exciting and I kind of laugh-mumble as we stare in silence at the cheese for at least another minute before I decide on a sharp white and make a move toward crackers.

- It is now Bonus Round, where we have to go around the store trying to find markdowns with high percentages of savings, and the person who has the highest amount of money saved in his or her cart by the end of the round wins ten extra points, which would put me in the lead. My trick for this round, after our host starts the timer and sends us off, is to squint a little. The price labels with higher percentages of savings are a slightly different size than normal price labels even though they’re the same color, and by blurring my vision a little, I can better see which products to throw in my cart. I worry that Bernard has this same technique just with his actual vision, though, so I’m not quite sure I’m at an advantage except for that I am younger and more nimble than both he and Sarah.

- Age 25—Costco

*In Austin But, Also, The World*

I stay up too late on a website that details shopping secrets, like how if there is an asterisk on a label at Costco it means an item has been discontinued. I go first thing this morning to sign up for a membership but end up leaving before I find anything I want to buy.

In the future I will sometimes walk through other Costcos not even for samples but just to see what’s there, to see what housewives are buying and which books Costco has chosen to discount for its specific demographic. There is safety in Costco that’s hard to describe. Like, I got transferred from Houston to Austin, and Austin isn’t actually as cool as everyone thinks it is because everyone thought it was so cool for so long that uncools started moving in, but that’s
less relevant. What’s more relevant is how Costco manages to elude the general Austin public in
my age and demographic, because we can’t afford to buy food in bulk probably, but also we
wouldn’t want to, because it’s less exciting that way, and besides, it would spoil, because we eat
out all the time anyway.

Walking every aisle of Costco can take two hours, and during that time I can forget
where I live, who I am, etc., and instead pretend to just be worrying about whether to buy
individual cups of yogurt or the larger tub kind. Costco’s good for phone calls, too. Sometimes to
my older sister, but she has an only-child who she devotes a lot of attention to so she doesn’t
always answer. Most times the calls are to Mom, to talk about mundanes. Did the leak on the
roof get fixed, did you try the Crock Pot recipe from the internet, did you see the Marvelous
Wonderettes are coming back this Christmas?

I almost never buy anything from Costco, but I always leave with more, somehow.

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It is now Round 5, the last round, the round we’ve all been waiting for: the actual sweep. The
goal is simple. Cram as many items into your cart as you can, from all over the store, and try to
have the highest total price when the timer runs out. Classic strategy would say hams and turkeys
are big bangs for your buck, but I might go with smaller, more expensive cheeses. My initial
thought was to just get every single pack of Zyrtec on the shelves, but the store has blocked off
the pharmacy section, which is perhaps smart on their part. We get a bonus for filling a small
brown bag with store-brand coffee, but it takes time away from picking up other items, so I
waver on whether to go for it. There are surprise bonuses on items throughout the store, too,
apparently, but they are unmarked, and I’m still thinking about them when the timer starts. And
we’re off.

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Age 27—Bodega

Two Blocks From The Apartment I’m Subletting On The Lower East Side That I Moved Into Four Months Ago After Moving to New York to Work A Temp Job My Friend Helped Me Get

I run into Bodega 7 after work for some Halloween candy just in case any costumed kids feel like walking up three flights of stairs. I guess I’m not the first person to do this because the only candy-like items left on the shelf are protein bars and mini boxes of cereal, so I grab a pack of each and call it done. I have never been unimpressed with a bodega in this city because they never purport to be something they aren’t. I know the Fig Newtons will come in a weird box and be more expensive than if I had ordered them from grocery delivery. But I also know the bodega will be open and they will have the latest issue of whatever magazine on the day or sometimes the day before it comes out. Prices are irrelevant when shopping at a bodega because time is infinitely more important than money, and bodegas are always close by.

I have almost forgotten it’s Halloween when I get one tiny knock from the son of the woman who lives on the first floor. He is dressed as a blue Lego. I give him the entire six-pack of mini cereal boxes and wish him a happy Halloween and watch through my door’s peephole as he sits on the top stair to survey his loot before heading back downstairs. His mother waits patiently, which is kind. I hope I’ll be a kind mother, too, if I ever am one. My parents are visiting in two weeks with my nephew, who is about this boy’s age. Maybe I will buy him mini boxes of cereal.

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Going into the game, I really thought Sarah would be my main competition, but I underestimated Bernard. Thirty seconds in, I pass him, and his cart is already full of laundry pods, ham, and beef roasts. So far, I just have a lot of cheese and macadamia nuts. Sarah has gone for the coffee, I
think, so I head that way to go for it, too, thinking I can set the coffee to pour into my bag while simultaneously grabbing whichever pre-packaged roasts are most expensive.

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Age 29—Brookshire’s

Because I’m Visiting My Parents’ Farm For The Holidays

My mom grabs a wide melamine platter with holly leaves on its edges from a storage cabinet in the laundry room as we head out the door. We are halfway to the Christmas party when she pulls into the grocery store and asks me to run in and pick up whatever looks the most homemade to arrange on the platter so we don’t show up empty-handed.

I recognize the cashier as a girl I babysat when I was in high school. I don’t think she remembers me and all I can remember about her is that she was only six years old but her mother let her spray Sun-In all over her head before I took her to the pool. I thought that was a liberal option for such a young girl, because it was bleach and sometimes turned out blotchy, but decided later that it was one of those harmless allowances that lets a child feel grownup without actually having to use extreme measures like salon highlights. I don’t think her hair even lightened but, really, that’s not the point.

Back in the car, my mom drives slowly as I place cookies on the tray and I don’t realize until we pull up to the party that I paid for the cookies myself and won’t ask my mom for reimbursement.

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The buzzer goes off and we all roll our carts back to the front. The way points have been allotted, if Susan wins this round, she still won’t win the game and we’ll have to go to a tie-breaker. But if either Bernard or I win, we will get enough points to beat the other. As far as general mass of items in cart, Susan is winning, but everyone knows it’s not about mass, but price density. The
host makes conversation with the crowd while three cashiers tabulate our baskets. Then, the
power flashes and the machines blink before the generator kicks in, and they have to start over
again. Part of me wonders if the host has planned this, for drama.

- Age 29—Brookshire’s

Because I’m Still Visiting My Parents

Schmidt Funeral Home drops off obituary notices at the counters of gas stations, grocery
stores, and restaurants around town, and I find out another person has died while the cashier
scans the lemons I came in for. I guess it’s a little morbid to announce local deaths via a piece of
paper on the checkout counter, but I kind of like it. It’s informative, but it’s also a good reminder
that the lemon I am buying is temporary and the magazine with Leonardo DiCaprio was
temporary and that life is, too.

The obituary today is for Ms. Tina, the lady who has run the video rental store for as long
as I can remember. I liked Ms. Tina. She would save the movie posters from the windows and let
us take them for our rooms, and if you bought a packet of popcorn, she would always throw in a
peppermint pattie “for balance.” Not all the parents liked Ms. Tina—there was a door behind the
drink cooler that said Adults Only, and that caused a lot of stir in some families, though not in
others—but I think she was ultimately pretty harmless.

- The host announces Sarah’s total first: $790, including the coffee bonus. She lost. We knew she
would. Next, the host takes my hand and Bernard’s, like we’re all in this together, and gives the
two totals but without names: $1,044 and $1,121. He squeezes my hand a little when he reads the
second number, and I know then that I’ve won. And then he looks at me and tells me that, not
only do I get to keep the groceries, but I have won a $500 store gift card and free coffee from the
store’s hot deli for an entire year. I don’t even drink coffee, so I mentally plan to give the free coffee voucher to Bernard, and I hope he will take it.

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Age 30—Coleman’s

Near My Older Sister’s House, Which I’m Visiting

I am spending a week with my sister, who lives in a quaint neighborhood with older houses right near a lake. The shops are on our walking route to the lake, so my niece and I stop by this little grocery for bottled water. She doesn’t ask for anything. She is a serious girl and, besides, she packed banana chips from home. I tell her I remember going to the grocery store with her mom when I was little. She looks at me like duh, you are sisters, and I want to be like no, it was more than that, but then I worry I’ll taint the moment by trying to make it special and deep.

Instead, I tell her to pick something out, and she says she doesn’t need anything and I’m like come on, how does a ten year old girl not want anything from a grocery store, but then she sees a sparkle journal and a lighter by the register and I tell her she can’t get the lighter because her mom will get mad at me, and then she asks me why, and I tell her it’s because people use them for smoking, and she tells me her dad smokes cigars sometimes and that it isn’t bad, and that she’ll only use the lighter for candles, and I have to say no but I do get her the sparkle journal and some black currant Ricola pearl candy.

Maybe she will remember this someday, maybe she will think of me fondly, and maybe it will just be a time in a grocery store that gets lumped together with all the other times. It’s hard to tell.
I don’t want to go to sailing camp. I know this attitude is juvenile but it’s just the truth. I hate the drive to the coast, I hate that the restaurants on the way aren’t even good, and I hate that Rich always insists we stop at Jolly’s for lunch. Even though Jolly’s is a really nice gas station, the ceiling for gas station food is only so high, and though I remind Mom of this during every trip south, we still stopped there two hours ago and I was still working on my rubbery cold cuts and seltzer by the time we rolled into Lakewood. Rich got like four kinds of sour candies for lunch because I don’t think he listened in health class even though he made an A in it, and even though I am making a C in it, I did listen, which matters more than grades anyway.

Lakewood Yacht Club isn’t on a lake—it’s on an ocean, or the Gulf of Mexico, at least—and if you give the guard a two-finger wave, he’ll let you in even if you forgot to move the membership sticker to your new car, which was the case today. We are staying in Cabana 6, which is across the cobblestone bridge and next to the boat slips where we used to keep our boat before we had to sell it because Dad had to go to a detention center, which is what Mom calls jail, for two years. He didn’t kill anybody or anything and it’s barely even dramatic or worth talking about even though I could detail the specifics if I really wanted to. He just did a real estate thing that went south. Still, he was supposed to eventually teach me how to tack and jibe and stuff, and I bet he could teach me how to remember which one is left, starboard or port, because I bet he has an easy way to remember that sort of thing. I’m not always good at remembering. Mom made me get tested for Mensa last summer, right after Dad went in, and I
passed, but I told her she was stupid if she paid the dues for me just to get a card that says I’m smart. Paying money for someone to tell you you’re smart seems not-smart, you know? It’s bad enough she paid for me to take the test.

Mom’s friend Donna, who’s on the club board, took charge of decorating Cabana 6 after the hurricane-sponsored rebuild. Before we walk in, Mom says that if it looks bad, we shouldn’t tell Donna, and when Mom keys in the code and the door opens, we all know we’ll keep our mouths shut. There is the smell of a perfumed candle. And a generic shell theme that’s I guess what I would expect a cabana on this part of the Texas coast to look like. And there are two rooms, which means Mom gets one and Rich and I have to share. I won’t even get into how Mom is forcing me to go to camp but insisting she come too instead of letting Rich and me just stay with the other campers. She swears it will be family fun for us all. Rich is actually a counselor for the second time this year, because he’s been coming as a camper since he was like seven and has grown into the counselor position, but it’s only my first year. I’ve been sailing a bajillion times with Mom and Dad and stuff, but I have never captained my own vessel, and I’m not going to lie: I don’t like the sound of it. My counselor says that circumstances are neutral, but I don’t believe it. The circumstance of being forced to go to camp is not neutral. Neither is the circumstance of a strong smell, but I can at least find the source of the perfumed candle, which is actually potpourri, so I stuff it in a bottom kitchen cabinet next to a toaster we probably won’t use. The only good part of the yacht club is the food.

We eat dinner in the main dining room at the clubhouse, which is past the bar and through a room with a baby grand piano. Our waiter, Manny, who has worked here as long as we’ve been coming, sets down three Shirley Temples right as Donna spots us on her way out of the club’s office. She and Mom cheer and hug, their delicate gold belts clanking—I don’t know
why, but all the moms here wear gold belts—and then Donna comes at me with a hair ruffle. We arrived a day before actual registration, but she runs back to the office to grab a camp tote bag to busy me while she and Mom chat about the drive down, the new cabanas, and then more quietly about court and transitions and words they don’t think I hear them say. Donna isn’t close enough to the situation to know that Mom doesn’t get quiet around me or hide any of that stuff. Actually, I only get suspicious when people start getting quiet around me, which has happened a lot. In gym, Mitch and Aiden, who have the mini lockers next to mine, started getting quiet after Dad went in, which is only suspicious because they used to talk non-stop and loud about Battle Fjord 2 and I’d tune them out after a while. But when they get quiet, I can’t help but listen in. Then they started locking the locks on their lockers instead of leaving them open like everyone else and Mom said they weren’t worth being friends with anyway, which I already could have told her because of the Battle Fjord 2 talk, even though friends are hard to make so it sucks to close the opportunity.

The sailing camp at Lakewood Yacht Club is the second largest sailing camp in the country, which means it’s a weird mix of Lakewood kids, like me, who can go for a discounted rate, and kids who have flown here from Rhode Island and Australia or wherever. They’re mostly kids with sea legs. Dad gave Rich sea legs when he was my age, which involved a sip of champagne while christening the boat and then hands-on lessons in the water. I was too young then and also didn’t really care about sailing, and last summer, Rich came alone, I guess because sailing camp always seemed like his thing and not mine. Instead, I went to PowerPoint camp, which was pretty informative even though they offered no tote bags. People who like sailing love tote bags.
Dad was the one who asked if I was going to sailing camp this year, and I told him that yes, I would, because visits are short and there isn’t time for well actually. He told me I could have his old Sunfish, which is like the Opti boats that most kids have in camp except it’s longer and flatter, but I don’t know how to sail those yet so it doesn’t really matter. C’est la vie, as they say. Rich already has his own Sunfish, which Dad bought him before. Sometimes Rich will bring it out to Uncle T’s lake in the hill country, where he ranches goats and cattle. Apparently Uncle T, who is Mom’s brother, has one of the top twenty largest man-made lakes in Texas, but I’m not sure I believe it. I read in a counselor’s office once that all but one of the lakes in Texas are man-made, and for Uncle T to have the twentieth biggest seems like a farce olds tell to youngs and then assume youngs will realize was farcical when they get older. Three summers ago, all my aunts and uncles and cousins went to Uncle T’s for a family reunion and Rich brought his Sunfish to go sailing with the older cousins which left me with the younger-but-not-toddler cousins—not old enough to be on the boat without supervision but too old to stay inside without a lecture on the advantages of being outdoors from my rural relatives. I’m sorry, but I think my mother married up even though Dad is in jail.

Uncle T is always a horrible host. During that last family reunion, he wrangled me and the awkward-age cousins into a goat pen, which also held a baby goat. I am terrified of goats and everyone else should be, too. What made it worse is that the pen was behind the barn, which backs up to the lake, so for most of the afternoon, I sat in the pen with three little kids—four, including the goat, plus the awkward homeschool second-cousin who wears pleated dress pants to every event—watching Rich and the others sail around the lake. And then on the way home, Rich had the gall to ask to roll down the windows because I smelled so bad, which was only after tying me to the roof was deemed not an option. It’s not like I asked to sit in goat excrement all
day. That isn’t my kind of fun. I didn’t ask for that or this or anything but sometimes you’re just stuck in a goat pen until you’re not.

The whole point of that is to say that I can’t sail, but this morning, when the counselors sort campers into groups, they put me in Intermediate—I guess because of my age—and I don’t say anything because I don’t want to make a scene or look babyish. I sit with my palms up, a technique my counselor told me helps quell anxiety, and try to eavesdrop on a Beginner counselor going over protocol—how to attach sails, how to tack, what to do in case the boat tips over. The irony is that I have spent whole summers getting sunburns on sailboats, but big boats are easier to handle because dad and Rich do all the work. In theory, I know how to hike and steer and stuff, but I’m concerned about the semantics.

“Let’s rig your boats, guys,” Lucy tells my group. Lucy is the head Intermediate counselor, and the Intermediate group is sectioned into three subgroups, and Lucy is the leader of my subgroup, Green, too. This is the only win, so far, of sailing camp, because Lucy is beautiful and kind and friends with Rich, so she’ll look out for me. There are five other Greens and I get paired with Jackson, a chubby Jewish kid whose grandparents are lifetime Lakewood members. I’m not sure what to say when I first see him, but he’s holding a Tupperware with something that looks like a burnt cinnamon roll, and I don’t know how to read that so I just look around and wait for more instruction from Lucy.

I have my own Opti—passed down from Rich—but, as previously established, I’ve never sailed it alone. Dad told me this wouldn’t be a problem and then gave me a bunch of generic advice that sounds good in the initial moment but in the actual moment, now, doesn’t seem that helpful. He said I should buck up, bear down, be strong, do right, blah blah—there wasn’t time
during our weekly visit for him to explain the details that I really needed. The only thing he was really specific about was that this is all in the field of sailing.

Because we’re partners, Jackson and I help each other roll our boats out of their storage lockers. My boat, which is in Rich’s locker, has Rich’s old surf and sailing stickers on the stern, about which Jackson says, “Cool, dude.” Jackson pulls his mast up to raise his sail, make sure the rudder is in place, and I do what he does because it looks like he’s done it before. And by the time I check my mast, Lucy calls for all the Intermediates to hop on a rickety pontoon boat before our inaugural sail so she can show us where and where not we’re allowed to sail.

Jackson sits by me and gives takes on everything. “Yuck” to barnacles on a docked fishing boat. “Whoa” to a wide, slow turn we make where it’s obvious we won’t hit the gas-up station but he evidently thinks we might. A Beatles medley plays quietly over the pontoon’s party speakers and he lets me know that Paul McCartney is his favorite Beatle, and he knows about all of them, because he saw a musical about them in Las Vegas with his grandparents.

I keep my takes to myself. I’m convinced no one has ever bought a new pontoon boat because all the ones I’ve ever seen have just looked and felt rickety. And they all have that matted fake-carpet that’s stained by weather or spilt drinks or fish water. And I don’t know very much about the Beatles, but I know my dad likes George Harrison more than Paul McCartney. The tour goes slow, and by the time we’re back at the dock, we have to break for lunch.

This is the tricky part. I tell Lucy I’m headed to the bathroom when all the other kids sit under the trellis by the pool, but instead I head for the dining room. If you’re a member at Lakewood, your family has a code, and if you want to buy anything from the store or the cabana bar or the dining room, you just give the waiter your code and you can get what you want. Mom won’t like that I am charging things to the account, but I don’t like that I’m at sailing camp, so
we’re even. I order a ginger beer, which I admittedly like because it’s like I’m drinking beer but I’m not actually, and ask the waiter to bring a chicken salad sandwich on pretzel. The dining room has huge windows that overlook the trellis where everyone else is sitting, so I kind of stare at them and out at the pool and then past that toward the boats and the harbor and then suddenly, hair ruffle.

“Why’re you eating in the dining room?” It’s Rich and two other counselors—girls, of course—and I’m annoyed to see him because he’s my brother and it’s important to get annoyed at your brother, but I also hope some people look in from the trellis and see me talking to three counselors and think I’m cool.

I offer Rich some of the sorbet the waiter has brought me, which is usually for cleansing the palate but I think for summer they just give it to everyone to avoid anyone overheating.

Rich declines the sorbet and chastises me more than he normally would for skipping out on the camp food, which is just cabana food anyway, and I roll my eyes and let him look cool in front of his counselor friends as I eat the rest of the sorbet, because that’s also what brothers do.

When lunch ends, Green team ends up sailing around the harbor for like twenty minutes but there isn’t enough wind to do anything more than paddle so we come back early to tie knots. I do know how to tie knots, and I tie knots for so long that the imprint of the dock’s wood stays on my legs when I finally get up. Before he was away, Dad and his friends used to sail in a regatta every October and they always let me ride along. It was a decent regatta, from one coastal town to an island a few hours away. When the guys needed to work fast, or when the boat was keeled over and they had to keep tacking, Dad kept Rich up top to help out and sent me into the hull to practice tying knots. This sounds like a punishment to the uninitiated, but it made me feel important to know that once we docked, I could tie us up securely. Plus, I got to study the knot-
tying book from the wooden captain’s desk, which felt very official. Honestly, I think the book was Mom’s doing, because it seemed more decorative than informative, but it still made me feel important in the moment even if I was learning how to tie knots from a book instead of real-life practice. Moms really like to decorate, but decorating a boat is tricky. She put pillows on the two curved benches in the middle of the boat, but they always ended up sliding down to the floor and blocking the walkway. The only thing that stayed in place was a plaque right above the captain’s chair that asserted how The Captain is Always Right. Maybe Mean, Dirty, Misinformed, Bull-Headed, Dumb, but Never Wrong. Seems a little sassy and on-the-nose but I guess nautical-themed décor is limited and she chose the best she could.

“Well, was it terrible, William?” Mom asks as I walk up to Cabana 6. She’s in a rocking seat that hangs from the upper balcony. “You officially made it through day one. What’re you thinking for dinner?” I can tell she assumes it went bad and is trying to keep my mind off of things. Rich is going out with friends, so it’ll just be me and her. Honestly, most things are more complicated with Dad gone, but choosing restaurants is a lot simpler. Dad doesn’t eat cheese, and with him away, we just choose restaurants where all the best dishes involve lots of cheese. For tonight, Mario’s Pizza. My friend Randy asked me once if having a Dad in lockup sucked, and it kind of does but it’s not that big of deal, at least not in my everyday life. Randy’s nice and will just ask it to my face unlike Aiden or Mitch. My counselor says Randy seems like a good friend because he listens when I tell him that my dad didn’t kill anyone or even steal anything. He was partners with a family friend and they started a mortgage business together but the other guy screwed him over and Dad got arrested for fraud. He’ll be out next summer, maybe sooner. I asked Mom if we’re poor now and she said that we’re fine as long as we hold off on big purchases. We just put a lot of things on hold, basically. Dad’s car is still in the garage. Mom had
to get a new one, but she traded in the Suburban for a smaller car and made money on the deal. She still teaches math at the private school. We’re just a normal family who gets pizza delivered and watches the sunset and says goodnight early but stays up late because the longer you stay up today, the easier it is to put off tomorrow.

I’ve thought about it, and I don’t think jail would actually be that bad, at least not for a year or two. Dad gets a lot of reading done, and all of his friends are still his friends except for the guy who said he was his friend and then set him up to go to jail. I guess I’d make sure that I didn’t have kids yet, though, because Dad does miss out on weekend pancakes, Rich’s baseball games, and seeing my gifted and talented presentations every six weeks. Another downside is food, which he says is just fine, and, though he hasn’t mentioned it, probably the company. Plus there’s reputation, which honestly hasn’t taken that much of a hit except with kids in my school who don’t know any better. The rest of the town treats us normal.

It rained most of days two through five, so actual sailing has been blessedly limited. It’s day six now, the last day before the end-of-camp regatta, and I’ve spent most of the morning sweating from heat and also from anxiety. They send us out in the moments it doesn’t rain, but that gets chaotic. Yet, I’m here, I’m alive, and I have continually made it back to shore in one piece. Part of what makes Lakewood’s camp the best is that it’s not just sailing. Granted, there’s usually more sailing than there’s been this week, but there are also lectures. Most days, we sit on a jute rug in the artificially cold Commodore’s Hall to listen to lectures from sailors who have won regattas or sailed around the world and earned a cover on SAILOR Magazine. Back when I was in fourth grade, I gave Dad a subscription to SAILOR and it came with a free compass, which I also gave to Dad but I told him it was free so he didn’t think I spent too much of my own money
on it. When he left, though, I snuck into his bureau and swiped it back for myself. I carry it in my pocket most days. Today’s lecture is boring—just a guy from the Coast Guard lecturing us about wearing life jackets and staying in the ship channel and stuff—and pretty soon Green breaks for lunch with instruction to meet at the pool afterwards. I’ve still been eating in the dining room instead of by the pool, and I’m glad no one has stopped me.

“Listen up, guys,” Lucy says when all of Green has gathered poolside. I feel like she’s looking directly at Jackson, and I wish she would give me a little more attention. Or at least just less attention to him. “Today we’re upgrading to get a little Sunfish action.” Oh, God. This is alarming. I immediately put my palms up in my lap. Sunfish are bigger than Optis and more complicated to sail and I don’t know how to sail them. “Get your partner and head to the dock.”

I ask Jackson if he’s ever sailed a Sunfish and he says he has once with his grandpa. Luckily, the Sunfish is a two-person operation, and since Jackson has at least moderately more experience than I have, I think we’re at least in a better position than Jackie and Carter, but I could still be wrong. Fletcher and Allison are going to whoop us, though, because instead of heading toward the Sunfish dock, they head toward Fletcher’s boat locker where Fletcher stores his own Sunfish which he apparently sails, “like, all the time.” I’m not sure if Allison has ever sailed a Sunfish, though, because she flew in from Colorado. Maybe she has an uncle who has a man-made lake, though, in which case Jackson and I are definitely the worst sailors in Green and maybe even all of Intermediate as a whole. Regardless, Lucy gives us a quick rundown and then tells us that the best way to learn is to do, which I firmly disagree with, at least at this stage in the learning process.

“I got this, I got this,” Jackson assures me as we slide into the water. Initially, the biggest difference between sailing a Sunfish and an Opti is that with Optis, you’re sitting in the boat. It’s
comfortable and relatively safe. With Sunfish, though, you’re sitting sort of on the boat, which is perched right on the water, which is full of bacteria and dead fish and generally unpleasant wildlife. Somehow, though, Jackson and I maneuver around the docked boats and into the harbor, where Lucy and the other counselors stand in a Boston Whaler, calling out instructions.

Again, somehow, Jackson and I fall into a good rhythm. We’ve tacked three times to avoid cruising into other Optis. We’re not cruising like Fletcher, but we’re fine. Jackie and Carter even seem to be struggling more than us. The sun is under clouds so my skin isn’t burning, and someone a few boats away is playing a song I only sort of recognize but that feels right for the moment.

And then Jackson tells me to jibe, and I jibe, but I should have tacked, and we ram our Sunfish up into the Boston Whaler. We somersault backwards, salt water in noses, which flips the Sunfish so that it pierces the Boston Whaler again, simultaneously cracking the Sunfish’s rudder.

It is more calm than a shipwreck should be. Lucy and another counselor dive in to retrieve us, so now we’re on the Boston Whaler we’ve just damaged. I’m almost too embarrassed to care that Lucy dove for Jackson instead of for me. I tell myself it’s because Jackson was closer to her and not because she is secretly in love with him instead of me. And then we take the Boston Whaler to the pontoon boat, which is also in the harbor but, more importantly, has not been pierced, and then we ride the pontoon boat back to shore, which is a real shame because the pontoon boat goes so slow that everyone gets a real nice look at Jackson and me. We smell like fish and we are slimy like fish, like Gulf Coast scum, like failure.

The counselors that let us off at the dock didn’t really tell us what to do, and they went right back out, so we just sit on the dock for a while until Jackson offers to go get us the
chocolate babka his grandma has sent with him for a snack. He is only gone for a few minutes but he comes back with the babka and with two glasses of milk, which will get gross in the heat if we don’t drink them immediately, so we do. And when the milk is gone and the babka, which is seriously so good and I was wrong to think it was a burnt cinnamon roll because it isn’t burnt but is just chocolate and amazing, is gone, we just watch the rest of the boats speckling the harbor, going in and out, until everyone else comes back in and we can go home.

Mom has already heard about what happened by the time I get to Cabana 6 but she’s pretending she doesn’t know yet. I tell her I can tell she already knows and she has to bite her lip to stop from laughing, I guess at the present situation but also at herself, for making me come here and insisting I’ll have a good time and then having literally the worst possible thing to happen at sailing camp happen at sailing camp. I ask if the damage will cost us money, because I know I willingly charge meals to the Lakewood account, but I would feel bad if Mom had to pay for fixing two boats. She says that between the club’s insurance and the camp’s insurance, everything is covered. No harm done, except perhaps to Jackson’s ego and my own. She pats my shoulder and asks how I feel about it and I tell her honestly, I feel pretty okay, because I didn’t have to sail for the rest of the afternoon and because I got to eat the babka. She tells me that’s the spirit.

I go to my room. I’ll shower off the day, or at least the smell, before dinner. I take off my shirt, which is that weird kind of crisp that salt water dried in sun makes shirts. I reach into my shorts pocket for the SAILOR compass, but it’s not there. Pause. Where’d I see it last? Lunch? The Sunfish dock? Eating babka?

This is a neutral situation. These are all neutral situations. I repeat this to myself. I put my palms up. I can choose to respond however I’d like. But I wrecked the boat today (two boats,
technically), and I lost my father’s compass today, and realistically, I haven’t learned how to sail this week, and this shower faucet is so fancy that I still don’t know how to change the water temperature before getting in, which is only adding to the evidence that I am and forever will be a cold and utter failure, which is not neutral.

And my toes are numb. On the upside, at least I now know what happens when a sailor jibes instead of tacks. And I was the captain of that Sunfish, or at least the co-captain, and if I have learned anything from Dad it’s that the Captain is always right, even when he is bullheaded, even when he listens to the wrong person, even when he crashes and sends everyone to the bottom of the Gulf.