"THE CHILD" AND OTHER COLLECTED WORKS

Rebecca M. Jarding

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THE CHILD
AND OTHER COLLECTED WORKS

by

Rebecca M. Jarding

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the
University Honors Program

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The members of the Honors Thesis Committee appointed
to examine the thesis of Rebecca M. Jarding
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

____________________________
Dr. Dennis Sjolie
Associate Professor of English
Director of the Committee

____________________________
Dr. Lee Ann Roripaugh
Professor of English

____________________________
Dr. Randy Quevillon
Psychology Department Chair
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Artist’s Statement:

A Journey of Discovery

Perhaps one of the most challenging obstacles I faced while working on my thesis was relinquishing the control that was hindering the development of my stories. I do not recall exactly when I acquired this sometimes inconvenient personality trait, but at some point in my young adult life, I became a planner. Not a compulsive one who must know what is happening and what will occur next at every point in her day. The kind of planner who writes extensive outlines before beginning a paper, who records every upcoming event in both her notebook and iPhone calendar. When I began writing short stories for my collection, I attempted to plan my narratives as well, beginning with at least a vague notion of how my story would start, unfold, and end. I had learned in my first creative writing course during my sophomore year of college to avoid this preciseness and control over my fiction writing; still, control proved difficult to give up.

Last fall, during a creative fiction writing course focused solely on the genre of short stories, I was reminded again to relinquish the control over my writing that was prohibiting the real stories from being told. I was reminded that writing is a process of discovery—not only about a story and its characters but about the writer as well. I was reminded that the reader and the writer alike should be surprised by a story’s outcome. Intricate outlines with fixed beginnings, middles, and ends are not necessary. All the writer needs to start a story is an idea. The rest will be discovered during the writing process. In planning my stories before writing them, I was not allowing the characters to grow and evolve as my stories unfolded.
Within a short story, the writer has the opportunity not only to embark on his or her own journey of discovery but also to provide the reader with a grain of truth, something the reader can enjoy, savor, use to more deeply understand the experience of human life. Through my stories, I attempt to provide the reader with this truth, this authenticity, this savory experience. Nearly every story included in this collection is a work of fiction (with the exception of Prem Dan, a nonfiction piece) that I have written in order to better understand an experience, an emotion, a curiosity, or an uncertainty in my own life. Once I began to fully embrace writing as a process of discovery, I realized that writing my stories helped me come to deeper understandings in my own life.

There is a raw power, a vulnerability, contained in an individual’s story and who the writer is willing to share it with. Words, though beautiful and capable of revealing hidden truths, have a certain danger, a risk, to them. Oftentimes one cannot begin to understand an individual until he or she learns the other’s story, regardless of any hastily made judgments. All of the characters I write about have their own aches and hidden wounds. In living their lives, they have encountered experiences that have brought them pain, while molding them into the individuals they have become, not unlike the reader experiencing the characters’ stories. Each character is searching, looking for meaning and understanding in her life. In this way, each character is a small reflection of myself, as I continue to search for answers to my own questions.

This past year has been one of profound discovery for me, a theme that transcends to my writing. I witnessed a beloved uncle regard his diagnosis of stage four terminal brain cancer as a gift that he graciously accepted throughout his entire experience, until his death last July. I went to India to serve with the Missionaries of Charity, the religious order
founded by Blessed Mother Teresa. Here I witnessed joy and peace experienced by those who seemed to have the fewest reasons to be happy because of their overwhelming poverty and destitution. Religious sisters willingly took vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, dedicating the rest of their lives to serving the poorest of the poor, each day following the same simple pattern as the one before. Individuals from young children to elderly men and women smiled joyfully at the care they received from volunteers coming from all over the world, neither requiring words to express the emotions they felt towards each other. I learned to be vulnerable and share life with the fourteen members of my mission group. We boarded an international airplane as complete strangers and returned to Chicago five weeks later united in strong bonds of friendship that only those who have undergone such life changing events together could understand.

Next year I will begin a two-year commitment to serve as a missionary with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). After five weeks of training in Florida, I will move to one of nearly one hundred college campuses throughout America to invest in students, so that by our authentic friendships, they might grow more deeply in their relationship with Christ and learn how to effectively share Him with others. Evangelization through this means requires an understanding of people and how best to relate to them. Writing this collection has allowed me to increase my skills within this realm. As a writer, I have had to take the perspective of various characters, forcing myself to abandon my individual perspective as I write the story from each character’s distinct point of view. Writing in such a way has increased my ability to interpret situations from multiple vantage points and subsequently, my ability to understand others’ motivations for their actions and how past difficulties continue to affect them, shaping them into their present selves. This
understanding of others will remain useful throughout my entire life, especially as I hopefully pursue a master’s or doctorate degree in psychology in the future.

One of the many books that has motivated me to become a better writer for the profound impact it has had on me is Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*. The novel is a story of discovery in which a boy encounters many obstacles and learns how to follow his heart as he attempts to fulfill his Personal Legend. As the boy considers whether or not he is willing to leave everything he knows behind in order to pursue his Personal Legend, he comes to a realization. Coelho writes: “The boy felt jealous of the freedom of the wind, and saw that he could have the same freedom. There was nothing to hold him back except himself” (28). In working on this compilation, I realized that the same words could be said about my own experience with writing. Oftentimes it is ourselves, rather than outside forces, that present the most challenging obstacles in achieving our goals, a truth that is evident in both my own lives and the lives of my characters. Once I moved out of the way and allowed myself to write, it is amazing how less daunting and more enjoyable the endeavor became. My hope is that in reading this collection, the reader too might discover a grain of truth to apply to his or her own life.
Fiction
Jai

Before I met you, I knew you were dying. Not dying in the sense that we are all slowly working our way towards death, but that your health was literally deteriorating. Knowledge of your impending death does not make what happened any easier. I’m still not ready to say goodbye.

When I first started nannying for you and Vishal, I was only looking for a summer job. I was glad to help you and your husband as your disease continued to attack your already ravaged body. But honestly, I wasn’t overjoyed to be working for someone who would be home all day. I had been babysitting since I was twelve and knew from experience that children listen much better when their parents aren’t around.

I was nervous that first day. You lived on the opposite side of town from my parents’ house, giving me ample time to worry during my long morning drive. I remember feeling intimidated by the cul-de-sac I turned into, one of Sioux Falls’s wealthier neighborhoods. My beat up jeep looked out of place parked next to the curb outside of your house. The car’s broken A/C, combined with the unseasonable June heat, caused sweat marks to grow beneath the armpits of my shirt.

What I remember most about first entering your house was the distinctive smell. Not a bad smell, just one I had not yet encountered. A pungent mixture of what you would later describe to me as hing and ajwain filled my nostrils, nearly obliterating the friendly smile I had used to mask my nervousness. As I worked to hide my grimace, a large dog came running towards me like a charging bull, its tail wagging rapidly.

“Reishi, down! Outside, now!” said your husband, who had opened the door for me.
With his black hair neatly parted on the side and his crisp dress shirt and kakis, he gave off the impression of a man who was used to being in control. I was intimidated by his commanding voice, his serious appearance. Standing in my faded blue jeans and plain, gray v-neck t-shirt, I felt underdressed.

“Hello, I’m Vishal. Pleased to finally meet you, Courtney.”

“Hi,” I said, extending my hand to meet his, hoping my nervous sweat would go unnoticed. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

Off to the right, from the basement, ran a small, dark skinned boy. I barely had time to notice his mischievous smile and curious brown eyes before he hurriedly hid behind his father.

“And this little rascal,” said Vishal, “is Ramin.” As he spoke, he hoisted his giggling four-year-old son over his shoulder. I began to feel more at ease. “Would you like to meet Jai?”

I followed him and Ramin down the hallway and into your bedroom, where I met you for the first time. I felt uncomfortable at this point. I had just met Vishal and Ramin, had not had a full conversation with either of them, and already I was in your bedroom, intruding into your private sanctuary.

You must have recently woken up because your face still had creases from your pillow. My feelings of intrusion increased. I was surprised by how healthy you looked. When your husband first called and requested someone to care for his son and sickly wife, I had imagined you as a frail, thin, weak looking woman. Despite my expectations, you did not appear to be dying.

“You must be Courtney, the young lady I’ll be spending my summer with.”
“Yes, I’m Courtney. It’s nice to meet you.”

“I’m going to be late for work,” said Vishal. “Courtney, Jai will tell you everything you need to know. I’ll be back at 5:30. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call.”

You looked at me and smiled. After waiting until the door leading to the garage had shut, signaling Vishal’s departure, you beckoned me closer.

“Courtney, can I braid your hair?” you asked. You gave me the same mischievous smile I had seen moments ago on your son’s face.

I agreed, surprised by your odd request.

I would eventually learn that that my hair reminded you of your youth, of your long-haired days as a young girl. Before your arranged marriage to Vishal. Before you left your family, your homeland. Before the birth of your child. Before your illness. Before life revolved around the unrelenting pain and fatigue that attacked without warning or chance of retaliation.

Your styling of my hair was slowed by the constant shaking of your hands. The doctors had told you not to perform unnecessary tasks involving dexterity, saying it would worsen the tremors. You didn’t care though. Having accepted that your days were limited, you had resolved to only heed selected medical advice. These last acts of rebellion provided you with a sense of control, however minimal, over your otherwise unalterable condition. I did not realize it at the time, but this was the start of our friendship, the first of many times when we both needed each other.

It’s almost ridiculous now to think of the concerns I had about working for you. I feared your son would not listen to me, that I would do something wrong in your sight. Shortly after meeting you, I became grateful for your constant presence. I appreciated your
respect towards me. You regarded me as an adult, an equal, never treating me like the child I was to most other adults in my life.

During our afternoon tea breaks, while Ramin was napping, I was entranced by your knowledge of the world and your customs that were so different from my own. I would sit before you, eager to learn as much as I could before fatigue trumped your efforts at conversation.

You had read every book I mentioned and many I had never heard of. We discussed *The Awakening, The Bell Jar, As I Lay Dying*. When you grew weaker and couldn't keep your hands steady enough to hold a book, I would read to you as you lay in bed. Every so often you would interrupt me, saying something about a line or passage that gave new meaning to the author’s words.

I loved this about you—your ability to make me see situations from a new perspective. I never told you these things—how important you were to me, how much you helped me grow. You taught me that I was not inadequate, that I was worth investing in. Unlike my parents, you weren’t concerned with my future’s lack of direction.

“Passion, Courtney, that’s all you need. So you don’t know what you want to study next year or if you still want to go to college. So what? You have passion. You have life. I’d rather have a child who was uncertain than one who didn’t have passion. Besides, what does certainty guarantee? I was certain about my life, and here I am, dying.”

You didn’t mention your impending death to elicit sympathy; it was simply a fact you stated, like someone reporting the weather forecast. Since you were dying, there were certain lessons, pieces of wisdom, you wanted to share. I listened eagerly, unwilling to miss any of your insights.
All summer, I had opportunities to tell you how much I valued our relationship, how I appreciated your mentorship. I never did though. A few times a lull of silence in our conversation provided me with the chance to finally speak the words I’d rehearsed. Then Ramin would get bored of playing in your room and insist he and I go outside. Or the house phone would ring. It was never the right time. I remained unconcerned, insisting we would have plenty of opportunities for goodbyes later.

At the end of the summer, mid-August, I stopped working for you. Much to my parents’ relief, I had decided to go to college at Montana State University in Bozeman. Coming home meant either a twelve-hour car ride or a plane ticket I couldn’t afford. I wouldn’t be returning home often, maybe three times. We both knew you were getting worse. The evidence of your impending death could no longer be ignored. Your hand tremors were now constant, your naps longer. Some days you slept more hours than you were awake.

Witnessing this deterioration, I should have told you. Everything. How much I appreciated you, how much I would miss you while I was at college, how much I had learned from you that summer. Instead, I denied the possibility that I might never see you again. I still wanted more time with you. I withheld my goodbye, reasoning that my delay was equated with death’s postponement.

My plans of returning home three times during my freshman year fell through. A November blizzard left me stranded in Bozeman over Thanksgiving. It was December 18th before I finally made it back to Sioux Falls. I had been planning on visiting you after Christmas. I didn’t want to intrude on your time with your family, who had come from India to see you.
That was the excuse I told my mother. I was afraid. I didn’t know how much further your illness had progressed. It had been four months since we had seen each other. Besides a phone call or two, we hadn’t spoken. College was more difficult than I had anticipated. I was constantly struggling to maintain the grades required to keep my scholarship. I became so immersed in my new life that I didn’t stay in touch with you like I should have. Now my last time with you would be in a hospital room that smelt of death.

Vishal called me the morning after I returned home. You had been taken to the emergency room that day when you stopped breathing. With the help of an oxygen mask, you were resting in the intensive care unit. The previously forbidden time limit had finally been given—you had less than two days left.

My mom drove me to the hospital. This would be the first time I had seen someone in the process of dying. All the conversations I’d had, the novels I’d read that semester, my experiences I wanted to share with you, no longer mattered.

I stepped off the elevator and onto your floor, bypassing the nurses’ station and waiting room. The smell of stale coffee mixed with rubbing alcohol further upset my already nauseated stomach. The patients and their visitors were so quiet that the sound of the ice machine seemed obscenely loud, a roaring rumble amidst the otherwise eerily silent ward. By the ice machine, a man sat hunched over on the floor, his head buried in his crossed arms, which rested on his slightly shaking knees. At the sound of my approach, he lifted his head, turning his blood-shot eyes anxiously in my direction before resuming his accordion-like position.

I walked past him, entering your stark hospital room. Ramin ran to me, wrapping his arms tightly around my neck, refusing to loosen his grasp. Vishal sat in one of the room’s
two stiff chairs, his face expressionless. A jungle of tubes and machines surrounded you, alive with noise. With Ramin still clinging to my neck, I sat on the side of your bed and grabbed your hand, ready to tell you everything.

It was too late. You were no longer conscious.

I sat with you, not wanting to go, knowing this was the last time I would ever see you. A nurse came and insisted I leave. It was after visiting hours, and I was not a member of your family. I gave your hand one last squeeze, placed Ramin on Vishal’s lap, and said goodbye to them both. Before the elevator doors reopened to the lobby, my breath was coming out in painful spurts between deep sobs. It had not been the reunion or farewell that I had naively hoped for.

I can still see you, still hear your voice. Somewhere I imagine myself standing in the door of your bedroom. You give me a knowing smile and beckon me in. Your face has no trace of the gray pallor I remember from our last time together in the hospital. Your cheeks, spread in a full smile that turns your eyes into small slits, have a round, healthy glow.

Ramin has just gone down for a nap; we have the next two hours to ourselves. I position the tea tray between us on your king-sized bed and lean over to prop up your pillows into a comfortable sitting position. As I fill your mug with chai from the teakettle, you put your hand on mine and smile.
‘Tis the Season

For weeks, long before I returned home, I had been dreading this evening’s dinner. Pulling up my parents’ silver SUV to the nearest open parking spot, at the far end of the lot, I remained unmoving in my seat as I listened to the rest of the Collin Melloy track playing on the car’s CD player. It was nearly impossible to listen to the familiar music without being taken back to my childhood. My mom, sister, brother, and me all singing to the tracks as we drove to the grocery store, forbidden to ruin my mom’s favorite songs with our fighting. I wish I could return to that time, to the ease of my childhood. No problem had been too daunting then. The world was a conquerable place where I would undoubtedly triumph. Reliving the past now only served as a reminder of how much I had changed, how complicated my life had become.

Not caring that I was already a few minutes late for dinner, I remained in the car, thinking of the night before. I had been unpacking in my old room in the basement of my parents’ house, having returned for a week from Colorado, when my mother had knocked lightly on the door and peaked her head in, inching her way slowly into the room with a steaming holiday mug in each hand.

“I brought hot chocolate, your favorite.”

My mother had always been hyperaware of my emotions. I hadn’t been home for more than two hours, and she could already tell something was wrong. Despite my best efforts, I had never been able to hide my feelings from her. She had sat beside me on my full-sized bed, on top of the paisley mattress I had picked out when redecorating my room in high school.
I had stared at the old photos pinned to the corkboard above my desk, barely recognizing my former self. Following my eyes to the corkboard, my mom had put her hand on my shoulder. I wonder what had gone through her mind when she saw those old photos. Did she not recognize me anymore either?

Assuming I was upset because of my breakup with Paul last month, she had patted my back and said, “Oh sweetheart, it’ll all be okay. Look how long it took me to find your dad.”

I had let her hold me, wishing I was still a child whose mother could provide all the comfort she needed. I had been spared the necessity of telling her that Paul was not the reason I was seeing Rhonda, my therapist, again. My problem was deeper than Paul, an unsettling feeling of hopelessness and anxiety. I would tell her the truth later, after Christmas.

Knowing I couldn’t hide out in the parking lot much longer, I slowly worked up the resolve to leave my car and take the first step towards Old Stanton. After checking my hair one last time in the rearview mirror, I unfastened my seatbelt, slowly emerging from the car. Almost instantly, I heard Addie call my name from across the parking lot, as if she had been watching for my arrival.

“He said!” she said. “Get over here!” Her voice was loud enough to attract the attention of an older couple, who turned around and searched for the source of the noise before entering Old Stanton’s double glass doors.

Forcing a smile onto my face, I obediently headed towards her, walking slowly through the rows of expensive cars, not in a hurry to reach her.

“Addie, good to see you.”
“You look so skinny! And my gosh, your hair! Do you like it?” she asked, fingering my new pixie-cut hairstyle. Her high-pitched tone made her opinion of my hair unquestionably clear. “It’s so different!” she continued before I could answer her question. “You probably needed a change, huh? I heard about you and Paul.”

Despite the cold snowflakes falling on my unprotected neck, I raised my ducked head high enough to appreciate the building I had entered on December 22nd for the past three years. Old Stanton was a place people went to see and be seen, making the building’s wall-length glass windows a major appeal, only second to its extensive wine collection. It was the kind of restaurant that required a reservation made three weeks in advance; the kind of place Millie loved. With Christmas only days away, the restaurant’s exterior had been adorned with red and white lights and hundreds of circular, gold-colored bulbs. The building glowed welcomingly, beckoning us in.

As I opened the wreath-adorned doors, a blast of warm air issued from inside, a sharp contrast to the icy chill we sought refuge from. Without so much as glancing at the customers waiting for their tables on the plush, leather couches surrounding two of the restaurant’s fireplaces, Addie marched to the hostess and put on the same fake smile she had shown me minutes ago in the parking lot.

“Reed, party of four.”

“Welcome to Old Stanton,” said the hostess, shifting her eyes from us to the laminated table listings displayed on the podium. “Right this way, please.”

As the hostess led us through a maze of dark mahogany tables and leather booths inhabited by extravagantly clad couples, the sense of dread I had been feeling since I started driving towards the restaurant intensified, embodied by the ever-present knot of anxiety in
the knot had been with me for months now, I had not yet learned to ignore its presence. It was like an inconsolable child inside of me, throwing a tantrum when I experienced high levels of anxiety. I was getting better at appeasing the angry child. If we hadn’t been walking so quickly, I might have been able to perform the breathing techniques I had learned to quiet the knot. Though I could not concentrate enough to take the required deep, slow breaths, our quick pace at least excused me from making small talk with Addie.

Claire and Millie were already at the table. Millie leapt to her feet, squealing as she hugged Addie and me alternately. She had not changed much since I had last seen her. Her dark brunette hair still fell at her shoulders in the same carefree manner it had for years, appearing as though it did so naturally and did not require the hour of preparation I had witnessed on countless occasions. She and Addie were dressed similarly, as usual, both wearing leggings, tunics, colorful scarves, and knee-high leather boots. I would not have been surprised if they had coordinated outfits.

Throwing her arms in the air, Millie did not notice the water pitcher she nearly knocked out of a passing waiter’s steady hands. Even more so than Addie, everything with Millie was dramatic, big, demanding the attention of everyone around her.

Claire, always the tranquil one of the group, remained in her chair, smiling at us genuinely. “It’s really great to see you guys.”

Her dark jeans and wool cardigan made me feel less out of place in my similarly casual outfit. Claire and I were both underdressed compared to every patron surrounding us. An awkward silence followed our greetings. Bing Crosby’s “White Christmas,” playing in the background, sounded much louder now that Millie’s shrieks of excitement had subsided.
Millie distributed menus to Addie and me, making sure to do so with her left hand so we could admire her ring. We had all heard of her engagement to Brian, of course. Now in her presence, we were expected to fawn over her, ask every detail of the occasion. Thankfully, Addie was curious enough for all of us and happily asked every necessary question. I sat there and pretended to look interested, nodding every now and then.

I had called Brian a week or so after I heard about the engagement. I attempted to sound enthusiastic as I offered him my congratulations, but even I thought they sounded less than convincing. Just like my mother, he had always been able to tell when I was lying.

“Look out there, Hannah. Don’t sound too excited.”

“Oh, please, you know I'm excited for you. I’m just surprised is all. I never thought you’d settle down so soon.”

“You’ve got to grow up someday. Besides, we’re not that young anymore, Hannah. Thirty’s only five years away.”

“So you got an ultimatum then, huh? No ring, no Millie?” Once the words left my mouth, I instantly wished I could erase them, shake them away like a discarded drawing on an Etch-A-Sketch. Unable to retract my words, I said, “You know I’m only kidding, Brian. I’m happy for you both.”

He could probably tell these words were a lie too. Brian and I had been friends since the first grade, when he wrote me my first love note during indoor recess. He had started dating Millie when they ended up at the same college in Michigan, during the time when Millie, Addie, Claire, and I had all drifted apart. Though we had all been friends during high school, Brian and Millie were polar opposites. Brian was independent and could go for
weeks on backpacking trips with his German shepherd, Leo, as his only companion. When he did choose to spend time with people, his piercing green eyes had a way of gazing at another’s so intently that he could make someone feel like it was just the two of them there, even in a crowded room. He had a sincere, inviting nature, nearly the opposite of Millie’s.

After paying Millie the proper amount of attention, the rest of us took turns asking about the changes in each other’s lives since our meeting last year. My weight loss, new haircut, and recent breakup all received the expected amount of undesired attention. I wondered if Millie and Addie were determined to bring up every topic of conversation I did not wish to discuss. By the time my salmon arrived, I had already heard more than I cared to about my former friends’ lives. Were it not for our physical maturity, someone listening to our conversation might have thought we were a group of high schoolers out at a restaurant we couldn’t afford. With the exception of Millie’s engagement, practically nothing about her or Addie’s life had changed in this or the last three years. All the ambitions, dreams they had spoken of when they were younger, had been seemingly forgotten, replaced by the acceptance of their monotonous lives.

Undoubtedly just as bored with listening to Millie and Addie ramble on as I was, Claire filled the long-awaited pause in Millie’s discussion of the latest drama at her father’s accounting firm she worked at.

“Hannah, how is your photography going?” she asked.

“Well, actually—”

“You must be really busy with Christmas card season and everything,” said Millie, interrupting.
“I finished up my Christmas photo shoots last month, but I’ve been pretty busy with engagement sessions lately,” I said. “‘Tis the season.”

Millie smiled, glancing at her ring.

“That must be tough, taking pictures of engaged couples when you and Paul just broke up,” said Addie.

Coming to my rescue again, Claire said, “Did you guys hear about Annie Kappman? She’s pregnant again!”

We made eye contact, smiled. Claire and I had long ago gotten used to the other two’s snide comments. As the waitress cleared our half-eaten plates, each of us refusing to be the one who ate the most food, I wondered why I had come.

My therapist told me that I should talk to people about my feelings of anxiety and hopelessness, share my concerns with a support group. With the exception of Claire, I had no desire to share even the most remotely intimate details of my life with my former high school friends. I did not want to see the change in their eyes, a combination of pity and excitement, following the revelation of what would become Millie and Addie’s latest piece of gossip. I could already imagine them casually sharing details of my emotional distress with acquaintances over the phone or at the grocery store. Did you hear about Hannah? She’s seeing a therapist. Almost every day, I heard. Yeah, she really went off the deep end after Paul left her.

The only other person I could imagine telling was Brian. He would understand, know how to be sympathetic without pitying me. But now that he and Millie were engaged, it seemed wrong to call him, as if that were crossing a recently erected invisible boundary.
Besides, our last meeting hadn’t gone well. Paul and I had already made plans for the afternoon, but I cancelled on him to make time for Brian, who has in the area. The beginning of our lunch went smoothly. Brian and I had always been close, and it wasn’t until I walked towards his table at the outdoor café that I realized how much I had missed him. With the mountains providing a spectacular backdrop against the small, crowded, outdoor seating area, Brian and I could have been mistaken for a couple in the scene of a romance film, two former lovers reunited after an unfortunate period of separation.

But Brian had changed. Subtle changes. Failure to laugh at what he once would have found humorous, relating nearly all of the conversation back to Millie. He was suffering from what Claire and I had once jokingly coined as the “Millie Effect,” a situation men experienced when spending too much time around the condition’s namesake. The men who dated her were always duller than they had been before, more lifeless, unable to utter anything but frequent praises of Millie. Brian made my attempts to avoid speaking about her nearly impossible.

“You know, Hannah, she’s been having a rough time. I know Millie misses you.”

I nodded, annoyed, avoiding his gaze, choosing instead to focus on the five bikers clothed in matching neon yellow, spandex shirts, speeding by on a nearby bike path.

“I know she’s not always the easiest person to deal with, trust me. You two are friends though, and she could really use a friend.”

“She has Addie.”

Brian snorted. “Yeah, Addie, a real loyal companion to keep around,” he said sarcastically. “I know you two lost touch in college, but what about all the time you used to
spend together? You’ve always been the bigger person, Hannah. Think about giving her a call, okay?”

I nodded again, having already made up my mind not to call Millie. I should have guessed Brian would take her side, make Millie the eternal victim of whatever ordeal she had managed to get herself into. I wanted to tell him I didn’t care about Millie anymore, that I was too old to have manipulative friendships and the emotional baggage that always accompanied them. I decided against having the futile conversation with him; he was clearly unaware, or unconcerned, of how Millie had changed our friendship.

As the four of us rose to leave our table, there was a general assent that it had been so great to see everyone. We just had to get together more often, stay in better touch. The same things we had been saying to each other since going to college.

As I walked to my car in the bitter cold of the parking lot, I felt numb. Tonight would be the last night I ever spent with them. Whatever motivation to remain connected to my former friends I had been searching for throughout dinner had remained unfound.

I sat in my car, staring at the few stars visible amidst the city’s glowing lights. Turning on my headlights, I was about to pull away when Claire knocked on my frost-covered driver’s side window, causing me to gasp in surprise. She walked around the front of my car, sliding gracefully into the passenger seat.

Claire had always been the one I was closest to. She was the only one whose friendship I missed. We sat in the dark silence as she looked down at her gloved hands placed delicately on her lap. As she spoke, her words were accompanied with the fog that emerged from her mouth.
“I always thought it would be you and Brian who ended up together.”

“Me, too,” I said. “We would never work out though.”

She lifted her head to meet my eyes. In all of our years as friends, my feelings for Brian had always been an unspoken understanding that Claire was too kind to make me discuss.

“He loves you, you know. Everyone can see it but you.”

My phone began to vibrate. I silenced it, turning the screen facedown in my lap, not looking to see who was calling.

“Before you and Addie got here tonight, Millie was complaining about you and Brian, saying he wanted her to have you as one of her bridesmaids. I’m surprised she didn’t ask you. It’d be the perfect opportunity for her to gloat. She’s always been jealous of you. I can’t believe Brian can’t see it.”

She paused, waiting for me to say something.

My cell phone vibrated again. Giving Claire an apologetic smile, I checked the screen, assuming something urgent had happened. Brian’s name illuminated the screen.

“Do you need to take that?”

“No, it’s no one important,” I said, pressing ignore and turning off my phone.
Sisters

Helen:

While packing her apartment’s possessions, Helen came across a cardboard box on the top left shelf of her hallway closet marked, “Adolescent Stuff.” Amongst the worn paperbacks, high school yearbooks, and old journals, Helen found the scrapbook her younger sister, Mattie, had made of the two of them the summer before she had left for college.

Helen sat on the floor against the living room wall, flipping through the pages of the forgotten book. She ran her hands across the pictures, the words her sister had painstakingly written. The pages reminded her of the person her sister used to be, back when the two were inseparable. The sister whose friendship she missed and had never been able to replace.

Mattie:

Mattie and Helen stayed up until four o’clock the morning Mattie left for college. Lying in her sister’s bed, Mattie listened to the college advice Helen had already shared with her on countless occasions. Neither of them acknowledged that Mattie would be leaving in four hours. Mattie had gotten used to only seeing Helen once or twice a month last year when her older sister started school in Lincoln, Nebraska. Now that Mattie was going to school in Montana, she would have to wait months to see her sister.

Though the two were complete opposites in some respects, it was each other they turned to first whenever they needed someone. Their opposing temperaments somehow balanced each other out. Mattie, always the obedient one, lacked her sister’s rebellious spirit, one that pushed Helen to stretch or break any and all of their parents’ rules. “Why can’t you be more like your sister?” was not an uncommon question yelled by their angry father.
Mattie was always the first to run to Helen’s defense, the peacemaker between her father and her older sister.

Mattie eventually fell asleep listening to Helen’s words, wondering why she had decided to go to school so far from her best friend.

**Helen:**

It was 3:00, and Mattie still hadn’t called. Helen glared at her phone, annoyed her sister had neglected to call her for the third time that week. Every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, it was Mattie’s turn to call Helen when she finished her afternoon class. That was the compromise they had made when Mattie decided not to join Helen for school in Lincoln, the way they would stay close despite their physical distance.

On both Monday and Wednesday, Mattie had ignored Helen’s calls, instead sending the text, *Sorry, busy! I’ll call later.*

Helen was unsurprised when her call went straight to Mattie’s voicemail again.

**Mattie:**

Even if she hadn’t been afraid of disappointing her parents like Helen always had, Mattie had felt obliged to look out for her sister during high school—drive her home from parties every weekend, sneak her inside the house without waking their parents. Tired of babysitting her older sister, Mattie finally let herself be the irresponsible one during her freshman year of college.

Under the prompting of her roommate, Brooke, Mattie started to enjoy the parties she accompanied her new friend to, freed from constantly monitoring her older sister. By November, the formerly tame freshman could easily out drink Brooke and had become a highly sought after beer pong partner.
**Helen:**

When she was first paired with Carmen in their astronomy lab, Helen hadn’t imagined she would be inviting the girl home for Thanksgiving. Much to Helen’s surprise, the two became fast friends. Carmen’s serene nature reminded Helen of Mattie. Since her younger sister had seemingly forgotten about her when she moved to Montana, Helen was willing to overlook that Carmen’s tranquility was a result of nearly always being high, rather than a personality trait.

Helen couldn’t wait to see the look on her father’s face when he met Carmen. She smirked when she thought of their meeting, already imagining his flared nostrils and throbbing temple. She could recognize his attempts to hide his repulsion at anyone so unacceptably different from himself. The way he sometimes looked at her.

**Mattie:**

Mattie didn’t walk into her parents’ kitchen until 1:00 in the morning, after driving the twelve hours home. Helen was sitting at the island on a barstool, two glasses of whiskey on the table between a bottle of their father’s Crown Reserve.

While Mattie embraced her sister, a girl she did not recognize entered through the doorway that connected the kitchen and living room. A skinny, braided lock of hair, longer than the rest, extended past the stranger’s shoulder, like a snake coiled from her head to her torso. She sat beside Helen on the other barstool, the one Mattie usually occupied.

Mattie feigned tiredness from her long drive and excused herself, walking alone to her bedroom. No one had told her Helen was bringing a friend home for Thanksgiving.
Helen:

At Jeb’s house, during her third year of college, Helen drank more than usual, enough to black out. She woke up the next morning in Jeb’s bed, wearing only a shirt, with no recollection of what had happened the night before.

Unable to find her clothes in the dark room, she took a pair of sweatpants and a baggy sweatshirt off of Jeb’s floor and walked the six blocks back to her apartment. She shoved Jeb’s borrowed clothes into the back of her closet, behind her clothes hamper, hiding the evidence of whatever had happened last night.

She curled into a ball on her bed, nauseous, head pounding. Everything was hazy, unclear. She picked up her cell phone and dialed Mattie’s number with shaking fingers, though they hadn’t talked in weeks. The call went straight to her sister’s voicemail.

Mattie:

At a party early in her sophomore year, Mattie saw a guy who might fit the criteria of Brooke’s dream man, who she was constantly enlisted to help find. He was tall, muscular, had dark brown hair, and wore a flannel shirt and worn hiking boots. Mattie made a mental note to tell Brooke about him when she would inevitably be pulled aside by her friend later.

One her way back to the living room, in search of her roommate, the flannel-clad man approached her. After talking to Max for twenty minutes, she forgot about Brooke and assessing the party’s prospects for her friend. She left with Max to get ice cream at a twenty-four hour diner a few blocks away.

Next Sunday she found herself sitting by Max in a Catholic church, the kind of building she hadn’t entered, with the exception of Christmas and Easter, in years.
Helen:

After having lunch with her mother when she came to visit on Sunday, Helen had resolved to stay in Lincoln that summer. During the entire meal, all her mother had talked about was Saint Mattie and her amazing boyfriend who had brought her back to God. Helen had become a heathen, compared to her suddenly devout sister, who’d started going to church every day and was going on a three month long mission trip to Africa with Max.

It might be a lonely, boring summer in Lincoln, but it beat spending three months listening to her sister be exalted by her parents. Helen was used to being alone. Ever since that night at Jeb’s house, she’d avoided Carmen, afraid her friend would bring up Jeb, afraid she might figure out what had happened. After Mattie hadn’t responded to her call, Helen had decided to keep the night’s mysteries to herself.

If she became desperate for human contact, she could linger at the liquor store, make small talk with the cashier. He had stopped checking her ID long ago, recognizing her as one of the store’s regulars.

Mattie:

Mattie was hardly surprised that at her and Max’s engagement party, Helen behaved just like she had in high school, becoming intoxicated enough to attract the attention of others, tripping over nothing on the way to the bar, grabbing onto guests to steady herself. She could ignore Helen’s snide comments about her fiancé and her faith. Her sister’s embarrassing public behavior was more difficult to avoid.

During their father’s congratulatory speech, Mattie scanned the area for Helen, sure she would make a scene. She couldn’t see Helen anywhere, not even at the open bar. After hugging her father and accepting more congratulations, Mattie excused herself to find Helen.
The smell of vomit filled her nostrils immediately upon opening the bathroom door. Helen’s unlocked stall reeked of it. Mattie walked in and held her sister’s hair out of the toilet, wiping away spit that had been dribbling down Helen’s chin. Helen mumbled, as if wanting to say something.
The Child

The woman did not own a watch or cell phone; she knew from experience it was not yet 5:00. Despite years of living in the streets, she could not sleep through the sunlight. It seemed her eyes had become more sensitive to its intense rays. She did not mind her body’s refusal of sleep. This time of day was her favorite, for its silence. Soon the bustling city of Kolkata would awake. Susmita’s streets would swarm with vendors, rickshaws, tuk tuks, taxis, buses, animals, pedestrians.

She rolled up her matt, hid it in her usual space—a small gap in a crumbling brick wall between two billboards, one for Thums Up Cola, the other an old Hindi movie advertisement—and walked down the block to the nearest water spigot. Cupping her hands, she splashed the cool water on her weathered face, neck, arms, and legs. Part of her job was to appear dirty and poor, but she could not resist the comfort the water granted from the constant humidity and heat. Before long, she would again be coated with the city’s dust and dirt.

Kolkata was an unforgiving city, where a rise in one’s position was nearly impossible. Susmita, despite never having heard this truth, had nonetheless learned the permanence of her poverty. Instead of dreaming a different future, Susmita had long ago accepted that she had been born into poverty and would never leave the trash-strewn streets.

After making her morning offering—a handful of discarded orange and yellow flower petals coated with dust from the ground they were thrown upon, petals once considered a worthy gift—Susmita left the Ganesha shrine. As the streets began to fill with pedestrians and the sounds of the market, she went to get Rajesh, hoping he was in a better mood than yesterday.
As Susmita approached the alley she noticed a goat, connected by a fraying rope to the outside of a tarped shack. The goat continually gnawed on the rope, attempting to free itself. Boula stood where she usually did with Rajesh cradled in her left arm. She looked in the animal’s direction distractedly, gazing beyond it at something only she could see. While her lower body remained still, Boula used her right thumb to twirl her earring around her forefinger. Rajesh peered up at his mother, hypnotized by the constant spinning of the gold hoop.

“Nameste, Mashi,” Susmita said, raising her joined hands together to her forehead in a respectful salutation.

“Nameste, Susmita,” Boula said gruffly, returning the salutation emotionlessly. As Susmita’s closest maternal figure, Boula had earned a certain amount of respect from the younger woman. The respect bestowed upon Boula, combined with her age, granted her the title of Mashi—Auntie.

Susmita noticed that Boula’s voice sounded even more strained and tired than usual. The ever-visible bags under her lifeless, brown eyes were especially prominent in the morning light. Rajesh must have kept Boula awake for most of the night again. Susmita hoped this meant the infant would spend most of the morning sleeping, rather than screeching as he usually did when separated from his mother.

Boula thrust the squirming bundle into Susmita’s outstretched arms. Instead of her usual hesitation and look of guilt, Boula’s release of Rajesh was accompanied by a soft, barely audible sigh of relief. She handed her son to her younger companion as readily and with as much thought as one might give an old sheet, an easily replaceable object whose
return did not concern the lender. Susmita accepted the child, without his mother’s usual
reminders to be careful with him and keep him out of the sun. Boula simply said, “You’d
better go before your spot is taken. Beggars don’t respect seniority.”

With Rajesh’s high-pitched scream filling Susmita’s ears, she did not notice anything
unusual about her and Boula’s exchange. Knowing the truth of Boula’s words, Susmita bade
the woman farewell and quickly walked away, her pace only slightly slowed by the bundle in
her arms. Her thoughts were quickly taken elsewhere as she walked briskly down the dusty
alley.

Now the streets were chaotic: loud shouts of vendors, warning horns’ blasts,
whooshes of speeding taxis. The over-stimulating environment battled for the attention of
every one of Susmita’s senses. Her nostrils filled with hundreds of smells—frying naan,
animal excrement, stagnant urine, Rajesh’s sweaty body—simultaneously. Her eyes took in
sari-clad women, school-bound uniformed children, men surrounding chai stands, slender
cows walking leisurely through darting traffic. The same sounds, smells, and sights she
experienced every day.

The only people of interest to Susmita were the foreigners. She had learned early on
that most of the city’s inhabitants did not pity her or care to help another starving woman.
And why should they? Many faced the same difficulties that she dealt with. They, too, lived
one day at a time, never knowing if the money they made that day would be enough. Those
not in a position requiring begging resented her. She could see it on their faces as they
walked past her, giving her as much attention as they spared the plastic garbage bags thrown
in the streets. As they passed her, their nostrils would flare, their lips curl in disgust. They
saw her as a different form of garbage, another object adding to the ugliness of the city. She was as useless to them as the traffic signs no one bothered to acknowledge, nothing to offer but worthlessness.

Not everyone was so calloused. Susmita knew the city also contained people who would help her, though not with the kind of assistance she wanted. They would not give her money, for they had no way to know whether Susmita begged out of necessity or laziness. Some would give food, clothes, shelter. For a price. Susmita wanted these comforts but was not willing to exchange her freedom as payment.

She would rather beg every day than live in one of the many “homes” for the destitute scattered throughout the city. Places where she would be trapped, forced to live out her days in monotony around people inferior to herself—the undesirables. She knew that once someone entered the gates of one of these homes, she was never seen again.

The woman with the distorted face, the one whose husband had thrown acid on her, she had gone to one of these homes. For a few days, the woman had begged on Sutter Street, further down the block from Susmita. Despite the distance between them, Susmita was constantly aware of the woman’s presence, her ceaseless moans traveling to Susmita and Rajesh, despite every other noise on the street. The woman’s acid ruined eyes might as well have been marks of leprosy for how effectively they dispelled others’ charity. Susmita never saw the woman receive a single rupee. On the third day of the woman’s begging, Susmita had seen the nuns in white saris pick the woman up and carry her into their white car. The woman had not resisted the nuns but continued her low, sorrowful moans as she was led away. Susmita never saw the woman again. Whether the acid woman was imprisoned in the
home or chose to stay there did not matter to Susmita. She had been fooled before by people who claimed they wanted to help her, a mistake she refused to repeat.

Susmita was surprised to realize she had nearly arrived at her destination. Soothed by the rhythmic motion of her steps, Rajesh’s shrills had slowly lessened as his eyelids began to droop. The baby was unaffected by the noises of the city, familiar with the chaos after living amongst it for four months. Even as Susmita stepped cautiously into the busy intersection, Rajesh barely stirred. Susmita dodged between the passing vehicles, her worn sari caught in the torrent of wind created by a taxi driving dangerously close to the pair.

Her father had once told her, “Child, every step you take in this city could be your last. Step carefully.” She had not spoken to her father in years, yet Susmita remembered his words. Thought of them every time she crossed through the roaring traffic. She felt protection in his words, as if their power granted safe passage across the street.

Susmita walked two blocks until she arrived at her usual Sutter Street corner, claiming it before any of the street’s other regulars. Already the street was alive with movement. The many cafés and clothing stalls lining both sides of the street made Susmita’s corner one to be fought over for its high levels of pedestrian traffic. Her corner faced the Blue Sky Café, forcing the foreigners exiting the cramped building to confront her guiltily after having just satiated their own hunger. For hours she would remain there with Rajesh, alternating between sitting against the wall and pacing back and forth, waiting for rupees to be pressed into her constantly outstretched palm.
Susmita positioned herself on the ground against the wall, one arm held in an arced position cradling Rajesh, the other outstretched towards the passersby. A constant stream of people walked by, most passing Susmita as if she were invisible.

Except the tourists. Most of them traveled from rich countries and had never seen such intense poverty. Their countries had beggars too but none of this caliber. Never having seen such destitution, most of them found it difficult not to stare. Susmita did not mind the stares—they worked to her advantage. She had learned from years of experience that making eye contact with the foreigners increased her chances of eliciting their sympathy and more importantly, their money. As a child, she had boldly approached the tourists, reaching for their hands and following them for blocks until they could not help but reward her for her efforts. No longer having the appearance of innocence and youth, now Susmita let the people come to her.

A young Caucasian man and woman walked from the end of the block towards Susmita. They wore thin, bright harem pants that attracted more attention than their Western attire would have. Like most tourists, their attempts to blend in with the crowd had failed. Nothing could mask the whiteness that sharply contrasted the dark skin of nearly everyone around them.

The woman kept her woven satchel clutched nervously to her chest, her other arm fixed on her stomach, remaining inches from her companion. Susmita spotted the woman as she approached her and Rajesh’s spot. The child’s arm emerged from the blanket he was swaddled in to grasp a strand of Susmita’s long, dark hair. Such a sign of affection should have brought joy to Susmita’s face, but she maintained her look of despair.
Susmita could tell from the woman’s expression that she had succeeded in gaining her sympathy. She sensed that the man would not be as easily convinced. Men rarely were. His expression was not one of pity but rather of wariness and mistrust. His face masked any feelings, positive or negative, that he felt towards Susmita and Rajesh.

As they neared Susmita, the woman’s pace slowed. The man appeared annoyed at the unplanned stop. He looked at his watch pointedly. The woman ignored his subtle gesture.

Five feet from Susmita, the woman stopped. The man, unwilling to leave her, was forced to stop as well. The woman spoke quickly to her companion in a language Susmita did not understand, moving her hands about her in a flurry to accompany what Susmita assumed was an argument whose victory would favor her and Rajesh. Back and forth the man and woman spoke, the woman often interrupting her male companion. Now both hands moved to her stomach, resting on the small bump that had formed there.

Susmita stared at the couple as they spoke, bringing her hand to her mouth to emphasize her and Rajesh’s hunger. As he spoke, the man drummed his fingers impatiently on his right thigh. After a final statement and sigh from the man, the woman reached into her satchel, pulled out a wad of rupees, and smiled at Susmita and Rajesh as she quickly slipped the money into Susmita’s outstretched palm. Susmita reached her free hand up to her forehead and bowed to the woman with a thankful salutation. The woman returned the gesture before she and the man, with a last look of annoyance, quickly walked away.

Amidst the chaos, the transaction went unnoticed by those closest to the group. Susmita counted the rupees, quickly placing them in her sari. She wondered if the money had been earned because of her morning offering to Ganesha or because of Rajesh’s presence. Although the young child could be burdensome, the inconveniences he caused
were easily endured when Susmita reminded herself of the extra sympathy and generosity he created.

Susmita had not admitted to Boula that she had grown fond of Rajesh. It was comforting not to be alone for once. The child provided her with a sense of responsibility; during their time together it was her job to protect him. Holding Rajesh in her arms, she was reminded of another child, the one who had almost been hers. She could not help but feel a connection with Rajesh, who at the age of four months was already rented out as a commodity, much like she had been.

Susmita had begun begging when she was four years old. One day two men had approached her father while she played in the dirt outside of her family’s tarp. The family had always lived in poverty, but after her father’s in-home tavern had been shut down by the police, the family’s income had disappeared. With both of her parents unable to find work, the child had become the family’s sole source of income. Susmita could not easily forget her experiences begging while rented to the two men who were only kind in her parents’ presence. She had never wanted to go with them but knew that disobeying her father was not an option.

Starting when the men came to get her in the morning, Susmita would beg all day, returning in time for dinner with a fourth of the rupees she had earned. Her parents were too ashamed to ever ask Susmita about her experiences begging in the streets, so she never told them the things the men did to her before she returned home.

Rajesh was lucky Boula cared about him. She could have rented him out to people much less kind than Susmita, and for a higher price, but she trusted Susmita and knew the
woman would protect her son while he was in her care.

For the next few hours, a constant stream of people continued to walk briskly past the woman, not taking a moment to pause. She might as well have been a bench, another part of the scenery, for all the attention she received. The monotony was broken only by the afternoon adhan, calling the men to mandatory prayer. The calls blaring from the speakers of the nearest mosque a block behind Susmita startled Rajesh, who had been sleeping. His cries were barely heard amongst the call to prayer and repeatedly blaring horn of a nearby bus. A latecomer ran quickly towards the mosque, a prayer matt rolled under his arm. She wondered if he ever ignored the summons, ever rebelled against what was demanded of him.

The day’s earnings would not be enough. Susmita had only received the one alm earlier that morning.

“Well, Rajesh, let’s take you back to your mother.” The child looked up at Susmita and smiled, comforted by the sound of her familiar voice.

It did not take long to reach her and Boula’s meeting spot. Susmita paced back and forth impatiently, rocking the fussing Rajesh as she walked up and down the side street. Her eyes scanned the crowd, expecting every woman who walked by to bare Boula’s familiar face. After an hour, Susmita’s impatience was replaced with concern. It was not like Boula to be late. Separated from her son for most of the day, the mother was usually first to arrive at the spot and would reach for Rajesh as soon as Susmita appeared with him.

She was nowhere to be seen.
Susmita began walking towards Boula’s street, more nervous with every step. When Susmita and Rajesh arrived at Boula’s alley, she saw the usual inhabitants: children teasing the still tethered goat or chasing each other with sticks and women watching them with stern expressions. The sleeping mats that usually covered the unpaved ground in the morning were neatly rolled up and placed against the wall in an attempt to protect them from the dust of the streets. One mat holding a snoring man was the exception. His sleep remained uninterrupted despite the squealing children and passing traffic.

Still no Boula.

Spotting Boula’s neighbor, Susmita approached her. “Have you seen Boula?”

The woman avoided Susmita’s eyes, continuing to wash the clothes in the bucket she knelt in front of. “Not since this morning. But she told me to tell you—” She hesitated.

“Tell me what?”

“She told me to tell you not to worry about paying her for Rajesh today.”

“Is that all? Did she say when she would be back?”

“No, that was all.” The woman wrung the clothes in the bucket faster, still refusing to meet Susmita’s eyes.

“Can I leave Rajesh with you until she comes back?”

“I have my own children to take care of, my own mouths to feed.”

“It won’t be for long. Just until Boula—”

“No. He is yours to watch.”

The neighbor returned to her laundry, her face still expressionless. Susmita turned away, unsure of what to do next.
The child yawned sleepily, seemingly unbothered by his mother’s absence. Susmita did not have the energy to create explanations for Boula’s uncharacteristic behavior. Her stomach contracted painfully, reacting violently to its absence of food. The idea of the newfound responsibility in Susmita’s arms made her mouth dry, her breathing uneven. She tried to calm herself; surely Boula would explain everything tomorrow morning.

For now, Susmita focused on the present moment, choosing to ignore the uncertainty that lay before her. She left the alley and headed towards the nearest street vendor to exchange her precious rupees for her and her companion’s first meal of the day, knowing she could not leave the defenseless child alone.
All Caffeined Out

Bridget had never liked flying. It wasn’t the actual flight that bothered her as much as the crowded, bustling, germ-infested airports she would be trapped in for hours. On her previous flight, she was forced to sit next to a middle-aged woman who shared intimate details of her drawn out divorce proceedings.

Bridget feigned sleep in her uncomfortable airport chair. A stranger sat in the seat directly beside her, despite the entire empty row across from them. Opening her eyes and turning, Bridget looked upon a vaguely familiar face.

“Hey there, Bridget. Mind if I commandeer this seat?”

Chase looked different now; the fitted jeans he used to always wear would no longer look as appealing as they used to, stretched over his pot-bellied stomach and thickened thighs. Instead of appearing carefree and relaxed, Chase’s disheveled mat of hair now looked careless and juvenile.

Bridget hadn’t thought about Chase in years, not since she’d sat at the desk in her old apartment, searching for the right words. She remembered typing hesitantly, angrily, then ever-faster, as she gained confidence in her words. Her eyes had remained fixed on the glowing screen, a beacon of light in the dim room. She was writing to take control, to become someone other than the pitiful friend pining after an unrequited love. With each newly formed word, Bridget had felt herself gain power.

Her first draft included Chase’s development of a terminal illness; the second a car accident that left him paralyzed; the third his incarceration for a devastating scandal. With each draft she became more merciful. Five hours and four drafts later, their roles were reversed—Chase was left pathetic and alone after she turned him down for someone worthy
of her devotion. Bridget had eventually risen from the desk, her eyes tired and bloodshot from staring too long at the computer screen, her back stiff. She had felt tired but strong.

Amidst her reverie, Bridget paused in her conversation with Chase, distracted by a couple running through the terminal. The pairs’ hands were clasped together as they each pulled along two clumsily rolling suitcases, following obediently behind them like ducklings in a straight line, veering occasionally as the wheels shook and threatened to overturn the luggage. The man and woman wore broad grins on their faces, paying no attention to the commotion caused by their airport sprint, eliciting smiles from some waiting flyers and scowls from others. The man moved faster than the woman but fell back when necessary, never leaving her behind.

“Come on, Lil; we’re going to miss our flight!” he said to the woman, laughing.

Bridget smiled in their direction. The couple reminded her of the runs she and Chase used to go on. Then, it had been Bridget falling back, allowing Chase to lead them through the constricted portions of the trail. She could still remember staring at the back of Chase’s Patagonia running jacket, watching his back muscles strain against the fitted material.

During one run, she had seen a woman who stretched her leg on top of an old, wooden bench while a man applied pressure to her thigh. The woman had removed her leg and stood upright as the man kissed her forehead. Chase had picked up his pace, creating a gap between him and Bridget. Already out of breath, Bridget had increased her speed to match his. Unable to run fast enough, she fell behind, causing the distance between them to grow wider.

Once the airport couple had rushed past them, Chase offered to buy her a coffee.
“Thanks,” said Bridget, “but I’m all caffeined out. I’ve actually got to get going. My husband’s probably waiting for my call. It was good to see you though.”

It was her turn to leave Chase behind.
Nonfiction
Prem Dan

There was no orientation when we started at Prem Dan, one of eight of the Missionaries of Charity’s homes that Blessed Mother Teresa established in Kolkata. It was not until I had already been volunteering for at least two weeks at the home for sick, destitute, and dying men and women that I found a laminated instruction sheet for new volunteers taped to a wall in the storage room, previously hidden behind a row of folded wheel chairs. The instruction sheet’s recommendations were too late to be helpful. I had already neglected to supply my own medical gloves. I had massaged women’s arms and legs with uncovered hands when the volunteer room had run out of gloves. I had not brought or ever worn a surgical mask.

The instructions I did receive on my first day came from either the veteran volunteers—those who had been there at least one day longer than me—or the mashis, gruff Indian women who for the most part, spoke little to no English. When it was time for the female residents’ morning snack, a cup filled with a white lumpy paste of biscuits, milk, and water to help them gain weight, a mashi thrust a cup and a spoon into my hands, gesturing towards a young woman sitting on a cement ledge. The mashi spoke angry words—perhaps, I interpreted, Bengali—I could not understand.

I nervesously approached the woman on the ledge. She was much younger than most of the other women living at Prem Dan. Maybe in her twenties. She had short, black hair, wore the typical long, cotton dress that adorned most women at the home, and had a teal, plastic rosary around her neck. As I approached, she smiled widely but never spoke. Like most of the women at Prem Dan, her exact reason for living at the home was unclear. Many of the female residents were brought in starving from the streets, rescued from their destitution.
Some suffered from malnutrition, physical or mental disabilities, illnesses, broken limbs, blindness, acid burns to their faces and eyes. The woman before me seemed happy to be where she was, filled with the same simple contentedness as a young child.

Each time I inserted the spoon full of creamy mush into her mouth, she bit down, forcing me to maneuver the spoon back and forth so that I could slowly remove it from her mouth. This left the food in the front of her mouth, requiring her to use her fingers to push the mush back far enough that she could swallow. Despite my lack of experience in feeding adults, I had a feeling this was not how it was supposed to work. The woman’s fingers were not always quick enough to push the food farther into her mouth, and by the time she was done eating, the front of her dress was covered in half of her snack.

I walked away from the woman I had just fed, with food running down the front of her dress, feeling like a failure. I had come to India to help at one of Mother Teresa’s homes for the poor, to serve Christ through my service of others. Instead of making myself useful through service, the whole first day I felt like I was in the way, more of a hindrance than a help as I pestered the mashis, sisters, and other volunteers for further instruction, wanting someone to just tell me what to do. The only people who offered me any precise instructions—at least I thought they were instructions—were the female residents who I could not understand because of the language barrier dividing us. On the walk back to the Motherhouse, where we were to meet the other members of our volunteer group for lunch, I remained silent, wondering why I had thought I was qualified to volunteer in a foreign country. Working with the Missionaries of Charity here was nothing like volunteering with their order back in America. I prayed for strength, knowing I would need it to continue volunteering for the next three weeks.
As I gained experience in my time at Prem Dan, my feeding skills slowly improved, along with my ability to communicate with the women through universal hand gestures and the occasional assistance of a sister or mashi who spoke English. Before long, the woman I had first fed would approach me during nearly every morning snack with her cup and a spoon, ready for me to feed her.

My desire to go to India had existed for years, though I could not pinpoint the exact time of its origin. I remember reading *Eat, Pray, Love* during my freshman year of college and envying Elizabeth Gilbert’s ability to travel the world and have grand adventures in India, experiencing *my* dream country.

Two and a half years later, I finally had my chance to go to India, on a FOCUS (Fellowship of Catholic University Students) mission trip to Kolkata with fourteen others: four missionaries—Laura, Molly, Mark, and John—and ten students—Bob, Brian, Ben, Alex, Hogan, Sarah, Courtney, Andi, Katherine, and Emily. It wasn’t until the week before I flew to Chicago to meet the group for a pre-trip orientation that the reality of the next five weeks set in. The only times I had ever left the country had been on family vacations to Mexico. Now here I was, traveling to the other side of the world, with complete strangers, when my uncle could die from his terminal illness any day and my sister’s wedding, in which I was the maid of honor, was a little more than six weeks away.

In the airport bathroom at Mumbai, after flying eight hours from Chicago to London, and another nine to India, I had my first realization of how strange and foreign this new country was. Seeing my first Indian toilet, a hole in the ground you had to squat over with an
accompanying water bucket to rinse off with, I felt nauseous and started to sweat. A quiet panic set in as I left the bathroom to retrieve a ration of toilet paper from my backpack. This unsettling feeling would return to me often during my first few days in Kolkata.

As we had our visas checked by the expressionless Indian customs officials. As we walked past armed security guards leaving the Kolkata airport. As we were swarmed by taxi drivers, all shouting, trying to herd us toward their vehicle. As we rode in a taxi in the chaotic Kolkata traffic, constantly playing chicken with the other drivers. As we walked the streets our first day in the city, men staring unabashedly at us and my foot almost coming into contact with a blowtorch. As children ran up to us, begging for money. As I checked the seal of my plastic water bottle, paranoid it had been refilled with nonfiltered water. I remember praying in adoration the first few nights, attempting to concentrate amidst the unceasing noise of the nearby traffic and car horns, asking God, What am I doing here? Is this really what You wanted from me?

A few days after first feeding the woman whose name I never learned, I found myself in the Coloring Room. I don’t remember if we were recruited by a volunteer who was leaving and needed a replacement in the room or by Sister Florentine herself. I do know that Courtney and I did not wander into the room aimlessly; I had been unaware of the room’s existence until that day. Prem Dan was a large complex, and I spent most of my time in the same areas—the outdoor laundry space, where every day of volunteering began; the room in which the women slept and received medical attention; the indoor eating area for the women who weren’t mobile; the outdoor recreation and eating area; the roof-covered volunteer break tables—leaving the remaining spaces unexplored.
The Coloring Room was in a building opposite the outdoor eating and recreation area. A throng of twenty to thirty women lined up outside the door to the room, which contained four blue tables with matching benches, a storage cabinet, a wall covered with hand drawn pictures, and not much else. The disproportionate number of women to chairs left many of them sitting on the cement floor. Courtney and I stood watching as volunteers from Spain passed out white paper and the stubbed remains of a crayon to each of the women. Imitating the other volunteers, Courtney and I moved from woman to woman, drawing a simple picture that they could then color. Since coloring books did not fit into the Prem Dan budget, the sisters had found a way to improvise.

I found myself a spot on the floor between a group of women and drew hearts, stars, crosses, flowers, trees—any images that did not require the artistic skills I lacked—on each woman’s paper. The women colored their pictures quickly, not giving me much of a break before one of them needed another picture to be drawn. As I was attempting to draw quickly enough to keep up with the women’s coloring speeds, I heard a voice from above speak to me in a harsh tone.

“No sitting while you draw!”

I looked up, confused, at a sister in a white and blue sahari wearing glasses and a stern expression. She must have slipped into the room when I wasn’t paying attention. I was fairly certain I had never seen her before.

“How will your students learn if you only teach some of them? What would a parent say to a teacher who only spent time with some of the students? No more sitting. Draw for everybody.”
Surprised by Sister Florentine’s unexpected chastisement, and wanting to avoid further rebukes, I sprang up from my spot on the floor, quickly walking to the other side of the room to show I was heeding her instructions.

That evening, during our group’s nightly sharing, my experience with Sister Florentine served as my low for the day. I had not expected to receive praise for my time spent serving with the Missionaries of Charity, but I hadn’t planned on being chastised either. My encounter with Sister Florentine had reminded me of being an elementary school student, when stern words from a teacher had seemed like the worst fate imaginable. Upon later reflection, I realized I had been upset by Sister Florentine not only because she hurt my pride but because she challenged me to consider why I had really come to India. If it was simply to serve, then why did I become upset when being instructed how to better serve the women I was working with? She had revealed to me a personal weakness, one I was ashamed to acknowledge, even to myself. An inner pride that expected a gesture of graciousness for what I was doing, from a woman who every single day cared for the people I had prided myself in serving for a mere three weeks.

My difficulties with Sister Florentine persisted, to the extent that at the end of the trip, when our group members wrote each other affirmations, Hogan’s affirmation to me said, “I love listening to your highs and lows because they give me perspective, and your encounters with Sister Florentine always make for a good story.”

I was not alone in my difficulties with Sister Florentine. Her “students” were not always enthusiastic to be in the Coloring Room, a feeling I could relate to. Sister Florentine thought it was important for the women to be intellectually stimulated, so she would close the
door of the Coloring Room, detaining the Prem Dan residents and volunteers until we had been learning and teaching for a sufficient amount of time, usually around an hour.

Unless a woman had to use the restroom—an excuse one of the sneakier women often used to escape—or a volunteer left the room unnoticed for the 10:00 allotted tea and biscuit break, dancing was the toll Sister required for one’s exit from the prison of the Coloring Room. Some of the women loved Sister’s required exercises. They would giggle as they waved their hands and stomped their feet to the Indian music played on the room’s outdated CD player. Other women would frown, only dancing with the forced assistance of Sister or one of the volunteers. They clearly did not see the physical therapy as advantageous a practice as did Sister Florentine.

Many of the Missionary of Charity sisters were some of the most joyful people I had ever met. Their humble smiles, constantly fixed on their faces no matter what monotonous task they were performing, radiated pure joy towards everyone they encountered. Receiving one of their smiles felt as if Christ Himself was gazing lovingly at you. Mother Teresa had always described this joy as being an essential part of her and her sisters’ mission. She is known to have said, “Joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls.” Sister Florentine did not noticeably radiate this joy, this net of love I had come to expect from the Missionaries of Charity. It took me a long time to realize that her actions, though harsher and less outwardly joyful, were also motivated by her love for those she served. There could be no other explanation for why she had sacrificed her entire life to service and prayer, taking the vows of chastity, poverty, obedience, and wholehearted, free service to the poorest of the poor. Why she demanded the women be treated equally, to prevent any of them from feeling
unloved. Why she gently picked head lice out of Agnes’s hair for an hour, while I kept my
distance on the other side of the Coloring Room bench.

Sister Florentine reminded me that the sisters, though holier and more virtuous than
most individuals, were still human. She challenged me, gave me an example to imitate,
helped me grow, probably more than the sisters with whom I had a more positive
relationship. It is easy to love someone who treats you with an overwhelming amount of
kindness. To love someone despite your difficulties in getting along with the individual is
the far greater sacrifice, the one that allows you to, “Love until it hurts,” as Mother Teresa
often instructed others to do.

I had another opportunity to love until it hurt the first time I helped a woman use the
restroom, a task I had secretly been dreading. The woman who motioned me over that
morning was old, her spine hunched over so that she was no longer able to sit straight. Her
face remained scrunched, her eyes constantly squinted into thin slits. When I approached
her, she grabbed my arm and pointed in the direction of the bathroom. My stomach dropped
slightly; similar to my first feeding experience, I had only ever helped young children with
this task.

The woman and I walked slowly to the back corner of the sleeping area, where the
toilets were located, as she maintained a firm double grasp on my arm for support the entire
way. I helped her position herself over the squatting hole and stepped aside to give her
privacy until she needed further assistance. After relieving herself, she used her left hand
and water from a bucket to clean herself. Never having more than urinated in a traditional
Indian toilet, I was surprised by the woman’s substitution of her hand for the toilet paper I
carried with me everywhere we traveled. I approached the woman again to help her stand back up, hoping she would only grab me with her clean, right hand. Instead, she grabbed my outreached arm with both of her hands, including the one she had just used to wash herself.

I resisted the urge to cringe or otherwise show my disgust. This woman needed me. I could either act selfishly and react in a way more appealing to my inner germophobe or be grateful that she was allowing me to love her by serving her most basic needs. I led the woman back outside to the ledge she had been sitting on before, and eventually left her to tend to someone else. I looked back at her while sitting with another woman, silently thanking her for allowing me to help her, unknowingly challenging me to overcome my selfish tendencies.

I ended up having many more experiences in the Coloring Room, some more positive than my first day, although corrections from Sister Florentine remained a regular occurrence. Every day after morning snack, I followed the women into the Coloring Room. One day, I received a promotion from mere drawer of pictures to an English teacher. It was now my job to teach English to the accelerated students who sat at the blue table closest to the supply cabinet. My students—women ranging from about thirty to older than sixty—spoke limited, if any, English, while I knew a combined total of five words in either Bengali or Hindi. Our English studies focused mainly on the alphabet and numbers. If the women could grasp these concepts, we would move on to individual words.

Being mindful of how much attention I gave each woman, knowing Sister Florentine would not allow any demonstration of favoritism, I still ended up forming a stronger relationship with one of my students than any of the others. Her name was Susmita. She was
tall, slender, and had gray hair buzzed to her scalp. She was beautiful. And very stubborn.

It was never difficult to tell which days Susmita did not feel like learning English. She would sit at the table in silence as I pointed to letters of the alphabet that she had been able to recite with relatively few errors for the past week.

When she did feel like learning, Susmita caught on to the alphabet and numbers much faster than the other women. For days I had been trying to teach her to count above ten. She could repeat eleven through fifteen after I said the numbers aloud but could not yet recall them later on or draw the numbers when hearing their names. When she did learn the number eleven, it was a milestone that warranted celebration. A wide grin spread across her face as she kept repeating “ten” and “eleven” while pointing to the numbers written on her lined paper. I felt like I imagined a proud teacher would, rejoicing with her student over an accomplishment that might seem unimpressive for someone her age but that warranted praise nonetheless.

Despite the deep impact she had on me, I do not know the name of my favorite Missionary of Charity sister at Prem Dan. She was a young Indian woman, probably around my age, who nearly always wore a shy smile. After asking her to repeat her name countless times and never understanding exactly what she said because of her difficult accent, I simply referred to her as “Sister.” I met Sister when I was walking up the four flights of stairs to the roof with a bucket of laundry that had to be hung up to dry. The metal bucket was heavy, overflowing with damp clothes, and I stopped on the stairwell to catch my breath. I smiled at Sister, asked her how her day was going, and after a short conversation, proceeded up the remaining flights of stairs.
We continued to exchange short, polite conversations whenever we saw each other. One day, Sister asked me about my family and if they were Catholic. I told her they were all practicing Catholics except for my oldest sister, Amy, who hadn’t gone to mass in years. She told me she would pray for my sister, which I appreciated since I did so every single day, asking God to bring her back to her faith.

The next day when I saw Sister, she rushed over and told me she had offered her hour of prayer last night for Amy.

“Your sister,” she said, “she will come back to God. Be patient, and keep asking Him.”

My eyes filled with tears, touched by her act of kindness.

A few days later when I was carrying laundry buckets to the roof again, Sister approached me.

“Pray for your sister while you carry. Each step, offer a prayer for her.”

She probably had hundreds of people to pray for, people around her who were suffering and dying. Still, Sister did not forget her promise to pray for Amy. I like to think she still remembers my sister in her prayers.

During cleanup after morning snack, one of the friendlier mashis walked around to the women, placing red, adhesive bindis—circular marks traditionally worn by married Hindu women that have also become a fashionable emblem with a multitude of meanings—on their foreheads. Laughing, she placed a bindi on the foreheads of both Sarah and me. All day long, our honorary bindis elicited grins and joyful laughter from the female Prem Dan residents, the mashis, and the sisters. During lunch, my bindi caught the attention of Luna.
One of the other volunteers had bestowed the name upon the older, toothless, always beaming woman whose actual name we did not know since she never spoke. As I fed her lunch to her with a spoon, Luna smiled, pointing repeatedly from her bindi to mine, laughing at our shared adornment.

My last day at Prem Dan was by far the most difficult, even more challenging than my first overwhelming day of volunteering. It was a Tuesday, the second to last day our group was working in Kolkata; we would be leaving Thursday for Jai Pur. My day had gone well during the morning and early afternoon. We had already served and cleaned up lunch; it was nearly time for the volunteers to leave so the women could take their afternoon naps. Before returning to the volunteer room to gather my belongings, I walked into the large sleeping room, packed with cots of resting women spaced a few feet apart, to make sure none of them needed help using the restroom or getting into bed.

On the right side of the room, towards the wall, a woman sat on the floor whimpering. She was not mobile on her own and required the assistance of a walker to move around. The woman did not speak, though I probably would not have understood her even if she had. One of the mashis walked by us, ignoring the crying woman. I motioned to the woman that I would be right back and ran to find a different mashi to come and help. The mashi unsmilingly helped me half-carry, half-drag the woman to the bathroom without the use of her walker. The woman was large and relied entirely on our support, leaving me out of breath by the time we traveled the short distance to the bathroom. The mashi had the woman drag herself into the stall and left us. I wanted to give the woman privacy but was afraid to leave her. After she relieved herself, she used a small water bucket to clean herself off like
the women always did. I was about to leave and go find another mashi to help me carry her back to bed, when she started pouring water over her head. She seemed to be gazing at something only she could see, mumbling incoherently as she mechanically poured water on herself with shaking hands. Her soaked white and pink-checkered dress clung to her wet skin; her gray hair lay flat against her scalp, covering her ears. I stood there watching, unsure what to do for this woman who did not seem to realize I was there.

After being ignored by two mashis whose help I tried to solicit, one of them simply said, “Find Auntie,” pointing vaguely in the direction of one of the other volunteers in the room. I approached a volunteer from China whom I had talked with during laundry duty that morning and took her to the bathroom with me. The woman remained as I had left her, making quiet, incomprehensible noises to herself. With the help of another volunteer, a kind mother from Spain who was here volunteering with her daughter, the three of us dried the woman off, dressed her in clean clothes, and carried her slowly back to bed.

The Spanish volunteer remained with the distressed woman. As she fed her the rest of her lunch, which had been left unnoticed on her bed, she spoke to the woman in a cheerful voice, talking about the woman’s beauty and the strength her lunch would provide her with. The volunteer seemed at ease in the situation, not exhibiting any outward signs of uncertainty. Her actions demonstrated patience and love towards the woman, consoling her as if the woman were her own beloved child. Watching her made me miss my own mother, who would also have known exactly how to react to the woman in a way I had not.

On the bus ride back to the Motherhouse, I talked to Karen about what had happened. Karen was originally from Michigan but now lived in Germany. She was a twenty-five year old woman who had come to India by herself, in search of answers, direction for her future.
We had formed a strong relationship volunteering together at Prem Dan and often spoke on the morning walk to volunteer and on the bus ride home.

I was confused by the woman’s actions. What kind of sadness or disturbance had caused her to pour water on herself? I couldn’t understand why the mashis had been so unwilling to help, why they had seemed so unconcerned, calloused towards this woman’s plight. Karen reminded me of a homily one of the priests had given at 6:00 a.m. mass earlier that week. He had been talking about service towards others. How Christ did not call us to serve so that we would receive praise or scorn but so that we would show Him love through our service to the least of His people. Karen reminded me that there were some things in life, like suffering or the seemingly uncharitable actions of others, we could not understand. It was less important then, to wonder “Why?” and more important to instead ask how I would react to the challenging situation. I could not control or understand the actions of the woman or the mashis, but I could decide how I would react to the situation, how I would treat Christ through my actions towards others.

Because I became ill that night and the rest of the next day, I was unable to volunteer on our last scheduled day, making this my last memory from my time at Prem Dan, one I still return to in prayer, still think about.

One of my favorite parts of the day were our group sharings, which took place every evening after adoration with the Missionary of Charity Brothers. The fifteen of us would go to the roof of the Nirmala convent where we stayed, the coolest escape we could find from the unrelenting heat, and spend time together as a group. Each of us would share a high, low,
and God moment from his or her experiences that day, and one person would share their faith testimony, how they had come to know Christ.

I remember Sarah’s story of helping a boy who had lost hearing in one ear, hearing which returned when she removed a cockroach from his ear with the help of sterile saline. I remember Bob’s account of holding his breath while walking past two stalls of dead, skinned cows emitting a putrid smell in the stinking heat and inhaling deeply what he thought was fresh air, only to realize that a third butchering stall stood straight ahead of him. How he nearly projectile vomited right there in the streets. I remember Hogan’s excitement as he told how he and Ben had played soccer with a group of Indian children at the park down the street. I remember Courtney describing how a woman’s face lit up when she told her, “I love you,” in Bengali.

The sharing I return to most often though, is one of Molly’s God moments. She volunteered at Kalighat, the home for the dying. One day Molly had noticed a woman who was sitting up in bed crying quietly. This was not an unusual sight in a place of abundant illness, suffering, and death. She sat beside the woman and put her arm around her, rocking the two of them back and forth as she sang to her. After awhile Molly noticed that the woman had stopped crying. She turned her head, looked at Molly, and smiled.

In the English that Molly had not expected, the sick woman, surrounded by cots filled with dying women, said, “Isn’t humanity beautiful?”

In three words, the woman I never met had managed to sum up my entire India experience.
Final Thoughts and Acknowledgments

In the “Writing Short Stories” chapter of her *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O’Connor describes short stories as “one of the most natural and fundamental ways of human expression” (87). She goes on to state that, “A short story should be long in depth and should give us an experience of meaning” (O’Connor 94). However, despite the natural and fundamental aspects of short stories, the writer still must learn how to craft the kind of short story that will allow the reader to take away the “experience of meaning” O’Connor describes. I do not think it is a coincidence that many prolific writers are in their fifty’s or older. It takes time, practice, and life experiences to enhance one’s writing skills. In compiling this short story collection, I have had many individuals whose guidance, advice, and instruction have allowed me to grow as a writer, some of whom neither of us realized were teaching me at the time. I would not have grown and gained as much knowledge about the craft of short story writing had it not been for my thesis director, Dr. Dennis Sjolie, who first began encouraging me as a writer two years ago and made me realize that my writing was worth sharing with others. Without his guidance, advice, and gracious sacrifice of time, this collection would not have been possible. The guidance of my other committee members, Dr. Lee Ann Roripaugh and Dr. Randy Quevillon, is also greatly appreciated, as they too helped shape my thesis into its finished product. Dr. Fred Arroyo, one of my creative writing professors, has also provided me with invaluable instruction. Without him I would not have discovered James Salter’s *Last Night*, Pam Houston’s *Cowboys Are My Weakness* and *Contents May Have Shifted*, and Brad Watson’s *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives*, which also functioned as guides on my writing journey, influencing my style, craft, and approach to the art of short story writing. A large amount of gratitude is also due to my uncle Jimmy, the
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