

BEFORE I THROW IT ALL IN

by

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## Before I Throw It All In: Critical Introduction

### Project Overview

Prior to moving from North Carolina to Texas, I had never lived on my own. I had never lived more than twenty minutes away from my parents, actually. For most of my life, I have had a significantly limited worldview with minimal racial and economic diversity: I was raised in an upper-class, predominantly white neighborhood, and I attended Catholic school for twelve years. When I moved into my apartment complex in Texas, I was no longer in the comfortable bubble of my upbringing: I moved into a lower socioeconomic neighborhood with racial diversity, public bus stops, and public laundry machines. None of this was somehow wrong or lesser—I want that to be clear—but it was all entirely new to me. Suddenly, *I* was a minority. This realization was uncomfortable as it called me to consider the way my upbringing and skin color affected my everyday life, including my overall perception of what it meant to be privileged. Eula Biss discusses this jarring awareness of one’s own privilege in her essay collection, *Notes from No Man’s Land*. “Perhaps it is only through leaving home that you can learn who you are,” Biss writes. “Or at least who the world thinks you are. And the gap between the one and the other is the painful part, the part that you may...keep arguing against for the rest of your life—saying, *No, I am not white in that way*, or, *No, I am not black in that way*” (126). As I settled into my new life in Texas, I felt these crippling, unconscious biases about race, class, and gender boiling to the surface of my mind, but, until this project, I had not begun reconciling them in a productive way.

The central idea of this project, an investigation of privilege and intersectionality, is linked to an exploration of what I refer to as the mundane: everyday aspects of our lives—laundry, exercise, driving to the store—that are so tedious and generic, and perhaps seemingly unworthy of a second look. However, I believe these mundane activities beckon for examination

as they allow for a more accessible engagement with the topic of privilege. The intersectional perspective of this project was informed by Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality. In her article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," Crenshaw specifically emphasizes the problematic tendency to focus on "the most privileged group members" (140). Crenshaw argues for a multidimensional framework when assessing discrimination because markers of identity, like race and sex, cannot be fully understood when considered independently of each other. With my project grounded in Crenshaw's theory, I explore how intersectionality, as revealed through the mundane, illuminates how privilege is nuanced through lived experience. My project, a collection of personal essays, necessarily relies upon my experience with the mundane to think through these issues of intersectionality. The fluidity of essay writing was crucial to my project because I needed the writing to propel me toward a greater understanding of privilege rather than one idea to guide my writing.

Writers John D'Agata and Dinty Moore both define the creative nonfiction essay as a written attempt to understand the rich inner world within a person, the essayist, while also engaging with the broader, experiential world. In his edited compilation, *The Lost Origins of the Essay*, John D'Agata postulates that "the essay tries to replicate the activity of a mind" (9). In my own essays, I write to confront the questions of my mind that linger and haunt me; I write to spin answers, however open-ended and incomplete, out of my interactions and perceptions of the world. Essays allow for a probing into the *why* that so often plagues the essayist; D'Agata is concerned with the *why*. Dinty Moore's stance, on the other hand, centers around the *how* of the personal essay. In *Crafting the Personal Essay*, Moore concerns himself more explicitly with the basics of essay writing—structure, voice, point of view, and scene. Moore states that the personal

essay is open-ended in the directions it can take, and the discovery process hinges on the curiosities of the writer. There are “endless possibilities of meaning and connection” in the personal essay (Moore 6). Though different in their respective angles, each writer mentions a crucial aspect of the essay: our modern concept of the essay derives from its earlier French beginnings. D’Agata says: “From the Middle French *essai*—‘a test,’ ‘a trial,’ ‘an experiment’...” (9). Moore claims the creative nonfiction essay comes from the French word “*assay*,” which means to try or attempt (5). The bottom line: the essay in creative nonfiction writing is fluid, a process of discovery.

The experiential elements of the essay also granted me the necessary freedom of sustaining multiple gazes as I raised questions that require an intersectional perspective. I purposefully tangle subjects of race, class, and gender together to problematize the idea that we can ever truly separate and define aspects of privilege. With each draft, various questions about race, class, and gender inevitably sprouted. If I raised a question about race, for example, another question about class or gender would immediately follow, eventually showing how each one bleeds into the other. As I worked on this project, questions of intersectionality revealed my own struggles with conceptualizing privilege and how privilege affects my everyday life. Questions about race and class, in particular, often filled me with guilt and doubt because they showed me the depths of my unconscious biases. There were times when I felt unsure about including this layer of self-doubt in the project because I did not want to make myself too vulnerable; yet, vulnerability was exactly what I felt had been missing in my academic discussions of privilege. Without vulnerability, the speaker in the essays would lack the necessary ethos to incite conversation about privilege and intersectionality.

The manner in which I probed my personal experience was heavily informed by Leslie

Jamison's essay collection *The Empathy Exams*. Jamison opened my eyes to teasing nuance out of concepts—empathy for her, privilege for me—that are generally discussed within a fixed framework. Rather than accepting one definition of empathy as truth, Jamison seeks an understanding of multiple truths. Through her writing, she expresses a willingness to question herself at every turn as she reflects on personal experiences, conducts interviews, and researches topic relevant to her ideas. My project predominantly focuses on my personal experiences, but it is through my self-questioning that my essays call for a genuine and continuous investigation of privilege. By questioning my own biases, I invite others to consider their own. This feeling and questioning of the self helps people turn inward for the purposes of turning back out: we need to understand our own lives if we are going to truly understand the lives of others. There needs to be emotional connection in order for people to assess how privilege affects their own lives *and* society at large.

### **Motivation for Project**

Throughout my first year of graduate school, I read countless scholarly articles and participated in numerous conversations about what it meant to be privileged. Privilege existed on a grand scale: black versus white, rich versus poor, male versus female. However, the overwhelming conclusion seemed to place an emphasis on skin color above all else: If you were white, you were automatically privileged. I took this to mean that, as a white person, I had never encountered hardship of any kind. And, as a freshly matriculated, *white* graduate student, I had no clue how to insert myself into these conversations. Still, I desperately wanted to assure my peers that I had suffered; I wanted them to know that I did not believe myself to be above anyone simply because of my skin color. (Of course, I was entirely missing the point about privilege,

which is that some groups of people, like white people, never have to think twice about their treatment in certain situations. As a young white woman, for instance, I will likely never worry about being racially profiled in a department store.)

This self-centered mindset became increasingly problematic as I felt myself turn away from participating in these discussions regarding privilege. Most of the time, I felt silenced, emotionally invalidated. Part of this tension came from an admittedly myopic focus on the self, and part of it from my inexperience with the density of traditional scholarship and its tendency to situate privilege from a historical perspective. For example, in one seminar, the class discussion focused on a gap in scholarship in classical rhetoric due to the historical exclusion of women in this field. The popular reaction from my peers was frustration; history's sexist perspective, they professed, had limited the field at large. Personally, I struggled with my reaction: I did not feel angry, but I sensed I was supposed to be. Instead, I felt largely unsurprised. It seemed obvious to me that history held a sexist gaze. I was content, more or less, because I believed things had changed as time progressed; I saw the world as "better now." In retrospect, it is clear to me that I did not yet understand the connection between larger acts of discrimination and smaller acts, nor how any of it related to privilege. After a few months, I perceived myself to be on the outside of my classmates, and I grew increasingly defensive. There seemed to be nothing of import for me to offer in my seminars unless I vocalized a general disgust with both men and white people. At least this was how I felt. In fact, many of my white peers loudly and unapologetically announced the shame they felt about their own privileged spaces, but I wondered how genuine their exclamations were. It was not that I didn't believe in their desires to do more inclusive work and to be more inclusive people, but I could not gauge their authenticity. I was thirsty for vulnerability and emotion; I wanted someone to share a relatable experience—a personal

experience—of how privilege affected her life outside of the scholarly realm. Alas, instead of sharing these experiences, my classmates always pointed toward history, toward traditional scholarship and how it privileges certain groups.

For a time, I sincerely believed that I had given up on understanding privilege. I genuinely feared that I was not the compassionate, inclusive person that I aimed to grow into. On my worst days, I had accepted my lot in life as an ignorant, close-minded white person who supported this nebulous patriarchy, which was how I feared I would be permanently seen by the academic world. I only loosened my defensive stance when I threw myself into embracing life outside the classroom, which was, of course, a coping mechanism. Everyday experiences, like going for long walks or doing laundry, distracted me from my feelings of intellectual inadequacy. Gradually, I became more consciously aware of the role of privilege in my life. Privilege, I realized, is not guaranteed by race, class, or gender. Instead, privilege and intersectionality are entwined in each other. I also noticed how fraught with emotion these markers of privilege are because they are attached to our sense of identity. In my seminars, I'd grown defensive because I assumed my classmates' issues with privilege were secretly linked to their opinions of me. That assumption was admittedly juvenile, but it was also my honest emotional reaction. Once I processed my emotions, however, I began to see that holding a privileged space in society does not mean that I am therefore incapable of contributing to a meaningful perspective about privilege. This shift in focus allowed me to become attuned to the experiences of my life in an effort to broaden common public understandings of privilege.

### **Theme: Intersectionality Revealed Through the Mundane**

The central theme of this project, intersectionality as revealed through the mundane, was

informed by two creative nonfiction books: *One Day We'll All Be Dead and None of This Will Matter* by Scaachi Koul and *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* by J. D. Vance. Koul's essay collection inspired my exploration of the mundane to make privilege a more accessible topic, while Vance guided my belief that modern markers of privilege (race, class, and gender) do not necessarily translate into privilege.

In her essay "Fair and Lovely," Koul discusses the incessant desire she felt as a young Indian girl to seamlessly fit in with her white peers. One way this desire manifested itself was in the school lunches her mother packed for her: "My mom always packed me 'white' food, things that wouldn't be embarrassing" (59). The meal a child brings to school may seem inconsequential to someone in a white family who typically packs a turkey and cheese sandwich with grapes and crackers on the side, but imagine how stressful it must have been for a young Indian girl to hope her mother never packed khichdi for lunch. All children, no matter their skin color, tend to make fun of each other for eating anything that looks or smells out of the ordinary. White children, however, do not often, if ever, feel the anxiety of their "strange" meals being directly linked to their skin color. When I read Koul's essays, I began to consider the countless ways I had overlooked the degree of privilege in my own life. Growing up, I knew that I was privileged in the sense that I appreciated living in a three-story house and receiving private school education; however, I also associated these aspects of my life with an idea of normalcy. The majority of my friends were white, like me, and raised in spacious houses, like me. Living in a house in suburbia was not something I equated with privilege, mainly because I was never asked to think about it. Having a laundry room on the first floor of my house was never something I considered a luxury until I no longer had it. As I probed into these minor, everyday

experiences, which I tended to take for granted, my understanding of what privilege can mean for various people started to genuinely expand.

In his memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance argues for the critical need to look beyond any one marker of privilege, especially race, in order to understand and appreciate the nuance of privilege. He writes about his own family history, sharing insight into the white underclass of his upbringing, while also offering larger sociological analysis that complicates the modern idea of privilege. Vance is a straight, white male who graduated from Yale Law School. At first glance, it would be easy to assume that he has only ever held a privileged space in society and that he may be less aware of those hardships or experiences of people whose lives are not obviously marked by privilege. However, privilege is not necessarily guaranteed by race, class, or gender. Vance was raised in Middletown, Ohio where he claims “poverty is the family tradition” (1-3). Besides poverty, his childhood was filled with violence, verbal abuse, and unstable (or absent) parents. Yet, these experiences are not easily noticed from an outside perspective. “There is an ethnic component lurking in the background of my story,” he says. “In our race-conscious society, our vocabulary often extends no further than the color of someone’s skin—‘black people,’ ‘Asians,’ ‘white privilege.’ Sometimes these broad categories are useful, but to understand my story, you have to delve into the details” (3). Vance writes with both compassion and perspicuity, showing how essential it is for us to travel below the surface to understand each other as people and to respect the different complications of each other’s lives.

## **Essay Overview**

**“Before I Throw It All In”:** In this essay, I emphasize class as I explore my first experiences at a public laundromat with questions of race being woven in. This essay begins with

an anecdotal insight into my intense fear of germs and my incessant need for order and cleanliness. I also provide backstory about some of my family dynamics to further contextualize my personal discomfort with shared space before the piece moves into a more complex observation of my time at two different laundromats. I connect these observations of the public laundromat to my apparent obsession with germs and to a broader realization about certain luxuries of my upper-class upbringing. The complexity of movement in this piece is meant to depict how I've been unintentionally classist for much of my life. The main tension relies on the growth of the speaker: will she see undeniable connections between class and race, or won't she? Eventually, I reveal that I am still learning, but I have found an unexpectedly welcome feeling of community with strangers at the laundromat.

**“Story of the Decent Samaritan”:** This essay calls the intersectionality of class and race into question as I share my experience of giving money to a black woman pulled over to the side of the road, and the process of *deciding* to give her money. As I struggle with what to do, I consider how drastically skin color, class, and gender affect my decision to even consider helping her in the first place. The nagging questions of this essay are how significantly (and how unknowingly) I weigh the importance of skin color, class, and gender, and what these crucial overlaps mean for me as an individual and how they might influence my actions in the future.

**“Young Stunner”:** There is a distinct emphasis on gender in this third essay; however, elements of gender and class do overlap to strengthen the increasing awareness I have of myself as a woman, and how living alone has intensified my awareness and desire to protect myself. Each section of this essay builds on the previous section to convey the paranoia that I have carried with me from a young age and how that paranoia escalates precisely because I am a

woman. Women are casually objectified, made uncomfortable, and treated as less than simply because of their bodies, which I depict through numerous small yet impactful experiences.

### **Looking Forward**

One of the greatest challenges of this project was my inadvertent struggle to remain sensitive to experiences of people whose backgrounds are unlike mine—someone, for instance, who would not think of a trip to the laundromat as anything other than ordinary. Because I experienced privilege so unknowingly for so many years, I had to work especially carefully when selecting descriptive words choices and including inner dialogue. Despite my efforts, I would be foolish to believe that putting such volatile subjects of race, class, and gender into conversation with each other—especially as someone who occupies an overtly privileged space—would ever be easily or perfectly done. This project is a work in progress. As I wrote these essays, I was discovering the way I acknowledged privilege in my own life and how to assess what this meant for the concept of privilege at large. This process of discovery is still unfolding. In each essay, there are places where I would have liked to include more backstory in order to appropriately comment on the overlapping markers of privilege. In another revision of my essay, “Before I Throw It All In,” for example, I would have liked to develop more backstory to strengthen my commentary on social class and better contextualize the self-awareness I hoped to include in the piece. This creative project has been the largest, most meaningful work of my life, and as I continue opening myself up to challenging conversations about privilege, I suspect I may never see these essays as truly complete.

While I am proud of my work and feel confident that these essays connect to each other in a cohesive, compelling way, this project could very easily expand. Ideally, as I continue

working on this collection, I will include more voices, instead of predominantly my own, to allow for a wider range of perspectives to be expressed—perspectives of people of color, people who do not identify as cisgender heterosexuals, people with disabilities.

## Before I Throw It All In

There's a certain intimacy between strangers at the public laundromat. We have an understanding, each of us, a silent contract, an agreement. We write it with our diverted glances, *I promise not to look at the underwear you dropped on the tile floor if you promise not to look at mine*. In fact, the fallen underwear may serve as a metaphor for the entire experience of doing laundry in public. An open secret: there are things we all have, and there are things we lack.

### Uncomfortably Close

Stirring with guilt and sadness, I wake up before my alarm. My sheets need to be washed. My comforter, my pillowcases, all my colorful blankets draped on the chair in the living room—everything needs to be washed. I need to wipe down my kitchen and bathroom counters with Clorox bleach, even though the smell burns my insides, and I need to spray the bathroom mirror with Windex. I should probably take a few disinfecting wipes to the doorknobs and night table and fridge. Perhaps I should also dust the baseboards while I'm at it: my least favorite chore growing up. And it would be best to move some of the furniture around, at least the lighter pieces, so I can *really get in there* with the vacuum. Wouldn't it?

It's Monday morning, and Christina and Julia, my weekend visitors, are gone. The weekend of morning mimosas and evening wine and spicy tacos and goodies from the Farmer's Market and bickering with Christina and calming down because of Julia, in a flash is gone. It's all gone. I feel sad because reminders of home are just that: only reminders. I love my sister and cousin, but their presence makes me think of the way things used to be. Worse, and this is the guilt, I can't wait for them to leave before they even arrive.

When we'd get together at my parents' house as children, there was plenty of space for the three of us to do cartwheels in the front yard and paint our fingernails at the kitchen table.

“Lisa, go get the nail polish from upstairs,” Christina would say. “If you get it, then you can paint your nails with us.”

We kept a container of nail polishes in the upstairs linen closet outside my bedroom.

“Fine,” I’d say with a pout, sprinting up and back down the back stairwell so she couldn’t change her mind.

“Now, will you get one of those towels to put down on the kitchen table,” Christina would say. “Pretty please?” she’d add with a devilish smile, her green eyes tickled with power.

Of course, I’d always follow her orders because I desperately wanted to be included, to pretend I was a big girl, too. Besides, if I didn’t grab a towel to lay down on table, Christina would tell us to paint our nails anyway and someone might spill and that someone would probably be me because it always was and Christina would taunt me about the mess until I’d cry about breaking my mom’s rule: *Girls, you must lay down a towel if you’re going to paint your nails. Especially on my nice kitchen table. How many times must I tell you?*

But the table wasn’t particularly nice—my mom only said that for an additional fear-factor. The wooden table was actually quite old and scarred with marks from all the times we gripped our pencils too tightly, drawing on sheets of printer paper we sneaked from my dad’s office in the basement.

“I’m painting mine pink,” Christina would say.

“Me too,” Julia would say.

Without hesitating, I’d chime in, “Me three.”

“No, you can’t copy us,” Christina would say, tilting her head ever so slightly and not blinking even once.

“Come on, Christina. Don’t be mean.” Julia never failed to defend me.

“Fine, you can paint your nails pink. But I’m doing mine blue.”

Because, when we were children, Christina would understand my desire and exploit it.

Now, in adulthood, my relationships with my sister and cousin are different. I can paint my nails without spilling an entire bottle of polish, and Christina and Julia actively include me in their lives. Except Christina still pushes my buttons. She still finds me far too sensitive, too worried about things that won’t kill me. Maybe she’s right. Or maybe we’re just different.

Their visit revives, as I knew it would, my obsessive, inner beast. The needs-to-clean-everything-that-has-been-touched-by-anyone-besides-me beast. For many months, my apartment has been home to only me. They’re my first overnight visitors, and when they come, I must share my space. Nine-hundred square feet, cramped and shrinking the longer I think about it.

Christina, my older sister, flies into town Thursday afternoon and doesn’t shower until Saturday evening. Julia, my cousin, arrives Friday morning, and also only showers Saturday. I shower Friday to give them both a hint that goes entirely unnoticed, and I shower again on Saturday. I share my bed with both of them. Thursday, Christina sleeps in my bed with me. Friday, Julia sleeps in my bed with me, and Christina sleeps on the couch. Each night I wrap myself in an extra blanket for only me, and I build a barrier between us with my XL pillow to guard myself from their germs. Nothing helps; a thousand years pass before I fall asleep. Saturday, just after the sun comes up, I decide—without yet telling anyone—that I’ll sleep on the couch that night, that I’ll give up my bed. *It’s polite*, I pretend.

Nuzzled onto the edge of my bed, I check the weather app on my phone and see there’s a high of ninety-three today. An unseasonably warm day in early February, even for Texas. The three of us change into workout clothes and leave my apartment to explore Fort Worth. We walk

around town for hours, sweating and sweating and sweating, and wiping our sweaty upper lips and hairlines with the backs of our hands and onto our clothes. Our first stop is the Farmer's Market, around nine in the morning. Julia buys a loaf of freshly baked bread and a jar of locally made strawberry rhubarb jam, but she's short by two dollars and asks if Christina or I will spot her. Christina has no change. I have three dollar bills, but I lie and say I only have one because I'm a parsimonious asshole when it comes to singles. They're the easiest to convert to quarters, which are insanely important to me. The woman selling the jam tells us not to worry about the extra dollar; I am the worst. I know this and still don't cough up the last dollar. Instead, I will feel guilty about it at random moments in the future.

When we come back to my apartment late that afternoon, my A/C unit isn't working and my apartment feels horribly stuffy. Christina and Julia demand I leave the apartment door open because, with the soft evening breeze, it feels cooler outside. I worry about the bugs getting in, and they tell me to *shut up*. Christina lies on the ground like a fallen angel, but Julia goes rogue and collapses on my couch. Her mucky athletic shirt and leggings and socks all make devastating contact with my throw blankets and pillows. Her greasy, airplane hair explodes onto one of the pillows from my bed that Christina used the night before. I watch, just standing there, holding my breath and thinking about all the other airplane hair that Julia's airplane hair must've touched.

"What's wrong?" Julia asks, which means that I must look disturbed. I can feel my wide eyes fixated on her sweaty, careless body.

*You! Everything! There are rules in this apartment!*

I try to say nothing, to take a deep, yogic breath, but I cannot hold in the beast: "Um, would you mind maybe not using that pillow? It's just that we're all so sweaty, and, um, I sleep

with that pillow.” What a stupid comment to make. I know, even before the words leave my mouth, that I’m going to wash the pillowcase as soon as I can, as soon as my visitors are gone.

And yet.

Christina yells at me from her spot on the floor by the coffee table, “Lisa, are you frickin’ serious?”

*Frickin’*—she is twenty-five when she says this. It pisses me off because I think she sounds like a loser and because she’d never even have to ask me to protect one of her bed-pillows. She isn’t the cool, big sister. She isn’t someone who understands and honors my quirks.

*This is my apartment!* Which also means: *Stop saying, “frick.” It’s weird! And sometimes I hate your voice. And why can’t you read my mind like I can read yours? And why can’t you automatically be on my side and understand that I hate sweat and dirt and germs?*

I’m stressed out because I have no control over where each family member throws her unwashed body. Everything annoys me, and I’m crushed because, once again, my sister has failed to intuitively understand me, to be there for me when I need her. I’m snappy and ridiculous because of all the heat and dirt. And the truth is I’m still wounded by a jarring remark she made at lunch about a guy I think I love or thought I loved, or something in the middle.

“Yeah, but does he even talk to you,” she said.

I took a bite of my grilled cheese sandwich that tasted too strongly of Swiss and called her an insensitive bitch.

“Girls,” Julia said, a strand of hair falling loose from her ponytail as she whipped her head up from her salad to glare at us.

However, that evening, I ignore Christina’s sass and apologize to Julia for acting so silly about her airplane hair. Secretly: I don’t feel silly at all and fail to understand why anyone

wouldn't shower after traveling in an airplane. But I'm trying to be reasonable and to remember that not everyone's as much of a moonhead as me. I'm the one who gets worked up. I gawk at her feet, her toes twisting into my off-white, cable-knit blanket artistically flowing off the edge of the couch. And I can't handle the disarray any longer, so I change the subject. (Or do I?)

I volunteer to take the last shower, which is a slanted move on my part. On the one hand, I'll have to sit in my sweaty clothes and filth until my turn for the shower; on the other hand, I'll be able to monitor who touched what and for how long. Neither one of them cares about showering right away, though. They want only to *lie down for a little and be still*. That sucks for me.

In the end, I get my way and sleep on the couch by myself Saturday night, with my secret blanket. On Sunday evening, I count the quarters in my wrinkled, plastic baggy and realize I only have enough to do one load of wash and one load of dry. Except I am far too exhausted to drive the mere thirty seconds over to the laundry area at my apartment complex and wait for my sheets and things to become fresh and clean again. It's the waiting around I can't handle. Thirty minutes for the washer, an hour for the dryer.

But the germs. The sweat and the flakes of dead skin. The airplane hair.

Deliriously tired, I whine for a second. Then an idea kicks up from the part of my brain that chases cleanliness, like one might chase a storm: I'll strip my bed, toss all the bedtime linens into my hamper, and sleep on top of my mattress with my one unblemished blanket. *I'll get more quarters tomorrow and do laundry then.*

### **Interlude: A Word Problem**

There are 40 quarters in a single, ten-dollar row of quarters. I do the math as I stroll into the bank on a dreary Monday morning. I walk up to the counter and ask the bank teller for 20

bucks in quarters. That's 2 rolls of quarters, or 80 quarters. It costs \$1.25, or 5 quarters, per load of wash and dry at the miniature, low-ceilinged laundromat in my apartment complex. That's per load of wash, per load of dry. If I spend 5 bucks, or 20 quarters, doing laundry every 2 weeks, then I'll be able to do laundry for 8 weeks before I have to return to the bank and ask for more quarters.

That's roughly 2 months for me to trick myself in to believing I am O.K. with this situation. It's not so bad, always needing quarters. Yet, every 2 months, I stop by the bank to withdraw my quarters, and the bank teller says, *Ah, laundry day?* Then she smiles, like my request is cute. And I want to tell her, *This is not my life.* Instead I smile back.

### **My Own Need, Just Beginning**

I grab my car keys, backpack, laundry basket, and close-to-empty bottle of Arm & Hammer detergent, and head out the door. About five feet from my car, I realize I've left my wallet on the kitchen counter. I don't go back for it because I check the time on my phone and decide I can't be late for my class.

Naturally, I arrive to class on time. I actually beat the next person who shows up by seven minutes, and it becomes painfully clear that I could have gone back upstairs to my apartment and grabbed my wallet. Some part of me knew that I would've had time, but another part of me craved the false sense of accomplishment I felt when I got to class with time to spare. At least I had that.

Sitting in the front of the classroom by the whiteboard, upright in a small but sturdy desk, I'm flustered and thinking about my dirty laundry. Perhaps I look composed, even eager to start the day. Yet my thoughts are dinging all over the place. Rather than going straight to the bank

when class lets out, I have to drive back home—going past the bank—retrieve my debit card, and drive back out to the bank to withdraw my quarters.

Champagne problems—at least I have a car to take me back to my debit card so I can withdraw quarters every two months. Of course, I don't yet see it this way.

A couple of hours later, I finally get my hands on two fresh rolls of quarters and pull up to my apartment complex laundromat. I open the passenger door on the driver's side and tug my canvas hamper, which I'd wedged in between the seats, out of the car. The straps of my hamper pinch the inside of my elbow as I trot down the dusty path to the laundry room. Once I see that nobody is there, I relax my shoulders. I'm thankful I can unload my laundry without worrying about anyone's peering eyes. Something's going my way for once. Until I notice a few chewed-off fingernails scattered on the floor like confetti.

*Nope, nope, nope*—I move my head in small, frantic shakes—*you never saw them. Look away.*

Feeling rich with all these new quarters, I consider starting three loads of wash. How quickly I've forgotten frugality. *How many hands have touched these quarters before mine?* Jostling my bottle of detergent, I decide that I don't want to risk starting three loads. I load my clothes into two washers: Bedding/Whites in one (since my sheets are white), and Everything Else in the other. I pour half a cap of detergent into each washer, keeping things balanced in case there's not enough detergent to thoroughly clean my clothes. And then I add a dash more to both machines, shaking the upside-down bottle, watching as blue detergent splatters out in thin, gelatinous strands. Finally, I close the machines, insert my quarters into the silver coin-slot, press START, and leave. There's nothing for me to do but wait now.

Instantly I feel a torrent of relief pour over me. I am elated, practically skipping back to

my car. Laundry shouldn't have such a hold on me, but it does, and now I can finally go home and clean up from the weekend with Christina and Julia while I wait for my clothes and sheets. And when my clothes dry, I can do my readings for my evening seminar that I hate. I have this all planned out. The day is turning around.

Thirty minutes later, I return to the little laundromat to transfer my clothes into the dryer, but I notice something as I pull handfuls of clothing out of my Everything Else washer: these clothes are dry and unclean, save for the sparse patches of liquid detergent. When I open the other washer, I notice the same thing. *Shit. You've got to be kidding.*

I've wasted 10 quarters. That's two weeks of laundry. My face burns.

I try again, but I use the two other open washers—also the only ones left. It takes me a few armfuls to move my laundry from one machine to the next, and I extend my gaze up to ceiling so my face won't be buried in the odor of dirty, stale laundry and partially soaked detergent. Again, I insert 5 quarters into each machine. A total of \$2.50. Two more weeks of laundry. I press START, and, then, this time I wait. There's no waterfall sound in either machine. And I get this bad feeling in my gut; it's going to be a long afternoon. I flip up the lids of the washers, remove my dirty and now sticky clothes, quickly stuff all of it back into my hamper like I'm jamming shut a suit case, and I drive to the front office of my apartment complex.

I feel defeated and want to cry, but suddenly, after busting into the reception area, I'm embarrassed. Am I just overreacting because I'm exhausted? And because I don't want to go to my seminar tonight? Because I haven't done the readings because I don't want to? Why did I let Christina and Julia visit me?

I attempt a few deep breaths before I approach the woman at the front desk, explain my situation, and ask her what to do. She tells me to call the number on the sign in the laundry room.

*What fucking sign?* I'm mad again, because I actually did see a sign with a number on it when I was yanking my dirty laundry out of the washers. I guess I thought the sign was a formality, or I maybe just wanted to present my problem to someone who had to listen to it right away. I want to yell at the woman, even though I don't yell at people. Even though it's not her fault. It's out of her control, she says.

And, so, I drive back around to the laundry room and call the number on the sign that's tacked onto the grimy wall above the washing machines. No one answers. The phone rings 97 times before I catch a hint and hang up. When I call the second time, a robot puts me on hold, and I know that I'm never getting back my four weeks of laundry. Again, I drive back around the bend, back to my apartment.

### **To See the Same World Differently**

For no good reason, I turn my hamper over and dump the laundry into my bathtub. I'm going old school, hand-washing these bad boys. *How dirty is my tub, though?* With that thought, I chaotically toss chunks of dirty clothes back into the hamper and scrub and rinse my bathtub until I've decided it's adequately clean. I spin the nozzle to the left and let the water heat and fill the tub. Predictably this turns out to be a miserable idea. I'm tired after washing and wringing out one shirt and just plain *over it* when a thin, old sports bra traps itself in the drain. Plus, there's no use kidding myself: I'm far too much of a clean freak to touch even my own dirty clothes for more than a few seconds. My knees ache from kneeling on the plastic-wood floor, stinging with pain as I shift my weight, but I stay there, kneeling like a repentant sinner, as I drain the bathwater and wring out the rest of my sopping wet clothes.

After about twenty minutes, I stand up, deliriously frustrated with myself, and search

online for a nearby laundromat. This particular debacle, I realize, would've never unfolded if I were still living where I grew up. If I were only a fifteen-minute drive away from my parents. I'd make the easy, obvious choice of driving to their house and using their machines. The laundromat would've never even been on my radar because in my upper-middle class, predominantly white neighborhood, the public laundromat is a place that only existed for me in movies.

I'd be lying if I said this realization doesn't sting.

My quick Google search provides me with a few options based on my location. I choose a Yelp-reviewed, 3.5 out of 5 stars, laundromat because the fact that it's been reviewed comforts me. Yet, I'm too flustered to read any of the reviews. I just get in my car and go, making a quick stop at Wal-Mart to buy a giant, cheap bottle of Arm & Hammer detergent: 210 ounce bottle for \$8.98. A voice in my head says, "Gross, Wal-Mart," but a voice in my heart says, "They have good deals, though." I'm being a snob because my mom is a snob about Wal-Mart and laundry detergent. Truthfully I'm thankful for Wal-Mart's low prices. Still, my gaze lingers on the display of Gain laundry detergent: 40 ounces for \$4.97—not worth it. But my mom buys this brand. She likes the smell. She has the luxury of buying laundry detergent based on her own scent preference. She also has the luxury of doing laundry in the comfort of her laundry room, which I never really considered as a luxury until this moment in the detergent aisle at Wal-Mart. This Arm & Hammer bottle will easily last me five months, and quantity over quality matters more now that my new quarter supply took a hit. Plus, I've used this brand before; I used it all throughout my junior year of college when I was living in a house nearby campus and paying for my utilities, groceries, and basic living expenses. Monthly bills taught me to cut unnecessary costs. No need for Gain when Arm & Hammer will do. And nothing memorable happened. My

clothes all came out of the wash clean.

In my car, about ten minutes later, the GPS tells me that I have arrived at my destination. Except I miss my left turn into the steep parking lot and subsequently pop an illegal U-turn in the middle of the road. Luckily, there aren't many cars around to witness me being a dumbass. At long last, I park my car, tote my hamper into yet another room, and look around the place. The walls are mostly white with flakes of paint chipping along the ceiling and hues of yellow in patches where water must've leaked. Everything else feels silver because of the long bank of dryers lining wall. The mechanical hum of the tumbling dryers grows louder with every second I stand paused by the entrance, taking it all in. Of course, then it dawns on me: I've never actually been to a laundromat before. Maybe I have known this my whole life, but only now do I realize it. I wonder, *Is it obvious? Can they tell?* Nobody's looking at me, though, because they're doing their laundry. Because why would they.

Moving toward one row of washers, I step on a small puddle of soapy water and slide, quite inflexibly, in my nice leather, riding boots, into a partial split. And I laugh, because it's about damn time, because whatever. An elderly woman, one of the employees, in stained khakis and a scarlet t-shirt, comes to my aid and asks if I'm okay.

*Define "okay."* "I'm fine," I tell her, smiling because I'm still laughing at myself. "Thanks."

She walks away to greet someone, and I insert another 10 quarters into the machine. Another \$1.25 per load; another two weeks' worth of laundry money. These washers are bigger and cleaner than the ones at my apartment complex, but some of them are nicer than others. The one I snagged is white with some rust by the nozzles, and when I notice this, a flash of worry strikes me. *What if I can't count on these machines? What if my clothes get even dirtier and I end*

*up having to throw them all out?* I shake off the possibility of another failure—I refuse to think too hard about my laundry anymore—and take a seat at one of the tables by a cluster of randomly provided arcade games. It’s a round, stool table, and it brings me back to my grade-school cafeteria. The last time I sat down to a table like this I was wearing my Catholic school uniform and about to eat the lunch one of my parents packed for me, usually my mom. My two sisters and I tended to eat healthier than most of our peers: red grapes and sliced bell peppers and carrots and rolled-up slices of turkey with provolone, and, if we were lucky, three Oreos.

I’m not a little school girl anymore. But I’m still a student, and I’ve brought my backpack with me so I can complete those readings for that class I can’t stand. I’ve also brought my laptop, which I gingerly place on the table because I’ve grown increasingly aware of the fact that, in the laundromat, I’m marking myself as a type of person: privileged. Not only am I someone with a laptop, but I’m someone with a Mac. The laundromat doesn’t seem like the place to bring this superfluous expense. As if I’m rubbing it in—like I don’t really belong here, and I’d like everyone to know. Don’t I belong, though? I need to do my laundry, and I can’t afford anything else. There’s nothing wrong with this picture, yet my cheeks are red hot. Surely everyone’s looking at me; surely they know I’m uncomfortable because I’ve never been here before. But when I glance up from my readings, no one’s looking at me. Again, why would they? In fact, there are only a few people in this laundromat right now. This observation soothes me until I noticed that I’m the only white person.

Being the only white person isn’t a problem for me, but I do notice it. A wave of treacherous white guilt washes over me. If skin color doesn’t, or shouldn’t, say anything about social class, then why don’t I see more laundromat integration? What does this say about my life, my background—that it’s shockingly white, middle-class, and separate from this—and every

other—laundromat? That, in some capacity, I've associated skin color with class? Have I even realized this horrible truth before? Probably not. I've never been smacked in the face with my own privilege until this moment. And it's not that I necessarily associate skin color with social class, but it's that I can no longer deny the reality that skin color says something about class. How much of life have I failed to notice because I'm white?

Both of my parents grew up in white, upper-middle class families, very similar to mine. My dad's family went bankrupt when he was in college, though, leaving my dad to work multiple jobs and pay his way through school. One of his jobs was working as a chef at some breakfast diner. He was the master of omelets—two eggs in each hand at the same time. A key aspect of that story, which he prefers to leave out, is the Cromwell family bankruptcy. My dad's face falls into a tight, sad expression whenever I ask him about it. His reaction is always that he'd never let something like that happen to his family. So far, so good. My parents ensured that my sisters and I would all receive excellent educations—that's why we went to Catholic school. Not for the Catholicism but for the more rigorous curriculum. All so that we could have excellent teachers, get better test scores, and follow whatever trajectory would lead us to one day having our own washers and dryers.

About half an hour later, I stand up to switch my clean laundry over into one of the hefty dryers. Each quarter buys me eight minutes of dryer time. When I sit down again, I pull out my laptop and check the queue of readings to complete. There are two intimidating articles I need to power through. Frustrated, I bring my hands to my cheeks and squish my face. Forty minutes later, I'm still groaning, and a scuffed-up family of five enters the laundromat. Their clothes are disheveled, painted with dirt, and the youngest daughter—there are three girls—has a Pitbull puppy on a leash. The puppy yanks her forward, and when she whips past me, I decide it's

probably a good idea to put my laptop away for good. I opt to doodle in my notebook instead. I draw waves, my name in bubble letters, my name in cursive, imperfect flowers, and, occasionally, I observe this bedraggled family.

The father, swaying as he walks, is stout with short, thin white hair. His faded beige cargo shorts come past his knees, and his gray t-shirt looks covered in car grease, which reminds me of my own dad, who spends his free time on our garage floor fiddling with underbellies of cars. Glints of metallic casing shine from this man's mouth as he mutters angrily to his wife. She has a swollen, black and purple eye. Thick chunks of ratty brown hair hang around her face, escaping her low ponytail. I stare at her, trying to communicate her worth to her. *You don't have to stay with him! Take the girls and leave!* She stares back. I invent all these struggles in her life while she just lives.

The eldest daughter, probably thirteen years old, needs a bra and a shower, and my heart hurts for her. I remember the day I got my first training bra from Limited Too. This was at the end of my fifth-grade year, and I definitely didn't need any sort of bra yet. But I *was* pubescent, one of the worst things to be in life, and my mom took Christina and me shopping. Christina, of course, had to comment on the fact that I didn't even need a bra. Anything to embarrass me. I cried and stormed back into the dressing room, not wanting her to look at me anymore.

Yet, here I am looking at this young girl. Her skin is a darker shade of brown than the rest of them, and she has shiny, black hair. Truthfully, with that hair and that skin she reminds me of Christina as a young girl in the summer months. This girl smiles at me timidly. *Was I staring again? I hope I haven't embarrassed her.* The middle daughter, maybe nine years old, sits quietly in a row of chairs by the dryers. She has her mom's olive skin tone and a gentle disposition. The youngest girl, a dirty blonde, sports a pink tee and magenta shorts, and runs

around wildly with the Pitbull, laughing to herself. She knocks into me during one of her loops, and I huff. I think she's annoying and rambunctious, not like me when I was a child. I'm glad I packed my things up. Then again, I was never a child who went to the laundromat, and who cares if she bumped into me, I'm only doodling.

"Sorry!" she says, circling back toward me and placing her feet within inches of mine.

Chuckling, I say, "Oh, that's okay. Don't worry about it." I draw my face back some, creating a comfortable space between us.

"He's just a puppy."

I smile and gently nod my head before turning back to my pressing notebook sketches.

"Hey, do you have any quarters you can give me?"

If she only knew my current relationship with quarters. I catch a whiff of her bad breath, and I spot a gray, gooey substance on her upper gums. I jolt upright in my seat, trying not to gasp. *Has this child never been to the dentist before?*

"Sorry," I say, feeling awful, "I only have the ones I need for my laundry."

She shrugs her shoulders, and says, "That's all right, I guess," putting a soft, chubby hand on my arm. "I just wanted to play one of these games."

I take inventory of her slovenly appearance. Her hair looks like it hasn't been washed or brushed in days. There are scabs and scars speckled across her knees and shins. She has no clue about personal space, about how invasive she is being with her little face moving ever closer to mine.

"I'm sorry. I wish I had some extra change for you!" I mean it, and I don't mean it. I want to take her home and wash her up and be a more hygienic parent to her. I want her to take her clammy hand off my arm.

Just then, the father comes over to the arcade area and pops a few quarters into one of the games—Pinball or Pacman, something like that. *Why didn't she just ask her dad for the quarters?* He doesn't seem to care that his youngest daughter, I assume she's six or seven years old, is bugging a stranger for conversation, for recreational funding. Actually, he seems oblivious to anything but his game. *Is he neglectful at home? Is that why her hair and teeth aren't brushed?* The young girl rushes over to him and tugs his pocket to get his attention, but he shakes her off like he's swatting a fly.

The whole scene is hard to watch, but I can't get myself to look away. Finally, I pack the rest of my notebook up, strap on my backpack, and wander over to my dryers. Three minutes left until my clothes are fully dry. I take another seat, turning back to the shabby family of five, and mentally compose my last assessment: *I guess the dad hits the mom, and no one pays attention to the girls, and the dad wastes laundry money on arcade games, and is he drunk right now?*

Sitting by the dryers, I think about the intricacies of this family's private life. I feel sad and judgmental. What if I had been born into another family? How different would my life be? I think about my father and wonder about the circumstances of his life that allowed me to have certain experiences. What if he never learned to crack four eggs at once?

I send him a text to tell him that I am grateful for him and my mom, and all the luxuries they've afforded me. "This is random," I say, "but thanks for always providing for us. I'm at a public laundromat right now, and I'm grossed out."

"Welcome to being a person. Luv you. Dad"

### **To Make the Familiar Strange**

One summer day, on a late Thursday afternoon, I walk into a cold, white room. Another

laundromat opened near my apartment, so I'm here to check it out because, since it's new, I assume it's also exceptionally clean. Water swishes and slaps around in the machines, and someone squeaks by me with a rolling metallic hamper. Suddenly everything looks silver again. I recognize this feeling, and I actually enjoy the familiarity. But I feel something else, too. A sense of frustration, an inconvenience: how much nicer it would be to do laundry in my own home. Except I don't have a home, and I clearly don't have my own laundry machines. This whole thing, the inner conflict, feels shameful to me in a visceral, hard-to-explain way.

There are fewer places to sit while waiting for your laundry here. Only one row of chairs against a back wall, blue and hard and metallic, connected by parallel bars. These seats remind me of the ones at a bowling alley. And there's a lot of noise in here. A Marvin Gaye song plays in the background, which gets in the way of a giggling Spongebob on one of the TVs, which gets in the way of the little, screeching toddler watching Spongebob. One, two, three, four—eight other TVs. I wonder why a public laundromat needs such an absurd number of TVs. The wall behind me is decorated in generic superheroes, and I feel a dorky sense of pride that I recognize Spiderman, Thor, Ironman, Captain America, the Hulk, and whoever Scarlett Johansson plays in these things. A miniscule kids' picnic table rests in the corner of the seating area, where the toddler sits on a plastic bench.

Dryers line the walls to my left and straight ahead of me. The center of the room hosts rows of washers of varying sizes and varying demands for my money. There's a sign on the automatic doors as people walk in: \$1.25 per pound. How many dirty shirts and pants and socks does it take to make a pound? I've never worried about this before, and my mind focuses on my perpetually depleting baggy of quarters.

Striding up to the second row of machines, I see they're cheaper than the ones in the very front—\$3.50 instead of \$4.50. That's 18 quarters and way beyond my budget. So, I investigate a \$3.50 machine and find a welcome boon: there's a credit card payment option. An end to the bimonthly quarters! But, in the end, I decide that I'll just use my quarters since I already have them. I set my fresh bottle of Gain on top of the washer, and another wave of shame rolls over me. This isn't my brand. I buy what's cheap, and so far I haven't died from using more affordable cleaning products. And yet, here I am, with this fresh bottle of detergent, feeling exposed. As if it reveals how badly I would like to go home to my parents' house and do laundry there.

Alas, I place my dirty laundry in the open washer, but only the colors. I'm not sure I can trust this laundromat yet, so I left my dirty whites behind in one of those hefty, 99-cent bags from HomeGoods in my closet. In my haste, I drop a few socks and a pair of bright coral, lacey underwear. Gasping, I bend down and grab the underwear first because the thought of anyone knowing I wear underwear horrifies me. After loading my clothes into the machine, I notice a solid amount of open space in there. *Is there not a smaller, cheaper machine?* I don't look around any further because I assume there are only two options for washers: regular and heavier duty, and because I feel out of place here. I don't want to be that girl who doesn't know her way around the public laundromat. I struggle to shut the door on the washer because I'm confused by the handle; I can't get the damn thing to lock in place. I fiddle with it for a long, seriously flustered ten seconds or so, and when I finally figure it out, I look around to see if anyone's staring at me.

I pour a full cap of detergent into the designated space, trying to be inconspicuous, because I shouldn't have splurged. I scan the room and spot three bottles of Arm & Hammer

detergent—a distinct, mustard-yellow color—stationed on top of machines-in-use, and I feel like I’m cheating the self I am becoming, the one who’s becoming used to cheaper things. Before I hide my Gain by my side, I pour in a little extra detergent, which overflows the MAX FILL line in the washer, just to be sure my clothes get absolutely clean.

About half an hour later, as I wait for my clothes to dry, a pudgy white woman with shaved head and orange flowers tattooed on her arms struts by me with two hampers stacked atop each other. She’s holding her toddler’s hand, guiding him toward a row of washing machines. They head down my row. A man in blue jeans and cowboy boots, holding a newborn, trails behind them. He seems frazzled, and calls out to her, “Can’t stack the baskets!” She turns around and says, “What?”

“Can’t stack the baskets!” he says again.

She repeats herself, and the whole thing goes on for entirely too long. After the woman’s third confused exclamation, I desperately want to interject with some clarification.

They start their loads of dirty laundry and then join me by Thor. Seats are already limited, and I feel immediately crowded when they plop down next to me. The toddler reaches for my detergent by my foot, and, for some reason, I don’t think to stop him. I figure I’ll stop him if he puts his mouth on it. Orange Flower Mom quickly puts an end to her child’s detergent adventure, and she asks if the bottle is mine and if she can move it. I nod stupidly hard, feeling guilty for not moving my detergent away myself, but I also didn’t want to be rude to her baby. While I’m nodding like an idiot, the Cowboy comes and sits down only one seat away from me, which unsettles me—because personal space—so I scoot over one space to the right.

I can’t pinpoint why it’s so hard for me to be here, and I rejoice in the noise of the dryer buzzer, gather my clean clothes, and head home.

The next time I'm in this laundromat, it's a busy Saturday, and I almost turn around and go home, thinking that I'll just come back on a calmer weekday. But, I stay, gradually feeling more at ease this time, even if I hate the number of people here. I head for the same aisle of machines I used the first time, scooching between two women whose legs and butts jut out into the walkway. First I unload my brightly colored laundry, accidentally sending a thong soaring through the air before it lands. Mortified, I snatch it off the ground and start the load. I wrestle with the latch on the door again, but a sweet Latina woman, about twenty-five, helps me shut it. I say, *Thank you*. She says nothing but beams a smile at me, more so with her eyes than mouth.

I take the last seat by the wall of superheroes and embrace the short distance between the older black fellow and me. We're not so far apart. I crack open my book, Joan Didion's *Blue Nights*, but find myself unable to concentrate on her prose. The incessant footsteps and slamming doors and voices from the overhead TVs keep pulling me out of focus. "Consider what special circumstances are required before this woman throws it all in," writes Didion. I stare at this sentence, read it four times, before accepting all that bustles around me. Just as I lift my head out of the book, a teenage boy, walking hastily by me, drops a sweatshirt and a pair of navy boxers. Out of respect, I return my gaze to the book. I think about all of us, chugging along in here, dropping our underwear and surviving.

## Story of the Decent Samaritan

Leaving my cramped apartment feels crucial. Away from the low ceilings, the shrinking living room, the fortress of books stacked all around my floor. There are only so many joyless paces I can take from one beige wall to the other.

An excursion to World Market seems to me the perfect antidote. I want to gaze at the mammoth wall of patterned pillows, and I want to slide my hands across the faux fur and intricate beads. I want to be irresponsible. I want to pretend I can spend my paycheck on frivolous, colorful things.

I punch the blue AWAY button on my alarm system and step outside where a billow of searing heat envelopes my body, but there is no sun. The sky, dressed in dusty clouds, emits a bright gray light. A lonely wasp buzzes softly near my door. Children holler as they run up and down the street. When I get down to my car, a group of excited black kids whips past me on their too-small-for-them bikes. I watch them for a moment, and I am already sweating. They're completely unfazed by the Texas heat. They stand upright on their bikes, pedaling with erratic speed, racing each other and laughing. A piece of me envies them. Or at least their youthful innocence. I turn toward my car, hopping into the driver's seat, and I feel a fleeting moment of guilt: I wonder what my own childhood might have looked like had I not grown up in white suburbia. I wonder, too, if I'd grown up in an apartment complex, how much less attention I might pay to these kids. *Would I be used to this? Children playing in the concrete lots?* I reverse out of the parking lot and shake the thought away.

The stoplight outside of my neighborhood is red, so I brake and peer at the gas station to my left. Its concrete lot is littered with plastic wrappers and smashed down wads of gum. I feel embarrassed, like the trash on my side of the street is somehow a reflection of me. A minute

later, the light turns green, and I make a wide left turn, curving past the school across the street and noticing a row of school buses. I've never seen those buses on the move. They only sit there, like giant, mango-colored Lego pieces. Plenty of times I've seen the school's security gate open for a mom in one of those gas-guzzling Tahoes or crisp Lexus SUVs. One of those pristine black Escalades. One of the Beemers, all shimmering and silver and so wholly separated from my side of the street. Again, I think of the idle school buses, how I don't know what it's like to ride one. There were no buses at my Catholic school, and I was always jealous of my friends who attended public schools.

My eyes trace the brick wall lining the perimeter of the school: private property. But some of the litter from my side of the street still flutters near the entrance. Shiny plastic wrappers swirling in the wind, like a tornado of leaves. *We are not separate.*

Time moves slowly as I grow lazy with observation. Maybe it's the evening's cloudy haze, but I feel increasingly like I'm watching myself from somewhere on the outside. Suddenly the car in front of me brakes, and my own car, almost a decade old now, squeaks to a halt. My body flushes with the heat of adrenaline, a reminder to pay attention to the traffic ahead. Instead I inhale and continue staring out my windows, taking in the slanting shade trees planted in a sloppy row down the strip of faded grass. I miss the trees back home in North Carolina—tall, lush, unavoidably beautiful. Nothing like these trees outside my car, which are thin and uninspiring and inconsistently patched with leaves. Finally, there's movement up the road; cars roll steadily forward. Someone in the truck behind me honks—some older white man in a cowboy hat—before abruptly charging past in me in the other lane. I scowl at him.

I look again to my side of the road and notice its sidewalk. I've noticed it before, sure, but never thought about it. Big deal; sidewalks are for walking; we walk on them. So, why

doesn't the private school side of the street have a sidewalk? *To keep us on our side.* Did the moms in the Tahoes not need a sidewalk, because they drive everywhere? *I basically drive everywhere. I'm not like the people on my side of the street.*

At the next stoplight, I pass by the posh nail salon that my mom would love if she lived here: brand new, high ceilings, a few shops down from the Whole Foods. My mom swears she was a queen in her past life. "It's why I'm such a snob sometimes," she says. I miss her cooking and dinner parties, all her artfully arranged cheese plates with Kalamata olives and prosciutto. I hear my dad's voice as he steps into the kitchen, clasping the final button on his shirt: "Where'd you get all that?" he asks. "Whole Paycheck?" There's an elitist part of me that feels safer with this shopping plaza just down the road from my apartment complex. *I'm terrible.* I guess I value the familiarity.

I turn right at the light and drive toward the neighborhood I like to run through. *I hardly run anymore.* Young mothers with wide strollers jog through here. Once I saw an old man in athletic gear walking down the street and puffing his cigar. He must live in one of the custom houses with the wraparound porches and infinity pools. I love to look at these homes with their tiered water fountains and four car garages—as if the homes themselves are showing off.

Before coming up to the neighborhood, though, I have to pass through a highway intersection. And, as I approach the stoplight, I see someone moving in the distance—someone on the side of the road next to an old, slightly battered red car. Their arms are waving, their flashers are on, and I feel a pit form in my stomach. I am instantly worried about how to drive past this person. As I get closer, I see a skinny, middle-aged black woman in a tight gray dress. She moves her arms like windshield wipers clearing away heavy rain. Cars drive by her as if she's invisible; the pit deepens. A lump emerges in my throat. My car is still a couple of yards

away from her, but I convince myself we've made eye contact. *God damnit.* I am now infinitely bound to this woman.

The light turns red as I drive up, so I pull to the side of the road, and the woman looks at me. I roll my window down as she walks over, but I panic—*what if she tries to stab me?*—and roll it up a little. *I'm an asshole.* The woman pokes what she can fit of her head into my half-closed window and stares at me with these big brown eyes.

“Thank you, thank you,” she says, exasperated. “I been stranded for an hour, and you the only one who's pulled over.”

I don't say anything because of the lump in my throat. Because I don't know what to say. I simply listen. She tells me something happened with her car, and she needs money. She is \$44.67 short and the towing company refuses to pick her up. I stop listening after that. I forget why she needs my money. But I'm irritated she's asking for it. *But I expected this.*

“My sixty-seven-year-old father is in the car with me.”

I turn my head away from her, looking for movement in the front seat of her car. For a second, I think that maybe she's making him up. *Who would do that?* The light turns green. And I wish I had all the money in the world, or that I could disappear with the passing cars. I feel guilty watching the cars go by; I know none of them will bother pulling over for this woman now that they've seen someone else taking care of it.

“I'm sorry,” I say, my legs shifting nervously in my seat. “I don't have any cash on me.”

Immediately, she walks away, only offering me a quick, “Thanks.”

*That's it? Doesn't she believe me?* My face flushes again, and the heat overwhelms my entire body. I want to explain myself at least—to call out to her and promise that I really don't have cash. She must think I'm lying, but I'm not: I'm a shit liar, and I never have cash. If I do, I

spend it right away on ridiculous purchases like bottles of Fiji water or two boxes of Wheat Thins for five bucks. *Doesn't she believe me?*

So, it's settled: I have nothing to give this woman. And then I remember the coins stashed in my center console. Coins that have been there for months. *But I need these.*

I drive off slowly, catching a final glimpse at her car as I go, and I spot her sixty-seven-year-old father. He's slumped over in his seat, his head covered in white-gray hair, and his shoulders crunched up toward his neck.

My head pounds, and my mouth goes dry. *Am I really leaving them? Am I a bad person?*

Through my rearview mirror, I see the woman waving her arms back and forth again. It's as if I never stopped for her—my gesture of goodness canceled out. My ears ring.

The trip to World Market no longer appeals to me, yet I keep driving that way. I want this hot anger to leave me, but I know it won't. I won't be able to sleep tonight if I don't get the money for that woman.

I could scream. *I'm not made of money!* But I have more than she does, which is the point I keep trying to ignore. There's a Wells Fargo at the next intersection, and I can feel my skin practically catch on fire when I consider just driving by. It feels like maybe the whole world can see straight into my mind. So, I give in; I pull into the bank to grab some cash. I figure I'll have to withdraw three twenty-dollar bills, and my frustration spikes: I don't want to give the woman an extra fifteen dollars she doesn't need. *Like I know what she needs.*

For a few moments, I sit in my parked car outside the bank and contemplate my next move. If I walk into the bank and engage with a bank teller, then I can withdraw \$45, or the \$44 and exact change. Except I'm not presentable enough to enter a break—not with my unwashed hair and my ripped jeans. I'm not even wearing a real bra, just a flimsy bralette. *Plus, what kind*

*of asshole would I be if I returned to the woman with exact change.*

I choose the drive-through ATM, telling myself I'll bite the bullet and withdraw the sixty dollars. *Just give it to her.* Then I remember the grocery store across the street, and my blazing skin cools down some. I can stop there, buy something, and get some change. When I insert my card into the ATM, however, there's a new option to withdraw a \$50 bill. This surprises me, and my spirits lift as I select this option and grab the money.

I speed back to the woman, ready to help her, hoping nobody else had. A few minutes later, I reach the edge of the ritzy neighborhood, and a Jeep brakes at the stop sign in front of me. I stare at the spate of bumper stickers decorating its trunk: 26.2, a longhorn icon, "Life is Good." And, the one that sticks out to me the most, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

This makes me sick. I think I'll vomit because I want it to be me who helps her. I ache to see the goodness of my deed reflected back at me because how else will I know it's true, that it's there at all?

*She'll be so happy to see me. She'll forgive me for earlier.*

The closer I get to the side of the road where the woman stands, the more I secretly hope someone else has already helped her, but I doubt it. We all ramble off excuses. I swear I'll give anyone food and water, just not money. It's been a while, years maybe, since I've given anyone food or water. The guilt burns again.

*It would be nice to keep my money. But what if no one else stops?*

I roll through every other stop sign, run all the yellow lights.

Why hadn't anyone else stopped? What had they been waiting for? Someone else to take care of it? The area where the woman pulled over is wealthy. There must have been money in those cars that passed by her like she's invisible.

It's obvious, then. People don't really help each other out. We are full of hollow values. No follow-through. I squeeze my hands around the steering wheel like I want to break it off my car.

What if it had been me on the side of the road? How long would a young white woman have to wait for help? What if the black woman had a less beat-up car? What if she'd been white? I wonder if I might have been less skeptical about handing over the money if the woman's skin color matched my own.

Tears well in my eyes because I know the truth. I am going to help the woman regardless, but I probably would have been more immediately giving, more trusting of the situation if she looked like me. *I'm wrong. I don't have these thoughts.*

At the final stoplight, my heart bumps erratically in my chest, as if to yell at me. I am weepy and heartbroken and full of contradictions. I see the woman again, and there's one final U-turn between us. She's still waving her arms as cars zoom by her. I feel desperate and indignant on her behalf. I make my last turn and take a deep inhale—ten seconds to collect myself. As I pull up, the woman seems to recognize my car and she relaxes her arms. This time, when she walks toward me, I roll my window down completely. The money is tucked in my right hand, and I extend my arm as she leans her head in.

"Thank you, baby," she says in a slow and shaky voice. She gazes at me for a few seconds, her brown eyes soft with defeat. "Pray for us."

"Absolutely," I say, but I'm lying. I have never been one to pray, not even with all my years of Catholic school.

And I drive straight home, confused that I don't feel better or at all proud of myself. Here is this person who has less than me, so I helped her. This was the right thing to do. I should feel

light and good, but I feel the opposite. There are too many questions popping up like sores: If it were a man on the side of the road, would I still have pulled over? Unlikely. What if he were white, black? I'd have pulled over for a black man in a business suit driving a dent-free car. I would not have pulled over for a white man with sagging pants and a missing taillight. I would make assumptions.

All these intersecting points of color and wealth and gender and age. All these criteria for relieving someone's burden.

*I am petty. I am all wrong.*

## Young Stunner

1.

Sometimes I see these Maybelline commercials on TV, thirty-second clips about whatever new makeup product is guaranteed to make me more beautiful, and I am instantly disgruntled. There's usually some flawless model posing in a pointlessly sexy manner in front of the camera and a close-up of her flawless face, as she shows off the latest Maybelline product I need to buy. At the end of the commercial, a flirty voice says, "Maybe she's born with it," and then more voices chime in to sing-say, "Maybe it's Maybelline."

I'd like to repurpose Maybelline's whole "Maybe she's born with it" idea and make my own commercial, featuring an average, *relatable* gal, maybe someone in her mid-twenties who's leaving work to go for an evening run. There's nothing particularly special about this scene, but that's kind of the point.

In the first scene, the camera pans up a towering office building before cutting to the woman. We see her walking into the bathroom, wearing black heels, a gray pencil skirt and blazer, and there's a gym bag hanging off her shoulder. Then the camera cuts to a shot of her on the sidewalk outside her office building: she's dressed in sneakers, running shorts, and a baggy tee with one of those front pockets. A frocket. On the frocket, in small, red letters, is the word *PARANOIA*.

The running gal glances down at her watch, fiddles with the timer, and takes off down the street. Her ponytail swings, her toned calves and quads flex with each athletic stride as she passes by leering, whistling men. Some women stare, too, but their gazes imply more judgment than desire, as if they believe running gal is only running to attract attention. A few women, perched at an outside seating area, roll their eyes in the background as they sip glasses of rosé.

Halfway through the commercial, the running gal finds herself in a quiet, suburban

residence. Sprinklers gushing water over bright green lawns, rollerblades and bicycles scattered across driveways. She runs down a long, flat street where nearly all the houses look the same—black roofs, red bricks, black shutters. Her only company is the occasional passing car: boring dads in their mid-forties with grease-stained polos stare far longer than they would if their wives were in the car. A white, F-150, stuffed with rowdy college men, honks at the running gal. Some of them make crude gestures with their tongues.

Running gal just keeps running.

More men drive by. A shape of a bulky man in a red Mustang cranks his engine and drives off laughing like he's done something unique and original. A van of carpet cleaners honk and holler as they roll by running gal. A car full of high school girls drives by next. They've got their windows rolled down, Top 40 music blasting through the speakers. The girl sitting behind the driver sticks her head out the window and yells, "Ow, ow! Nice legs!" Her friends laugh.

In the last ten seconds of the commercial, the running gal pauses to catch her breath and stretch out her cramping calf muscles. She flexes her left foot against the curb, feeling a tight strain in her calf as she leans forward into the stretch. As she does the same stretch to her other leg, the camera zooms in, and we see a stun gun in her left hand and miniature bottle of pepper spray in the right one. Then the camera scales slowly upward from running gal's hands, giving us a close-up view of her shirt: *PARANOIA* on the frocket.

A God-like voice cuts in, a Morgan Freeman narration, that says, "Maybe she's born with it." Another car honks in the background, another person hollers. Running gal rolls her eyes. A second later, the same voice says, "Maybe it's environmental."

2.

I often joke that I came out of my mother's womb paranoid, but I don't think that's quite right. Instead, I learned how to be paranoid from my parents, who constantly told my two sisters and me to be aware of our surroundings, to never walk anywhere alone, to be alert to strangers.

One evening, Maria, my little sister, and I were tired of watching our older sister Christina's soccer practice, so we asked if we could go to the "far" playground that sat by the woods around the corner from the soccer field. I was seven years old, Maria about five.

"Stay together, girls," my mom told us, after we begged for permission to play away from that dreaded soccer field. We craved the swings and the slides, the multiple rows of monkey bars that laid outside her line of sight. "Only respond to someone who knows the code word."

These were two of her favorite rules when we were young girls: stick together and assume stranger-danger.

"Okay, Mommy," I said.

"And what's the code word?" she said.

"Puppy," I whispered, an easy enough word for small children to remember. And she went back to gabbing with Miss Meg, her favorite soccer mom.

We linked hands as walked down the loopy sidewalk. The sky was still bright enough in the early evening that we weren't afraid. At the playground, I climbed the monkey bars and forced Maria to stay right near me because I understood that I was responsible for her. She whined about wanting to go play on the swings.

I hissed at her, "Mommy said to stay *together*." And she pouted her cute little lips.

With each sweaty grip on the handles, I imagined the scarily pale man from a movie my dad let us watch all the time who yanked out chunks of Drew Barrymore's hair. I'd hop to the next bar, checking for the scary man's face peeking out of the woods that lined the playground.

We'd have to run away, but I worried Maria would be too slow and he'd kidnap her.

The two of us stayed at the playground for only a few minutes. I couldn't last very long after I pictured the scary man. We ran back to our mom. She thought it was funny how desperately we begged to go and how quickly we returned to her, at least until I told her what I was afraid of. I hugged her and buried my face in her stomach because I loved the smell of perfume on her clothes. She stroked the top of my head with a gentle hand and held me close. After that, Miss Meg did cartwheels with us on the sidelines.

Not once did I fear a scary woman at the edge of the woods. I suspect this had something to do with my early understanding of women: women were moms, which meant they were loving and smelled safe and did cartwheels with scared little girls on the side of a soccer field.

As teenagers, when any of us went off to a party in high school, and eventually off to college, my mom's favorite rules transformed to fit our age group. She loved to repeat them: "Never leave your drink unattended. Never let a boy bring you a drink, ever. Get your own drinks and stick with your girlfriends." The emphasis seemed to be on alcohol, but the hidden message, which I now plainly see, was to protect my body. A mysterious drink would damage my body. A boy would damage my body. Being alone would damage my body.

3.

As a girl, if there was a spider in my room, I'd call my dad upstairs to kill it. If there was a mysterious noise in the house, my dad would investigate it. For most of my childhood, he traveled during the week for his work. On the weekends, he'd cheer my sisters and me on from the sidelines at our soccer tournaments; he'd make us chocolate chip pancakes from scratch on Sunday mornings. He taught me how to change the oil in my car. I cannot count the number of

times my dad stepped out of the laundry room and into the kitchen, holding a fresh-from-the-dryer thong, to ask, “Whose undies?” And when my doctor said I had dysfunctional ovaries, my dad used to casually check in with me at the dinner table: “Hey, how’s your period?”

I think, in many ways, being a father to three girls allowed my dad to genuinely appreciate and respect women because he didn’t have a choice. Our bodies, emotions, talents, and imperfections were unavoidably present, and my dad was sensitive to our overall well-being. Of course, concern for one’s kids seems intrinsic to parenthood, but I find myself wondering what my dad’s concern looked like—if it was specialized because of our gender, and to what degree he was even consciously aware of this. He said it was his job to protect us, and I took that at face value. My dad has been a consistent source of security in my life, the male figure whom I associate with unflinching safety and protection. Part of me will always cherish this about him, but I’ve grown tired of needing a male’s protection. I learned this about myself when I moved to Fort Worth for graduate school. I was no longer a fifteen-minute drive from my parents; the comfort of my father was stripped away from me. I turned into my sole protector, but I suppose this was always the final outcome.

4.

Jack, my best male friend from high school, sends me a text message seeking my opinion, and my true feelings, toward “dudes DMing girls on social media.” I roll my eyes and think, *Oh, shit.*

“Hear me out,” he says, anticipating a familiar response from me. “It’s a very weird and funny type of messaging.”

*Very weird.*

*Funny type.*

I tap my fingers on my iPhone and begin typing and deleting numerous questions. I need more information. *What kinds of girls? What was his end goal? Hadn't I already guided him toward not doing this sort of thing?* He tells me these are girls he didn't personally know, and my mind flashes to conversations with him during our college years: Jack complaining about another Barbie-like female he's found online, another person who's ignored him or tired of him after a few short weeks. This time, he claims, he mainly wants to see their responses, and to make himself laugh. I tell him to buy a journal and write his jokes down in there, maybe read them aloud to himself.

Thinking he has one person in mind, though I have no clue whom, I message him back: "Is it a famous person or a regular chick?" This distinction is important because if it were a famous woman, then the message would likely get lost in a sea of other creepy direct messages. But the regular chick, with less followers contacting her, well, she'll probably actually see the message. And there are some things we cannot un-see.

The young woman Jack wants to message, I learn, is a friend of someone he knows from college. He's seen her in a few videos on someone else's Snapchat feed and thinks she's cute. This justification seems intricately coiled and difficult for me to support, but I want to give him the benefit of the doubt. My excuse for him: *So, he potentially wants to be set up with this person...?* Then I learn she lives in California, while Jack lives in North Carolina. Then I learn his one goal is to let her know he finds her attractive.

Yikes.

I continue probing Jack for more, eventually asking to see the message he has planned. He sends me a screenshot from his Instagram, and the time stamp on the message shows that he'd already sent it. In fact, he sent it sixteen days before he even asked for my opinion, so the

damage had already been done:

“Hi, I’m Jack.  
Wanted to pop in and say you’ve got a great face. Real good, 10/10.  
Little bit about me: I was born with no arms or legs  
(I eventually acclimated to the disability),  
I also have two glass eyes—I am writing this in Braille  
and my mom is translating (she does all my DMs for me),  
in terms of foot speed I am somewhere between a wolf  
and a mongoose. Anyways! Hope you have a great weekend!”

The number of problems in this message made my head spin. It still does. I took a quick glance at the screenshot and, right away, I saw the word “disability” and panicked.

People *are* born with no arms or legs. People *do* have glass eyes. Braille *is* a language.

Was I missing the humor, or was the humor simply missing? I asked Jack if he considered that this young woman might herself have a disability or know someone who does.

“I hadn’t thought of that until just now,” he said.

“Well, that’s alarming,” I said. I wanted to hurt his feelings but not too bad. “Also, just speaking logically here: if you have no arms and no legs then your foot speed wouldn’t matter.”

Pointing this out made me blush; it was so obvious that it felt cruel. It embarrassed me to embarrass him, but there were so many reasons for me to call him out. I knew Jack thought the wolf and mongoose comment would get a hearty laugh, but it legitimately made no sense. And it wasn’t funny. And Jack was twenty-four-years old, so he should’ve known better. Right?

“Oh, yeah,” he said, and I pictured the usual roses in his cheeks turning pale.

I couldn’t help it; I backed up to the first part of the message and picked it apart.

*Wanted to pop in and say you’ve got a great face.* Something about the “wanted to pop in” made me want to kick him in the balls. Nobody asked anybody to pop in. Perhaps all Jack meant to say was, “Hey, you’re pretty, and I have no reason to tell you this or any clue how to, but I’m going for it anyway.” To me, and to some of my female friends I showed the message to,

it sounded much differently: “In my classically male—and subtly patriarchal—lurch for I’m not sure what (power? attention? misguided fulfillment?), I’m randomly swooping in to let you know your face has passed the test. Oh, you didn’t know there was a test? No matter, bravo, little lady!” Jack needed to learn a lesson, so, I explained how rating this great-faced woman, whom he didn’t even know, undermined her worth. Also: what an obnoxious and creepy way to grab someone’s attention. He grew defensive, said I was reading too far into it, taking it too seriously. I think I was mild.

*Real good*, as if to say, “This part of the message is so casual.” As if he hadn’t wanted to seem *that* invested in the apparent beauty of this woman. *10/10*. The ultimate compliment! Women wait all their lives to hear this! Honestly, how had Jack missed this one? (His fake glass eyes?) Had he genuinely overlooked how insulting it was to rank, judge, *quantify* her appearance? Jack assured me that I was taking this part too seriously. I thought, *Well, someone has to, or else we’ll have a lot more of you running around someday*. Sure, Jack meant it as a compliment. It’s nice to feel beautiful, but I found it hard to imagine that his message would make anyone feel beautiful. It made me cringe. The five other women I showed it to cringed. Jack’s words felt like objectification, not respectful observation. He disagreed. All he wanted to do was let her know she’s attractive. He did not understand how that was precisely the problem.

In the end, the young woman responded to Jack’s message. She said, “Hahaha, best DM ever.” I’ve chosen to believe she was merely being nice. Next time she shouldn’t be.

5.

The Leyden jar, the first device capable of storing an electric charge, was invented in 1745 by either Ewald G. von Kleist, a German scientist, or Petrus van Musschenbroek, a Dutch

physicist. Most people credit Musschenbroek for this discovery, which is why the Leyden jar has its name: At the time of his discovery, Musschenbroek lived in Leyden, Holland. He was conducting experiments with some of his physicist friends, (von Kleist not included), when he observed the different charges of electrified bodies and found that exposing these charged bodies to air significantly reduced their electrical charges. Musschenbroek did not like this. He wanted to elongate the charge and figure out a way to store static electricity. So, he gathered a glass bottle, water, and a brass rod. He believed if he inserted the metal rod into a conductor of electricity (water), which was inside a non-conductor (the glass bottle), then he could trap the charge. And if he trapped the charge, then he could create a stronger, longer-lasting surge of electricity. With his water and glass bottle, Musschenbroek geared up for some static electricity. Except, when he placed the metal rod into the water to absorb the electricity, nothing seemed to happen. But then one of Musschenbroek's friends, Andreas Cuneus, holding the glass bottle, touched his hand to the metal rod and felt a tremendous shock.

Lightning in a bottle.

6.

When my mom opened the door of the U-Haul, she sent a blazing wave of heat into the cramped seating area. I groaned, peeling my sweaty thighs off the sticky pleather seat, and hopped out my door. We had just pulled up to my apartment complex in Texas, where my heart sank at the sight of the burnt orange buildings. I hate the color orange. Immediately I missed home: moving away for graduate school already seemed much better in theory. We walked to the front office to pick up my apartment and mailbox keys, and a maintenance worker escorted us to my apartment unit.

“Where are you ladies from?” he said.

“North Carolina,” my mom said.

He clicked his tongue, flashing his yellow teeth at us. “That’s a long way.”

We were delusional from driving through hundreds of flat miles before we finally made it to Texas. The last thing either one of us wanted to do was unload my furniture.

After three or four hours, and a zillion droplets of sweat, we managed to unload almost everything from the U-Haul. My coffee table, dresser, nightstand, duffel bags of clothes, and boxes of books sat in a large mound in my new living room. All that was left to unload was my mattress and box spring. I wanted a break. It was nearly 110 degrees outside, and I’d forgotten a ponytail. My long hair was drenched in sweat, dripping down my back and chest, stinging my skin. I convinced myself I was breaking out from the heat.

I leaned toward my mom, resting my head on her shoulder. “I’m dying,” I said.

“Get over yourself,” she said, abruptly walking out my apartment door, not caring if I toppled over. I followed her back to the truck. There was never any point in complaining to my mom about physical activities. My parents weren’t the type of people to load their daughters’ heavy suitcases into the car. We were never dainty.

“We’ll celebrate with some wine tonight,” she added before jumping into the U-Haul once more, maneuvering the mattress toward me.

I stayed on the ground by the loading ramp and positioned myself to catch the mattress as she slid it into my hands. Slowly, I backed up into the street, and my mom climbed out of the truck holding the other end. We walked back to my apartment, my mom leading the way with her confident backward stride, but halfway there I felt something sharp in my sneaker and asked her to stop. Just then, we heard someone’s voice from one of the first-floor units.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” said a man of maybe thirty. He looked only at my mom, eyeing her tanned, athletic legs. I did not appreciate the hunger in his eyes. When he smiled, I saw that a tooth was missing, and he had the gums of a cigarette smoker. I regretted pausing for a break. “Would you ladies like some help with that?”

From behind him, another young man appeared. This one wore an all-black outfit and his long dark hair in a low ponytail. He flashed a timid smile. Behind the two of them stood an old lady with multiple missing teeth and wrinkly, leathery skin. Her presence washed a sense of calm over me.

“Let my boys help you,” she wheezed. “Go on now boys.” She smiled at us, uncrossing her arms and pointing to the mattress.

My mom happily embraced their help, and about five minutes later, the last of my furniture was finally moved in.

“Here, let me give you guys some beer money,” my mom said after we thanked them, fiddling for her wallet.

The man with the ponytail quickly accepted the money, and I wondered if the only reason they helped was because they thought we might give them a little something like this. I felt shitty thinking that. When my mom shut the door behind the guys, my face grew suddenly hot as I thought about living alone for the first time. Was it obvious that my mom was moving me in? Could they tell she wasn’t staying? I shook my head. I was just being paranoid. Still, the fact that two strange men got to see my new apartment on the same day as me felt like a violation.

Many hours later, when I was in the shower, my mom barged into the bathroom to tell me that those guys were back; they’d knocked on the door and invited us to have some beer.

“I pretended not to hear, but they kept knocking,” she said, exasperated. “And we have

your living room lights on.” Then, as if my pending aloneness abruptly dawned on her, she said, “I don’t like that they know for certain that this is your apartment.”

“Great,” I said, my heart speeding up. Shampoo bubbles washed down my forehead and into my eyes.

“I mean, I think they were fine, but I couldn’t tell if they were inviting us over or wanting to be invited in.”

I stayed silent, let the hot water rinse over my face.

“We’ll buy you one of those door-jammers tomorrow,” she said. “And you need to have the maintenance man fix the fan in your bedroom and that broken faucet on your kitchen sink.”

7.

I have memories of my mom at my childhood home standing by the kitchen trashcan that pulls out from the island. She’s holding the mail, ripping envelopes and documents with our information into shreds and letting them fall like ash into the garbage. I can picture her now: her left and right hand meeting at the top-center of whatever paper she’s ripping, her left hand pulling back for the first big shred. After that, the tears become more reckless.

My dad’s mail-tossing process is more meticulous, his pace much slower than my mom’s, as he tears and aligns, and tears and aligns, the shred until tiny bits of mail float into a pile on the granite countertop. Then he scoops the pile into his open hand and releases it into the trashcan.

“Don’t you think that’s enough?” I asked him once as a teenager, curious. I sat at the kitchen table to his right, watching his pile grow.

His freckled face turned slowly toward mine, his hips and feet still parallel to the island.

“You never know,” he said. “I don’t want anyone piecing these back together.”

When I lived with my parents, I never worried about what to do with my mail because one of them would always shred anything that contained any of my personal information. I hardly received any mail in the first place. But, when I went to college, I started paying my own bills and became much more concerned about monthly statements and packages from Amazon and the occasional letter. Discarding mail became an urgent matter. My roommates loved to make fun of me: Any mail with my name, address, and last four digits of my debit card needed to be carefully handled. First, I’d take a chunky black Sharpie and run the ink over any line of personal information. Second, I’d flip over to the backside of the paper and run the Sharpie over those same lines. With cardboard boxes, I’d black out my name and address, and then I’d do my best to peel off the shipping label. As a final cautionary step: I’d place an additional layer of trash on top of whatever inked out mail I’d throw away.

Now that I live alone, I burn all my mail. I burn it over the kitchen sink before I run the faucet over the growing flame, and then I let the watered-down ink leak all over the flaky paper, making all the words blurry and indiscernible. Once the mail is soaked to my liking, I fold the soggy mail, toss it into the trash, and take a deep breath. *No one can get me now.* The fire alarm goes off now and again, but it’s totally worth it.

8.

Civilian stun guns crept into the modern consumer market in 1982. But by 1988, Nova Technologies Inc. (located in Austin, Texas) sold more than 300,000 “personal protection devices.” These first stun guns were specifically marketed toward a female audience as a means of self-defense.

Why are women always needing to defend themselves?

9.

Two days after my mom helped me settle into my apartment in Texas, I dropped her off at the airport for her flight home. The drive to D/FW was chaotic. The highways in Texas are much larger compared to the ones back home, and there's constant construction. Electric orange signs repeatedly warned me about road work ahead. People in monstrous pickup trucks sped past me going 80 miles an hour. Some stretches of the highway had four wide lanes. Others had two narrow lanes confined by hefty cement blocks on either side. Some stretches had numerous, intricate overpasses—curving and looping and suspended in the air with such great height. Never before had I encountered such bewildering roads.

To make matters worse, there was a crash near one of our crucial exists, so we had to take a detour. A semi-truck had flipped on its side elongating our 45-minute drive to just over an hour.

“EXIT IN ONE MILE,” said Siri.

My hands were shaky on the steering wheel. I drove at least ten miles under the speed limit. Another car zoomed past me. I could feel my mom's eyes on me as she fidgeted in the passenger seat.

“Honey,” she said, in a gentle yet assertive tone, “you're going to have to pick it up.”

“I'm trying!” I snapped, tears welling in my eyes. Traffic slowed down ahead.

“I'm cutting it really close,” she said, staring at her ticket.

“EXIT IN A QUARTER OF A MILE.”

For a moment, I zoned out. I stared at the cars in my rear and side view mirrors. Secretly

I hoped my mom would miss her flight and have to stay with me forever, or for at least one more day.

At the airport, we had a rushed, tearful goodbye outside the Delta terminal. I struggled to look my mom in the eyes, and it killed me to release her hand.

When I returned from the airport, it was about two in the afternoon. Maintenance was scheduled to drop by at three, so I had an entire hour to cry about my mom leaving. But nobody came when the clock struck three, so I just continued crying and scrolling through Facebook on my laptop. Finally, around four, there was a knock on my door, and when I looked through my peephole, I saw the same maintenance man I had met on move-in day.

Suddenly, a pit formed in my stomach. I didn't want to let this man I didn't know into my apartment without anyone else here, but I no other choice; I needed him to fix my fan and sink. I opened the door for him, and he set his tools and small stepladder down on the carpet. He stepped closer toward me, and his eyes swept slowly around the apartment. I took a step back. Something about his quiet energy made my skin crawl; maybe it was the methodical pace of his eyes moving across the living room, like he was absorbing my essence.

"Okay, so, my bedroom fan," I said.

"Very nice place," he said. His eyes lingered on my face.

"Thanks," I said, my voice tight and quick. I could feel my cheeks growing red.

I pointed toward my bedroom, but he had me lead the way to my faulty ceiling fan. I hated to let him into my bedroom, to walk in front of him. I felt like a spectacle. He switched on the overhead light to check out the fan's rickety blades. I stepped back into the living room and sat on the couch to give us some space. When he came out a moment later to grab his tools, my whole body stiffened. I didn't want to look at him as he walked toward me, but I could feel his

eyes on me. I looked up, and I was right. He was smiling, as if he could sense my unease, like it was tangible, fueling him. I flicked my eyes back to the computer screen and ignored him.

After a few minutes and many clinking noises, he returned to the living room to tell me that he'd fixed my fan.

*Hallelujah*, I thought. *Now get out.*

"That's a nice bed you have," he said. "Very comfortable looking." Again with the smile, though it seemed slightly sinister this time, or was I imagining that part?

"Oh," I said, "the fan is already fixed?" I kept my tone neutral, not wanting to offend or encourage him—a fine line—as I ignored his opinion about my bed.

"Yes, and you need your sink done, too?"

"Yep. The cold-water knob is cracked, and actually, half of it is broken off. So I just want to replace it with a new one."

"Okay, I see." He crouched down to his tools. "So, is your mom already gone?"

"Yes," I said. "Well, she's out at the store."

He stood up, gazing down at me as I sat on the couch. "But she's going back to North Carolina?" A grin, then he stepped past me and into the kitchen.

This question gave me a Bad Feeling. He'd remembered details of my life. He took a liking to me. He knew where I lived. He was there now. *Lie again.*

"Uh huh," was all I managed.

More clinking noises as he worked with his tools to screw and unscrew parts of my kitchen sink, and then a rush of water.

"What about your boyfriend?"

I blushed and typed furiously on my keyboard, hoping he would assume I hadn't heard

him.

“What about your boyfriend?” he repeated, his voice loud and sharp. “Is he sad you’re far away?”

*Lie again, lie again, lie again.*

“Not really,” I said in a very matter-of-fact way. “He’s moving in here, too.”

“This apartment?”

His questions were relentless. Each one designed to exacerbate my discomfort, each one granting him power. It was as if he wanted to catch me in a lie.

*Yes, my mom is gone for good.*

*No, my boyfriend isn’t moving in with me. He doesn’t exist.*

I glanced around my apartment with its various hues of pink and purple. Magenta pillowcases with gold tassels. Floral oven mitts hanging artfully on the wall above the stove.

“No,” irritation crept into my voice, “not this apartment. But the same complex.” I stared up at him, angry.

“Oh, that’s nice,” he said, walking out of the kitchen. “All done here.”

I hopped to my feet, more than ready to kick him out. Plus, I wanted to be on my feet in case I needed to escape. I kept imagining him knocking me out with a wrench and taking advantage of me. *Stay together, girls.*

“Let me give you my personal number in case you need me again.” He bent down to grab his bag, fumbling with his various screwdrivers and other possible weapons.

“Oh,” I said, my voice stern, “that’s perfectly okay.” I opened the door for him. “I’ll go through the front office.”

I slammed my door behind him, locked it, and called my dad right away. His first

reaction was to move me out of that apartment complex altogether, to which I thought, *Yeah right. Not after all this unpacking I did.*

“Well, we can’t afford that,” I said.

“We can afford anything when it comes to your safety.”

“Thanks, daddy. I mean, his questions were gross, but I don’t think he was actually planning to do anything.” Another lie: I had no idea what he planned to do.

“I don’t care,” my dad barked. “He should never have said any of those things to you. You need to tell the manager the front desk, *immediately.*”

I groaned. It wasn’t enough to be alone, sad, and worried about my safety. My first evening in my new apartment, and I was being ordered to do something by my dad. This wasn’t what I pictured for myself when I imagined my new, quixotic life in Texas. Later that night, I got a phone call from my mom, who wanted me to tell her the whole story even though my dad had clearly filled her in. I could hear him muttering in the background as my mom gasped and sighed.

“How are you doing? Did you tell someone at the front office?” she demanded. “Your father is ordering you a security system right now.”

“Simply safe!” he yelled. “Tell her to check her e-mail.”

“Check your e-mail.”

I checked my e-mail. There was a confirmation order for one SimpliSafe home security system sitting in my inbox. A week later, the security package arrived, and I Facetimed with my dad as I installed the four central pieces: an entry sensor, a motion detector, a keypad, and a base unit. (I received a keychain remote, too.) The first step was to station the base unit close enough to the front door to be able to detect when the door opened and closed. Then he instructed me to

attach the keypad on the wall by the front (and only) door and the entry sensor on the wall across from the keypad. Next, I placed the motion detector on the window that someone would have the easiest time breaking into. (“It has to be *this* window. This way, the alarm will sound and the intruder will be scared off.”)

After installing everything, my dad had me test it out. I pressed the blue button in the left-hand corner.

“ALARM ON: HOME,” said a robotic voice just like Siri’s.

I punched in my four-digit passcode: “ALARM OFF.”

I opened my apartment door: “WARNING: DOOR OR WINDOW OPEN.” The robot-voice boomed throughout my living room.

“Great!” my dad said. “I’m receiving text alerts about all of this on my phone.”

“Well, that seems a little excessive, don’t you think?”

“Lis-Bidees, I’m your dad.” His face beamed with joy. “This will help me sleep at night.”

10.

Dissociation. Mental Disorder. Psychosis. Mental case. Psychotic. Psychopath. Suspicious. Crazy. Fearful. Obsessive. Lamebrain. Schizophrenic. Schizo. Schizy. Certifiable case. Persecution complex. Delusion. Obsession. Insanity. Depression disorder. Manic-depressive. Deranged. Disturbed mind. Madness. Nervous disorder. Lunacy. Sick mind.

These are some of the synonyms I found for “paranoia” on the Internet and in my copy of *Roget’s Thesaurus*. I went to Google to do a simple search, and then I spotted a link for a webpage, [powerthesaurus.org](http://powerthesaurus.org), that claimed to have 130 synonyms for paranoid. 130. What could I do but click on it? After jotting down some of the synonyms in my notes, I returned to my

original search and read Google's definition of paranoia.

What I read surprised me: "A mental condition characterized by delusions of persecution, unwarranted jealousy, or exaggerated self-importance, typically elaborated into an organized system. It may be an aspect of chronic personality disorder, of drug abuse, or of a serious condition such as schizophrenia in which the person loses touch with reality."

I read over the entire definition multiple times. Over it and over it and over it. Apparently this is what it meant to be paranoid. I stared at the list of synonyms I'd made in my notebook. Was I delusional? Jealous beyond reason? Did I have a personality disorder?

Obsessive, check.

Suspicious, check.

Fearful, check.

Exaggerated self-importance, debatable.

11.

Flickers of citric light filtered through the thin branches on each tree. A Kendrick Lamar track bumped in my headphones. A fat squirrel pretended to be invisible on the tree in front of me. I looked at it, its red fur standing out against the white-brown bark, and thought, *Weirdo, I can see you*. Some older couples, smiling and holding hands, walked ahead of me. A young mother in a baseball cap ran past me. She smiled and said hello. I waved and took a soothing breath through my nose.

I had decided to go for a long walk around the river trail near my apartment, having spent most of the weekend indoors writing a paper on Hannah Arendt's *On Violence*. I needed to rest my brain, and I wanted to savor this feeling of being alone on an unseasonably beautiful winter

day. The air, cooler as night approached, felt crisp like a piece of cloth against my skin. The setting sun a tableau of the day's calm completion.

I paused for a minute to admire the watercolor hues of the sky when suddenly something jumped out at me from the riverbank. I screamed. In fact, I almost choked from screaming before I realized it was only a little boy. He cracked up, his shaggy blond hair bouncing freely as he laughed at me.

“What the—” I said. I looked him up and down and noticed his outfit. He wore khaki pants, and there were leaves glued onto his green shirt. He was dressed as a tree. “Oh my god.”

Tree-boy thought it was hilarious. Leaves even shook off, lazily floating to the ground, as he laughed and laughed.

I put my hand on my thumping chest and dramatically exhaled, as if to prove to myself that it was safe to fully relax, and I cracked up, too. I couldn't help it.

“Geez, how many people have you done this to?” I said.

“Just you,” he boasted, “no one else!”

My laughter faded. *Just me.* I looked around the river trail, eyeing all the nearby homes. Did I look like an older sister of his, or maybe a babysitter? Was this prank something he'd do to one of them? Had I not been paying attention? Was I an easy target?

“Why are you doing this?” My tone was light, but I needed to know.

“It's just fun!”

“Well, you really scared me.”

He kept laughing, so damn proud of himself. I wanted to tell him that what he did was pretty cruel and probably shouldn't be repeated, but I didn't know how to. He was maybe nine or ten years old, and I figured that the lesson about respecting women, which I desperately wanted

to teach, would go in one ear and out the other. He continued laughing and I followed the trail back to my car. The evening air no longer felt refreshing. Once I reached my car, I sat down in it and stayed parked for a few minutes. I felt strange, like I'd gotten lucky but also like I wanted to laugh. I called my friend Sara from back home to tell her all about the tree-boy story. She thought it was so hilarious that she put me on speakerphone and made me tell her mom. The three of us laughed. But as I lay in my bed that night, I replayed the event in my head. *I'm more careful than that. I need to be more careful than that.* My everyday-biggest-fear had happened: I'd stopped paying attention for one second, and someone jumped out at me.

What if the innocent tree-boy had been a harmful tree-man?

What are we teaching little boys?

Should I not have laughed?

I tossed and turned in my bed for hours that night.

12.

After the incident with tree-boy, I decided I needed to be more cautious. I certainly *thought* about my safety a lot, but what had I actually done to ensure it? So, I signed into my Amazon account, clicked on the search bar, and typed in, "stun gun." Well, I only typed in "stun g" and a dropdown list of possible search options popped onto my screen:

- stun gun for women
- stun gun flashlight
- stun guns self defense products
- stun gun for self defense
- stun gun baton
- stun gun keychain
- stun gun ring
- stun gun flashlight rechargeable

Of course "stun gun for women" came up first. I selected "stun gun for self defense" and

scrolled down to find the VIPERTEK VTS-880. For only \$9.98 and free, two-day shipping, I could own this hand-held, cell-phone shaped device. I added it to my cart, then I added a pepper spray keychain—one of the items frequently bought with the stun gun.

13.

In his article, “Survival Mastery,” David Dawson weighs the differences between stun guns and tasers. Stun guns, he says, are conducted electrical devices, also known as CEDs. Tasers are considered conducted electrical *weapons*. I had no idea that stun guns *weren't* tasers. They were synonymous to me. As it turns out, they're quite different.

Tasers can strike a person from up to fifteen feet because they launch tiny darts that contain electrodes, which “embed into the skin of the targeted individual.” When a taser-user pulls the trigger, two probes are ejected from the dart-cartridge at a speed of 100 to 180 miles per hour. If you use a taser, says Dawson, you should have reasonable coordination—at least enough to sufficiently aim and fire at the targeted individual. (Also: you'll want to exude robotic composure under pressure because how else will you aim and fire with any success?)

Stun guns don't fire any electrical charges; they don't out shoot anything. Instead, they have metal prongs at the end of them that often resemble claws. Energy passes through the prongs and into they are touching—ideally the skin of an assailant. Stun guns need a high-energy voltage *and* to make contact with the assailant's skin, preferably the neck or face, or else the weapon is rendered useless. (I did not know this when I purchased my stun gun off Amazon. I just knew I felt instantly safer once I added it to my cart.)

Dawson also says that with tasers, there's a chance you'll miss your target: “Conversely, since the use of a stun gun requires close contact with an attacker, a stun gun user runs the risk of

injury just prior to the use of the weapon. What's more, because of the close proximity a stun gun user has to the attacker, it is possible that the attacker can get the stun gun out of the hands of the victim, and in turn, use the weapon on the victim. *"The latter factors need to be considered before purchasing either weapon."*

The whole prong-to-skin scenario Dawson mentions disturbs me. It seems less than ideal for me to have to be *that* close to my attacker in order to stop him. I can't count on myself to stay calm. I can't count on myself to remember that I need to touch my stun gun to his face in the event he attacks me. If he's close enough for me to touch his face, isn't my safety irreparably compromised? Maybe I never saw him coming.

My attacker is always a man. I imagine these situations all the time. I'm on a run. On a walk. Leaving my apartment early in the morning. Leaving my apartment at night. Sitting in my apartment on a sunny afternoon. Climbing into my car after class. I'm at the grocery store, at the movies, the post office, the library. It's the middle of the day; it's just turned to night. It's late at night.

It's in my head, but it's not.

14.

The legality of owning, selling, possessing, and/or carrying a stun gun depends on state and local law. As of January 2017, stun guns are legal in these states without major restrictions:

Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wyoming.

On the political map of the United States, these states are overwhelmingly red, which raises the question of states' political opinions on the right to bear arms.

Stun guns are legal in Connecticut, Indiana, Michigan, Mississippi, North Dakota, and

Wisconsin, but only if you have a concealed weapon permit.

Mostly red states.

Some states allow stun guns in all but certain cities or counties. For example, stun guns are legal in Illinois, except for Chicago; Iowa, except for Crawford County; Maryland, except for Annapolis, Baltimore, and Baltimore County; and Pennsylvania, except Philadelphia.

A mix of red and blue states.

In Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and, Washington, D.C., it is illegal to buy, sell, or possess a stun gun.

All blue states.

I looked into Hawaii's state laws and found that stun guns are categorized as electric guns: "any portable device that is electrically operated to project a missile or electromotive force." All people in Hawaii, even licensed manufacturers, are *restricted* from possessing, offering to sell, selling, holding for sale, giving, lending, or delivering any electric gun. (Basically don't even look at a stun gun if you're in Hawaii.) If you're caught violating one of these restrictions, the electric gun will be "confiscated and disposed of by the chief of police." *Confiscated and disposed of*. I'm intrigued by this gentle language; violence is mentioned only implicitly.

New Jersey Code of Criminal Justice (39-1) states that weapons and devices "readily capable of lethal use or inflicting serious bodily injury" are prohibited. Anyone caught with possession of a stun gun in NJ is guilty of a crime in the fourth degree, which is the least severe—essentially a misdemeanor. If you live in NJ and are caught with a stun gun but have never been convicted before, you won't be arrested. Otherwise you may be indicted. An amendment was made, however, for policemen: the Attorney General can grant legal rights for

law enforcement to possess stun guns. The amendment seems fair considering our trust in the law enforcement to protect us.

In New York City, the law defines stun guns as weapons, like they are devices explicitly used to harm people: “the purpose of which is to stun, render unconscious, or paralyze a person by passing an electric shock to such person.” NYC police officers also have certain rights; they can operate electric dart guns (also known as tasers) “under regular department procedures or guidelines.” So, if a person acts unlawfully, but perhaps not threatening enough to have a gun pulled on him, a police officer can necessarily use his taser.

Each state, and some cities, with their different political beliefs and agendas, seemingly approach stun guns with a similar attitude as they do standard firearms. Generally speaking, if you’re in a state that believes in the citizen’s right to bear arms, then it’s easier to possess a stun gun; if you’re in a state that prefers stricter gun laws, then there are probably stricter stun gun laws in place, too. Yet, this isn’t the case in Chicago, a city notorious for its violence and high crime rates. Illinois is a Democratic stronghold and has some of our country’s toughest gun laws, but it does allow citizens to own stun guns. Illinois is also one of seven states that requires licenses or permits to buy any firearm, one of five states that requires waiting periods for buying any firearm.

Chicago’s gun laws, on the other hand, aren’t as tough as the media makes them out to be. Yes, Chicago has strict gun laws, but not the strictest in the country. The city used to have a gun registry program, dating back to 1968, but that ended in 2013 when the state passed a law allowing people to conceal and carry their weapons. In October 2017, Dahleen Glanton wrote an article for *The Chicago Tribune* addressing some of the city’s issues with gun-related violence. Glanton says, “With 762 people killed last year, no one has to remind us that we have a serious

gun problem. We own it. And we have to do something about it.” Seven hundred and sixty-two deaths—that’s a soul-crushing number. That’s a ton of guns.

I can’t control how or why others would use their stun guns, which I understand is the struggle lawmakers grapple with. The allowance of any weapons is a slippery slope. In the U.S., bearing arms is inherent in a police officer’s job: they are supposed to serve and protect. In theory, it makes sense why lawmakers want to limit civilian weaponry: they don’t want people going around shooting and shocking each other, and yet it still happens, casually, all the time. And because this violence against each other, this flagrant disrespect of someone else’s life, continues, as it will, there’s a part of me—a very self-righteous part of me—that feels angry toward these states that explicitly prohibit stun guns. This anger is problematic: I’m thinking of myself first, a young female walking around the river trail or handling an inappropriate maintenance guy, and I think of the larger problem second, which is that women are too often warned to protect themselves and men are too infrequently castigated for their daily leering and harassing.

I think, again, of Hawaii and its almost complete prohibition of stun guns, the benevolent language of its laws, and something fascinates me: as if Hawaiians earnestly believe that if there are fewer weapons available to the people, then there will be less violence. As if they’re holding out hope in the better parts of human nature, the light and the goodness.

I’m probably a hypocrite because I tell myself I don’t believe in violence, yet I own a stun gun and have many times mentally prepared myself to use it. If someone attacks me, and I shock him and run away to safety, and he still lives, is there seriously a problem there? That’s the other thing I tell myself: that stun guns aren’t lethal, that they’re “better” than guns, and that I’d only use mine if absolutely necessary to defend myself. But I can’t possibly control how others

use their stun guns, or whether they use them as merely weapons of self-defense. I just know that this cultural link between weaponry and protection says something about American culture. And, I find myself wondering if, deep down, we genuinely fear the darkest parts of ourselves will inevitably inflict violence on others, and that only more violence—at least the threat of more, worse, loaded violence—will be the way to truly stop it. Is that what we believe? Is that why *I* bought my stun gun?

Everyday I wake up and hope this will not be the *absolutely necessary* day, the day when my assailant follows me to my parked car, when he gets close enough for me to stun his face or neck. Obsessive. Suspicious. Fearful. Exaggerated self-importance?

In an ideal world, men would stop being creepy and disgusting toward women. We'd all be less disgusting in general. There'd be less violence in Chicago and everywhere else. There'd be no guns of any kind. In an ideal world, I'd take my walks around the river trail unarmed. I'd see a branch sway or hear leaves rustle in the woods, and I'd delight in the noises around me. I'd suspect no one.

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## VITA

Lisa Ann Cromwell was born on January 6, 1994 in Los Gatos, California. She is the daughter of William and Lois Cromwell. In August 1998, the family moved to Cary, North Carolina, which remains their home base. Lisa graduated from Cardinal Gibbons High School in 2012 and attended college at North Carolina State University. She graduated in 2016 with her Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in creative writing. In August 2016, she enrolled in graduate study at Texas Christian University where she will graduate with her Master of Arts in English.

During her first semester at TCU, she worked as an assistant to the then Director of Graduate Studies in English. She was also a member of the recruitment committee for the English graduate program throughout the 2016-2017 academic year. Since January 2017, she has held a Teaching Assistantship with the university.

## ABSTRACT

### BEFORE I THROW IT ALL IN

by Lisa Ann Cromwell, M.A., 2018  
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This creative project, a collection of personal essays, involves discovering the importance of an intersectional perspective to show how privilege is nuanced through lived experience. The central idea, an investigation of privilege and intersectionality, is linked to an exploration of what I refer to as the mundane: everyday aspects of our lives—laundry, exercise, driving to the store—that are so tedious and generic, and perhaps seemingly unworthy of a second look. The goal is to make privilege a more accessible concept to a wide audience by depicting the tangled nature of race, class, and gender through an artful examination of everyday experiences, emotions, and self-doubt. By writing about my own experiences and unconscious biases, I establish a degree of vulnerability that invites people to confront their own conceptions of privilege and to show that we can never truly separate and define aspects of privilege.