

I, INTERSEX: A MEMOIR

by

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Abstract

I, INTERSEX: A MEMOIR details my personal experiences as an intersex person in Canada from the early 2000s to the present day. The attempt of this memoir has been to fill a void in first-person intersex narratives in Canadian literature, to humanize intersex people—who are so often marginalized or stereotyped in socio-political discourse—and to disrupt the notion that biological sex is a binary concept. Living somewhere on the biological spectrum between male and female, my story provides a unique access point to the ongoing public discussion surrounding transgender people, and the mutability and spectra of sex and gender. As well as discussing the objective truth that sex is a spectrum, sexuality and gender expression are also explored for the spectra they are, through the lens of personal experience.

Lay Summary

I, INTERSEX: A MEMOIR, is a memoir manuscript. It describes my teenage years wherein I learned I was intersex, the various treatments I underwent for my condition, and my subsequent life as an intersex adult. Its chapters are first-person accounts and meditations on the many ways my sex and sexuality have affected my life.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my younger self, and to all the others like me.

Thesis Support Paper

I was sixteen years old when I learned I was intersex.

My condition is called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. Estimates put the instance of AIS anywhere from 1 in 20,000 live births, to roughly 1 in 130,000 live births for the rarer form I happen to have. I would never be pregnant. Never have kids. If I wanted to go through the female puberty I'd been raised to understand as my birthright, I would need hormone therapy, doctors, surgeries, and so on.

This revelation came after years of wondering and worrying and stressing about the many small and not-so-small ways that my body didn't seem to line up with the expectations for a young woman's body. Within three months of a proper physical exam, I had a diagnosis, an orchiectomy, and my first dose of estrogen. Though the actual diagnostic process moved quite quickly, the effects of this time of my life left a deep impression on me.

The first time it occurred to me to write my story, I had just moved home from a failed emigration to Australia. For years, I'd been obsessed with the idea of moving to Australia. I had visions in my mind of becoming a surfer, buying a bungalow on the beach and developing an Australian accent.

At twenty-two, I finally made the move. I sold my car (to my parents, who'd bought it for me in the first place), I saved up every cent I could, and I moved with my then-boyfriend to Sydney.

Two months later, I was back home, sleeping on the floor of my little sisters' bedroom with essentially nothing to my name. I hadn't learned to surf, I hadn't found a job, and my accent

was still completely, un-obnoxiously Canadian. This would not be the first time that I was felled by lofty expectations for my life, and it definitely would not be the last.

My mom got me a job working in housekeeping with her at a resort up the road from our childhood home. While many of my classmates had moved on to earn degrees, to get married and start families, to travel the world and begin careers, I was back in my childhood home earning minimum wage scrubbing toilets. To say I felt left behind is an understatement. I was miserable and lost and utterly without a clue as to how I might take control of my life. All day long, I made beds, scrubbed toilets and sweated my way from one discarded beer to another.

One day, as I was wrestling with a king-sized fitted sheet, the thought occurred to me that I didn't actually need money or a degree or a career to get something going in my life that I could be proud of. If I had nothing else, I could at least take creative control of my life. As long as I was lucid and I had access to writing utensils, I could write my story. The thought was so clear, and such a lifesaver. I suddenly felt as if I'd relied on writing my whole life, and I just hadn't realized it.

I started spending my days thinking about my intersex narrative, and all the many ways I might bring to life what was, for me, the most stressful, terrifying, and isolating time of my life, even more so than my current circumstances.

I imagined it first as a thriller.

Sitting at home, night after night without even a cell phone to distract me (this was 2009, and although cell phones weren't half what they are today, I did miss texting), I'd watch movies with my parents. Watching these, I began to see my intersex story like a movie.

I sat down one night and I wrote the sentence "I could still feel him inside of me, and it sickened me." From there, I imagined the story as a sexual assault narrative, where the woman,

traumatized by what appears to be a past sexual assault, gradually loses her grip on reality. She'd be my age, my build, working a meaningless office job in a small town. At first, her life would appear completely normal. Unremarkable. But then, she'd start to lose her emotional equilibrium. Something innocuous would happen at work, and she'd have a meltdown. I pictured her running down a hallway, glancing over her shoulder as if a man were pursuing her, intent on causing some sort of irreparable damage to her person. The story, I imagined, would get more and more convoluted until it was finally revealed that the man she believed to be pursuing her was actually the man *within* her. She'd be intersex, same as me, and her whole life's happiness would be tarnished by the fact that she had a male side to her.

In 2010 I started working reception at a window company in Kelowna. I worked on my manuscript, and I showed some of it to a colleague of mine. He told me my prose was good, but that I was dressing things up too much.

"Just tell me what it was really like for you," he said one night over a beer. "We don't need all this extra stuff. Your story's plenty interesting on its own."

But was it? It was interesting to me, sure, but I'd been there for every snide remark in the middle school hallways, every joke about my flat chest, every stomach-sinking exploration of my eternally pre-pubescent, pain-racked body. I had all those moments lined up end to end in my mind—all the desperate hopes for my body, and all the times they'd been dashed by one thing or another. Would it even be possible to capture all that in a written work?

I abandoned the thriller, and instead tried to write a different kind of novel. This time, I wrote what I hoped was a literary fantasy novel about an invisible person who wakes up one day, naked and alone in the woods, with no memory of how they got there. Their sex was as unclear as their origins. After stumbling into town and discovering that no one could see them, my

protagonist began spending their days hiding out in someone's attic, trying to remember who they were and how they came to be invisible.

This manuscript, I did finish—at least the first draft, anyway.

At the end, the protagonist discovered they were an intersex person who was driven to commit suicide years before, after the relentless taunting of their older sister and the general belief that they would never find their place in the world became too much to bear.

I ended up discarding this novel as well. It felt far too hackneyed and fantastical to capture what it was that I really wanted to say. I wasn't, after all, invisible. I didn't *feel* invisible. In fact, for most of my life, I felt far too visible. I was over six feet tall, flat-chested (during my impressionable, developmental years, anyway), and intersex. Even if I was the only one who knew, I felt obvious. People tend to notice tall women, even if they're only a little above average. It comes up in conversation like red hair or skin colour. So many people I've met have been so unable to contain themselves when they notice my height. "Do you play basketball?" "Do you play volleyball?" These questions have floated up to my ears so many countless times. Not that I'm offended by them. Most times people try to buffer them at least a bit with, "I'm sure you get this all the time, but..." It's not offensive, but it is there. At 6'1", I'm just tall enough to register on most people's radar, and a gimmicky novel about an invisible girl didn't capture how I felt.

One of my favourite movies, *A Single Man*, is based on a short novel by Christopher Isherwood. Both versions follow a gay professor, named George Falconer, through the last day of his life. I saw the movie in 2010, and I loved it so much, I decided to write my story as a novella that would focus on a day in the life of an intersex woman. The novella would touch on

various daily events that were subtly affected by her intersexuality, without delving too explicitly into her diagnosis and teenage years.

I liked the brevity of a novella for two reasons: one, I felt I might actually be able to finish writing and editing a novella versus a longer project, and two, I wasn't sure I had enough content to fill out a whole novel with just one day of material. I wanted to portray the various ways being intersex affected my life (buying clothes that never fit, comparing my body to the bodies of other women around me, constantly being confronted by the fecundity of my peers etc.) while grounding said issues and anxieties in tangible, modern things.

This project, too, fell flat. I tried far too hard to make the piece a subtle, Capital L Literary piece, and I went so far into metaphorical opacity that the piece hardly said or did anything at all. It also completely ignored the emotional journey I'd gone through to become an intersex adult, and I felt that part of the story was too important to omit.

Next, I wrote my story as a lengthy personal essay.

The essay followed my childhood, teen, and adult years, documenting my diagnosis, my subsequent hormone therapy and surgery, and romantic relationships in adulthood.

At around 12,000 words, I sent the essay to a few different magazines. One or two got back to me, saying the subject matter was interesting, but that the essay was either much too long or much too short to effectively deal with the subject matter.

Next, I tried to write a book of poems.

One of the first poems I wrote, called "Erin Brockovich," was published quite quickly. It was about the time my mom and I were watching *Erin Brockovich* together, and she commented on the horror of the woman who'd lost her breasts and uterus to cancer. I was fifteen years old at the time and flat as a board. I hadn't started to menstruate, and I could think of nothing else

besides my fear and hatred towards my body. My mom meant nothing judgmental in her comment; she's one of the least judgmental or hurtful people I know. Sitting there, though, watching a flat-chested woman with no uterus ask Julia Roberts' Brockovich if she's still technically a woman with no breasts and no uterus, prompted a sad little gasp from me, and a lot of reflection.

The poem was published in some small, now-defunct online magazine, and, at the time, I figured I was onto something. But I couldn't get the rest of the story down in poetry. It was far too linear. So much of my anxiety at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen was built upon other anxieties from the myriad little events that took place each day. I simply couldn't wrangle all the unruly moments into poetry—not in any way that would really bring the reader along with me from start to finish, or give me the catharsis I needed.

It might seem obvious that I should have simply written a memoir from the beginning, but there were several reasons I didn't. The first of which being that I was terrified of hurting anyone's feelings. I'd already been nervous enough to publish a poem about an actual exchange with my loving mom. How much higher would the odds of hurting someone close to me be, I wondered, if I were to write the whole thing down as I remembered it?

Secondly, I had hardly read any nonfiction and I didn't know what to do. My first literary loves had all been novels. Novels—to my understanding—were what sold. They were what made lasting impacts. Novels were the source of all meaningful quotations I carried around with me. Novels allowed a writer to tell the truth through a million different lies, and to avoid (at least to a greater extent) hurting anyone's feelings. If I wrote a novelized version of events, and anyone came up to me asking if a certain character was them, I could simply say no.

Additionally, novels were taught in schools, and it was the youth I wanted to reach. The whole point of telling my story (besides finally getting it off my chest and moving on with my life) was to let the other lost, scared, intersex teens of the world know they weren't alone.

And finally, I was terrified of being honest. I didn't know of anyone who was publicly intersex. I was afraid to tell the world that I was intersex, to be unable to hide behind fiction. The only way to do any real, good work, I imagined, was to be as honest as possible about the realities of my body. The thought of sharing so many intimate things with the world left me feeling exposed and powerless. I wouldn't be able to take any of it back, or to pretend I was anything other than what I wrote down.

I clung to the idea of writing my story as a novel. My favourite books were all novels. More importantly, most of my favourite novels were based more or less on versions of their authors: books like *The Catcher in the Rye*, and *The Bell Jar*. If I wrote a novelized version that stuck quite closely to what actually happened, I wouldn't need to remember everything exactly as it happened. No one could catch me in a lie—even an accidental one. I'd heard the story of that guy who wrote *A Million Little Pieces*. I knew what could happen if you fabricated something in a memoir. Even *Angela's Ashes*—one of the few memoirs I actually had read—had been attacked by various people from Frank McCourt's life over supposed inaccuracies in his account. If something as famous and poignant as *Angela's Ashes* could be reduced—in the minds of some, at least—to a few supposed inaccuracies that threw the whole thing into question, then what chance did my story have to be taken seriously? If I wrote it as memoir, I'd be recalling (or trying to recall things) from the most fraught, emotional time of my life. The odds that I'd make a mistake somewhere seemed high.

There was one novel in particular that gave me an idea of what I might do.

I'd been walking down Bernard Avenue in Kelowna a few years earlier when I first saw Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex* sitting in the window of Mosaic Books. The title, of course, leapt out at me as having something to do with people like me. I read the synopsis on the inside cover and could hardly contain my excitement. For the first time in my life, I'd found a book that focused on the experiences of an intersex person. It was all I could do not to jump the gun and tell the cashier that the book was about people like me.

The novel, as it turned out, was a beautifully written epic that followed a Greek family through three generations. It covered plenty of themes like genocide, the American Dream, incest, family lore, belief, sex, gender, and so on. It was a massive, sweeping text, and not at all my story. There were a few things that bothered me—one of which was the implication that the protagonist, Cal(liope) was only intersex because of their incestuous grandparents. Cal's condition—5 Alpha Reductase—was different from mine. I didn't know how accurate the incest requirement was for Cal's condition to manifest, but I wondered how quickly other intersex conditions would become conflated with Cal's once the novel won the Pulitzer, and how quickly people might wonder if I, too, was a child of incest once they learned of my condition. Not that it would be my fault if I was—or, indeed, anyone else's fault to be born in such a manner. But it wasn't my narrative—as Cal's narrative of transitioning from a young girl named Calliope to a man named Cal wasn't my narrative. Once again, I felt unseen.

I sat down at the beginning of my MFA, and I wrote the whole first draft of my novel in three weeks.

By and large, the novel followed my senior year of high school wherein I had a nervous breakdown and dropped out of school. I combined my grade eleven and twelve years for ease of storytelling, and I pretended I'd discovered my intersexuality, dealt with it on a medical level,

broke down, dropped out of school, finished high school via correspondence, then learned to drive and gained back my confidence all in the span of my senior year. It was easier, in terms of storytelling and pacing, to combine the two years into one. I even had some of my grade ten memories shoehorned in there, as well as, of course, the years of suspicion leading to my first visits to the doctor.

The first main problem I encountered was on revision. As it was a novelized version of things, I had plenty of scenes, conversations, and events included that hadn't actually happened. I'd included them to better illustrate the zeitgeist of my high school and of the world, as I experienced it, between 2004 and 2006. Characters were combinations of people I'd known, or fully imagined, and those characters needed arcs of their own to really make sense. The bulk of the story was there—the grand, overarching narrative was solid, as it was all based on what had actually happened—but the other people in the story were terribly flat. Many of them had narratives that popped up once or twice and then were never seen again.

After reading the manuscript through, my supervisor, Michael, had plenty of notes on ways to really flesh out the novel—many of which had to do with altering the family and social dynamics around my protagonist and avatar, Haley. Very quickly, I could see the story becoming something more commercial and fictional than I'd wanted it to be, and it made me deeply unhappy. I'd thought that fictionalizing my story would give me the freedom to be truly honest, but once again, it was turning into something that didn't reflect how things had really happened for me.

My manuscript was close to 100,000 words. It was the longest, most complete thing I'd ever written, and I hated it.

I started reading memoirs.

I'd already read Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love*, Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, of course, and Patti Smith's *Just Kids*, and I'd loved them all. Each one of them had such strong voices and exciting, baffling, engaging narratives. They all felt like Hollywood stories with classic redemption arcs and bildungsroman signposts, but they also felt real and relatable. None of them were particularly similar to my tale, but I felt by the end of each of them that I knew the authors. I knew what they'd been through and what it was that they wanted me to understand about the world and their place within it. I quickly read through Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, Kiese Laymon's *Heavy*, Patricia Lockwood's *Priestdaddy* (easily one of my favourite books I've ever read), *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot* by John Callahan, and several essays by David Sedaris. Each book furthered my understanding of what one could do with creative nonfiction, putting me more at ease about the supposed potential pitfalls of writing from one's life.

I also read Michael's memoir; *My Body is Yours*. Of all the memoirs, this one hit closest to home. It was about a young, queer person in British Columbia in the '90s struggling with substances, with sex, love, and their relationship to their body. It made perfect sense to me. This was a story I could relate to; it was true, it was poetic and beautiful and heartbreaking, and it shed light on my own narrative. It wasn't set up as a thriller or a romance or anything else. It also wasn't a collection of every little thing that had ever happened to Michael. The events were curated and the dialogue represented and arranged in such a way that I felt invited into decades of his life within only a few hundred pages.

This was what I wanted to do. I wanted to write my story from the first time I heard about puberty in school, to the years in which I watched my friends and my sisters start puberty without me, to the diagnosis of my intersexuality, my introduction to estrogen, my orchiectomy,

and my eventual inclusion in the dating world. There was just so much there that I couldn't get past—so many fears and worries I'd lived with for years, and for which I had no role models.

The best thing I could do, I decided, was write it all down as it happened and put it out in the world for someone else to find. The question was, how would I get all the major events down, while also exploring some of the major ways that intersexuality has affected my life in adulthood? There are plenty of arenas beyond basic puberty in which sex and gender affect us: the literature we consume, the religions we follow (or don't), the places we live and the jobs we take. All of it is wrapped up together with our bodies and our understanding of them, and I couldn't imagine how I was going to fit it all in, alongside the blow-by-blow narrative I felt I needed to tell.

The memoir I eventually wrote, and that comprises my thesis, was originally divided into two parts. The first part was a close narrative of my life from the age of fourteen to the winter after my sixteenth birthday when I finally learned I was intersex. It was largely narrative in structure, with little in the way of commentary. Largely, I just wanted to tell the story as it happened, with bits of opinion and insight peppered throughout.

The second part was comprised of narratives from my young adult life to the present—essays detailing specific events that have happened to me within the arenas of sex and gender, as well as meditations on aspects of my life that have been affected.

Michael read that version of the thesis and suggested I combine the two books into one. Though the timeline bounces around between some of the chapters, the book, as a whole, feels much more cohesive in its current form.

The memoir format for my story came very naturally to me, once I stopped trying to sugarcoat or hide from the details of my body and my story. It took me only a few weeks to write

the whole first draft, and about the same length of time to work through it again after some notes from Michael.

My sincerest hopes for this book are twofold:

One, I hope to finally be free of the overwhelming weight of my story, and to move on creatively, mentally, socially, and in pretty much every other way one might expect.

Two, I want this book to stand as a resource for other intersex people who have never seen their bodies and their lives reflected in any respectful, relatable way. I want to leave a record for people who have hurt intersex people, or who have never really interacted with them. Everyone has a gender identity and a sex, and I want people to understand that this is how those areas of life have unfolded for me. My story is unique, but not so unique that roughly two percent of the population won't be able to relate to it on a personal level. For the rest of the population—for the people grappling with what it means to be male or female, trans or intersex or something else entirely—I hope this book serves as a reminder that these things are spectrums. They're social constructs. By and large, they are stories we tell ourselves, stories we tell our children. I'm not trying to rewrite anyone's narrative by sharing my story. I'm simply pointing out that people like me have been here as long as there have been people, and it's time we had a chapter in the sex and gender canon.

Chapter 1—Right on the Line

As a solstice baby, my birthday falls right on the line between spring and summer. I was born just before ten at night on June 20th, and according to most calendars, I am a Gemini by only two hours. Two *western* hours, no less! One of the westernmost, sun-settiest time zones in the world, and only a two-hour margin. You might say that from the very first breath I took in this world, I was destined to live life in the margins.

You might also say I was simply born on June 20th, and the days and months of the year (indeed, the years themselves) are all constructs we invented and agree to perpetuate. Regardless of whether one would argue I'm a Cancer or a Gemini, though, I've known since childhood that I was a Gemini. I don't put any stock in the zodiac calendar, of course; I don't think the position of the planets at the time of your birth has anything whatsoever to do with who you are as a person. If it did, everyone born on June 20th, say, would be exactly the same, and rest assured, Nicole Kidman, John Goodman, Anne Murray and I are all very different people. If we strip away the assumptions surrounding date of birth, though, how quickly might other assumptions be stripped away as well?

At any rate, I've always known I was a Gemini. People ask, and I've always had an answer. It doesn't matter if the answer is basically meaningless. It makes me happy, and it's always right there on my tongue.

When I was younger, I dated a guy who got a tattoo. I hated tattoos, and he knew that, but we had non-refundable tickets booked to Australia, and I didn't want to move to another country with someone I thought to be a bit of a hick. After all, only hicks got huge flaming snake tattoos on their skinny white arms, yes? I can't think now why I thought that (as is so common with these things) but I thought it, and I didn't want to despise him. So, I got a tattoo of my own. If you can't beat 'em, and so on.

The tattoo artist was a friend of ours—or, more specifically, the brand-new husband of a friend of ours—and we were in their new apartment in Kamloops when all the inking took place. I had plenty of time to Google tattoo ideas, and plenty of second-hand couches to sit on while I did it. How could I summarize my whole self, though, in a single image? This was likely the only tattoo I would ever get, and I needed it to count. But what the hell did I care about enough that I would want it visible on my body every day for the rest of my life? I didn't subscribe to a religious creed anymore, having just recently left the Christian church for the last time, and I didn't particularly love any band or lyric or phrase with the kind of timeless ardour that might warrant a lifetime stamp. I couldn't think of anything that would follow me through life besides my horoscope. So what if horoscopes were stupid and anyone who placed their faith in them could only view the world in an incredibly limited anthropocentric way? They were fun, and to get one tattooed on you held the potential for a fun, meta silliness that appealed to me. If I got my horoscope tattooed on me, I might appear to the casual observer as just another white girl with her astrological symbol tattooed on her wrist (because where else??). But deep down, I would know that I was really poking fun at girls who did that kind of thing. So committed would I be to the slight that I would actually go so far as to tattoo a joke on my arm, plain as day for anyone to see and judge me. That kind of dedication took originality. Besides, my symbol being

what it was, it could signify to me, on an only slightly ironic wavelength, the marriage between male and female that existed within my intersex body. By tattooing the Gemini twins on myself, I would be nodding to the dually gendered personalities within me. It would be a celebration of my intersex self, wrapped up in an ironically skin deep, blatantly ignorant symbol. The layers of meaning were almost too much.

The tattoo, unfortunately, ended up being a dramatically swishy thing in a purplish hue that my skin rejected. A couple months later, and I was back in the chair, getting my friend's new husband to touch up the colour. And then again after I got back from Australia. Nothing seemed to work. No amount of shading could make it stick. It would start out vibrant and crisp, and then within a week or two, the colour would start to fade, the lines would blur and flake, and I'd be right back where I started. Eventually, years later, I covered it up with a rather aggressively purple-black flower that looked and felt like a bruise, and which, for the past three years, I have spent hundreds of dollars to remove. It's now a faded, mottled blob that looks a bit like two or three rather uninspired children tried to draw different pictures on the same three-by-three scrap of freckled paper. It's not a flower, not a Gemini and not attractive. It's nothing, really, but a scrapbook of the different versions of myself that once bubbled to the surface long enough to cause some damage.

Chapter 2—Origins

Me—What can you remember about my personality in those years—age 14/15/16, roughly 2001-2004? What was my confidence like? My mood? My loves and hates?

Ari—Considering we were always arguing and fighting for the majority of the time, I would say that in my opinion, your mood and mine were pretty negative. We didn't have the best relationship at the time, but from what I noticed you seemed irritable and anxious and you didn't seem to have the confidence in yourself and your body that you seem to have now. I remember how it seemed to me that you always seemed to get an idea in your head and...obsess about it until you decided you wanted something else, like having fish, or a hamster, or having the right car, or having to have the perfect little piece of jewelry, like every little thing had to be chosen perfectly as if it had to completely define you. As for things that you loved, you always loved being outdoors and exploring and swimming. In typical Ferguson fashion, you hated when something would go wrong and ruin your plans, or something didn't work out how you planned it would, understandably so.

My family and I moved to Fintry when I was seven years old. The house we bought was a little two-bedroom fixer-upper roughly forty minutes north of Kelowna, along the infamously treacherous Westside Road. With my dad being the only breadwinner in the family, we didn't have much money, and we were lucky to find such an affordable place. My mom had chosen to stay home to raise my two sisters and I, though, and whatever we lacked in money, we never lacked in love and attention.

In the single bedroom reserved for my sisters and I, we shared a metal bunk bed with a single mattress on top and a double on the bottom. As the eldest of the three, I got the top bunk, while my sisters, Brittany and Ariana (six and four years old at the time) shared the bottom bunk.

Being as small and as close-knit as we were, we didn't mind sharing our bedroom. At night, we'd sing songs together until Dad got annoyed enough to stomp down the hallway and tell us to go to sleep. We'd play games with the bunk bed, hanging blankets from the bars beneath the top bunk to make separate rooms for us and our stuffed animals. We'd tip over our little Formica table and chairs and build a whole world for our teddy bears. For years, we had little homes for toys to live in our book case. We made them by arranging books of different sizes, so their spines would form little negative spaces in which to hide our various Puppy in my Pocket figurines. We were always together, the three of us, yet always trying to carve out our own little spaces.

Our backyard was a rambling hill full of Pine trees, Maple trees, Wild Rose, and Oregon Grape. In the thickets and trees and behind the retaining walls my dad built by hand, my sisters and I would make forts out of pilfered wood scraps, carpet ends, and rusty nails collected from various abandoned local projects. My dad built us a proper fort at one point out of shipping pallets he collected from local businesses and leftover shingles from when we redid the roof of our house. It was a gorgeous little playhouse, but my sisters and I still preferred to make our own, no matter how inferior.

The name "Fintry" refers to a larger area than just my parents' neighbourhood, but the part we grew up in was the delta that sits on Okanagan Lake. The delta is divided roughly in half by Shorts Creek, with the residential side being on the south side, and the provincial campground comprising the north. Dad always liked to joke that we moved to Fintry to get away from the

city, and the very month we signed the mortgage, half the delta was signed over to the government to become a campground.

With our house so small and the woods so vast, my sisters and I spent most of our childhood days wandering the delta and the woods behind us. We explored the canyon that houses the waterfall which feeds into Shorts Creek, the old heritage barns on the campground side that once belonged to James Cameron Dunwaters, an old Scottish lord who owned and named Fintry back in the 19th century, and the kilometre or so of shoreline that wraps around the delta. Every glade and every grove of the delta is familiar and beloved to us to this day.

Our house sits right at the base of the mountain, right on the line between the hill and the delta itself. It's got chocolate-brown walls and off-white trim. In the summer, it looks like a getaway cabin, and in the winter, it looks like a gingerbread house. It couldn't be quaintier if it tried.

Living forty minutes from town, my sisters and I didn't get to do much in the way of extra-curriculars. With an hour and a half round trip, our mom wasn't a fan of driving anywhere unnecessary. Dad was always too exhausted after working all day as a mechanic, so my sisters' and my interaction with "town" was pretty much limited to school and the occasional family get-together. We rode the bus to school five days a week, and sometimes, on Sundays, the five of us would pile into Mom's '81 Tercel and head to Kelowna to visit our grandparents. Beyond that, the majority of our social interactions took place at recess, or with each other.

Without much money or access to the city, my sisters and I learned to make do with what we had. We whittled, we hiked, we swam and rode crazy carpets and bikes and scooters and rollerblades over every stretch of the delta. We told stories and made toys from beads and yarn,

and yes, I know, this sounds like we grew up in a religious community in the 1950s. But that was really how it was. We made our own fun without the need for other people or toys or teams or anything else beyond our means.

My favourite homemade toys were the people we made out of beads. We took ten oblong beads and a handful of others and we made little marionettes we simply called “Bead People.” The bead people became a hot commodity on the playground at school, and in no time short, we had a whole circle of friends who bought and played with bead people alongside us. Once, in grade seven, I made a gigantic one out of wooden beads I whittled and drilled and sanded myself. I crafted it into a marionette, dubbed it “Theseus” and put on a puppet show depicting “Theseus and the Minotaur” for a school project.

The bead people didn’t allow for much conversion when it came to gender, but we didn’t mind. The male bead people had three-cornered hats, and the females had bows. Other than that, they were identical.

Besides bead people, my favourite toys were army men. I had an air trooper I called Englebert who I found in a field across from our house, and a small G.I. Joe I called Cyril. Together with my action figure version of Dr. Alan Grant from *Jurassic Park*, I had a full harem of small plastic bodies to make clothes and houses and stories for.

It may stray into cliché to mention I never played with dolls, but I never did. My mom called me a tomboy for as long as I can remember, owing to my propensity for playing in the mud, wearing jeans, and hammering things together. I hated dresses, lace, makeup, and all things associated with hyper-femininity. To me, girls were passive observers, where boys were doers. Short hair and sturdy jeans meant that you could run and play in any kind of weather without fear

of anything too precious getting sullied. The girls at my school strolled the playground, engaging in Machiavellian dramas I didn't understand, or have any desire to. The boys played in the fields, making forts and wrestling and laughing. At least, it looked that way to me. It wasn't hard to choose which side to play with.

Though four years spanned between myself and my youngest sister, we were all quite similar in height and appearance right up to the time I went off to middle school. Everywhere we went, people remarked on the three of us together. We were always laughing and playing together, and people took notice.

"How lucky you are," people (mostly old ladies) would say to Mom whenever we were out and about. "Three little girls, all so close in age. And they get along so well! Boy, you don't see that much anymore."

Mom would blush and thank them for their kind words, and my heart would swell. "The Three Little Girly-Goos," my aunt Gloria always called us, setting us up at the kids' table for every major holiday dinner. No one ever remarked upon my little cousins, Ryan and Jeremy, except to say how they couldn't understand how two little boys could create so much commotion, or how they could fight so much without crying.

"I'm so happy I had girls," my mom would say. "Girls mature so much faster than boys."

In addition to being a girl, I was also the oldest of three, which meant—according to my mom—that I should set an example for my younger sisters. This belief extended from small childhood things like not shrieking in public to larger, more adult things down the road like dating good,

solid men, holding down a job, finding a career and not getting tripped up by drink, drugs, atheism, hopelessness etc. My parents were never the type to demand outright that my sisters and I live up to any specific standards. There were no expectations that we'd become doctors or lawyers or make a certain amount of money per year. There was no financial or appearance-based standard to which we were expected to rise. The only expectations we did have were what not to do: don't yell, don't swear, don't do drugs, don't stay out late, don't fuss, don't break the law, don't break the rules, and so on. For the most part, not doing things came naturally to me, so I didn't much mind.

In school, my teachers always said I was a delight to have in class. Every report card commended me for being on task, polite, and capable. I liked doing my schoolwork. I liked having clear expectations and lines and borders to stay within. There were plenty of things that good, mature young girls just didn't do, and I was happy not to do them.

When I was eight years old, a boy named Adam approached me one day on the playground. Without any introduction or preamble of any kind, he strolled up behind me and said "boy or girl."

I turned to him, confused. Was that a question or a statement? Was he even talking to me? I took in his wide-set eyes, his pin-straight brown hair, and I said, "What?"

"Are you a boy or a girl?" he asked.

I'd never been asked such a thing before. I'd never even considered it might be something worth asking. Of course, I was a girl. Couldn't he tell? My hair might have been quite

short and wavy, but wasn't it obvious I was a girl? If someone had come up to me and asked me if I was alive or dead, I could hardly have been more confused.

"I'm a girl," I said, blushing furiously. Something about having to say it out loud felt so absurd, I couldn't help asking myself if I was actually right.

Adam laughed and walked off, leaving me to try and sort through what had just happened. Ever the mature young lady, I tried to shrug it off. People made mistakes about all kinds of things. Maybe Adam had simply made a mistake.

The next day, though, trudging over one of the many grassy hills that spilled from the school down to the sports fields, I heard the same voice come up behind me.

"Hey boy-or-girl." This time, it sounded much more like a name than a question.

I turned to Adam, desperate for some sort of cutting remark to fire back at him with. But nothing came to mind. At eight years old, witty remarks were not really my strong suit. All I could do was blush and try not to cry.

A week or two later, I was standing in the line for my bus. I'd run as hard as I could for the lineup once the bell rang, and I was quite close to the front.

It was blindingly sunny out, and everyone was excited. Summer was right around the corner and the energy was up.

The buses were just climbing the hill towards us when a shadow fell across my face. A hand landed on my shoulder, turning me towards a much bigger kid whose face I couldn't make out.

"Ew, you're ugly," the kid said, "go to the back of the line."

I couldn't tell if it was Adam or someone else, with the sun casting such a shadow over their face, but I couldn't think of anything to say. I'd never been told I was ugly before. It wasn't until I'd relinquished my place and gone to the end of the line that the tears started to flow.

Mom could tell I was upset as soon as I stepped through the door.

"What happened?" she asked, coming over to me from the kitchen.

My mouth twisted and I started to sob as I struggled to get the words out. No sooner had I finished reiterating the tale than she dropped to her knee and pulled me in tight to her chest.

"You're not ugly in the least," she said, pulling my head beneath her chin. "Some people are just mean. Don't you listen to them for a second. You're a beautiful girl, and don't let anyone tell you differently."

I nodded, my head scraping against her chin. I tried to believe her.

Chapter 3—Hair

As children growing up in the '90s, when volume and wave and chaos were mainstays of the DIY hairstyle, my sisters' and my naturally wavy hair blended right in. With the big, bouffant, au naturel 'dos on TV, my sisters and I could do almost anything to our hair—blow dry, half dry, or leave it to figure itself out—and hold our poofy heads high. Of course, we were also children in the '90s, and utterly unconcerned by our physical appearances, but still. We fit, and it was good.

By the 2000s, when I was in middle school, straight hair had become the standard. From the rabble of unkempt, natural heads that had always populated the hallways of my elementary school, suddenly there were nothing but bangless, bleach-blonde, soft, straight 'dos. The really well-to-do girls had highlights from the expensive salons my family never went to. I'd hear them talking about how much it cost, how long it took, and how unhappy they were with what they'd gotten. In the music videos and movies, every female lead had perfectly straight, soft hair. Not a single hint of my own semi-wavy, semi-curly hair graced the silver screen. Every head looked polished and smooth in a way that mine never had.

When it rained, my hair frizzed. When someone dumped a water bottle out on a sidewalk six kilometres away, my hair frizzed. Any effort in P.E. and my hair turned into a cloud of waves and chaos. Not knowing what else to do with hair besides running a brush through it, I blow-dried and brushed and wondered aloud to my mom and my sisters why my hair didn't look like the other girls' hair.

I heard girls talking about their straighteners—obscure devices with names like Paul Mitchell and Chi—and I begged my mom to get me one. I knew the proper straighteners were

expensive (that's how you knew they were good) and we didn't have the money for such things, but I also knew it wasn't an option. I had to be part of the world, and to exist in the world meant making myself palatable to those around me. The only acceptable hairstyle was pin-straight and soft. I didn't understand that my hair was simply wavy hair. All I could see was how badly it was failing at being straight.

One day after a particularly grueling grocery shop, Mom came home with a straightener from Superstore. It didn't have a name that I recognized—SuperHair or something—and it needed water to run. It was electric, like anything else, but it also had to make steam to properly heat up the plates.

Naturally, any amount of steam anywhere near my hair only made it frizzier, which rendered the straightener only half as effective as it could have been. For every tightly-fisted pass through my hair, the steam fought hard against whatever progress I might have made. The longer I worked, the frizzier my hair got.

We only had the one mirror between my two sisters and I, so I couldn't see the back of my head. I asked my sisters how things looked, and they both said "pretty good."

"Well no, is it good or not good?" I asked. "Like, is it actually straight or not?"

"I dunno," Ari said, lifting the upper layer of hair and letting it fall back down. "It's still kinda wavy underneath, I guess. It's hard to say. Kinda everywhere."

In 2004, *Wicker Park* came out. We rented it as a family, and I fell absolutely in love with Josh Hartnett, and with the hair on his lady love. Lisa (Diane Kruger)—the object of Hartnett’s character Matthew’s affection—had wavy hair, and she was beautiful. To Matthew, she was so beautiful, he actually spent a good amount of time stalking her across Chicago before they finally went out on a date. I was sixteen years old, and it was the first time in my teenage memory that I had ever seen a girl with wavy hair portrayed as the object of pure desire.

My sisters and I bought a DVD of the movie (the third or fourth in our shared collection) and watched it again and again, analyzing Lisa’s hair over and over, scene to scene, to see if we could detect whether her hair was naturally wavy or professionally curled. Sometimes, the waves looked uneven in that way that told us her body had simply pumped them out in its own natural, chaotic fashion. It looked like the kind of hair that could easily frizz in the slightest moisture, and which certainly wouldn’t hold up against all the twirling and dancing Lisa was always engaged in. And sometimes, the waves were too perfect and bouncy to be anything but fake. Nothing natural had that much spring and shine. Plus, *Wicker Park* was a big Hollywood production—would they really trust the sex appeal of their female lead to something as whimsical as wavy hair?

“People are always saying they wish they had wavy hair, but what they mean is *waved* hair,” I declared one day. Our own mother, for instance, was one of the poor unfortunates constantly complaining about their “flat, lifeless hair” (which really just translates to “I can wash and go, and no, the weather has no bearing on whether I’ll look like I spent last night in the yard.”) “I’d have killed to have hair like yours,” she liked to say whenever one of us was lamenting the snarled chaos sprouting from our scalps. “People just always want what they can’t have.”

To be fair, every morning of my childhood years was indeed backgrounded by the white triangle of my mom's elbow poking out of the open bathroom door as she forced her stick-straight, brunette hair into dyed blonde curls. Luscious curls had been the norm in her impressionable years, and so it made sense she'd hate the convenience of her naturally soft, sorted hair. Even so, hers was a lunatic desire to me. I couldn't help it if people wrongly thought they wanted curls and waves for a brief moment in recent history. Straight hair was not only convenient, but orderly, and anyone who said otherwise was simply covetous at best and ignorant at worst.

Now in my 30s, I still haven't sorted it out. I let my hair grow out and be wavy, and I look like Jesus. I cut it short and I look like a snowboarder boy, or Jim from *The Office*. Even letting it be wavy, it's not the right kind of wavy you see on TV. Rather than Katherine Heigl's damp, noodly waves when she gets caught in the rain with James Marsden in *27 Dresses*, it's the flipped-up, under-a-baseball-cap-all-day bullshit of a frat boy.

That said, it is my hair, and how can you blame hair for being what it is? It can't try and fail to be straight or curly. It's hair. It's goddamn hair. It's not even alive. Every part of it that's visible is already dead. If you hate it—if you spend every morning wrestling it into a shape it wasn't intended for—you're only wrestling a ghost. As Lady Macbeth said, "What's done is done." She was talking about murder, but what's a life spent fighting one's own hair besides one long, slow murder?

Chapter 4—The First Lesson

Me—What was the first time you thought something might be off about me and my body? What made you suspicious?

Britt—I'd say the first time I considered that something may be "off" was when I got my first period and you responded with stress and sadness. I remember writing in my Spice Girls diary that I thought you may be upset with me. I felt concerned that you hadn't gotten yours yet, but I also didn't feel like it was anything to be concerned about because I felt like I was getting my period too early and you would probably get yours at the exact right time. I also remember this one time perhaps a year later that I didn't know how to use a tampon and therefore had a devastating period mishap at school. When I got home, I cried to Mom about it, and then when I was in the bathroom cleaning up the carnage, I heard Mom saying to you in the kitchen that it had been a tough day for me and you said something like, "Oh yeah, it must be really hard for HER," and then I realized that you still hadn't gotten your period and this caused further and more real concern.

It was the spring of 2000, and everything felt at ease. The hysteria around Y2K had resulted in nothing, and all our school projects on the subject had been relegated to the recycling bins. The snow was melting, the birds were out, and I was rounding the bend of my last year as an

elementary school student. In only a few short months, I'd be at the brand-new middle school just up the road. I had plenty of friends and Pokémon cards, and very little to worry about.

The buzz around Hudson Road Elementary School one particular day in May was that an important, secretive class was going to happen that afternoon—something *so* secret and so important that the boys and girls had to be divided and put in separate classrooms. What could this possibly be about? We all wondered aloud. Whatever it was, a few of the kids from the more religious families were conspicuously absent.

Huddled outside the portables, near the base of the mountain where the clean lines of our school grounds ended and the brambly line of the woods began, we all shared our suspicions. I heard the word 'periods' more than once, but I didn't think much of it. It was a word I'd heard many times before, in many different contexts, and it didn't excite much curiosity. Someone said 'penis' in a grown-up, professional voice, and a few of us giggled. Someone else added that the boys would be *learning* about their penises, and this did spark my curiosity. What could you possibly have to learn about a body part you'd had all your life?

The door to our usual grade six portable opened, and a woman stuck her head out. She had greying reddish hair in a faded perm, and she was wearing a beige women's suit. Her face was pale and lined and tired-looking, like this was her fifth lesson that day and she could use a cup of coffee.

We all piled inside the portable and sat at different desks than we usually did. There was a feeling in the air of occasion and excitement, like when the classes would all get together before a field trip, or for a cultural assembly.

The woman we didn't know stepped to the front of the room, where two desks had been pushed together to make a large enough space for all the things she'd brought. There were a couple large cardboard boxes, the overhead projector, and a couple glasses of water. Standing behind the desks, the woman looked out at us, flashed us a tired smile, and said, "Well, I guess we'd better get started. Welcome, grade-six girls. If you're here today, it's because your parents or guardians gave you permission to take a sexual education, or sex-ed, seminar."

There was a buzz of excited chatter that went around the room as the woman took a few things from one of the boxes and laid them on the table. She turned to the chalkboard behind her and wrote the word 'puberty' in clumsy cursive.

"Can everyone take out some paper and something to write with, and write this word down?"

I dug around in my backpack and pulled out a pinkish Hilroy notebook, and a pencil with the eraser chewed into a thin wedge. I turned to a fresh page and scribbled 'puberty' at the top. I looked around at some of the other girls in class and noticed that, as usual, they were highlighting their writing with various pencil crayons and markers. Some were adding hearts, flowers, and other doodles. Some had vines and swirly lines creeping around their margins and under the words.

"It doesn't have to be pretty," the woman said. "You just need to get this down. Now, I won't put any of you on the spot if you don't feel comfortable talking. I know this topic can be a little embarrassing, a little too private for the classroom, but I want you all to understand that it's nothing to be ashamed about. Okay? Everyone goes through puberty in some form or another. It's nothing you should have to feel worried about discussing. Puberty is just the perfectly

normal process by which the human body transforms from a child's body, which can't reproduce, into an adult's body, which can. It's perfectly normal and healthy and nothing to be afraid of."

She walked over to the bank of light switches and turned out the lights. The classroom plunged into darkness, until a few girls in the back row wrenched the curtains open so enough light could come in for us to still write in our notebooks.

"Thanks, ladies," the woman said as she flicked on the overhead projector.

An image popped up on the chalkboard. I couldn't make out what it was at first, as the overhead wasn't calibrated right and the image was partially on the wall, but I could see it was something that looked more or less like a bighorn sheep. There was a longish part in the middle, and two big horn-shaped things that poked out of the top and curled around to the sides. The woman wrestled with the screen a moment, but she eventually got it to stay in place. Another slight adjustment to the overhead, and I could see the title above the diagram.

"The Female Reproductive System"

"Okay, so, lots to get through here so let's just dive in."

She started going through the various parts, pointing to each and describing their function as she went: ovaries, Fallopian tubes, uterus, vaginal canal. There were a few giggles, a few hushed whispers, but not many. It was fascinating to think that all of those things existed inside of us; that they'd been there since birth, just waiting to become activated.

"I'm guessing you're all around twelve years old? Some of you are eleven or even thirteen? So, that means that in the next couple of years—and for some of you, this will have

already started—but for most of you, in the next couple of years, you’ll start to menstruate. Now, menstruation is what happens when the lining of the uterus here,” she indicated the interior edge of the uterus with the end of a pencil, “starts to thicken in anticipation of a pregnancy. Each month, an egg is produced by one of the ovaries, it travels up the Fallopian tube and down into the uterus. While it’s there, if it becomes fertilised, then it will attach itself to the wall of the uterus and start to grow into a baby. If it doesn’t become attached, the uterus will shed its extra lining, and you will menstruate, which is basically just when blood is expelled through the vaginal opening.”

I stared at the diagram, wondering how accurate it was. Were all those shapes and organs really inside of me my whole life, just waiting to kick in and start doing their thing? Did they look like the drawing, or were they just a bloody jumble?

The woman turned off the projector a few minutes later and wheeled a TV cart up to the front of the class. There was some more fumbling around with that, and then we watched a video from the 80s about a girl who got her first period and didn’t know what to do about it. Bursting into the kitchen, tears streaming down her face, she confessed to her mother through poorly acted sobs that she’d found blood in her underwear, and she worried she might be dying.

As it just so happened, her mom had just returned from the supermarket, so she had several No Name products on hand with which to instruct her daughter on her changing body.

Pads were brought out, and their application discussed and modeled using a pair of freshly purchased panties. Tampons were also brought out and discussed, though there was no visual accompaniment in the video.

At this point, our instructor paused the video and turned the lights back on. From one of the boxes she'd brought, she removed three smaller boxes with names like Kotex and Tampax printed on them, and placed them on the desks beside the glasses of water. Then she started talking about how to insert them into a body, and which kind you should use for which kind of flow. She popped a tampon from each box into the glasses, and we watched as they bloomed like broken bulrushes.

“Tampons can be very convenient, but you never want to keep them in for too long,” she said. “There’s a condition you can develop called Toxic Shock Syndrome from leaving in a tampon too long, and it can very quickly kill you, if you’re not careful.”

I was shocked. How could something as magical and exciting as menstruation actually kill you if it wasn’t handled right?

The woman opened up the floor for questions. Amazingly, a couple girls put up their hands. One of them asked if there were any signs to look out for when menstruation was about to start for us.

“Well, usually the various parts of puberty happen more or less at the same time, so you should start to see some pubic hair, some axillary, or armpit hair, and definitely some breast growth. It likely won’t all happen overnight, so you’ll know it’s coming, but unfortunately there’s no foolproof way to know you’re about to menstruate, which is why it’s usually a good idea to always keep a pad or a tampon or two in your backpack, just in case. A lot of women do report some cramping in the abdominal area, though, some mood swings, some cravings, tiredness, that sort of thing, so that might also help you know when it’s on its way.”

“It sounds so messy,” one girl said.

The woman chuckled. “Yes, becoming a woman can be a messy thing,” she said in a very TV, aww-shucks-gee kind of way. “But that’s just the way it is. Nothing worth doing is ever easy.”

The woman pushed the TV aside for a moment and placed another image on the overhead projector. This time, it was a side view of a woman’s breast. There were several sections of the breast which were labeled with their various scientific names.

“Now, as I mentioned, as you move through puberty, you will start to develop breast buds. Again, some of you have likely already experienced some tenderness, maybe a little puffiness around the nipple, a little pain if you bump up against something, and I just want to let you know that’s totally normal.”

She pointed to the milk ducts on the diagram.

“Now, as these ducts start to develop, you might even feel some lumps from time to time. These lumps will appear and disappear and shift in size and location, and you shouldn’t worry about them. Lumps really only become an issue down the road when you’re older, and even then, they’re usually nothing to worry about.”

I jotted down ‘lumps’ ‘puffiness’ ‘pain’ and ‘all okay unless old.’

She switched back to the TV, and we watched an episode of *Degrassi*. The episode focused on a girl named Melanie who was worried she was flat-chested. She was on the swim team, and she was worried everyone could see how flat she was whenever she was in a bathing suit. At one point, she was walking out to the pool and this guy yelled at her that she was “so flat the walls are jealous,” and someone threw him in the pool to make her feel better. Her chest did

look just as pre-pubescent as mine, but then she was young and I was young, so it was probably just a timing thing.

I looked around at the other girls in my class, and I was amazed to see that some of them were actually pretty developed already. It was weird that I'd never noticed before, especially given that some of them clearly had bras outlined against their shirts, and that those bras held a lot more than just breast buds. Earlier that week we'd played a huge game of tag on the playground where everyone in grade six joined in, and it was exactly like every other grade we'd ever been in—just a bunch of kids playing tag. Now, some of the girls in my class looked like women. If they'd already started their periods, did that *make* them women? It was strange to already feel behind on something I'd just learned about, but nevertheless, I could hardly contain my excitement. It was almost as good as the Rapture I'd been hearing about so much since my friend, Cassandra, had started reading the *Left Behind* series.

According to the books, one day, not far from now, I'd be living my life, minding my own business, and suddenly I'd disappear from the face of the Earth. Me, and all the other Christians. Maybe menstruation was like that. Maybe I'd just be living my life and suddenly something would start to feel differently. Maybe it would start with a little bit of a cramp that I normally would have shrugged off as a stomach ache. Maybe I'd wake up one morning to find that I'd started bleeding in the night. Maybe I'd wake up tomorrow with puffy little breast buds that fought to be seen no matter how hard I smoothed my shirt down over my chest.

I had so much time for it all to begin, and that should have put me at ease. But it bothered me that some girls around me were already on their way. How was it that their bodies had heard the gun go off so much earlier than mine had?

On the bus ride home, I tried not to worry about it. I tried to tell myself that all of it—the period, the breasts, and all the other wonderful secret initiations into womanhood that happened in the middle of the night—would happen for me. But I wanted it all so badly, I just couldn't imagine it happening. Just like the Rapture, or like the trip to Disneyland that had never manifested for my sisters and I. Every year we'd asked to go, and every year we were given an answer like, "I don't know where we'd find the money, but we'll see." Never quite a no, and always just enough hope to be miserable when it didn't happen.

I had a friend, Carrie, who was a year younger than me. One day, a year or so after the Sex Ed class, she and I were walking down the hill where our bus had dropped us off, and she brought up periods.

"Have you gotten yours yet?" she asked. The question felt like a trap, but how could I lie? She'd asked me what it was like, and I had to either tell the truth, or come up with a whole story on the spot.

"No," I said.

"We should only tell each other when we get ours," she said.

Her being a whole year—a whole grade—younger than me, I felt certain mine would come before hers. Ever since learning about periods and puberty and all that, there'd been little else on my mind. Every morning was another chance for something mysterious and wonderful to have happened in the night, and every day was another disappointment.

I agreed, feeling certain it would be me to surprise her with the exciting news before long, and not the other way around.

Every day after school, I'd watch *Lizzie McGuire* with my sisters, and try to track how quickly Lizzie's boobs were growing. Kate, Lizzie's nemesis, already had full-grown lady bosoms, but she was the most popular girl in school. I didn't need to compare myself to her. Lizzie, on the other hand, was mediocrity incarnate. If the most NORMAL, middle-of-the-road girl started to develop beyond what I could keep up with, then I was in trouble.

There was an episode where Lizzie, her friend Miranda, and Lizzie's mom all went bra shopping. Neither of the girls had much need for a bra, though it was obvious to me that they had indeed started to develop. No matter how Disney-friendly their shirts were, it was impossible not to notice the little bulges starting to sprout from their chests.

My own chest remained as undeveloped as ever. If I wanted to—if I really pressed my shirt down over my skin—I could almost swear my chest caved in a little. Proper breast tissue fought to be noticed no matter how many layers you had on. For me, though, even if I had a bra to stuff, it would be obvious I had nothing going on beneath.

The summer I turned fourteen, I was still waiting for something to happen. My best friend, Stephanie, let it slip one day when we were down at the beach shooting glass jars with a

slingshot that she had cramps. She'd always been the type to have stomach aches, but there was something in her tone that let me know this wasn't the usual childish indigestion.

"Like, period cramps?" I asked, tossing stones into the lake.

"Mhm," she said, sitting down on a rock and hugging her belly.

I nodded, knowingly, trying desperately to switch gears from "child with a slingshot" to "world-weary woman who's already had enough of menstruation."

"That sucks," I said. "Mine aren't usually that bad."

The lie wasn't easy—I couldn't remember having blatantly lied to Stephanie before—but it was much easier than the truth. We may have been only fourteen, but the miserable authority in Stephanie's voice had sent me reeling. How could she possibly be so well-acquainted with periods that she was already complaining about them?

Back at her house, we invited her friend Jenny over. Jenny lived just up the street from Stephanie, and she was a year younger than us—the same age as Carrie. It was obvious to me that Jenny already wore a B cup at least, as did Carrie.

The three of us were sitting in Stephanie's den, debating what movie to watch to pass the afternoon. Jenny was sitting behind me on the old couch, and Steph was framed by the window overlooking the hilly backyard in which we'd all played cops and robbers every sleepover evening for as long as I could remember.

Without warning, I felt a set of fingers pinch the back of my t-shirt and quickly pull away.

"Whoa, are you not wearing a bra?" Jenny asked.

“What?” I turned to her. I could feel my face get instantly hot and red as I scrambled to find some sort of reason for why I wouldn’t be wearing a bra—one that had nothing whatsoever to do with my complete lack of need.

Jenny giggled.

“You’re not wearing a bra,” she said, glancing at my flat chest.

“No, I...don’t really need one,” I finished, pathetically.

Jenny sat up on the couch and placed her hands on the outsides of her breasts, accentuating how much they stuck out from her chest. “I couldn’t go without one,” she said, sitting up on her heels. “I’ve gotten way too big.”

I didn’t know what to say, so I said nothing and waited for the moment to pass.

At school, people had started to notice my chest was flat. In the hallways, every now and then, someone would say something as I walked past. Usually just a phrase like “flat chest” or a simple question like, “Do you even wear a bra?” But it was enough to let me know they were watching. Of course, they couldn’t tell I hadn’t started menstruating yet, but it was only a matter of time. Things like that never manage to stay hidden long.

On the bus, a few weeks later, Jenny walked up the aisle past my seat. She was with another girl from the neighborhood—one I didn’t really know. I heard them talking as they approached, and I knew, somehow, they were talking about me.

I turned to face them as they reached my seat, and the other girl looked right at my chest.

“You’re right. She’s not even wearing a bra,” the other girl said, turning to greet Jenny’s laughing gaze.

My face flushed as I watched them climb down off the bus. If I were a different kind of girl—an angrier kind—maybe I’d have rolled down my window and shouted, “Fuck you” down at their ignorant, laughing faces. But I said nothing. I just waited for the bus to pull away so no one would hear me sobbing over the roar of the old, struggling engine.

Chapter 5—The Discovery

It was the summer after grade eight, and I was sitting at the kitchen table. I'd woken up that morning with a strange pain in my abdomen that I couldn't quite remember feeling before. It was hot and simmering away rather low in the front of my shorts. Not like a stomach cramp, which is how I expected menstrual cramps probably felt, but like an injury. Like someone had branded me in my sleep, but under my skin. It got a bit better after I'd peed, but it lingered even as I sat at the table eating my breakfast toast and orange juice. It wasn't the acute pain I'd been taught to watch out for in the event of appendicitis, but a deeper ache I couldn't quite place. As a natural hypochondriac, I wondered if it was the result of a deeply rooted, far-spread type of cancer already too insidiously spread to deal with. Or maybe I just slept weird. Either way, both options, (I decided) required no effort on my part. I was either doomed, or I just had to wait it out.

I tried to push it from my mind. It was a gorgeous summer day.

Britt and Ari were in the back yard on the trampoline, doing something they called 'belly bounces' which was pretty much exactly what the name would imply. They'd each jump as high as they could, and then one of them would throw their body flat on the trampoline, flat as they could, while the other would 'double bounce' them by landing on their feet as hard as they could just a millisecond before. Then, the double bounced sister would fly a good ten feet into the air, flat and rigid as a board. I heard them laughing away outside, and I got up to join them.

I saw my middle sister, Britt, first. Her mane of red, curly hair was flopping around in the bright sunshine as she dug her heels into the trampoline's surface and catapulted my baby sister, Ari, into the air.

“I wanna try,” I said, running barefoot over the lawn.

Ari came down before I reached the edge of the trampoline, her brownish-blonde hair whipping around her giggling face as she held her board-like shape.

The physics of a double bounce are such that pretty much anyone of any size can bounce pretty much anyone else with little effort, so, it didn't matter that I was the oldest and had maybe thirty pounds on my sisters. All I had to do was throw my body down and physics would take care of the rest.

When my turn came, I bounced along with Britt for a few seconds, then I threw my body down as flat and rigid as I could make it.

The moment my pelvis hit the trampoline, this sharp, burning pain exploded inside me. It was hot, it was acute, and it radiated out from my lower abdomen like I'd been kicked in the gut by a burning golf shoe.

Instead of rocketing into the air in a perfect board shape, I bounced about a foot and landed on my side. The only thing I could do was grab hold of my crotch and hold on as tightly as I could. The pain radiated through me in dark pulses of nauseating, debilitating pain. My sisters kept jumping, I kept bouncing, and the pain kept coming.

When I could finally get control of myself, I rolled off the trampoline and went inside. Thankfully, our one little bathroom was empty. I stood in front of the mirror and I pulled down my shorts to see if there was anything that might indicate what the hell had just happened to me.

The skin around my groin was a bit red from having been squeezed so tightly, but other than that, everything looked the same as it always had.

That is to say, my mound looked as prominent and bulging as ever, which didn't arouse much suspicion in me, because why would it? I'd known the words for my parts since I was a child, but I'd never done much exploration. I was fourteen years old, and the only sexual things on my mind concerning my body were my desperation to grow breasts and to start my period. So, if my mound happened to be a bit more prominent and sensitive than it was maybe supposed to be, or than was typical, it completely escaped my notice.

At least for the most part.

I ran the water until it was freezing, and I held my fingers under the stream. Then I pressed them gently over the sides of my groin.

The relief was immediate. And for some reason, that put my mind at ease. There was nothing wrong with me if it could be cured by a little cold water, I reasoned. I pulled my shorts back up and went back to the trampoline.

Not long after the trampoline incident, I was swimming at the beach access near my house. The same strange pain was there, nestled like a coiled snake in the front of my tankini bottoms, waiting to strike. I was lying on my belly on the floating dock that had been there since we were all kids. It was a blindingly hot Okanagan summer—if not quite forty degrees, then something close to it. And I had to pee. I was trailing my fingers in the water, trying to think of a casual way to pop into the water for a pee without advertising to my sisters and the various neighbourhood kids also swimming that I was peeing, when the idea occurred to me that I could simply slide into the water like a seal and get it done while I was beneath the surface. So long as I kept moving forward, I could push the pee out without letting it settle around me, and anyone watching would think I was just seeing how long I could hold my breath.

Without a word to anyone, I pushed myself forward over the edge of the dock.

As my abdomen slid over the dock's rounded, plastic edge, the same pain exploded inside of me. This time, it was like someone shoving their dirty finger inside a gunshot wound. Or so I imagined. Except it was two fingers, two wounds, and more than enough surface area to almost make me pass out from the sudden, stabbing sensation.

I surfaced immediately, wiping water from my face with one hand and grabbing my crotch with the other.

I coughed and sputtered, but no one seemed to notice. As I kicked to stay afloat, the pain radiated from my groin and down the lengths of my legs, while simultaneously reaching around to my back, as if I were wearing a floaty made of nails and fire around my waist.

I kicked a little way from the dock, no longer concerned if anyone suspected I might be peeing, and I pushed as hard as I could to get the pee out. As the warm, steady stream shot through the thin fabric of my bottoms, I could feel a little relief pouring in to fill its place. By the time I was empty and I'd circled back to the dock, the pain was only a shadow of what it had once been.

Well, that's it, then, I told myself as I settled back down on the dock. Sometimes, if I have to pee bad enough, I'll feel some pain. Nothing to be alarmed over.

As the summer progressed, though, the pain kept coming, and not always in conjunction with the need to pee. Sometimes, it would show up just from the pressure of my bathing suit bottoms. Most mornings I'd wake up after sleeping all night on my belly (the only way I've ever been able to fall asleep) and the pain would be so bad, I'd have to take ice cubes from the tray in the freezer, slip a few of them into a Ziploc bag, and press that bag to my groin. Once or twice,

my mom caught me taking ice cubes and asked me what I was doing. Every time, I made something up about having bumped my knee or my elbow, or just needing an ice pack to cool my sweaty brow. And every time, I made my way to the bathroom—the only room in the house I knew I'd be left alone—and I pressed the ice pack to my throbbing groin.

The thought that I could simply bring up the pain with my mom or dad didn't really enter my mind. For one, the pain was so strong and deeply buried, I felt certain it had to be something too terrible to confront. If I ever started to consider maybe mentioning it, my courage dissolved immediately. It was just too scary. If I brought it up—if I told someone it was happening and put a name to it—then I'd have to deal with it. And I couldn't imagine it wasn't cancer, or something else just as horrible. I knew that time was of the essence with things like cancer, but I honestly felt it would be better to suddenly drop dead one day, living my best life, than to bring it up, get diagnosed, and spend the last weeks and years of my life getting sicker and sicker as I fought a doomed war.

There was a character in a show my sisters and I watched called *Third Watch*. The show was about cops and firefighters and paramedics in New York City, and the character in question was a lady detective called Cruz. She had cancer, but rather than deal with it and lose her hair and get sick from chemo, she just lived with it, knowing that she was constantly getting sicker, but also feeling she had SOME control over her life. Even if that control was just an illusion.

I saw that, and I understood it. You couldn't help something bad happening to you, but you *could* pretend it wasn't happening. At least for a while.

And then there was the issue of *where* the pain was coming from.

My family didn't talk about genitals or sex or bodies or anything of the sort. The pain was so low in my groin, it was squarely in the area that would qualify as "full frontal nudity." Nothing about the daily doings within my family made me feel I could share that with anyone. Not that I think that's in any way odd. The old puritan grip on society's throat, as a whole, is quite firm wherever you look. Any local news source with an annual article about female toplessness at the beach will tell you that. But I really didn't know how to talk about it. My family weren't the type to ban every last salacious thing (we watched the murder shows nightly, we watched movies that had sex in them, and sometimes my mom would even neglect to mute the part in *Titanic* when that guy says the F word), but it just wasn't something I could connect to my body and my life. I knew it wasn't a sin to have a body with sexual aspects, but talking about that body and sharing that body, even out of medical necessity, felt like a different monster altogether. It wasn't that I thought I'd be punished for bringing such a thing up. I just literally didn't know how to. Whether from fear of medical intervention or fear of reproach, I just didn't know how to handle it.

With so much time to kill just standing in the bathroom all the time, though, I was starting to do a little exploration. Massaging my fingertips around the sides of my mound—both out of curiosity, and to try and alleviate some of the pain—I noticed that the sides of my mound were not so much these uniform bits of fat, but largely comprised of two egg-shaped blobs that I could move around with my fingertips. I could pull and prod at them enough that I could slide them off to the side of my groin and make out the rounded edges of their shapes. It hurt to do this, of course, but with so much pain radiating from that area almost every day now, I hardly noticed a difference.

I was a little worried by the egg shapes, but to be honest, they didn't bother me that much. There were plenty of parts of my body that seemed to have oddly-shaped stuff lying just below the surface. If you poked or prodded too much, it was easy to worry about almost anything. It made me think of the times I'd come to my mom with mysterious injuries as a child.

"It hurts when I do this," I'd say, bending my arm or cocking my head to the side.

"Then don't do that," she'd always say.

Running my thumb and index finger over the egg shapes, I could tell they measured several centimeters around, at least, and they were almost perfectly smooth. They were quite hard to the touch, but not so hard that they really stood out that much from the rest of the area. In truth, I had absolutely no idea what they could be. In the back of my mind, though, I worried they were cancer. They seemed so inherent to my body—so connected to everything else—they didn't strike me as foreign in any way. Rather, they seemed as perfectly situated as my eyeballs in their sockets. But that didn't mean they weren't cancer.

I tried to push them out of my mind and to just enjoy the summer, but it was so hard. Instead of the usual happy, mindless bliss that summer always brought before, I spent every day wondering about the lumps. July and August rushed by in a blur of lumps and swimming and pain and worry, and before I knew it, it was September and I was in grade nine.

I'd never started a new school year without some sort of dramatic (if only to me) changes for the better, but by the time the summer ended and the school year started, the pain was just as bad on a near-daily basis as it had been since the first time on the trampoline. Now, of course,

with the cooler weather, I had to start wearing jeans every day and trying not to let the tightness and rigidity of pants press too hard against my body.

The girls in my grade had all kicked their femininity up a notch over the summer. They were all fully developed, or close to it, and beautiful. They'd all figured out makeup. Their hair was all straight and streaked to perfection.

Meanwhile, I'd gotten only so far as a half ponytail (which favoured the straighter hair underneath, while taming the waves on top) and a small smear of my mom's blue eyeshadow on each eyelid.

Naturally, my breasts hadn't grown over the summer, and my period hadn't started. I went into grade nine just as flat and unbled as I'd always been, except now, I was also terrified I had cancer. I told myself over and over every day that the whole situation was probably bound up together inside me, and that cancer had likely taken over my whole reproductive system, and that if I didn't deal with things soon, I would probably die.

Nevertheless, I held onto my fear and I didn't tell anyone about it.

Every night, it seemed, there was another TV movie about someone with cancer. I don't know if it was just the most popular issue to make cheap movies about in the 2000s, or if my mom sought the movies out herself, but there was an endless parade of bald heads and weeping eyes on our TV. It was always painted as the absolute worst, life-ruining thing that could ever happen to a person. The protagonist, whoever they were, was always living their normal, happy life when suddenly they discovered a lump. Before long, they'd be alone and scared and bald, dying in a hospital bed somewhere. I knew every lump wasn't cancer, and not every person with cancer went as quickly as the movies implied, but I also didn't care. I was terrified of it

happening to me, and all I could do to stop it from happening was avoid every chance of being *told* it was happening to me.

Meanwhile, I started to grow taller than all of my friends. Over the ten-month school year, I grew at least six inches. Where I'd been indistinguishable from all my friends for my life up to that year, I now towered over them. I also started to sprout a small patch of pubic hair. One night I went to bed and there was nothing there, and the next morning, there it was—a few hairs, and only the most boring part of puberty, but evidence that something was happening. It wasn't much, but it was something.

As I grew, though, and as my body hair started to come in, the pain in my groin also seemed to be getting worse.

One night around the end of grade nine, I just couldn't take it any longer. Mom and I were sitting on the couch, no doubt watching another cancer movie, and before I could contain myself, I just asked her outright if you were supposed to have painful lumps on either side of your mound. I even used the word "mound." It horrified me, of course, but I knew what it was called, and how else was I supposed to get an answer that would actually set my mind at ease? I had to be specific.

"Well, you know, it's a very sensitive area," she said, staring straight ahead at the TV.

"Sure," I said, "but it *really* hurts. I'm worried something might be wrong with me."

My lip had started to quiver, and I felt my eyes grow several times more moist.

Mom looked down at me, and surprised me with the next words out of her mouth. "Have you started your period yet?"

I was shocked. She'd never asked me anything period-related before. I felt my face flush as I realized she'd probably been wondering for some time, but no doubt feeling just as unsure how to broach the subject as I was.

Not trusting my voice, I shook my head.

Mom sighed. It was a deep, truly sad sigh. The kind of sigh one usually reserves for the second before a hard decision must be made. I was surprised how quickly the mood in the living room dipped.

“Do you want me to book a doctor’s appointment?”

My confidence scattered like frightened mice in the light of her question, but what else was I supposed to say? The only way to fix what was wrong with me was to admit there was a problem.

“Okay,” I said. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”

She sighed again.

“I’ll call in the morning,” she said.

I turned back to the TV and tried as hard as I’d ever tried to shut my mind off and think nothing at all. With all the misery and fear on the screen, though, it was like trying to forget a stabbing, burning pain in your groin.

Chapter 6—First Appointment

Me—What was the first time you thought something might be off about me and my body? What made you suspicious?

Mom—I guess the only thing that comes to mind is you weren't developing breasts and menstruating. I didn't want to think there was anything wrong so I just told myself it was because your body was putting everything into growing tall.

I looked around at the stacks of magazines, and the metal hoop and bead toys laid out for kids. All of it was so familiar to me. We'd been coming to the same doctor since I was a baby: sitting in the same pastel-green waiting room, in the same pink upholstered chairs with the same weird stains. We'd come for every checkup and every case of strep throat or pneumonia in our family since before I could remember. We'd been lucky: none of us had ever broken a bone or had cancer or diabetes or anything. But I felt a shift in the sterile, recirculated air of the office. *I was going to be the first tragedy our family experienced. I just knew it.*

Still, it was nice to be away from school—away from people staring at my chest, and from all the big-boobed, red lip-sticked reminders in my classes that everyone but me was out hooking up, making out at parties, and enjoying their years of perfect, tight bodies as much as they could, while they could.

“Brianna Ferguson?”

I looked up to see the receptionist from the front desk standing there, holding a folder. She was wearing the same hot pink and lavender scrubs and the same ultra-short, spiky hairdo she'd had as long as I'd known her. But there was a different look in her eyes now. I couldn't tell if it was pity or something more adult that I didn't quite understand.

I followed her into the exam room and sat down on the crinkly paper that covered the bed. There was a white and blue speckled hospital gown lying folded on the bed beside me.

"I'm just gonna get you to take your shoes off and stand on the scale over there," she said, opening my folder and placing it on the counter beside the tubes of gauze and Q-tips. I kicked my shoes off and stood on the scale. She fiddled with the weights, then jotted the number down in the folder.

"Okay, and height..." she said, pulling out a collapsible metal rod from the top of the scale and raising it above my head. "Gonna have to stand on a stool for this one," she said, laughing. I grinned feebly back as she noted the number and jotted it down.

"You play basketball?" she asked. I shook my head. "No? Volleyball? You'd be great with all that height."

"I'm not very competitive," I said. I didn't bother to mention that the rich girls in school took private lessons in every sport from kindergarten onwards, and that they were so far ahead of the rest of us who couldn't afford to be on after-school teams, it wasn't even worth it to try.

"Okay, I'll just get you to put that robe on and sit back on the bed. The doctor will be with you in a minute."

I nodded that I understood, and she closed the door. I pulled my things off and threw them in the chair beside the door. Then I shrugged into the robe and sat down on the bed, cinching the robe shut with a hand pulled behind my back. I didn't have a bra on, so I only had to bundle my underwear up to keep it from being seen.

A minute later, there was a knock on the door and a woman walked in. She introduced herself as the doctor who "shared a practice" with my family doctor. She was short and thin and businesslike, with an expensive-looking suit jacket under her white coat and a brittle looking asymmetrical bob. I forgot her name the moment she said it.

She looked at me for a second or two before she said anything else. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black, and close-set, like a predator's eyes.

"You're fifteen years old?"

"Yeah, for a month or so now."

"And it says here you haven't had your first period yet?"

"No, I haven't."

She sat down on a little stool with wheels and rolled towards me. "Well, that's interesting, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so."

She adjusted her weight on the stool and folded one leg over the other.

"Can you describe for me what you tend to eat in a day?"

The question surprised me. Could something as simple as food be the problem?

“Well... I guess I usually have a piece of toast for breakfast. Then for lunch I have a sandwich with some meat, or peanut butter and banana, and a cheese string and some crackers and maybe banana loaf, if my mom baked any. Then for supper it’s usually steak and potatoes, or pizza, or chicken and rice or something.”

“Do you drink milk?”

“Yeah, every night.”

“Okay.” She took a few notes. “Honestly, it sounds like you eat better than a lot of the girls your age, so we can probably cross that off. Sometimes, with delayed menses like this, it can be due to improper diet, but it wouldn’t look to be the case here. It looks like you *are* a little underweight for your height, though, according to your measurements from today. Do you play sports?”

“No.”

“Do other members of your family have a high metabolism?”

“Yeah.”

“I see here it says you have two sisters—are they skinny little minnies like you?”

“Yeah.”

“And your sisters are younger than you?”

“Yeah, thirteen and eleven.”

“And do you know if either of them has begun to menstruate?”

I hesitated.

“My middle sister, Britt, has.”

“Do you know how long it’s been since her first period?”

I blushed.

“A few months, I think. I can’t really remember exactly. Maybe a year or so. Maybe more; honestly, I’m not really sure.”

“And she has normal breast development, as far as you can tell?”

I felt my cheeks grow hotter.

“Yes.”

“Okay.” She jotted down a few more notes. “Can I take your temperature and do a brief physical exam? Nothing too invasive, I promise.”

I said sure.

She did the usual simple ear, nose, throat exam I’d had a dozen times before throughout the years, then Mom came in to hear the doctor’s thoughts.

“Well, as far as I can tell, there doesn’t seem to be anything worth worrying about here,” she said. “Brianna seems perfectly healthy. These things, you know...there’s no way to know when they’re going to start, but every person is different. Fifteen is...you know...it’s not *that* old. I know it can be hard when it seems like everyone at school is ahead of you, but it seems like that in a lot of aspects of life, and it’s almost never the case. My advice is to just keep doing what you’re doing, and try not to rush things.”

She turned to me.

“Is there anything else?”

I hesitated. I knew I should bring up the lumps specifically, as she hadn't really investigated that area, but I so wanted it all to be done with. I just wanted to go home and wait for things to get started. The lumps weren't hurting at that moment, and it was easy to tell myself they were nothing to be concerned about.

Easier than it would have been if they were hurting, anyway.

“Nope, I'm good,” I said, tightening my ponytail, which had come slack when I'd pulled my shirt off over my head.

“If nothing happens in...let's say a year from now...I'd like you to come back,” the doctor said as Mom stood and slung her purse over her shoulder. “I wouldn't anticipate I'll have to see you again, but just in case, let's give it a year. If nothing's changed by then, pop back in and we'll see about sending you to a pediatrician.”

I nodded. I wasn't entirely sure what a pediatrician was, but it sounded like something vaguely related to diet. With her having brought up what I ate in a day, that sounded right to me. Worst case scenario, a year from now I'd have to change my diet. Big whoop. A year was a long time. No way I'd still be going through all this in a year, I told myself.

“Well, that's a relief,” Mom said as we climbed into the Tercel.

“Yeah,” I agreed, trying and failing to feel relieved as we pulled out of the parking lot and headed for home.

Chapter 7—The Bisexual

Louis CK claims his first memory of consciousness is of him standing in his driveway around the age of four, looking up at his house, shitting his pants. That's it. Before that, there was nothing—he was basically still just part of the aether. And then suddenly he was in the world, shitting his pants.

I can't claim the same—most of my earliest years are nothing but lights and noise.

But I do remember my first crush on a girl.

Her name was Ashley. She had big, wide open eyes and brown hair. We were both in grade two at Hudson Road Elementary. It was April, and I was a new kid at the school. The chances of my making any real friends before the end of the year were slim.

I saw Ashley one day on the playground, and I just felt like I had to be close to her. I wanted desperately for her to like me and to want to spend time with me.

I waited for a massive game of tag to break out when it wouldn't be weird for me to touch her shoulder or talk to her, and then I took my chance. Amazingly, she accepted me without a second thought. I talked to her as much as I could, given the frantic, giggling chaos of the game, and she responded, smiling.

After that, I'd think of ways to be near her. I'd make sure our desks were close together as often as I could. I'd follow after her and her friend group every lunch, making sure to be there whenever a game broke out, making sure my swing was next to hers.

When the announcement came that a new elementary school had been built and several of the Hudson students would be transferring there next year, I was heartbroken to learn that Ashley was one of the students who would be moving. I had dreams at night of what I would say to her if I ever saw her down the road, and they all had to do with how much or how little our friendship had meant to her. I'd wake up thinking, *Oh well, maybe we'll find each other again one day, and then we can get married.* Then I'd remember, *Oh no, wait, girls marry boys, and Ashley and I are both girls.* It was always a bummer.

The next year, though, I met Brooke, and I forgot all about Ashley.

Brooke, Carrie and I were friends, and we played together every day. Brooke and Carrie were a grade younger than me, though, and in the same class. They were both allowed to line up for our bus at the same time at the end of the day, which meant Carrie almost always got to sit in the middle of the bus seat between Brooke and me.

One day, though, while playing in the field, Brooke whispered to me that I was her best friend, and my heart nearly exploded from happiness. No seating arrangement could get between best friends.

I would sleep over at Brooke's house sometimes, and lying there in the dark of her bedroom or her basement, I could never believe how happy I was. Being invited by her to spend the night, to play with her Puppy in my Pocket toys and to see her room, to watch *Flubber* in her basement and to swim with her at the local pool, just the two of us, I really thought I couldn't be happier. The same dreams would come then—that we would get married one day—and the same confusion when I woke up. Sometimes we would both be girls in the dreams, and sometimes I'd

be a boy. I'd be a handsome, blonde boy, or a full-grown man, and it would be okay that we were getting married.

Sometimes, it wasn't even Brooke. Sometimes it was just some random girl. Sometimes it was Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. Whoever it was, though, whether I was a girl or a boy in the dream, I'd wake up feeling happy, then sad that it was over, then confused about who or what I was, and who was allowed to like whom in "that way."

All of this is, of course, pretty normal for children. Attachments are formed—often deep ones—and those attachments have all kinds of intimacies swirling around them. The world is big and confusing and relationships are arguably even bigger and more confusing. Just because one has a little same-sex childhood friend-crush, doesn't necessarily mean anything at all. It's a time of firsts, and often lasts. Just because something is first, though, doesn't mean it's important, or even valuable. Take, for instance, my induction into the world of heterosexual dating.

I was standing outside my elementary school with my best friend, Stephanie. We'd been playing in the dirt with that great homemade '90s standard, the bead lizard. Each one of our lizards had a back story, a particular stick and stone home, and a name. We'd been playing with them all of our grade-five year, and now into our sixth-grade year. There'd been three of us in our bead-lizard group: Me, Stephanie, and Sara. Each day, we brought our drawstring sacks of lizards to school, and each day at lunch we either played out various storylines with the lizards, or we sat and beaded fresh lizards to revitalize flagging plotlines.

That one day in fall, Sara wasn't with us. She was part of the student council, and she'd had something else to do that lunch hour. Stephanie and I went off to play on our own, but we ran out of things to do a bit before the bell rang. Walking back toward the front of the school,

Sara suddenly appeared from around a corner. But she wasn't alone; she was with a new kid I'd never seen before. A boy. They were skipping along in a choreographed style, flinging their arms out together. It looked like they were singing, and they were smiling into each other's eyes as they skipped.

When they saw us, they came to a stop. Sara walked over to us, but the boy stood awkwardly a few feet back. He smiled up at me in this shy little way that I quite liked.

"Hey guys," Sara said. "This is Slayden. He's new."

Obviously, I thought. Having gone to school with all the same kids for years, a new kid was as noticeable as a nuclear explosion.

"Are you guys dating?" I blurted.

They looked at each other and shared a devilish little smirk.

"Uh, yeah," Sara said in this matter of fact "well duh" kind of way.

I blushed. Of course they were dating. Guys and girls didn't just hang out together one-on-one like that unless there was something going on. I suddenly felt embarrassed by the drawstring sack of lizards in my hands.

The bell rang and we all went off to class. I couldn't focus, though. How had Sara suddenly gotten a boyfriend? It was insane! It was as if she'd said to me that she just bought a house at eleven years old, and hadn't I bought one as well? I felt so behind. Was everyone secretly crushing on each other and dating and doing all kinds of grown-up things while I was bent over making bead lizard houses in the dirt? What else was I missing out on?

At afternoon recess, the four of us went down to the small playground at the end of the field to play tag. For the most part, that playground was reserved for the intermediate students, so we knew we could talk about relationship things without being interrupted by the shrieks and childhood antics of the younger grades.

As soon as we were all running every which way, and Sara and Slayden weren't standing side by side in this phalanx of adulthood, I felt the urge to get Slayden alone. I don't know where it came from. One minute I didn't know he existed, and the next, I burned to have him look at me the way he looked at Sara. If she could get his attention, surely I could, too. I was the fastest girl in our grade. I was funny. I could make bead lizards and bead people that other kids wanted. I had things to offer.

I waited until Slayden was squatting on the playground, catching his breath while Sara and Stephanie chased each other around, then I went and squatted next to him. He smiled up at me and I smiled back in a way I hoped came across as flirty. I said something about tag, asked how long he and Sara had been dating (a few days, but in secret) and rejoined the game. Every chance I could get, I smiled at him. Almost every single time, he smiled back at me. As soon as I was 'it' I'd go after him, and he after me in return. So obvious was our flirtation that Sara took me aside at one point and asked me not to steal him from her.

"I won't," I said. But I knew I would. First chance I got, I'd go for it. It was simply too tempting. If this was the direction life was going, the only option I had was to get out in front of it. I would not be the only girl in grade six without a boyfriend.

The very next day, Slayden broke up with Sara and told me he liked me.

Well, he told me he liked "someone," and left it to me to pry the name from him.

“Is it Stephanie?” I asked.

He shook his head, grinning.

“Nope.”

“Is it Nikki?”

“Nope.”

The bell rang. Lunch was over. It was now or never.

“Is it me?” I asked, blushing furiously.

His grin grew wider, and he nodded.

“I like you, too,” I said, my voice sounding like it belonged to someone else. I had never ever told someone I liked them. What was I doing?

The bell was almost done ringing, and if we didn’t get moving, we’d be in trouble. I stood and headed up the hill to the school. He ran ahead of me, looked back down at me and offered his hand to help me up onto the pavement that ran around the school. The angle wasn’t very steep, and it wasn’t hard at all, but I took his hand anyway.

Sitting in class, my heart pounding in my chest, I ran over the conversation in my head. A boy had just told me he liked me! A cute one, too! He was taller than me, with brown hair and big, sad eyes. I got the feeling he’d seen some sadness in his life, and I liked it. We obviously didn’t know each other that well, but we’d get to know each other a lot better now that we were dating.

We *were* dating, weren’t we?

The snow started falling in the next few days, and Slayden and I spent every lunch hour sliding down the snowy hills that surrounded our school, mitten hands clasping mitten hands. It was fun some of the time, but most of the time I just wanted to slide on my own, or with my friends. If this was dating, it was terribly dull and consuming.

I broke up with him after a week or two, and that was that.

There was another boy, though, who came along that year. This time, though, it was Stephanie who noticed him first.

The boy's name was Jeff, and he was into stargazing and fantasy novels and all kinds of fabulous things. He wore tweed vests and spoke like an adult. He had brown hair and eyes that twinkled with intelligence. As soon as I knew Stephanie liked him, he seemed magical to me. Before, he was just a slightly chubby, polite, brown-haired boy in our class. But once I knew he was worthy of a crush, I saw him in a new light. There was something at work here—some adult force of attraction that I didn't want to be left out of—and the sooner I could confess to a crush of my own (preferably one I could convince Stephanie I'd had for some time) the better my chances would be of getting to find out what that was.

The thing is, though, as soon as I told Stephanie I had a crush on Jeff, and as soon as she had a chance to call me deceitful, or whatever choice phrase she went for, I really did get a crush on him. Suddenly, he was no longer just the quiet, bookish boy who sat a few seats away from me, but the perfect guy in every way. True, we'd hardly spoken to each other, but knowing Stephanie saw enough value in him to confess to an actual crush made him seem to me like the perfect guy. Stephanie would never be able to make him happy, I reasoned; they were too much

alike. If I threw my hat in the ring, though, and I managed to get him to confess to feelings in return, I'd show him how good life could be.

After weeks of discussing our shared crush, of admiring Jeff from afar, we slipped him a note to settle things once and for all: Who do you like? Brianna [] Stephanie [].

The note came back with the little box beside Stephanie ticked off.

Seated in the same portable where we'd recently learned about puberty and hormones, I felt my eyes water and my breath catch in my throat. I was unliked, my best friend was very actively liked, and we both knew it. There was no way to un-put myself out there, and it was awful.

Oh well, I thought, if Jeff doesn't like me, I won't like him either. And suddenly, I didn't. It was as easy as that.

I mean, I did cry a bit, right there, in class, but I couldn't tell then if it was for the thrill of drama, or the embarrassment, or the loss of true love. And I can't say for sure now, either.

Where, might you ask, did this feverish desire to avoid being left behind in the romantic world come from at the age of eleven or twelve? You might ask that, but then, you might also have been a person developing and growing in the late twentieth century alongside me. Every TV show I watched, every movie, every book I read had girls and guys absolutely lusting after one another. Every movie was a romance and every character was incomplete without that one special person. Every human being I'd once thought to be a whole being was, I could now see, an aching wound desperate to be healed by the presence of someone special. There was no Rose without Jack to show her what freedom and life really looked like, no Francesca Johnson without

a Robert Kincaid rolling up her driveway with a camera and a plethora of globe-trotting stories to open up her landlocked, housewife's eyes.

I watched the movies with my mom and my sisters. I fell head over heels for Leo DiCaprio, the same as everyone else, but never to quite the same fervour. My sister, Britt, had a diary where she'd write about her love for Leo, where I only ever looked at him and thought, *My god, he's beautiful, but he'll never be mine*. There had to be something wrong with me, I decided. I never talked about crushes in the gushy way that other girls did. I felt things, yes, but no one would describe me as 'boy crazy' or overly romantic. All I really wanted was to play with my friends, read books and watch shows. Not exceptional, I would imagine, for a twelve-year-old.

By the time I got to middle school, though, this simply wasn't an option. In the first week of grade seven I was overheard saying to a friend of mine that I "couldn't wait to get home and play with my sisters," to which a popular girl named Kelsey said, "You mean *hang out* with them."

Everywhere I looked, the kids I'd played tag with for years were suddenly dating and flirting and getting embroiled in drama, and it was impossible to look away.

The urge to have something to add to the conversations was overwhelming. Those who had nothing to add were suspected of lesbianism, nerdiness, or a myriad of other social crimes. If I couldn't feel overwhelmed by heterosexual lust before I'd officially begun puberty, I decided, I'd have to fake it.

I was a middle schooler from 2000-2003, and the climate was not congenial for those who dared to exist outside of the gendered and sexual norms. Gay marriage was not yet legal across Canada, and the topic was hotly debated in every arena. As soon as there was a whiff of homosexuality around you, no matter how unfounded, people knew.

In grade seven, my friend Nikki and I were working on a project together when this guy Spencer walked by us in the hall and called us lesbians. That was it. One minute we were trying to conjugate *être* for the sentence “I am a banana,” and the next minute there was a label hanging over our heads.

At first, I didn’t think much of it. But then Spencer said it a few more times, and then every time he saw us together. Eventually, I was nervous just to be seen talking to Nikki, for fear somebody would see and say something.

In grade nine, I went on a camping trip with most of the kids in my grade. We hiked up Frosty Mountain in Manning Park, spent a couple nights on the mountain and one night down at base camp. On the last night we were there, I had to go to the bathroom. I walked over to the bathroom complex where there were flush toilets and showers and two outhouses. Most of the girls were in the complex, showering and talking and laughing, and I didn’t want to use the bathroom with so many of them in one place, so I went to use an outhouse instead. The first one I tried was the men’s. The second was the women’s, but it was boarded up. With no other option, I went into the complex. Girls were walking every which way wearing nothing but towels, laughing, talking, drying their hair, applying makeup, and so on. I tried to use the farthest stall from the sinks, but it was occupied. I tried the middle one, and it was occupied, too. As was the last one. In the end, I simply washed my hands and went back outside to the boys’ outhouse. With any luck, no one would come along to bother me while I was in there.

The next day on the bus ride home, a boy named Nathan asked me if I'd been spying on girls in the bathroom.

“What?” I asked, blushing horribly. “No, of course not. When?”

He smirked.

“I just heard you were hanging out in the bathroom, watching girls shower.”

“No, I wasn't,” I said, and I turned to look out my window. I heard Nathan say something to another guy behind me, and the two of them laughed. I hunkered down in my seat and spent the three-hour ride home trying to imagine what it was about me that always seemed to bring suspicion down on my head.

When I met Dalton the next year, I was all too happy to let him take me to the movies. He was a friend of a friend, and he was kind to me. We didn't have a ton in common, but he had big, warm brown eyes, and he was boxy and squishy in so many cuddly ways. On the bus rides home, I would gaze out the window and imagine all kinds of wonderful things that he hadn't said to me yet, but that he might say in the future—things I imagined would make my knees go weak like in the movies.

We would hold hands in the hallways, and at lunch, and after school. It was nice, but kind of dull. Who wants their hands to be occupied all the time? I knew from a few random comments that Dalton liked boobs, and I didn't have any to speak of yet, but he didn't seem to care much. Just as I liked having my hands free and walking myself to my bus like a fully capable human

being, but I let it slide. This was dating, and I didn't want to be the only person not madly in love with someone.

Once, Dalton and I went on a weekend movie date to see *The Butterfly Effect*. My mom had to drive me into town, which was almost a full hour drive both ways, but she said it was fine because we were out of milk and she had to go to the bank.

I waited until about half an hour into the movie before I leaned my head on Dalton's shoulder. Then I just...left it there. It was the only move I could think of that wasn't kissing (terrifying), and wasn't simply more hand-holding. But it was horribly painful. My neck cricked and seized in all kinds of unbearable ways. I'd made a move, though, and I wasn't going to back out. Besides, after a while, when it was obvious I wasn't going to be moving my head any time soon, he leaned his head on mine, pinning it to his shoulder, and I couldn't have raised mine if I wanted to.

I watched the movie sideways, and I wondered if we were going to kiss at some point. In movies, people always made out at the movie theatre, so at fifteen, it wouldn't have been out of the question at all to make out. But the whole thing put me on edge. I wanted to kiss someone, absolutely, but the thought of pushing my face slowly into Dalton's face seemed like madness. Would I purse my lips, like I was going to kiss my grandma at the end of her Sunday visit, or would I just kind of move my flat lips into his flat lips and let nature do the rest?

In the end, all my stress and worry was for nothing. We hugged, said goodbye, and I went home with my mom and sisters.

The next weekend, though, Dalton and I went to see *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton*. This time, the movie was all about secret love and kissing and all kinds of romantic comedy trappings.

When the movie was over, we hung out on the sidewalk in front of the movie theatre and waited for my mom. Avril Lavigne's "I'm With You" was playing quietly from the laundromat next door. It was cold out, still being winter, and Dalton and I cuddled a bit on the covered sidewalk in front of the strip mall as we talked about the movie, about the week ahead, and whatever other non-dangerous topics came to mind.

"Would you want to wear this?" he asked, producing an oversized mood ring from his jeans pocket.

"Oh, yeah," I said, dropping the ring down over my thumb. It was obviously, comically too large, but neither of us said anything.

I slipped it into my own pocket, and that was that.

My mom pulled up a few minutes later and parked at the very edge of the parking lot. She was maybe thirty feet away and staring right at us. I could see my sisters in the back seat, jockeying for the best place to watch us.

"Well, thanks for the movie," I said. I went to drop Dalton's hand and give him a hug like always, but he kept holding my hand and pulled me in for a kiss.

He flashed me a huge, relieved-looking smile as he pulled away. I smiled, mumbled something like, "Okay bye" and climbed into the Tercel.

Mom had the good grace not to say anything as we pulled away, but I knew my sisters' minds were racing. Of course, mine would be, too, if I'd just watched one of them kiss a boy from the same Toyota seats we'd sat in all our living lives. After all, now that one of us had kissed a boy, our childhood was officially dead. That was simply it. No going back now. We

three had now entered into the realm of adult things, where absolutely anything was possible, and most of it was dramatic.

I wanted to hold onto the mystery of my kiss—after all, for anyone knew, I was a seasoned professional by now—but eventually Britt piped up.

“Was that your first kiss?” she asked. Her thirteen-year-old voice sounded terribly excited, but also reserved, as if to show any excitement over anything so clearly monumental yet necessarily prosaic as a first kiss was to admit to a childish excitement unbecoming of a young woman.

I confessed that it was, and I slumped down in my seat to stare out my window in dignified silence. The kiss had been wet, fast, and confusing, and above all, a relief to get past. But beneath all of that, I was quite sure I liked it. The hurdle had been cleared at fifteen, and no one could any longer say I’d never kissed a boy. If nothing else ever happened to me, I had that. I was not going to end up like that Tragically Hip song about that guy who’s thirty-eight years old and never kissed a girl.

Now that we’d kissed, it stood to reason that Dalton and I would kiss plenty more times, yes? The thought was an exciting, nerve-racking one, bathed overwhelmingly in a sense of relief. I had enjoyed kissing a boy. I wasn’t repulsed by it at all. Imagine if the opposite had been true! The things I’d have to grapple with, rather than simply being happy...

Over the rest of the weekend, I took long walks, listening to my discman. “If I Could Be Like That” by 3 Doors Down was my favourite song to listen to as I walked the lonely country roads of my neighbourhood and thought about Dalton. Something about the bare guitar, the mournful, hungry people in the song wanting all the big things they’d likely never have, and the

fabulous “Hooooooo, ooooooh, falling into it” part just gave me chills. I pictured Dalton playing the guitar—not for me, just as something he liked to do. He didn’t play, and I’d never heard a musical thing from him, but it was a romantic thought, anyway. I pictured him at home, thinking and wanting all kinds of grandiose things he’d never mentioned. I stared out at the frozen earth, the leafless trees, and I pictured the summer when he and I could swim and lie on the beach.

The thought always died there, because there was no way I’d let him see my flat chest in a bikini. It was okay to wear a hoodie at school all the time, when the baggy fabric helped to conceal my chest from his big, wandering brown eyes. But in a bikini, there’d be no way to hide.

Still, I wondered how long our relationship would go on for, and how many more firsts we’d have together. How many could we really have if my body never properly started going through puberty? I’d heard every argument under the sun for why you should wait until marriage to have sex, or at least until you were graduated, or in a committed relationship, but what were you supposed to do if you just physically *couldn’t* have sex? How deep were you supposed to go into a relationship if you knew it *couldn’t* lead to sex?

I tried to push the thought from my mind, and to convince myself that things would start to happen before it ever came to that. We’d only just kissed, after all. Sex was a long way down the road. No need to worry about it for now. All I needed to do was relax and enjoy the fact that a boy had kissed me.

Monday at school, though, everything was different. Where there’d been just the one kiss before, by the end of the day there were at least six. Right when I got off the bus, and before every class, just as we parted ways in the halls, he’d pull me in, just as he had at the theatre, and kiss me. It didn’t matter how many people were swirling around us, jostling our bodies, forcing

us to miss the mark, or nearly. As soon as he saw me, or as soon as we reached the door to my next class, I'd turn just a fraction of an inch towards him and there he'd be, lips pursed and dusted with blondish fuzz, eyes wide and expectant, only a few inches from mine. It was fun until lunch (three new kisses in), but I could tell it was one of those things that started out new and exciting and were absolutely destined to become an obligation. And there were weird thoughts in my head that I couldn't put aside. Like, what if someone jostled us when we went to kiss, and I accidentally kissed the peach fuzz on his cheek? For some reason, the thought of kissing his cheek made me frantically unhappy. Like kissing a relative, but a relative I was supposed to be attracted to, which was exactly the opposite of what a relative is, or should be. It was the strangest thought, but I couldn't shake it. And what if he tried to touch my chest? He'd immediately be able to tell that I was so flat I wasn't even wearing a bra. It would be impossible to hide from his hands. I'd have to angle myself in such a way whenever we kissed that he'd never have an opening. But what would that even look like, besides that I was trying to wriggle away from him?

By the next day, world weary and tired of kissing, I found myself trying to avoid Dalton at every chance I could. I lingered with my friends until right before class started, hoping he'd rush off to avoid being late. I ducked into bathrooms and started conversations with people I wouldn't normally have given a second's thought to. I knew Dalton could tell I was trying to avoid him, and I felt bad. So, whenever a kiss came that couldn't be avoided, I mashed my lips extra hard into his, breathing through my nose in what I hoped came across as a noisy overflowing of ecstasy.

I lasted the rest of the week, and then I started avoiding him as much as I could. I walked too fast for him to keep up, laughing and chatting with whichever friend I'd roped into the role of

scapegoat. I responded in one-word sentences whenever he asked me a question, and darted into classrooms before he'd have a chance to pull me in. Where I'd once hated so many of my classes, now I looked upon them as brief, beautiful moments of respite in an otherwise harrowing day—eighty-minute chunks where no one would bother me with their pursed lips and hungry eyes. I dug into my assignments and focused as I hadn't done since middle school. And all the while, images of Dalton's lips flashed through my mind. Something needed to be done, I realized. There was simply no way I could keep on living like this.

In Social Studies, Nathan—the same Nathan who'd asked me on the bus ride home from Frosty Mountain if I was a lesbian peeper—asked me, loud enough so everyone could hear, how things were with Dalton

“Fine,” I said.

He laughed.

“He take his pants off for you yet?”

“Okay,” Ms. Flavelle said, “enough of that.”

Nathan and his idiot friends chuckled, and my face grew horribly red. Weren't they all out having sex and doing drugs and whatnot on the weekends? Why was it so funny to ask *me* such a thing?

The next day, Dalton told me (through a friend) that he didn't want to date me anymore.

“Okay cool, me neither,” I told his friend.

“Oh, he also said he wants his mood ring back,” the friend said.

I didn't have the ring on me, naturally, having completely forgotten it existed, but I promised I'd find it and bring it to school Monday.

I never did, though, and Dalton and I hardly spoke again.

Having escaped my first real relationship—obviously, an elementary school romance like Slayden didn't count in the same realm as a real high school relationship that involved kissing and everything—I needed something new to set my sights on.

The school year ended, though, and I hadn't kissed anyone else. I tried to come up with crushes whenever someone asked, but truth be told, my mind was a million miles away from the dating world. There was a little lump on the back of my neck about the size of a pea, and I was convinced it was cancerous. Just as I was convinced that the lumps in my groin were cancer. I was absolutely riddled with cancer, I reasoned, and any day now, I would begin to feel unwell. Mom would take me to the doctor, they'd open me up and they'd find cancer in every organ and tissue in my body. It happened all the time, and it was going to happen to me. I was going to die tragically young and pre-pubescent, having never sampled any of the best parts of life.

There was this girl, Amanda, who I'd sort of known since middle school. She had long brown hair, big eyes, and the kindest smile. Every once in a while I'd be sitting in the halls, eating my lunch, looking however dejected one tends to look while eating a cheese sandwich on a hallway floor, and she'd smile down at me. And every time she did, my heart would flutter a little. I'd

blush and try to think of something to say that would make me sound totally casual, like just a girl talking to any other girl, and I'd trip all over my words.

Amanda played the flute in Concert Band, same as me, and I'd see her at the end of our row, puffing away, chatting with the girls who sat between us. There was something about the way she'd smile at me sometimes that made me feel like she was flirting with me. It was always this big "oh gosh, I'm so glad to see you're looking at me the same time I'm looking at you" sort of a smile that made me think she was secretly aching for a smile from me. I liked the thought. She was so impossibly beautiful, though, it was silly for me to think about. I knew that. She was gorgeous and popular and there was just no way on God's green Earth that she was hungry for attention from the likes of me.

One time, while waiting for our buses out in front of the school, she came up to me and told me that she was jealous of my hair.

"My hair's just so straight, I can't get it to do anything," she said, flicking a finger through her lank, perfectly straight locks. "I bet your hair holds a curl really well."

I smiled and said that it did, though no one had ever properly curled it for me, and I didn't have the foggiest how to curl it myself.

"You're so lucky," she said.

Another time, we were all at school for an evening concert. We were dressed in black pants and white shirts, but rather than the usual dress pants, my mom and I had found this fantastic pair of skinny black jeans that were black enough to pass for professional wear.

Amanda came up to me in the band room, touched me on the shoulder and said, "Oh my god, wear did you get those pants?"

I blushed and said, “Below the Belt.”

“You look amazing,” she said in the gushy, yet totally asexual way that girls were always complimenting each other. “I’ll have to get some for myself.”

I wanted to say she’d look good in a pair of her own, but the words wouldn’t find their way out of my mouth in time.

One day in Band class, Amanda’s eyes were red and puffy. She’d pick her flute up, puff a few notes, then lay it down in her lap. I could see she was crying halfway through Nadia’s Theme—the *Young and the Restless* anthem we were preparing for the next concert—and I wondered why. I was so distracted by her unhappiness, I could hardly play.

Later, while we were shuffling papers and transitioning to the next song, I heard someone ask her something about a guy. She shook her head, her eyes grew even redder and more tearful, and she asked to leave the class.

No guy had ever upset me like that before. For her to be that upset over one, she had to be SUPER straight, I reasoned.

Well, whatever. It wasn’t as if anything was ever going to happen between us.

It was around that time that my friend Crystal started hanging out with a different group. There was this stage in the cafeteria that the goth kids and the theatre kids liked to hang out on during lunch, and one day Crystal just sort of disappeared into their ranks. I couldn’t understand what

she saw in the kids who always wore long trench coats and dyed black hair, and who were always listening to death metal and setting things on fire, but I couldn't get her alone to ask.

There was one girl among them, Chelsea, who Crystal seemed to hang out with the most. Chelsea had dyed orangeish hair and sleepy eyes. She always looked like she'd just rolled out of bed five minutes earlier and stumbled into the school. She had a small plastic tube that she carried around with her always—the kind of tube that used to contain M&Ms Minis. Within it, she had various pills she'd take from time to time, or offer to others. I knew they were drugs, though what kind of drugs, I had no idea. She showed them to me once when we were sitting on the bus together, and I told her in an only slightly phony teetotaling voice that drugs were “icky and unclean” which she found hilarious. They might have been vitamins, or even candies for all I know, and she was just making fun of me by tricking me into thinking they were something far more nefarious, and they might have been totally illegal and, indeed, terribly unclean. I couldn't tell. So many people seemed to get a kick out of randomly lying about small things and watching as you tried to figure out what was real.

Crystal was super attached to Chelsea, and I had the feeling there was more to it than just friendship. They were always together, and more than once I'd seen Crystal laying her head on Chelsea's shoulder, exactly as I'd done with Dalton. Girls did that sort of thing, I knew, and it usually meant nothing. But somehow with Crystal, I knew in my gut that there was more to the story.

It was so hard for me to imagine the two of them together, I could hardly let the thought crystalize in my mind. The moment I pictured Crystal leaning in to kiss Chelsea, or wanting to see her naked, my stomach would clench and I'd feel like I was going to throw up. It was just so over the top for reasons I couldn't put my finger on, and I had no idea how to deal with it.

One night in the fall of 2004, as I was chatting with Crystal on MSN Messenger, she told me she had a crush on someone. My stomach started flipflopping and I broke out in a cold sweat. I was at my aunt and uncle's house, and my family were all having dinner in the next room. Our own internet at home was so slow, I could never use Messenger. It was a special treat to be able to finally chat on a fast computer like everyone else at school did, but I couldn't enjoy it. My heart was racing and I couldn't stop myself from asking who the crush was. The thought entered my mind for a split second that it might be me, but I pushed it away. No way I could handle that just now. Not when I had no clue how I'd react.

—Who's the guy? I typed.

— I don't think you know the person, she said, skirting the need to write "him."

—Well, who is it? I asked.

She didn't say anything. Her status switched over to "Busy."

—Is it a guy or a girl? I finally asked, my fingers trembling as I tried to type. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. It was late fall, but I was sweating through my shirt as I saw her switch back from Busy to Online. A message popped up to let me know that she was typing.

—chick

Lower case, no punctuation.

The air seemed to suck out of the room. No one had ever admitted a same-sex attraction of any kind to me before. Not a single soul. Certainly not one of my best friends. Yet here she was, admitting it to me with no more coercion than a question or two.

—Is it Chelsea? I asked.

—ya

I could feel her nervousness through the flickering blue light of the monitor.

—cool, I said.

—yeah? You don't mind? she asked. I felt my face grow hotter. I knew I should treat her revelation like it was nothing, or at least nothing to be excited over, but I couldn't think what to say. On the one hand, what she'd just said terrified me. I had a lesbian friend, or at least one who was questioning their sexuality enough to be open about having a crush on a girl. The debate about gay marriage was raging on a national level. Every time someone turned on the news, there was something about gay marriage.

I didn't have to dig deep into my mind to come up with a million examples of homophobia that complicated my reaction. A close childhood friend of mine, Cassandra, used to throw the word "lesbo" around all the time, and I didn't have to ask if it was a good thing or a bad thing to be a lesbo. I'd felt plenty of urges—the urge to run my fingers through Cassandra's hair, the urge to sleep in her bed at sleepovers, the urge to hug her (all of which had happened at some point or another)—but all of those actions were only okay if I didn't have any feelings behind them. So long as you weren't a lesbian, I'd even heard of girls getting drunk and making out at parties. No one said anything bad about them, though, because they *liked* guys. They'd only *date* guys. Not once had I heard anything about any of them having *feelings* for a girl, never mind the kind of strong feelings that left them crying in Band class.

If I said it was totally fine, though, could I still be a Christian? Christianity was about love and acceptance and reservation of judgement, sure, but it was also one of the number one reasons that people in the news liked to fall back on for why they couldn't support gay marriage.

“It’s right there in the Bible,” they always said. “In Leviticus. Man shall not lie with man.”

Always in a southern accent. Always shouted. And always so sure.

—No, it’s fine, I said, adding that I had to get back to supper.

—Okay, see you Monday :)

I said I’d see her, too, and I signed off.

When I rejoined the family, no one seemed aware that anything had just happened to me, but I felt like the whole world was watching me, waiting for my next move. I wanted so badly to be a good person, and a good person, to me, had always been a Christian. “He’s not very Christian,” we’d always say of anyone caught up in alcohol or greed or cheating. I wanted so badly to believe in God and Heaven and all of that, so my family and I could be together forever and my life would have some meaning. If I didn’t have that, if I traded it all in for a friendship that I would ultimately lose through death anyway, though, then what was the point?

At school on Monday, Crystal asked me in person if I was really cool with everything she’d told me. We were in front of the school, surrounded by kids pouring off of school buses. Anyone would be able to hear us if they just paid a little attention, but everyone was focused on getting where they needed to be.

“I mean...it’s a sin, isn’t it?” I said.

She lurched back, as if I’d slapped her upside the head.

“What?”

“I just mean...I mean I’m not *saying* it’s a sin or that it should be, but *isn’t* it? I mean, doesn’t the Bible say...”

She didn't let me finish. Her eyes flooded with tears and she turned and walked away.

"What was that?" my friend Christina asked.

"Nothing," I said.

For the next few weeks, Crystal and I barely spoke. She came up to me one time in the halls to tell me her mom was very disappointed in me, but that was all she said. I didn't try to set things right, because I still didn't know what right was, exactly, but she was never far from my mind.

In the news, stories came out about senators and lawmakers and all kinds of prominent people who'd been anti-gay quite publicly, and who—it later turned out—were hiding gay lives of their own. Every day, it seemed, another story came out about how everyone who said being gay was a sin was secretly gay themselves. I knew it couldn't be quite as easy as that, but I also knew what I'd said and what I felt, or what I was terrified I might be feeling, and I knew that not all the stories could be fake.

In English class, we had a debate about gay marriage. Naturally, I was on the side that was against it. I parroted all kinds of ridiculous statements I'd heard in the news about "Adam and Steve" and "why can't it be marriage in all but name" and so on. Our side lost, but I was commended by my teacher for my articulation and confidence.

In the weeks following, a few different people called me a Bible thumper. While working on a group project one day, my group decided we needed a Bible verse. I went to my locker and grabbed my Bible, and one of the girls in the group laughed so long and so loud at the thought of

someone carrying a Bible with them to school, we ended the block without getting anything done.

I couldn't understand it. I'd been raised my whole life to believe that Christianity was good and right—that anyone good and loving was on the side of Christianity. How could it have possibly switched so completely that anyone on the Christian side of things was actually worthy of ridicule and righteous anger? I didn't understand it.

The choice, as I'd always been led to believe—the only real choice worth making—was between following a Christian god and spending an eternity in fiery damnation. It never struck me personally as much of a *choice* really, given the absolute punishment that went with one of the “options” but it was still something I believed in. How could I be fine with Crystal being gay and with gay marriage if I thought everyone gay was going to Hell? I couldn't just fake it, so I'd have to believe it. If I believed it, though, then what did that say about Christianity? Would I be damned as well?

I had no idea what to do. So I just kept doing what I was doing. I stayed the course and I prayed that it would all somehow make sense.

By the time I started university in 2012, I'd had long term relationships with three guys (almost marrying one of them).

I'd also kissed a girl and left the church. I hadn't yet made any sort of declarations about my sexuality, but I also didn't really care. I thought about girls all the time, and guys, and I didn't feel any pressure not to.

I had a guy friend who'd spent his life in much the same state of fear, confusion, and self-loathing as I had. He didn't know if he was gay, bi, straight, trans, or anything. Every time we hung out, we'd talk about the various attractions we'd had to guys and girls since we'd last seen each other, and what we thought it all meant. One week he'd decide he was simply gay, and he was going to live out and proud. The next week, he'd be absolutely convinced he was straight and had simply gotten carried away with something he'd seen on TV.

I was much the same. One week, I'd be so disgusted with men and so completely uninterested with anything concerning them, I'd be convinced I was gay. Something would have happened in the news—a rumour about a beautiful actress being into girls—and I'd be convinced that, because I was so obsessed with whoever it was at the time, that meant I was gay. Then, the very next week, I'd have had a good few days with my boyfriend and I'd be convinced once again that I was straight with just a few lingering curiosities.

It wasn't long after I started my degree that I simply decided to let things lie where they seemed to want to lie. I liked guys and I liked girls. Not always to the same extent, and not always at the same time, but I liked them both. I couldn't remember a single two-week period in my life where I'd felt all the way straight or gay, and I wasn't going to force the matter anymore.

I started telling a few of my new university friends that I was bisexual. Everybody I told was either totally accepting or completely neutral. It was everything I'd hoped for and the exact opposite of what I'd provided for Crystal.

Since then, Crystal and I have sorted things out. I've told her all about the ways I actually feel, and where my head was at in school. She's told me all about how much I hurt her, and how completely over it she is. We've moved on.

That doesn't mean, though, that I've told everyone in my life how I really feel or who I really am. Even some of my most beloved family members don't really know, because I haven't really felt that I could tell them.

In 2018 when Hannah Gadsby's special *Nanette* came out on Netflix, I was in the latter half of my teaching degree in Vancouver. There was so much buzz around the special, and for so many well-deserved reasons.

For me, though, the part that struck me the most was when Hannah—an out and proud lesbian—confessed to homophobia. Not towards others, mind you, but towards herself:

“I didn't come out to my grandma last year because I'm still ashamed of who I am— not intellectually, but right there,” she said, patting her heart. “I still have shame...By the time I identified as being gay, it was too late. I was already homophobic, and you do not get to just flick a switch on that. No, what you do is you internalize that homophobia and you learn to hate yourself. Hate yourself to the core. I sat soaking in shame in the closet for ten years. Because the closet can only stop you from being seen. It is not shame-proof. When you soak a child in shame, they cannot develop the neurological pathways that... carry thoughts of self-worth. They can't do that. Self-hatred is only ever a seed planted from outside in. But when you do that to a child, it becomes a weed so thick, and it grows so fast, the child doesn't know any different. It becomes as natural as gravity. When I came out of the closet, I didn't have any jokes. The only thing I

knew how to do when I came out of the closet was to be invisible and to hate myself. It took me another ten years to understand that I was allowed to take up space in the world.”

If I could go back to my childhood and simply feel the things I felt without having to judge or filter them, I wonder how different a person I’d be today. I don’t regret the person I am or lament my life as some lost, wasted stretch of confusion and mistruth, but I do wonder how different my life would be if I’d simply been allowed to feel what I felt, and to sort through my feelings on my own, without a ranking system of “acceptable” and “shameful to the core.”

Chapter 8—Between Appointments

A year came and went after the first doctor’s appointment, and nothing happened. A year of individual mornings and afternoons and evenings lined end to end, full of frightened prayer and envy and hating my body and my luck so much I could hardly stand it.

I’d gotten taller, and my body hair had thickened a bit, but that was it. I was sixteen now, and six feet tall. My chest was still completely flat. I hadn’t had a period, and the pain in my groin had only gotten more consistent. The pain that used to hang around mostly just in the mornings, or when I bumped against something was now almost constant. I couldn’t lie on my stomach without pain. Couldn’t walk down the high school halls without holding a binder or a bag in front of me to guard my crotch or block prying eyes from my flat chest. In P.E. class, I changed in the little bathroom stall in the change room. Changing in front of anyone was unthinkable to me. Occasionally, girls would walk past the stall and rattle the doors, laughing and asking loudly why I never changed with other people.

All my friends had full figures. They were all menstruating. Both of my younger sisters were menstruating now. I was the only one I knew who wasn’t.

It was 2004, and we only had the one family computer that sat in my parents’ bedroom. Our rural internet was terribly slow, and it was difficult to look anything up. There was no Facebook yet and no discourse on sex and gender that matched anything I was experiencing—at least, none I came across. I didn’t know what to do.

And a couple of other things had started to happen to me. Things I absolutely and completely could not bring up with anyone.

The first was relatively straightforward, but still humiliating.

Twice now—both times after I'd already turned sixteen—I wet the bed.

Nothing out of the ordinary had led up to either instance. I hadn't drunk more than usual before bed. I wasn't more anxious than usual. I'd peed before I'd gone to sleep, as always. Nothing had prepared me for the horrible discovery upon waking. And both times, I woke up soaked and panicked.

The first time, I couldn't quite believe what was happening. I woke up wet and smelly and sixteen years old. That kind of thing just didn't happen at sixteen. It was summer and I'd been sleeping out in the backyard in our tent with Britt and Ari. The two of them were still asleep, and I was alone in my wet sleeping bag—one of the family sleeping bags we took on camping trips. I was wearing the handmade leopard print boxers I'd stitched myself in Home Ec and a white tank top that was now sort of yellowish.

The shame and shock were too much to handle. This sort of thing just didn't happen to people at sixteen. Sweet sixteen was about trying new sexy, druggy, alcoholic, adult things. It was about getting your license and taking one more enormous step into the adult world. It was not about regressing into a child who couldn't hold their bladder through a whole night.

With no better idea of what to do, I got up, rolled the sleeping bag into a bundle and hid it in the woodshed in our backyard. Then I snuck inside, grabbed some fresh clothes from the bedroom, had a bath and stowed my pee-soaked clothes in a bundle beside the washing machine. There was no way I could simply throw them out, as Mom always did the laundry, and she knew

well what clothes we owned. She'd ask what had happened, and I would have to tell her. I needed to buy myself some time, but I had no clue how.

Later that day, I scrubbed out the sleeping bag with soapy water as best I could, but when I went to grab my pajamas from beside the washing machine, they were gone. I wanted to ask Mom about it, but she didn't say anything until a couple days later when she was doing laundry.

"I found your pajamas beside the washing machine," she said as I was heading out the back door, which is beside the bathroom, which contains the laundry machines.

"Oh yeah?" I said.

"Why did they smell so bad? And what were they doing there?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "It really stank in the tent. Maybe something got into the sleeping bags."

A few months later, it happened again. This time, it was late fall and I was sleeping in my bed. Thankfully, the sheets didn't get wet beyond a tiny spot on the bottom sheet that I managed to spray down with disinfectant and Febreze, but again, there was no way to hide the pajamas without Mom noticing. I tried hiding them at the bottom of the laundry basket, but she approached me later that day and asked outright if I'd peed the bed.

The question hung in the air between us, unable to climb back down her throat, and unable to get inside my head and make sense.

"I...no...maybe a little," I said, feeling my face go hot. "I don't know why."

Mom just nodded and left it at that.

The second thing was far more intimate and far more frightening.

For most of the last year, whenever I'd masturbate, or even just get excited, a horrible pain would come along with it. A different pain unlike anything else I'd felt. If I had an orgasm, or even if I was just really excited, it was like a dam would break somewhere inside me, somewhere deep down and unreachable inside my body, and I'd be overwhelmed with waves of pain that would last as long as an orgasm, sometimes longer. The pain was so bad, I could do nothing but grab hold of my crotch and wait for it to be over. If the pain of the lumps in my groin was like a kick from a flaming golf shoe, the new pain was like a pair of flaming hands were reaching into the golf shoe gash and ripping me open from side to side. Like someone reaching into a turkey's ass and ripping the whole poor bird open from end to end.

The first few times it happened, I thought I was bleeding out. The pain was so bad, I felt sure I must have ruptured something. But there was no blood. No evidence. I couldn't even pinpoint the location of the pain, because it seemed to rip through the very centre of my body, somewhere behind the lumps and down towards my spine. The only thing I could do was try not to get excited, or to have an orgasm. Not terribly easy at sixteen. Certainly not when you're unsure if the pain is caused by excitement, or if it's just one more random "fuck you" from the universe that'll fade once you've been properly humbled.

But the pain kept coming, and I couldn't ignore it.

It would be years before I'd have a Catholic friend who would explain to me the sin of masturbation but, don't forget, the pain came whether I touched myself or not. All I had to do was get excited, and it could happen all on its own. Like a wet dream, but instead of semen it was lava, and instead of ending up all over the bed sheets, it ended up all over every nerve ending in the lower half of my body.

I tried not to get excited. I tried to shut down even the most basic physiological processes brought on by simple visual or mental stimulation. But it was no use. I *wanted* pleasure, and I could easily remember a time when excitement had led to nothing else. But my body didn't *care* what I wanted. Like any other body, my body was drawn towards pleasure, but it was also the source of my pain, and there was nothing I could do but begin to connect pleasure and the drive towards it with unspeakably embarrassing, shameful pain.

In addition to the really secret pain that I absolutely would not and could not articulate to anyone around me, the usual pain of the lumps was also ever-present. I couldn't be sure that Mom's mind was also on the fact that a year had come and gone, and nothing pubescent had happened for me, but surely she knew. She knew I wasn't requesting pads or tampons whenever she went grocery shopping. She could see my chest, whether she looked or not, and she could see how flat I still was. She'd bought me a training bra once, on a whim—the kind that little girls wear when they're just starting to develop—but she knew it never left my drawer. She never had to wash it, and there was never an outline or a strap or anything showing beneath my shirts. She couldn't guess at the extent of the pain in my groin, as I hadn't mentioned it to her again since that one whimsical time on the couch, but the absence of all my feminine traits was as big a presence as anything else.

The first snow of my grade eleven year had fallen when I came to her and asked her to book me another appointment.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

I just nodded and headed off to the bedroom where Britt and Ari were watching a movie, laughing and chatting away like we all used to.

Chapter 9—Representation is Important

When I started grade seven in the year 2000, the only movie anyone could talk about was the smash summer hit, *Scary Movie*, starring Anna Faris. It was rated R, but somehow, everyone had seen it. Everywhere I went in my middle school halls, there was at least one skinny guy shouting “WAZZAAAAP.” People mimicked Doofy’s walk, which of course mimicked Verbal Kints’s distinct stride in *The Usual Suspects*. Everything anyone said was a reference to an allusion to something else. If you hadn’t seen the movie and you had no idea what anyone was talking about, you almost couldn’t converse. The only option was to see the movie.

Somehow, I managed to borrow a copy of the DVD from my friend Crystal and watch it without my mom finding out. Even though it was a parody movie, there were all kinds of sex and borderline nudity and drugs, and I knew Mom wouldn’t approve.

About halfway through the movie, there’s a scene with Cindy’s (Anna Faris’) PE teacher, Miss Mann. She’s sitting with Cindy in her office, and while she’s monologuing to Cindy about various sexually themed feminine issues of which one might be ashamed of, she spreads her legs and a huge, pendulous scrotum falls out of her skirt. She gets up and walks around Cindy, flirtatiously touching Cindy’s shoulders as Cindy starts to panic.

“Thanks for ball—I mean—all your help,” Cindy stammers as she escapes out into the halls.

Sitting on my bedroom floor, watching the movie at minimum volume, I was dumbstruck. Could a woman really have a scrotum and testes? Or, like Miss Mann seemed to

imply, could a woman have such things surgically attached to her body in order to benefit from the testosterone? Was that how athletic competitiveness worked? I knew testosterone was instrumental in male athleticism, but could it be used in the same way for girls?

It hardly mattered one way or the other, because Miss Mann was clearly a laughingstock, and the last thing I'd ever want to be.

The following year, once I'd turned thirteen, the movie *Rat Race* came out. Once again, it was all anyone could talk about.

Within the first twenty minutes or so, there was a scene where Cuba Gooding Jr's character, Owen, is sitting at a bar and asking the bartender (who's turned away from him) for a drink.

"Miss? Miss? Can I have another one of these, please?" he asks.

The bartender turns. They've got close-cropped hair, a flat chest, and a plain face.

"Oh, sorry," Owen says. "I thought you were a woman."

"I am a woman," the bartender says in a high, womanly voice as she plants an attitudinal hand on her hip. Owen's face falls, the joke is done, and the scene moves on.

Later in the movie, there's a whole segment with a bus full of Lucy Ricardo cosplayers headed to an *I Love Lucy* convention. One of the cosplayers asks Owen (who happens to be driving the bus) if he can pull over for a bathroom break. Owen says there's a bathroom in the

back, and that the Lucy in question should just use it as she doesn't have anything the other Lucy's haven't seen before. Our Lucy responds in a very deep, manly voice, "Not necessarily," frightening Owen so much he screams and almost crashes the bus.

Later that year, an episode of *Friends* called "The One with the Rumour" was released. At my school, as with many other schools in the late 1990s/early 2000s, *Friends* was the most popular show anyone had ever heard of. This episode, in particular, had Brad Pitt as a guest star, multiplying its popularity by a factor of at least a billion.

The episode's premise was that Brad's character Will, who went to high school with Rachel and Ross and the gang, used to be fat, but had somehow become skinny and hot. Back in the day (it's revealed), he had an unrequited crush on Rachel. Knowing Rachel wouldn't accept him, Will (and Ross) started a rumour that Rachel was a hermaphrodite, or—as they so delicately worded it in the episode—a girl with a "teenie weenie."

"The rumor was that um...you had both male and female reproductive parts," Ross says when confronted.

"What?" Rachel gasps.

"That's right, we said your parents flipped a coin and decided to raise you as a girl, but you still had a hint of a penis."

Rachel dissolves, shouting, "OH MY GOD!"

"Everyone in our school heard it!" Monica shouts defensively.

"Everyone in MY school heard it," Chandler chimes in. "You were the hermaphrodite cheerleader from Long Island?"

The laugh track is on max volume.

Rachel dissolves and covers her face in her hands. It's all simply too much for her to handle. How could her friends try to ruin her life like this?

"This is why Adam Carter wouldn't go out with me," she says, gathering herself just enough to vent her frustrations. "This is why Billy Tratt would only stay in *this* region..." she continues, motioning angrily at her breasts.

Ross says, "Actually, Billy Tratt is gay now, so that one's not really our fault."

Rachel turns to Monica. "Monica, how come you never told me about this?"

"I thought it might be true," Monica confesses, "and I was afraid you were gonna cry and then show it to me."

Rachel turns to Joey and finds him staring pointedly at her crotch. "Joey, stop staring, there's nothing there, it's not true."

"I'm afraid I'm gonna need proof," Joey (ever the lech) says with his hands in the air.

The laugh track picks it up another decibel.

A different rumour comes up about Ross making out with their fifty-something-year-old high school librarian. Rachel brandishes her finger at Ross and says, "What you did to me is *way* worse. You gave me a teenie weenie."

Will laughs, the audience laughs, and the subject is settled. Rachel had it worse—worse than the story of a grown, public school worker engaging intimately with an underage student. No question.

In early 2004, I went on a movie date with a guy from school. We saw the Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore movie *50 First Dates*. Sandler plays a guy trying to date a girl (Barrymore) who has short-term memory loss and can never remember meeting him.

There's a character in the film named Alexa who works with Sandler at an aquarium on Oahu. Alexa, clearly played by a woman, is supposed to be this gender atypical mess of a human being whose gender and sexuality are hilariously ambiguous. Her chest is flat, she wears no makeup, and her hair is done up in a Swiss braided crown. She hits on Sandler and one of Sandler's female dates, and complains of being "grouchy due to lack of recent physical intimacy."

Sitting in the theatre, watching this nonsense person get barfed on by a walrus and bowled ass-over-tea-kettle in the sea while wearing a children's flotation device—all the while sporting a chest as flat as mine—I could only sit quietly and hope my date wouldn't wonder if there was anything gender atypical about me.

Another character in the movie, Jennifer/Jonathan, is a trans man who Barrymore's character remembers as a woman. At one point, the character excuses themselves from a beach hangout, saying in a very deep voice, "I gotta go tinkle," to which Sandler responds disgusted and disturbed.

Now, few people would argue an Adam Sandler movie is the place to go if one's craving delicacy or understanding, but I didn't know that at the time. I was just a teenager on a date.

In 2008, my sisters and I rented *Baby Mama*. If you haven't seen it, it's a movie with Tina Fey and Amy Poehler where Tina Fey's a late 30s business lady who can't get pregnant, and Amy Poehler's a grown lady child who promises to carry a baby to term for Tina in exchange for \$100,000. An odd pairing, to be sure! Naturally, wouldn't you know it, this odd couple ends up living together and learning a little about life from the other side of the tracks. Hoo boy, the hijinks they get into!

Anyway, there's an obligatory scene where Tina's in a bookstore (straight-laced, preppy type that she is) looking for books on how to raise children. She's on the phone with her sister, and out of nowhere she says, her voice laced with anxiety, "What if the baby's a *hermaphrodite*?"

Her sister, blind-sided by this sudden, irrational fear says, "A what?" To which Tina helpfully responds, "A *chick* with a *dick*. I heard it happens to, like, two percent of babies."

"Well, then, that would mean that two of the people we went to high school with were hermaphrodites," her sister responds, to which Kate/Tina—no doubt remembering a lineup of less conformist high school bodies—goes, "Actually, that sounds about right."

The movie continues, and the subject isn't brought up again until Tina's new boyfriend picks up one of the baby books while in her apartment. Noting the book he's selected, Tina says, "Read the chapter on hermaphrodites. You won't sleep for a week."

I was twenty years old at the time, and in a happy relationship with a guy who claimed not to mind in the least that I was intersex. Now, granted, I didn't have a penis. I didn't have a scrotum, and I had all the external lady bits, so there were few tangible stumbling blocks to his heterosexuality. Thanks to modern medicine, I didn't even have secret testes burning shamefully away inside of me anymore. Outwardly, I looked every bit the part of the twenty-year-old girlfriend, up for anything with the guy she loved.

The instant shame I felt at everyone's revulsion and ridicule in the film, though, was overwhelming. All kinds of thoughts went through my head. Was I really a confident, beautiful young woman with a boyfriend I'd chosen to date, or was I a twisted freak who'd managed to find the *one* guy capable of loving me? And if he *was* the only one capable of loving me, was I *forced* to remain with him for the rest of my life?

All the other examples of gender non-conforming bodies laid the groundwork, but suddenly this one filled me with shame. If my body was the kind of thing an expectant mother would need to call her sister to worry about, then what right did I have to be proud or comfortable in my skin?

When I was twenty-four years old, I read Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *Middlesex* for the first time. The novel's protagonist, Cal, was an intersex person who started out life as a female-presenting person named Calliope, who (upon learning of her intersexuality) began instead to live life as a man named Cal. It was the first time I'd ever seen an intersex character portrayed as a human being just figuring out their body and their life like anyone else. Cal (Calliope in youth) was tall,

awkward, wavy-haired, flat-chested, and terribly insecure and uncomfortable in their skin. It was the first time I'd ever seen someone even close to myself represented on the page.

Cal's 5 Alpha Reductase condition, though, was somewhat different from my Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome. For instance, as Eugenides has explained, inbreeding is a necessary part of 5 Alpha Reductase syndrome, where, to my knowledge, there is no incest required for AIS. People with 5 Alpha Reductase also tend to be more virilised than people with the higher grades of AIS, like mine.

Naturally, the conflation of incest and intersexuality within the book has drawn some criticism and created some less than nuanced dialogues online. Ignoring that, it's still the closest I've ever come to seeing a story like mine in print. It may not be my story, but it's not Jennifer Aniston and Brad Pitt shouting at each other about a "teenie weenie," and I'd argue that's a step in the right direction. For someone as obsessed with movies as I have been my entire life, I don't necessarily need to see someone like myself on screen. But a little less ridicule would be wonderful.

Movies aren't the only arena for hysteria around phenotypical sexual purity, though.

In 2009, a photo was released of Lady Gaga wherein her crotch seemed to have a bit more of a bulge to it than the absolute nothingness apparently acceptable as the standard. Rumours ran rampant that Gaga might have a penis—or at least something "out of the ordinary."

When the story broke, an article was published on *ABC News* that opened with the sentence, "Lady Gaga may not be a he-she, but she sure is having fun with the rumours." Within the article was a supposed quote from Gaga saying, "It's not something that I'm ashamed of, just isn't something that I go around telling everyone. Yes. I have both male and female genitalia, but

I consider myself a female. It's just a little bit of a penis and really doesn't interfere much with my life. The reason I haven't talked about it is that it's not a big deal to me. Like come on. It's not like we all go around talking about our v***. I think this is a great opportunity to make other multiple-gendered people feel more comfortable with their bodies. I'm sexy, I'm hot. I have both a **** and a p*****. Big f*****g deal."

The article goes on to say that, "When ABC News.com asked Gaga's manager if the 'Poker Face' singer is a hermaphrodite and if she said the above quote, he replied: 'This is completely ridiculous.'"

Whatever the reason for Gaga's supposed crotch bulge, whatever the reality of her body is or isn't, it hardly matters. What matters is the way these matters are dealt with in life, art, and public discourse.

In the 2018 Munk debate on political correctness in which he fought alongside controversial Canadian professor and social critic, Dr Jordan Peterson, Stephen Fry said, "You know, words do matter...Gay rights came about in England because we slowly and persistently knocked on the door of people in power. We didn't shout, we didn't scream...when the Queen signed the Royal Assent...allowing equality of marriage, she said, "Lord, you know, I couldn't imagine this in 1953. Really is extraordinary, isn't it? Just wonderful!" and handed it over. Now, that's a nice story, and I hope it's true. But it's nothing to do with political correctness; it's to do with human decency. It's that simple."

Maybe the movies and shows I saw when I was a child and a teenager wouldn't be made today. Maybe the comments about someone's crotch wouldn't be publicized as scandal like they were in 2009. And that's good. It doesn't undo the damage of seeing bodies like mine (or

purportedly like mine) splashed across the TV and the papers as the object of natural ridicule, but it does give me hope. Like I say, I don't necessarily need to see myself represented, but it would be nice not to be ridiculed.

Chapter 10—Second Appointment

“Has it really already been a year?” the doctor asked, sitting down on her stool.

“Looks like it,” I said, feeling the weight of every awkward second piled into the room with us.

There was the usual preamble about diet, mood, exercise etc. Did I like school? Was I dating at all?

For the last question, I blushed a little. In truth, there was a boy at school I’d gotten a crush on. I barely knew him, but I liked the way he looked sad all the time. His name was Jake. He had dark brown hair and blue eyes and he was always staring at the ground. I’d been walking and chatting with my friend Jasmine during lunch one day, and she’d asked me if I liked anyone. For some reason, Jake’s face came to my mind. He was sort of friends with some of my friends, and we’d spoken a couple times, but I hadn’t really thought much about him until suddenly there he was on the tip of my tongue.

“Yeah, Jake,” I said.

And just like that, the crush was full blown. As if it came to life simply by giving it a name. And not a day too soon, either. I hadn’t had a real crush in some time, and I was desperately afraid I was on my way to becoming a lesbian. There was that girl Amanda I saw around school from time to time, and of course the many tiny, seemingly innocuous but potentially explosive things that had happened over the years that made me suspicious.

On my mom's soap opera, *All My Children*, there was this lesbian plotline between these two girls, Bianca and Frankie. And then Bianca and Maggie, Frankie's supposedly straight twin sister after Frankie died. You know soap operas. Anyway, both Bianca and Maggie were gorgeous, particularly Maggie. Bianca had to kind of convince Maggie that they should be together, because Maggie thought she was only into guys, but eventually she broke down and admitted she loved Bianca. I wasn't sure if it was just one more ridiculous soap opera thing, or if it was the kind of thing that can happen in real life, but I was terrified. I was attracted to Maggie, but I wouldn't let myself think about it. I prayed all the time for God not to make me gay. Sixteen years of being a person had exposed me to sixteen years worth of homophobia—both small and great. Every day, it seemed, there was a joke or a wink or something to indicate somebody's shameful, hilarious, repulsive gayness. Everywhere I looked, it seemed to be *The World vs Religion* (specifically Christianity, given my North American residence) in an endless debate over gay marriage, and gayness in general. The religious right—the side I understood myself to be on, because of my Christianity—was against it. I knew I couldn't give up Christianity—it was what I was raised in, and the only thing that gave me any comfort when I was terrified about dying, or about never going through puberty—so if the two couldn't coincide, then I assumed I just couldn't be gay.

So, it was a huge relief to realize I had a crush on a boy. Even if we barely knew each other, it was there. I had a real crush all my own—not because a friend liked the guy first, and not just out of desperation to have one. Surely, that meant I was straight.

“I've got a crush on this guy,” I said, feeling childish.

“Well, that's wonderful,” the doctor said, stepping towards me with her stethoscope.

“And does he feel the same?”

I shrugged.

“I don’t know. We’ve just sort of started hanging out.”

“Ah well, these things take time,” she said.

A few seconds passed as she checked my blood pressure and ears and whatnot. Then she stepped back and looked at me in this way that I just knew meant uncomfortable things were about to happen.

“So, what I’d like to do today is I’d like to give you a proper, thorough physical exam, just to get a feel for where you’re at, developmentally. Would that be all right?”

I nodded. That sounded invasive, but it also sounded like something I could easily be overthinking.

“Sure,” I said. To be honest, I didn’t *want* her middle-aged woman’s hands on my skin, with her big diamonds and perfume that smelled like something my aunts would wear. What choice did I have, though? I sat still and I willed myself not to think.

She stepped towards me.

“So, I’m just going to have to pull your robe down a bit there and examine your chest,” she said. “Would that be all right?”

I shrugged and said, “Sure.” I mean, obviously I wasn’t going to back out now. No matter how badly I wanted to.

She pulled my robe a few inches down over my shoulders, revealing the perfect flatness of my chest.

“I’m just gonna get you to raise your right arm high above your head, all right? Just straight up, as if you were trying to describe the height of someone really tall.”

I raised my arm, and she placed one hand on my back and the other over the right side of my chest. She pressed her fingertips into my armpit and started working slowly down to my nipple.

“Does any of this hurt?”

“No.” I was focusing on a painting of tulips across the room, so her face was just a blur beside mine. Tulips are my favourite flower; they’re so smooth and spring-timey. But under the fluorescent lights of the examination room, trapped in a shitty reproduction of a painting, they looked washed out and stale.

“Okay, now the other arm,” she said.

I lowered my right arm, careful not to hit her in the head, and raised my left. Her eyes were focused on something over my shoulder as she pressed away. I could feel parts of my body moving around under her fingertips. It felt like there were lumps sliding out from under her hand as she pressed, but I assumed that was just in my imagination. For all my fears about mysterious groin cancers, it had never occurred to me before that I might have some kind of breast cancer—perhaps the kind that stops breasts from growing before they even get started. Maybe such a thing could exist, though, and maybe I was just unlucky enough to have it.

“Have you had any pain or tenderness in your breasts yet?”

“A little swelling and pain once. Just for a day, in my...on the left side. Then it went away.”

“And did the swelling last long?”

“No, it was gone the next morning.”

“The tenderness too?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s the only time this happened?”

I nodded. “Mhm.”

“Okay.” She took a step back and looked me in the eye, her hand resting on my shoulder.

“So, for this next part, I’m going to get you to lie back on the bed and scooch down to the end just a little bit.”

I did as she said. She pressed her fingers down on my abdomen, massaging and working her way down the length of my body. As she moved along, I felt sure she’d feel the lumps. If she did, though, she didn’t give any sign.

“Okay, now, I need you to just let your legs sort of fall open for me,” she said.

My stomach clenched.

“Is that all right?”

I hesitated.

“...Sure.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“You sure?”

I pulled my knees up and lowered my legs an inch or two to my sides. “Mhm.”

She sat down on her stool and swivelled around to the end of the bed.

“Okay,” she said, standing up so I could see her. “Even wider than that. I need you to just”—she made a gesture with her hands that looked as if she were ripping open a melon—“let them fall, just, all the way open.”

I bit my lip and looked up at the tiles on the ceiling as my knees fell to the table.

“Perfect,” she said, sitting back down and disappearing behind the curtain of my robe as it stretched between my knees. I tried to make my mind go blank, but it was like trying to fall asleep. The harder I thought about it, the more aware I felt.

I focussed hard on the ceiling tiles, imagining the contractors putting them up there, working in the hot sun, looking forward to their lunchtime break and big, steaming thermoses full of coffee. I could almost hear their boots crunching on the gravel and bits of broken drywall.

I heard the snap of a glove, and then there was a hand touching my vagina. I gasped a little, but either she didn’t hear it, or she pretended she didn’t.

The hand turned into several fingers, all poking and pulling at my folds.

“I’m just gonna slide one finger inside for a moment. You’ll feel a little bit of pressure, okay?”

“Okay.”

The finger slid inside me, though it felt more like a fist than a finger.

“Have you done much experimentation, exploring your body?” she asked after a few seconds.

“No...I mean...not internally, I guess,” I said.

She slid the finger out of me, and a moment later, I heard the sticky sound of gloves being pulled off, followed by the splat of their rubbery bodies landing in the trash.

“All right, you can sit up,” she said, wheeling around to the side of the bed. I sat up, feeling a rush as the blood flooded out of my head and pooled somewhere lower down in my body.

“So, you’re a little bit small in there,” she said, “but that’s not completely abnormal. Are you sexually active at all?”

I shook my head.

“No, I wouldn’t think so.”

I frowned. Was she insulting me, or just stating the obvious?

“I’d like to refer you to a pediatrician friend of mine. Well, actually, she’s a pediatric endocrinologist. She’s a wonderful woman and her office is just down the street, so you won’t need to go far.”

I didn’t know what “pediatric endocrinologist” meant, but I didn’t really care.

“Can you tell—like—is there anything obviously wrong with me?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“Like, do I maybe have cancer?”

She frowned and tilted her head.

“What do you mean, exactly? What kind of cancer?”

“I don’t know—just—can cancer cause this sort of thing? Like can it stop puberty from happening properly, or whatever?”

She licked her lips.

“Well, it’s impossible to rule anything out at this point, Brianna. But no, I don’t see any indication here that cancer would have anything to do with this.”

I smiled and nodded.

“Okay, thanks.”

She smiled back, but it was a thin, cold smile.

“I’m going to get you in to see the endocrinologist as soon as possible, so we can find out what all’s going on here. I’m sure you’re chomping at the bit for something, you know, along the lines of a typical female puberty to start happening, and I don’t see any reason to make you wait any longer. With cases like this, I’ve seen it be nothing more than a little tweaking to the diet to get things going. Sometimes you’re just not getting enough of a certain vitamin, and your body doesn’t like that, so it holds you back from certain things. Back in the old days, when food was scarce, women sometimes went years at a time without menstruating.”

My smile widened as I pictured my mom and I buying an over-the-counter bottle of Vitamin B12, or something, and my breasts starting to bud the very next day.

“Yep, might as well get this show on the road,” I said.

“I mean, it might be something else hormonal. Sometimes the body’s just missing one particular enzyme or protein and it can’t get things started. It’s all very complicated as I’m sure you can imagine, and I wouldn’t rule anything out, but I really don’t think you need to concern yourself with cancer or anything like that.”

I smiled and nodded.

“You can put your things back on, now,” she said. “Unless you have any more questions?”

I hesitated. She hadn’t addressed the lumps. I hadn’t addressed the orgasm pain. I knew I should bring it all up, but I just couldn’t bring myself to say the words. The appointment was done. I was so close to free. If she hadn’t picked anything up...I mean, it wasn’t like I was tricking her by not saying anything. She was a professional whose every day was spent studying and dealing with human bodies. If she saw no need to bring anything else up, then neither did I.

“Nope, I’m good.”

She flashed another thin-lipped grin. Then she picked up the folders, pressed them against her chest, and left the room.

I got dressed and followed after her a moment later. My mom was standing at the front desk, nodding along to something the doctor was saying over the receptionist’s head. I walked over to them just as the doctor said, “...as soon as possible would be best, I think.”

Mom nodded in her distinct, rapid way that said to me ‘I’ll agree with anything you say, if you’ll just let me get the hell out of here.’

She turned to me.

“Ready to go?”

I nodded and headed for the door. There were images rushing through my head of my post-endocrinologist-appointment-newly-sorted-out body filling out a prom dress. I could see myself gliding over the dance floor in Jake’s arms, showing off my boobs and the rest of my new, womanly body, just like all the other girls. Or even just going on a date and not having to hide my chest. And I didn’t feel like talking. Not if it might lead to some sort of revelation from Mom that would throw the whole thing into question. Even just a hint of anxiety on her part could shatter what little bit of optimism I was starting to feel.

“I guess we’ll just pick up Little Caesar’s for supper,” Mom said, pulling her keys from her purse as we walked through the attached pharmacy and out into the parking lot. I pictured the night ahead, full of pizza and watching movies snuggled up with my family, and suddenly I couldn’t remember how I’d ever been worried that anything bad could ever really happen to me. I had the best family anyone could ask for. I was young. I was healthy. And soon, I’d be a normal-looking girl with graduation on the horizon and my whole life ahead of me.

I skipped the last few paces to the car and asked if I could drive home. I only had my L, but with Mom in the car, it was enough.

Mom shook her head, but added, “Next time, when we’re not in a hurry.” I smiled back at her, not minding in the least that I would have to wait. I had all the time in the world.

Chapter 11—The Endocrinologist

The endocrinologist's office was on the third floor of a four-storey building, cold glass and concrete. It was modern, though, which helped, somehow, with some of the nervousness I felt as we walked across the lobby to the bank of elevators. There was no sterile hospital smell. There were no glass-eyed patients shuffling around in blue scrubs and robes. With its coffee-coloured walls and warm, brown roof beams and door frames, it felt like a regular professional building. I could almost imagine we were there for something fun.

I sat down in the waiting room while Mom talked to the receptionist. There was a stack of magazines on the end table beside me. The one at the top of the pile was this month's *Cosmo*. The one beneath it was last month's *Maclean's*. I picked up the *Cosmo* and opened it to a random page. 'Hot Tips to Make Him Scream: Ten Tips for a Healthy Sex Life' was the title of the article. I read the first tip:

Tip Number One—The Art of Surprise. No, we don't mean jumping out from behind a wall and yelling 'Boo!' We asked the eligible guys in this country what they look for most in the bedroom, and the number one answer was Surprises. Keeping it fresh when there's so much to balance with work and home life can be tough, but a whopping seventy-seven percent of guys we asked said that surprises in the bedroom are the number one thing that keeps them interested. 'When a girl isn't afraid to try new things, I can't help coming back again and again to find out what she's got planned next,' says Tim, 21, a Junior at UCLA...

I put the magazine down, wondering how many ways there could possibly be to have sex. Didn't you just show up, start kissing and put penis in vagina—or penis in ass, or vagina against

vagina? Put private parts to private parts. There. How many other things could you possibly do? I'd heard people talk about role playing before—putting costumes on and pretending to be other people. But didn't that just *lead* to the same privates-on-privates contact? Was I missing something?

I pictured getting naked in front of Jake and seeing his eyes go over my flat chest, the lumps in my groin, the bony length of my body (I was almost an inch taller than him), and I tried to imagine anything I could add to the list of absurdities that would already surprise him about my body. But I couldn't think of anything. I mean, I could think of doing embarrassing things that he probably wouldn't expect me to do, but they were all embarrassing, not sexy.

I thought about finishing the article, but a woman showed up beside the reception desk and said my name, so I got up and followed her into a big corner office with a view of the city.

"Mom can stay here for now," she said as my mom rose to follow me.

The woman led me into a well-appointed office at the end of a short hallway. The walls were dark brown. The furniture was black leather. The whole place smelled like cleaning chemicals, but expensive ones. Not the rubbing alcohol, aerosol smells I was used to. More like shoe polish and leather.

The woman sat down behind this huge, dark brown wooden desk that stretched out below a bank of windows, and I sat down in a chair across from her. The desk held a super flat screen monitor, a bunch of pictures of a beautiful family, and an expensive-looking pen in a holder that seemed to mimic a feather quill and an ink pot. Everything was so nice, I suddenly felt self-conscious about my snowy boots and silly little outfit. Jeans and a hoodie had no right to be in such a nice place.

To the right of the desk was another door leading somewhere else. The door was a bit open, and I could see another room beyond it that just looked like a regular medical exam room. There was a bed in it that was sort of tilted up a little. It looked a lot nicer and more expensive than the beds at our family doctor's office.

"Thank you for coming in, Brianna. It's a pleasure to meet you," the woman (who I now realized to be the doctor) said, pulling my attention back to her. Normally, it would have been a receptionist who took my info and did the whole preamble with me. Somehow, skipping that step made the whole thing seem even more hoity-toity, not less.

"Nice to meet you," I said, though I was thinking the opposite.

"I'm Dr. so-and-so. I'm an endocrinologist. Do you know what an endocrinologist does? Did they explain it to you when you were with your family doctor?"

I shook my head. "Something to do with eating right and puberty, I guess. My doctor said sometimes girls who don't eat right don't get their periods, and that maybe that was what was wrong with me."

She wrinkled her brow.

"Well, I do work with diets and hormones and the ways they're intricately linked inside the body, but a poor diet generally only *halts* menstruation once it's begun; it doesn't tend to stop breast development and the onset of menses from happening. And in your case, I mean, you're *skinny*, but you're not the type of emaciated, starved person that we'd generally be dealing with in those circumstances."

My heart sank. If I'd actually believed for an instant it could be something as simple as adding a vitamin, I didn't now.

We went through the weighing and the measuring, the jokes about needing a stool to read my height, and the questions about whether or not I played volleyball or basketball. I answered all her questions and laughed at all her jokes, but there was a dull sort of ringing in my ears, as if they were packed with gauze. I could feel the physical exam coming from a mile away (the cold, gloved hand, the forced casual behaviour), and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

The ringing sound grew louder as I followed her into the room with the bed. She stepped outside and closed the door while I took off my clothes and put on the robe. "You can go ahead and take off your bra and panties, as well," she said as the door closed behind her. I took off my underwear and bundled it up in my pants. I didn't want her to see I wasn't wearing a bra, so I bundled my pants up in my hoodie and piled the clothes on a chair under my backpack.

She knocked on the door, and I made a little noise that meant it was okay to come in. I wasn't sure why we were still acting like I had anything to hide from her when she was clearly just about to see my naked body, but I played along, anyway.

She came in and placed a folder on the counter. She turned to me with her lipsticked lips and clumpy mascara on her eyelashes. She looked so much like the other doctor, it was uncanny. Like they were sisters from the same big family.

The room felt charged, as if there was a lightning storm brewing. I had the feeling that if I ran my hand over the top of my head, I'd feel my hair standing on end. Whatever the other doctor might have missed, I felt sure this one would pick up on.

“All right, let’s see here,” she said, taking a step towards me with her hands held out in front of her. She took my neck between her hands and pressed her fingertips into my glands.

“Does any of this hurt?” she asked.

“No.”

She massaged up and down my neck and under my chin. Her face was blank.

“Okay, I’m just gonna get you to slide your robe a bit over your shoulder and raise your right hand straight above your head,” she said. I smirked at the *déjà vu*.

She pressed her fingers into my pecs, massaging up and down the flat span of flesh where breasts would have been on a normal girl my age. Her hands were warmer than the other doctor’s, but still foreign and old and awful. I tried not to look at the unfamiliar rings on her fingers, the loose skin on the backs of her hands, afraid they might freak me out and I’d have to ask her to stop.

The ringing grew louder in my ears. I felt light-headed, as if I’d stood up too quickly.

“Okay, and the other one,” she said, moving to the left side of my chest. I lowered my right hand and raised my left. She massaged the area awhile and made a note in the folder on the table.

“So, not a lot of tissue in there at the moment,” she said. “I can feel the milk ducts, but they’re very underdeveloped. No lumps, though, which is a good thing.”

I nodded.

“Okay, I’ll just get you to lie back on the bed and let your legs flop open,” she said. I slid up on the bed a little way and did as she said. I heard the snap of a glove closing over her hand, and I braced myself for the cold, clinical feel of her hand.

But she didn’t touch me.

I chanced a quick glance down at the foot of the bed. She was standing there with her hands outstretched, resting on my knees. Her gaze was right on my vagina, and she looked to be thinking about something. Her mouth moved, as if she were searching for the right words.

“Your clitoris is quite enlarged,” she said after a few seconds. “Did you know that?”

I shrugged, causing the paper on the bed to crinkle beneath me.

Suddenly, I could feel her hands on me, pulling at my most sensitive area. A finger and thumb closed around my clit as she pulled it slightly from side to side. She made a sound like she was going to say something, but wasn’t sure how to phrase it.

“Normally—I mean, most commonly—the clitoris is around one to two centimeters long. And yours, just from looking at it, seems to be around an inch, or a little under an inch. I’d have to measure it properly to know for sure, but...yes, I would say it’s about an inch.” She looked up at me. “Can you remember when it started to grow exactly?”

I tried to remember, but I honestly couldn’t. It hadn’t always been that size; I knew that much. I could remember being a young girl with nothing but a crease down there. But that was when I was maybe five or six years old and just starting to explore my body. Between then and now, I didn’t have the foggiest idea when things had started to change. I hadn’t been looking for that kind of change, but it was interesting to know I had one more thing to be ashamed of.

I felt a finger creep inside of me. No warning this time.

There was the same pressure as before, and then nothing.

“Can I ask, Brianna, if you’ve done much exploration of your body?” she asked, straightening up and once again resting a hand on each of my knees. Her arms made a frame of the negative space between my legs, highlighting the feminine curves of her body, and the skinny, boyish length of my legs.

I shook my head.

“Just externally, I guess.”

She nodded.

“You can get dressed,” she said. “I’m going to go call your mom in for a quick chat. Unless you have any questions—?”

“No.”

“Okay. Be right back,” she said, flashing me a quick smile.

I got dressed the moment the door was closed. No need for Mom to accidentally walk in on me, too.

When I came out of the exam room, Mom and the doctor were seated across from one another at the desk. Mom didn’t turn around as I approached. She was slouched a little way down in her chair. She looked as if she’d just heard that someone had died.

“I’ve just been telling your mom a few things about our appointment today,” the doctor said. “I’d like to order some more blood tests before I give a final diagnosis, but if I’m right

about what I'm seeing here, I'd like to send you for a sonogram here in town. If their findings are congruent with mine, I'd like to refer you to a colleague of mine in Vancouver. She's an OB/GYN who handles these sorts of cases."

Vancouver.

Referred to a doctor in Vancouver.

The words hung in the air like a thousand different meals all being cooked in different apartments at the same time.

"Okay, and, when would that be?" Mom asked.

"Well, I'd like to book the ultrasound for as soon as possible—most likely the beginning of next week. And then, depending on the results, I'd imagine you could expect to go to Vancouver...honestly, probably no later than the middle of next month. These things tend to move quickly."

My mom nodded. I could see the wheels turning in her head. How would Dad get the time off work? How would the five of us get all the way there, pay for a hotel room, for meals, gas, and whatever else might come up? Who would watch the pets? Two cats and a dog forty minutes from town was a lot to ask of anyone.

As if reading her thoughts, the doctor chimed in, "There are programs in place for families in your situation. There's an Easter Seals house right down the road from the children's hospital where you could stay virtually free."

"Oh...good," Mom said, looking miserable.

“But we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it. For now, I’d like to book the ultrasound, and then we’ll take it from there.”

Mom nodded as she turned, finally, to look at me. Her eyes looked as if she was trying to communicate something—something that looked oddly like ‘say something—make all of this stop’—but I couldn’t be sure.

The doctor chimed in, pulling my attention back to her.

“Brianna, do you have any questions?”

I realized there was probably a name for what I had—something I’d never heard of before— but I knew it was probably far too early to ask. Besides, I didn’t want to know any more than I had to. Not if it might be horrible.

“No,” I said.

“Great. All right, well,” she said, rising to her feet and holding out a hand, “it was a pleasure to meet you both.” She shook my mom’s hand, and then mine. Mom mumbled something in return, and we left without another word.

The ride home was deathly silent. I could tell Mom was unhappy about all the sudden drama in our lives, but I could also tell she was afraid of complaining about it for fear of making me feel bad about something I had no control over. So she said nothing about it, and neither did I.

I watched the familiar woods fly by as we drove. They looked different, somehow, like my grandpa’s favourite armchair after he’d passed away—still the same structure, the same

materials, the same colour, but no longer connected to the person who valued it so much. It was like his soul had partly lived in the chair, and once he was dead, the chair was just a piece of furniture headed for the dumpster.

We got home and shambled out of the car. Without saying a word to each other, Mom went into the house and I went for a walk. Supper would be ready in half an hour or so, I knew, because it had always been ready at 5:00. But I wouldn't be back in half an hour. Not with where I was going.

Like I said, the delta where my parents live is divided into two halves by a creek that winds down the mountainside and out to the lake. On the southern side of the delta is the neighbourhood with my childhood home, and the big empty houses on the waterfront. The trees where I built forts as a kid, the hills I explored, the public beach access where I swam with my sisters, all of that is over there. On the northern side are the old heritage barns and a campground. In the summer, the campground overflows with people, but it gets so quiet in the winter you can hear the snow falling.

Just behind the barns, next to the creek, is a staircase that climbs straight up the side of the mountain. There are a few landings on it for people to stand and stare out at the waterfall and the creek below. The landings have railings carved deeply with 'such and such loves whoever' and 'The Something Family was here in Whatever Year.'

My favourite landing was one a little farther up the stairs than people tended to go. It was a larger landing with a little seat built into the railing from some excess wood the construction workers had when they were first building the stairs. The landing overlooked the waterfall from above. In the springtime, with the runoff, there'd be so much mist coming off the waterfall, you

could barely breathe while standing on the landing. The wood would be soaked, and if you weren't careful, you could fall and hit your head.

The landing also looked onto a deep, dark swimming hole hidden away behind the falls. I call it a swimming hole, but it's actually not great for swimming at all; it just *looks* like it would be. It's dark and private, and the canyon walls around it are steep and close together and all covered with roots and shrubs. It looked like the kind of secret grotto where you might swim naked with nymphs and fairies, but it's actually freezing cold and super deep. The smaller waterfall that pours into it has carved a deep wedge in the mountain, and that wedge is full of tires and beer cans and all kinds of other garbage. My dad used to scare my sisters and I into staying out of it by saying that it might go so deep into the mountain that if you were to get shoved down into the trench by the current, you might never be able to swim back out.

In the winter, the steps are always covered in ice. Winding through the shadowy woods as they do, the snow always takes longer to melt off of them.

Today was no exception. I stepped carefully, holding onto the railing like I was an old woman myself, and I tried not to think about the appointment I'd just had, or about the ones still ahead of me. I tried to leave it all on the ground below me like a neatly tied-up bag of dead leaves left to rot in the sun.

I took the steps two at a time. With legs as long as mine, it's not hard to do. It *is* tiring, though. I hadn't eaten much with so much anxiety about the appointment, and with supper still ahead, my legs were rubbery by the time I reached the landing.

I leaned against the outer rail and looked down at the falls. They were half-frozen, dribbling feebly over the mossy rocks at the bottom. There was a light breeze picking up, and it

tore at my eyes, pulling a few tears onto my lower lashes. One made it down my cheek to the dimple beside my nose, and I brushed it away with the cool sleeve of my jacket.

It wasn't that I could still feel the doctor's hands on my body, necessarily, but I *did* feel strange: older, somehow, or used, and not as clean as I'd been when I woke up that morning. I pictured the ultrasound appointment coming up, and I said a little prayer, asking for it to be the last appointment I'd need to get things sorted out. I'd only ever seen ultrasounds on TV, with happy women watching their bouncing, black and white babies on screen for the first time. But I had a good imagination. I could picture the sorts of things they might find inside of *my* body. Maybe there was a blockage of some sort—some plug in my uterus that had diverted all my menstrual blood into two painful sacs in my abdomen. *That* would show up, I'd imagine. And it could explain the lumps. Maybe they'd see that, or something else like it—something that could all be dissolved and cleared up with an injection.

And maybe—the thought forced itself into my head—maybe they'd see the lumps for what they were—cancerous blobs releasing waves of toxins into my body and ruining every system I had. Not just my reproductive system, but my lungs and my brain...

I could see all of it now: ugly dots of cancer clinging to all my most precious inside pieces, sucking the blood out of them and taking with them everything I valued so much. Everything that let me be alive. Everything that let me laugh with my family and go hiking in the hills.

The wind pulled another tear out, and I let it run down my cheek to my chin. I pictured someone finding me like that, staring out at the valley with a tear on my cheek. I pictured that someone being Jake. I imagined him coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around me

and nuzzling the back of my neck. I pictured him zipping me up with him in his winter jacket and keeping me safe from the cold, from the appointments, from everything.

The tear on my chin was starting to itch. I wiped it away and looked down from the bottom of the falls to the swimming hole far above it. With so many dangerous places right in front of me, it was hard not to imagine the various ways that something could kill me out here. I could slip and fall into the swimming hole and get sucked into the mountain. There I'd stay forever, as a cancerous, virginal skeleton, smiling up at the campers and the tourists who didn't know any better as they went for a swim. Or, I could slip and fall to my death at the base of the falls. It would be a quick death, too. I'd hit the rocks after only a second or two of falling. My head would burst open, and all the unhappiness of the last few years would break out of me and flow down the creek to the lake...

I stepped up onto the bottom of the railing and leaned a little over the edge. The wind picked up, whipping my hair around my head like a halo.

As I pulled my hair out of my eyes, I noticed something down below, lying across a boulder. I leaned further out, squinting to focus. As my eyes adjusted, I realized that it was a dead doe. Her body was spread out over a large, flat boulder with her legs splayed out in front. Her neck was bent backwards at a forty-five-degree angle, as if she were trying to stare up at the stars. Lying flat on her side the way she was, though, she was only staring at me. I followed the line of the cliff behind the boulder to the lip of the canyon where she must have fallen from. It was covered in tufts of grass and fallen logs, but not covered so completely that she wouldn't have seen where she was headed. She must have been getting chased by something, I realized, and decided that the edge of the canyon was less horrible than the snapping jaws behind her.

I stepped off the ledge and back onto the landing. I turned and headed for home, leaving the deer alone in the snow and the ice below.

Chapter 12—The Ultrasound

The morning of the ultrasound, I found myself at the kitchen table with a two-litre jug of water in front of me.

“How much do I actually have to drink?”

Mom sighed and picked a much-folded piece of paper up off the counter.

“It says six to eight glasses. And you’re not supposed to pee before they do the test.”

“How do they think I’m supposed to do that?”

She shrugged.

“I guess you just have to. So they can see things clearly on the scanner.”

I sighed and took a few more lukewarm gulps. It tasted like the plastic insides of the jug.

My sisters had left for school and Dad was at work. The house was quiet except for the sounds coming from the bathroom that meant Mom had settled in to curl her hair and do her makeup. Whenever she wasn’t instructing me on how to correctly stuff my body with near-fatal amounts of water, I could hear the metal clamp of her curling iron again and again as it fought to collect the short locks of hair she fed it and turn them into luscious curls.

“Could you feed the animals?” she asked, poking her head out of the bathroom. The curling iron was in her hand and her shirt was unbuttoned. Her bra was white lace, straining to hold in all her womanly curves. I thought of my own unworn training bra lying deflated in my drawer, and I got up to feed the animals.

The ride into town seemed to take twice as long as usual. Every curve and bump in the road jostled my bladder painfully.

“Are you sure we can’t pull over so I can pee?”

“It said you have to have a full bladder.”

“Yeah, but, full or bursting?”

“Just...full. I don’t know. Can’t you just wait?”

I sighed loudly. “I hate this.”

“Meee too.”

We rode along in shared, miserable silence. I thought about Jake, but nothing in particular. I thought about his bangs and his sad eyes, and the way he’d looked at school the day before. I’d talked to him a little, but it had taken most of the lunch hour to work up the courage. By the time I’d actually made it into his group of friends and sidled up beside him, we didn’t have time for much more than a “hey, how are things?” It was still exciting to be so close to him, though. And to be on his radar. It wasn’t much, but it was something to hold onto.

I wondered how he’d feel if he knew I was currently headed to the doctor to get an ultrasound for lumps in my abdomen, for my lack of a period, for all the things that were so wrong with me, and all the things that *might* be wrong with me. Or how he’d feel to know about all the old lady doctor hands that had been all over my body. Not that that counted as anything in

the dating world, of course, but was he out touching girls' bodies for fun while all this was happening to me? It occurred to me I had no idea if he was still a virgin, too, or if he'd been out dating and fucking for years already. Imagining him touching and being touched for fun while I'd only been touched for medical reasons made me sick with embarrassment.

Fortunately, I couldn't think too much about it; the pressure of the seatbelt on my bladder was too distracting.

"Are we almost there?" I asked as we went over the bridge into town.

Mom sighed and rolled her eyes.

"We're on the bridge. You can *see* where we are."

"I mean, is the clinic only a little way into town?" I asked, un-focusing my eyes and trying to disappear into a thoughtless place in my mind where nothing could get at me.

The car accelerated a little. Mom's mouth was a thin line. She couldn't *speed*—I don't think I've ever seen her break an actual law—but she revved all sixty-two of the Tercel's horses from sixty kilometres to sixty-five as she changed lanes to pass a semi.

Ten or fifteen minutes later, we were standing in line at the clinic. Standing up took some of the pressure off my bladder, but the pain was still excruciating. Like a swollen foot crammed into the boot that hurt it. The groin pain was simmering and low. The pee pain bloated my belly and wrapped around my back. My whole torso felt like a bag of milk that would tear open and spill if I let even a single drop slosh where it shouldn't.

I glanced around to try and get my mind off of it. There were six or so people seated in the waiting room. Of the six, four were pregnant women only a few years older than me, one was

an old man cradling his left arm, and the other was an old woman with her purse in her lap and her eyes glossed over in boredom. The pregnant women all shared the same energy—somewhere between frustrated, tired, hungry, sore, bored, and excited. It was strange to look at, foreign, somehow, like watching old people in their stooped, grey bodies and trying to imagine what it might be like to be them.

To the casual observer, I might have looked similar to the young, expectant moms, but truthfully, I felt much closer to the old people. I wasn't here for anything exciting. I didn't even know if I had a future to look forward to. What if the whole rest of my life was just an endless parade of back-to-back medical appointments designed to simply keep me chugging along?

The line moved, and Mom started answering a series of questions offered up by the curt woman at the desk.

“Yes, she's fasted. Yes, she's drunk water. No, she's never had an ultrasound before. Yes, here's her Care Card. No, we don't mind waiting...”

We took a seat and I glanced around the room, looking for the washroom. It wasn't more than a minute or two, though, before a young woman in scrubs appeared at the end of the hallway to my right and called my name. I left my coat in my seat and followed after her.

“How are you today, Brianna?”

“Fine,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Have you drunk your eight cups of water this morning?”

“Yep.”

“Have you peed?”

“Nope.”

“Oh, wow, that must be comfortable,” she joked. “You can get changed in here,” she said, stopping by a change room with a curtain for a door. “You can leave your things in there, if you like. Once you've changed, you can go in that room right there.” She pointed behind her.

“Room Two.”

“Thanks.”

She smiled, fumbled with the curtain on the change room, then disappeared.

I changed quickly. I couldn't remember if she'd said to leave my socks and underwear on, so I opted to leave them on, just in case. Better to have to take them off later than to show up butt-naked for something that didn't require nudity.

I opened the door to Room Two and stepped inside. The room was small and octagonal, with soft blue, almost white walls. The only light was the blue glow of a computer monitor, behind which was seated a rather large, short Filipina woman with a huge, warm smile.

“Hi, Brianna, I'm Erica,” she said, holding out a hand. I shook it, letting my robe fall open in the back.

“You can jump up on the bed there, and we'll get started,” she said, still smiling.

I climbed onto the bed and lay down.

“I'll just get you to pull that blanket up over your waist,” she said, pointing to a thin, blue blanket lying folded on a chair beside the bed. I grabbed it and pulled it over my legs and up to my stomach.

“I’m gonna get you to pull your gown up just a bit so I can see your stomach, and then I’m gonna squirt some stuff on your belly there. For a second or two, it’s going to feel really cold, and then it’s going to get nice and warm. I’m not going to lie, though, some people find it a little weird feeling, regardless,” she said, raising a big tube of something over my stomach.

“No worries,” I said, bracing for the impact.

She squirted about a litre of goo onto my chest. The bottle made a horrible fart sound as she squeezed.

“Okay, now I’m going to use this wand to work my way around your pelvis, and I’m going to stop in a lot of different places to take pictures, just to get the best picture I can and make sure I don’t miss anything.”

“Okay.”

She pressed the wand to my stomach, and instantly my bladder felt like it was going to explode.

I winced.

“Oh, wow, looks like you’ve got a *really* full bladder there,” she said, sounding impressed.

“Yeah, Mom and I weren’t sure if I was supposed to pee out any of the water.”

“Oh, gosh, you didn’t pee at all after drinking eight whole cups of water?”

“Nope.”

“Do you want to maybe pop into the washroom for a second?” she asked. She didn’t sound annoyed.

“Would that be okay?”

“For sure!” she said, laughing. “It’s good to have *some* water in your bladder—it makes the images show up better—but there’s no need for you to be uncomfortable through all this.”

I sat up and rubbed some of the goo off with my robe. It smelled sterile, like mouthwash watered down, and it clung to the robe in this horrible, gritty way that felt like it would be impossible to ever clean off. It made me think of the old pink robe my mom wore when we were kids. The one with the permanent vomit stain on the shoulder that had grown and calcified through my sisters’ and my infancies, and could never quite get clean.

“It’s just through that door,” she said, gesturing at a small door at the back of the room.

I hurried into the room, peed, and came back.

“You should have asked about that,” she laughed. “No one would have told you you couldn’t pee.”

I shrugged and lay back down. She squeezed some fresh goo onto my belly, and I started to relax as I stared up at the ceiling. I felt like asking how I was supposed to know when any particular discomfort was unnecessary, but it sounded too whiny in my head. What would this woman know of my last few weeks? Besides, she worked in medicine; she’d probably seen every kind of discomfort imaginable.

“You tell me if any of this hurts, okay?”

I nodded, relieved at how much better I felt once the physical pain was gone. Even the simmering pain in the lumps was at its least fiery. Maybe all that water had finally started to quench whatever was burning away inside me.

As she worked away, I wondered what other parts of the whole puberty ordeal I had made needlessly horrible by being afraid to ask questions. Or to speak up about pain.

I turned my head a little to the side and tried to sneak a peek at the monitor, but, of course, it was angled perfectly away from the bed so that only the technician could see it. Nevertheless, I was curious.

“Can you tell me anything about what you see?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“No, I’m sorry, any results will be sent to your family doctor and they’ll go over everything with you.”

“You can’t tell me if there’s just, like, a bunch of cancer all over the place inside me?”

She wrinkled her brow.

“Why would there be cancer all over the place?”

I shrugged and stared back up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know.”

She moved the wand around my stomach, going up towards my ribs, then down to the left, then to the right, pausing every once in a while to press a button on her computer. I started to tense as she made her way farther down. I could tell she was eventually going to hit the lumps,

and I both wanted her to, and desperately wanted her to avoid them at all costs. If she scanned them, I'd know once and for all what they were, and whether they were cancerous. I'd have some peace of mind for the first time in years, and that was almost too wonderful a thought to seriously consider. On the other hand, though, if she pressed down on them with the tip of her little wand, it would hurt so much, I might scream or throw up from the pain. I felt the urge to warn her, but what would I say? Besides, she dealt with sensitive areas every day—surely there were other women out there who couldn't handle any pressure at all being applied to their abdomens. Surely I wasn't the first one she'd ever dealt with.

I stayed silent as she slid the wand down towards my crotch.

“Would you mind just pulling the blanket down just a few inches there?” she asked. “And the waistband of your panties, if you still have those on,” she added. I slid them down, wondering how many more health care professionals would get me to slide my underwear down before a boy ever did.

“Okay, perfect,” she said. Then she slid the wand straight down over the lumps.

Pain exploded in my mind. I felt the right lump slide out from under the end of her wand like water sliding into both ends of a balloon when you squeeze the middle. I jerked back, almost sitting up on the bed.

“Oh, sorry, is it tender there?” she asked.

“Yeah, very tender,” I said, seeing stars.

“Yeah, sorry, your ovaries—”

“I have *ovaries*?” I asked. She looked down at me, confused. I looked back up at her, the confusion on my face meeting hers. Why had I said that? Of *course* I had ovaries. Every woman had ovaries. Sure, I’d never had a period, but that didn’t mean there just wasn’t anything inside of me. Every woman had ovaries, and I was a woman. So why the confusion?

She didn’t continue.

“What about my ovaries?” I asked.

“Sorry, just try to relax; I’ll be gentle,” she said. I lay back and pressed my arms down beside me, promising myself I wouldn’t respond again, even if it hurt. The sooner she got her pictures, the sooner I could leave.

She slid the wand over my groin from side to side, up and down, taking picture after picture. Sometimes, she froze with the wand directly over one of the lumps. Sometimes, between the lumps.

I discovered that if I exhaled slowly while she worked, I could sort of delay the pain response. So long as I kept exhaling slowly through my nose, the pain was manageable.

She stayed silent as she worked. I tried to read the expressions on her face for any hint that she was picking up something strange, but her face was unreadable—a perfect blank mask of professionalism.

“Okay,” she said a few minutes later. “You’re done.” She pulled the wand away and started cleaning it off with a disinfectant wipe.

“Here—you can wipe yourself off with this,” she said, handing me a towel. I rubbed at my tender belly, getting as much of the goo off as possible.

“I’ll get these results to your doctor today, and I’m sure they’ll be getting in touch with you soon,” she said, flashing me her brightest smile yet.

“Okay great, thanks,” I said, sitting up on the bed. I knew my ass crack was hanging out, and the paper covering the bed was tearing and bunching up beneath it, but I didn’t care.

She left, then, and I headed across the hall to change back into my clothes. I hummed to myself as I zipped up my jeans and pulled my hoodie back over my head. Even without the results, I felt about a hundred pounds lighter.

I dropped my robe into a laundry basket and headed back out to the waiting room. Mom was standing near the front door with an official-looking paper in her hand.

“Apparently, we have to go somewhere else now so they can take your blood,” she said, looking tired.

“Is that normal?”

She shrugged.

“I would assume so.” She pushed the door open and I stepped through. “No way I’m gonna be home in time for *All My Children*,” she muttered as we stepped outside into the brisk December air.

Chapter 13—Diagnosis

Me—What were your fears/worries during the diagnosis? What were your hopes?

Mom—The first fear I had about the diagnosis was you thinking you were “different” and not knowing how to handle the questions or what the future held.

I remember this day so clearly, if for no other reason besides the gap it’s left in the usual hum of my life. It was the day the phone call was supposed to come through, and the last day I could pretend I didn’t know the truth about myself. Up until then, November was always a dark, dull month with only my dad’s birthday and my baby sister’s birthday to break up the monotony of dying leaves, fading light and the last, flickering warmth of Fall. After it, though, there’s only one thing that comes to mind for me when the light starts to fade and the dollar stores start peddling their Christmas doodads.

It was a school day, but I couldn’t possibly tell you what classes I took, who I saw, what I said, or ate, or wore. That’s probably not too out of the ordinary for a high school student, but it was more than the usual boredom that had my mind pacing back and forth a million miles from my body. There was nothing outside of my own moist anxiety to place me in my immediate world. The phone call was scheduled for 1:00, and both my parents planned to be home for it. Dad never left work for anything but an emergency, and I felt ashamed that he had to come home early just because of me and my stupid body.

For the last few weeks, it seemed there'd been a phone call or a new appointment waiting for me every night when I got home. Most left me frightened and running out the front door and down the street to the dock my dad and I used to fish off of when I was younger. Each time I ran down there, tears streaking my face like something out of a movie, I wondered, as I ran, if I was going to fling myself off the dock and into the icy water. Not necessarily out of any suicidal drive, mind you, but out of a sheer need to shock me back into my body. Icy water, I figured, would wake me from my misery. Each time, though, when I got to the dock, I simply stood there, out of breath, cold, and crying. I simply didn't know what else to do.

If you've ever had a urinary tract infection or appendicitis or something else that causes moment by moment pain and discomfort, you know what it is to feel the prick of every single second lined end to end with no relief in sight.

Sitting in class, my jeans tight across the bulging lumps in my groin, the lumps burning like rapped knuckles, I could think of nothing but the doctor's impending assessment, and what it would mean for the rest of my life.

If the lumps were cancer, I would need to drop out of school for treatment. I was only in the first term of grade eleven, and the struggle to catch up would be immense. The people I'd been in school with for my entire life would move ahead without me, and I would be forced to either learn at home, away from friends and sports and movies and all the other distractions of school, or I would come back in the fall with people I didn't know. My friends would graduate a year ahead of me, and they'd go off to university while I was still stuck in school for a whole year. To say nothing of the suffering and pain, the hair loss, the daily fear of death, and every other unpleasant reality associated with chemo, cancer, and that whole messy world.

The girls my age were dating, drinking, fucking, and doing all kinds of things I could only guess at. It was obvious to me, just looking at their tanned, toned, bracingly female bodies, their perfect hair and faces, listening to them as they giggled and swore in the halls, that they were part of a world I could hardly guess at. However scared they were of everything, of being found out for the desperate posers that they were, of loneliness, of the future and what it held for them, at least they had futures, at least they were playing the game and part of the conversation. I'd been excluded from the exciting parts of high school so far, but there was still a chance for me to turn things around and be a part of it all. That is, if I didn't have cancer. Whatever else was wrong with me—whatever the lumps were in my abdomen, whatever the reason was that I hadn't started to menstruate, or to grow breasts—I could face it all if I could just avoid the big C. As long as I had my health, I could handle whatever was coming my way.

The day ended, somehow, and I got on the bus. My sisters rode silently with their headphones on, but I was too nervous to listen to music. I stared out of my window at the cold, half-frozen landscape, at the slate grey sky and the gathering twilight, and I prayed. I didn't know what else to do. I prayed to God that I would be spared from having cancer, and I offered everything I could think of in return for being spared. Let it just be some hormonal thing, I prayed, something that can be cleared up with a better diet and maybe a monthly shot. I didn't have a clue what hormonal treatment might actually look like, but the word 'hormone' didn't strike the depths of my very soul with terror the way the word 'cancer' did. I hadn't seen a million Hallmark movies where young people lost their hair and died of hormones. I hadn't seen and heard of a million different horrifying stories where otherwise healthy people suddenly found a hormone lump on their body and died a month later. It wasn't hormones that worried me whenever I fiddled with the funny little nodule on my neck, or whenever I woke up to the fiery,

smouldering pain in my groin. It wasn't hormones that might be seeping into my blood and my bones with every second I didn't deal with them.

Mom's car was idling by the bank of mailboxes as the bus pulled up. The sun was almost completely gone, and with no streetlights around, Mom's car flashed in the bus' headlights as the driver swung around and parked. It wasn't snowing, but the air had that chilly, smoky bite to it that makes you want to curl up in a blanket in front of a fireplace with some hot chocolate and a good movie. I picked up my backpack with trembling hands, walked to the front of the bus and stepped down onto the hard, frozen asphalt. Mom was sitting in the front passenger seat, which meant I would get to drive down the hill to our house. Normally, that would have pleased me, but not today. I slid behind the wheel, waited for my sisters to climb in, and pulled onto the road.

"So, what did they say?" I asked as soon as we were moving. I allowed myself a quick glance over at Mom, and I saw she was staring out her window. She honestly looked bored, but maybe she was just trying to summon the courage to tell me the awful news.

"Oh, I'll let your father explain when we get home."

My stomach lurched. Explain *what*? What could possibly be so elaborate that it would require Dad's eloquence to impart to me?

"Do I have cancer?"

Now she turned and looked at me.

"No," she said. "You don't have cancer."

Had I even told her how afraid of cancer I was? She sounded like the question had come out of left field. Either way, I loosened my grip on the wheel and let out a little half giggle, half

sigh. My focus came back to the world and I noticed it was starting to snow. I was driving. I had things to pay attention to besides my own misery. It was almost Christmas, and Dad had things to explain to me. I was curious, but I hardly cared anymore whatever had been discovered. I could handle it.

I pulled into the carport and threw the car in park. Britt and Ari got out of the back seat, chattering away to each other as they disappeared inside the house. Mom followed me to the front door and sort of waved me inside ahead of her. As we stepped over the threshold, I saw Dad standing in the living room, staring at us. How long had he been standing there? He looked like a restaurant host waiting to usher us inside.

The living room I'd been in a million times before suddenly felt strange to me, like the living room of a friend. I didn't quite know where to sit or what to say. I sat down, but it was on the cushion beside the one my dad usually sat on at night to watch TV. No one sat there, usually, but I was sitting there now, leaning forward over my knees, looking up at my dad.

“So, what did they say?” I asked him.

He sat down in the corner of the sectional couch, took a moment to get himself situated, and looked at me. Mom stayed standing near the door. I'd never seen her so idle. Usually she was dusting or vacuuming or sanitizing something. She was like a smoker who never looks right without a cigarette dangling from their fingers. She wasn't fidgeting, but I could tell she was vibrating in her skin.

Britt and Ari were laughing in the bedroom down the hall. It felt strange not to have them present for such a big reveal, or to be in there with them, but then, a gap had been widening between us the last few months. They had their lives and I had mine.

“Well, I had a good long chat with your doctor today, and he had some very interesting things to say.”

I didn't ask who 'he' was. All my doctors so far had been women. How many more people knew what was going on with me before I did?

“He said what you've officially got is something called Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome.”

Living in the country, there isn't usually a lot of noise unless there's a storm or someone's having a party. Since neither of those things were happening now, in mid-November, Dad's words seemed to hang in the cold, quiet air. I'd never heard the words before, though, so they didn't feel like much.

“So, what does that mean?”

“Well,” he lifted his hands in front of him, the fingers on each hand pressed together, “in the womb, when we're developing, we all have these things called gonads. Every person has them—doesn't matter if you're a boy or a girl. Then, when you start heading down either the boy or the girl path and your body starts making either estrogen or testosterone, those gonads turn into either testes or ovaries. In some cases, though, like with yours, things kinda get a little messed up.” He shifted in his seat.

Mom walked over to the patio doors and stared outside.

“In your case, your gonads started down the boy path. They started producing testosterone like normal boy gonads would, but there was something in you that couldn't recognize that testosterone. So, instead of changing into a boy, you just sort of stayed on the girl

path. All mammals start out more or less as girls, and since you couldn't use your testosterone, you just kinda kept on that road." He paused. "And that's why, I guess, they said your ovaries are in kind of a weird place that you wouldn't normally expect to find them."

I glanced down at my crotch. Were the lumps really ovaries, or were they just straight-up defective testicles?

"So, can I not have kids, then?" I asked. "I mean, if my...ovaries, or whatever...are messed up and creating testosterone...then, I mean, they must not be producing eggs or anything..."

Dad looked me in the eye. I stared back at his one blue eye, one half blue, half brown eye, and I knew before he said it.

"Doesn't look like it, no," he said. "They're kind of halfway between testes and ovaries. And, actually, that was the interesting thing," he continued, as if everything he'd said up to now was perfectly routine, "the doctor said you don't have any of the, uh...Fallopian tubes or uterus or anything that you would normally expect to see in a girl. I mean, you don't have this big empty space or anything—you just don't have those particular parts you'd expect. I guess they just never grew."

I sat for a second, then another one, and then the tears started to come.

It was odd, of course, to be told I would never have a baby—never feel that sudden kick, the bulging belly, the telltale morning nausea, none of it. And I'd never have the period I'd yearned so desperately for over the last few years. It was devastating, yes, but also—surprisingly—a tremendous relief. I would never wake up to soiled red panties and the magic glow of that mysterious christening of womanhood, but I also didn't have to wish for it anymore.

I didn't need to keep hoping for it, because there was no hope to be had. They'd seen inside me—those nosy doctors—and they'd seen only the vacuum of my womanhood. I didn't know exactly what made me female, if I was missing so many things, but I didn't really care just then. Even if all I had were a pair of “messed up ovaries,” I was at least healthy. I had time to figure it out.

Nobody moved while I cried. No one reached forward to put a hand on my shoulder, and I was relieved. We didn't do things like this in my family—just burst into great heaving sobs over something terrifically personal. Not that we couldn't, of course. No one would bark at you to pull yourself together if you briefly lost control. But we also just didn't do it. There was no script for my parents to follow, as there was none for me, and so the three of us sat frozen in the living room until I pulled myself together—which, mercifully for all involved, didn't take long. Motherhood and all the particular sorrows associated with it was a million miles away, anyway. There were much more immediate things to deal with.

“So, do I have to have surgery or something to get them out?”

Dad leaned back on the couch.

“Well, that's the thing. Apparently, in some cases like yours, they've been worried about the ovo-testes—I think that's what they called them—developing cancer, because of where they're placed. That's why guys have scrotums, it turns out, because the testes need to be kept at a lower temperature outside of the body, and where yours are, they can kind of develop cancer over time.”

I swallowed hard. In what seemed like seconds, we'd gone from no cancer, to testicles, to no female reproductive organs or babies, and back to cancer again. It was a lot to take in at the end of a day.

“Were they, like, worried or anything that I might have cancer?”

Dad shook his head.

“Not at all. The way they put it, the risk is so minimal at your age, it basically doesn't exist. This is more just to avoid cancer forming down the road when you're older. They said even then the risk is pretty low, but it's probably best to get them out, just to be sure. Then you don't have to worry about it.”

I nodded, thinking, *“Well, of course! Take them now!”*

“It can't feel good having them there, anyway,” he said. “I mean, in my life I've definitely been hit there enough times that I know how badly it can hurt. Did you find they hurt a lot?”

My eyes stung.

“Oh my god yes,” I half-shouted. “Just, all the time. Especially if I got hit in P.E. or I bumped into something. But yeah, they hurt all the time.”

Dad nodded, looking sad.

“I can imagine.”

“Did they say when they could do the surgery?” I asked, rubbing at my eyes and smearing what little eye shadow I had left.

“Well, they said they’re gonna have to give us a call again soon to kinda start going over hormones and surgery and all that, but the way they talked about it, it sounded like it could be in the next month or two.”

A wave of anxiety washed over me. What would it be like missing school to have surgery? Where would it all happen? Would we actually have to go to Vancouver, like the endocrinologist had suggested? What if I died on the operating table?

I pushed all that aside, though, and tried to focus on the good. I was going to be done with the groin pain soon. It wasn’t cancer. I would never be a mom...at least, not biologically...but I’d never particularly wanted to be one. I could stop hating myself for not menstruating. I could stop obsessing about it! And...oh my god—

“Did they say anything about hormones?” I asked, a little too loudly.

Dad smiled.

“They did, yep. They said, uh...what was it...oh yeah, you should be able to start estrogen right away. You shouldn’t have to wait for the surgery to get started. We’ll have to pop down to Vancouver to see a...what did they call it again, Cheryl? A geneticist, I think. Or maybe another endocrinologist. They’ll tell you what all’s going on and test your blood and whatnot to find out exactly what the levels of everything are, and then you should be able to start taking, you know...estrogen...pretty quickly. They said, actually, that once you’ve started, you should be, you know...” he motioned through the air as if he were describing the curvature of the Earth, “...fully developed...within a year or so.”

My eyes stung, but with happy tears this time. Lying in the tub at night, I’d often stared down at my flat chest—my absolutely and completely flat, flat chest—and tried to imagine

anything sprouting from it. Even at sixteen years old, it was still just so flat I could see my ribs beneath the small, childish pink buds of my nipples. There was just...*nothing* there. A handful of times, I'd woken up to some tenderness under my left nipple, and a tiny bit of swelling, but that was it.

To my mind, guys had it so much easier. If a guy had a small penis, he could hide it in his pants. There was no need for anyone to know outside of sex, and even then, was it really that easy to notice in the frantic, breathy swirl of sheets and limbs and excitement? If a girl had a flat chest, though, it was impossible to hide. Your chest was always visible. You could stuff your bra, but it was so hard to get it to look smooth and even. I'd tried on a couple of my younger sister's bras before, but they'd hung loose and deflated against my chest. I'd tried stuffing them with Kleenexes, underwear, socks, and whatever other small, reasonably smooth pieces of fabric I could find, but they never looked right. If I used Kleenexes, I could make out the folded edges beneath the cups. If I used socks or underwear, it was always clear I'd folded and scrunched dissimilar pieces of material into the cups, rather than smooth, firm breasts. It just never looked right, and I couldn't open myself up for the brand-new kind of ridicule that wearing a stuffed bra to school would bring.

"Was there anything else?" I asked.

"Yeah, actually. It's a small thing, but interesting," Dad said, leaning forward.

"Apparently, you've got XY chromosomes. Just like me."

I knew a little about chromosomes from doing Punnett squares in Grade 10 science, but I didn't know much. XY usually meant male, didn't it? The way Dad put it, though, it almost sounded like he and I shared some sort of strange combination of chromosomes that not many

other people had. Whether that was the case or not, I didn't really care. What even was a chromosome, really? I'd never seen one, I never thought about them or talked about them, and I doubted most other people had either. If my chromosomes were one more strange thing about me, well, whatever. At least they wouldn't humiliate me in the high school halls.

Mom left to start supper, and with her, the tension and ceremony of the moment left the room. There didn't appear to be anything left to say, so I grabbed the phone and announced that I was going to call my best friend Stephanie to tell her all about it. Dad said to go for it, and headed outside for a pre-dinner smoke.

I called Stephanie and told her the whole thing in one go.

"Wow," she said, sounding happy for me. "Well, I guess that's that then, eh?" Her voice sounded strangely formal; not at all like the intimate reception I wanted. But I hardly cared. We hadn't talked much about the whole thing, owing to my shyness and shame around it. Truth be told, we hadn't talked much at all in the last while. But—I told myself—I'd start to change that now that I didn't have to live so much in my own head.

"I know!" I gushed. "I can't believe it's all sorted."

We chatted another minute or so, then I hung up the phone and went for a walk to the dock. This time, though, I took my time.

Chapter 14—To Be a Mom

When Britt and Ari and I were kids, our mom told us the story of the first baby she ever had.

My parents were married in 1983, and I was born in 1988. That's five full years without children.

As a young girl, my mom never wanted to be anything but a mother. Growing up on a farm in Roblin, Manitoba, she would spend her days nursing and coddling her dolls, pretending they were her real children and she was their mother.

"I just always wanted to be a mom," she'd tell us. "I always knew, even when I was a little girl, that was what I was supposed to be."

After she and my dad got married, they tried to get pregnant, but didn't have much luck. They were both young, poor, and in love, and they both wanted to become parents. Their blood types were different, though, and my mom had to take some kind of medication to stop her body from rejecting Dad's. What that medication was, though, and how exactly it worked, neither of them can remember. Something to do with Mom's O negative, and my Dad's O positive.

"Even her blood's negative," Dad would joke in later years. "Typical English."

In 1986, though, my mom did manage to conceive.

Around the six-month mark, though, something went wrong. Mom went in for a regular checkup, and the baby's heartbeat, which until then had been so strong and healthy, was suddenly silent. As far into the pregnancy as she was, though, there was no other choice but to induce labour and deliver the poor, stillborn baby.

They named him Adam. It was October 1986.

My mom would hardly speak for the next year.

Almost a year to the date, though, she got pregnant with me. Obviously, having gone through what she'd gone through with Adam, she was nervous. But she was also terribly excited. She'd always wanted to have a daughter. She would have loved Adam with her whole heart, as she would love anyone and anything she came in contact with, but she always wanted a daughter.

When I was born (two weeks late) Mom was over the moon. Only a few weeks before I was born, she saw a woman named Brianna appear on a talk show, and she knew the name had to be mine.

There was nothing out of the ordinary about me when I was born. Nothing to indicate I might be anything other than a normal, healthy little girl. I had a brief bout of jaundice that left me lying in a baby tanning bed for a week or two, but once that was over, I was in great shape.

“You had a fantastic appetite,” Mom said. “You'd eat anything. Especially chocolate and meat.”

My sister Brittany followed in January 1990 (two days too late to be a newsworthy New Year's baby), and my youngest sister Ariana in November 1992. Three little girlygoos.

As kids, we played together every chance we had. Mom bought us dolls from time to time, but for the most part, I had little interest in them. Britt had a pair of twin babies she called Sara and Clayton, which she loved dearly, but I was far more into animals and dinosaurs.

We had a family dog named Buster. He was a Beagle, and he was horribly disobedient. He howled, he tugged so hard on the leash that he would almost choke himself unconscious, he

bolted as soon as the door or the gate was open, and he'd snap at you if you tried to hug him. We all loved him, of course, but what I wanted most of all was a dog of my own. I wanted to raise a puppy all by myself, and to have that puppy follow me on hikes, to swim with me in the lake, and to come when I called his name. I knew dogs could be bad, but I wanted one anyway. I had all the faith in the world that mine would be different—that having one of my own would help smooth the rough edges and make it all worthwhile.

I have never felt the same about kids.

When I was fourteen years old, I saw the movie *Riding in Cars with Boys*, starring Drew Barrymore and Steve Zahn. The movie follows Beverly D'Onofrio (Barrymore) as she and her son Jason drive to see her ex-husband Ray—Jason's father. Most of the movie takes place in flashbacks to when Beverly became pregnant by Ray at the age of fifteen, and all the various ways said pregnancy ruined her life. There were so many scenes in the movie where Beverly wanted to do some youthful thing—go to university, move to California, work someplace challenging, talk to a friend, or even just be alone for a minute—and she couldn't, solely because of her responsibilities as a parent. Everywhere she turned, there was Jason, screaming, crying, or just sitting in her way. At fifteen, all sense of freedom or control over her own life went out the window simply because she had a child. It was the most horrific thing I'd ever seen.

I've watched the film at least twenty times more, trying to see if there was something I missed, but each time I get to the end where she tells Jason he's what went *right* in her life, rather than wrong, I can't bring myself to believe her. How could she possibly say that, when she missed out on so many chances because of his mere existence?

When I was twenty-one, my friend Trazanna got married and had a kid. Up to that point, she had been what you might call a free spirit. She dated whomever she pleased (often more than one guy at a time), she moved wherever she pleased, and she did as she pleased. She was beholden to no one, neither emotionally nor financially. Every week, it seemed, she had a new project on the go. One week she was painting, and aspiring to make a go at it professionally. The next she was recording videos of herself singing and sending them to agencies. The week after that, she'd be preparing for a life in Hollywood.

After she had a kid, though, everything changed. Months would go by where she never left the house except to buy milk.

Her whole life she'd been tall and skinny. As a teen model, she liked to wear ball gowns and other various ostentatious outfits to school, just for the hell of it. After she had her daughter, though, she gained a good fifty pounds and spent her days shuffling from room to dirty room in their basement suite, wrapped in a faded pink robe. She never wore makeup or did her hair. She could never stay out past 9:00. The biggest outing we had in the first few years of her motherhood was to a viewing of one of the *Twilight* movies. Day after day after week after week, she'd ask me to come over, and every time I'd find an excuse not to go. I knew that going to her house meant sitting on a dirty couch, listening to her complain about how cloistered she'd become since entering the sacred realm of motherhood. Her daughter would whine for various items, and my friend would bring her those items. In the background, their TV, which was on all hours of the day, would play mindless, overloud children's shows like *In the Night Garden* and *Yo Gabba Gabba!* on repeat. Every visit had the air of visiting a dying old relative in a nursing home—not the beloved kind of relative, either—but the kind you scarcely knew, to whose death

bed your parents would bring you as a child, wrapped in scratchy pantyhose and stiff, patent-leather shoes.

Gradually, more of my friends became parents, and every single time I felt nothing but sorrow for them and for the truncated potential of their lives. One by one, all the future dentists, actors, singers, world travelers and professors of my childhood seemed to be trading in their dreamy futures for diaper genies and the kind of corny family photos our out-of-touch parents had always had. I just couldn't understand it.

I'm aware enough to know that that's definitely not always the case. People can achieve all kinds of wonderful things with or without kids. Usually, it's much easier if they have money, but people of all financial strata are capable of all sorts of things. At that age, though, all I saw were my formerly vivacious peers go from planning these big, beautiful lives, to sitting every day in their houses, looking like the undead and complaining about literally every aspect of their daily lives.

I've never been a night owl, a clubber, a partier, or terribly experimental with substances, but suddenly my life of going out for a few pints and perhaps a movie seemed the height of youthful self-expression compared to their stale routines. What the hell were they getting in exchange for their old lives, I wondered? Was it a fear-based thing—like their lives wouldn't amount to anything if they didn't procreate before they ran out of time—or was it actual desire? Because I have felt desire before. I know what it is to burn desperately for something. I burned for travel, for Europe, for university degrees, for my own home, my own dog, my car, my license, and my own published works, and all of those things, once achieved, have brought me nothing but joy. But parenthood—particularly a young parenthood, achieved before almost anything else—seemed like nothing but prison to me.

To be clear, I don't think there's anything particularly wonderful about jobs or specific countries or any of that—beauty is indeed in the eye of the beholder, after all—but surely there was SOMETHING else these people wanted before they threw in the towel and picked up a crate of Pampers. For them to decide so early on that, no, they'd seen enough of the world and all they really wanted was to stay home with a screaming, puking, shitting baby, smacked to me of giving up in the most fundamental, nihilistic way. “I don't need to see the world,” they all seemed to be saying. “I already know there's nothing out there for me.”

I was living with my then-boyfriend Marshall in Vancouver in 2017 when I got a call from my baby sister. Normally, Ari and I don't call each other (in fact almost none of us in the family go in for actual phone calls unless there's a disaster that needs dealing with) but suddenly there she was, speaking out of my phone in this slow, deliberate, adult sounding way. She'd been married for only a few months when I got the call, and I had a feeling of what it might be before she actually said it.

“Anyway, I just called to let you know you're going to be an auntie.”

I gasped, exactly like they do in the movies. I caught my breath and cupped my hand over my mouth. My eyes stung and filled with tears of joy. I could have scarcely acted more on-brand if I was in a Hallmark movie.

“Oh my god!” I gushed.

She told me she was due in November, right around her and Dad's birthdays. We chatted a bit about how she was feeling, and we hung up.

For some reason, as soon as I set the phone down, a scene from the movie *Julie and Julia* popped into my head. Meryl Streep plays Julia Child in the movie, and if you don't know, Julia Child never had children. I don't know why, exactly, but she never did. Her siblings, however, did have children. There is a scene in the movie when Streep finds out that her sister (played by Jane Lynch) is going to have a child, and she sits breathlessly down on the arm of a couch, gasping out to her husband Paul (Stanley Tucci) how wonderful it is for her sister. Her happiness for her sister is there, but so is this absolutely aching hole of what seems like envy and existential untetheredness. Such news will never be hers to tell. Never will *she* call up her sister, breathless with excitement, one hand on the phone and the other on the soft curve of her newly budding belly to share the news of a new life growing within her.

I thought of the scene, and I started to cry.

One second earlier, Marshall and I had been chatting about the pregnancy while scooping ice cream for movie night. The next second, I was sobbing into my Chocolate Chip Mint. If this sounds like a scene in a romcom, it basically was.

“What’s happening?” Marshall asked.

“Nothing,” I said, unhelpfully.

“It’s just, one second ago you were happy and now you’re crying. I don’t understand what’s happening.”

“It’s fine,” I said, wiping my eyes and pointedly carrying both bowls into the living room.

“It’s just a little overwhelming.”

When my niece, Emersyn (Emmy) was born at the end of November, I couldn't possibly have been happier. She was healthy and beautiful and a whole brand-new Ferguson for me to love. She had a huge plume of dark brown hair on her wrinkly little head, and Ari's signature frown.

I knitted her a tiny green toque, not to cover the hair, but to display my love in the best way I knew how. But her hair fought the toque off—such was the length and density of its plumage. Ari was happy, her husband, Mitch was happy, and Emmy was happy. Nothing about any of it struck me as sad or claustrophobic. I'd been to all the countries I'd wanted to go to, I'd gotten the degrees I wanted, and I was publishing poems and stories at a steady pace. Whether that had anything to do with the dimming of my sense that children ruined one's chance at a real life, I don't know, but the whole thing struck me as happy—

—happy, but still not something I wanted for myself.

When my middle sister, Britt, got pregnant with a guy she'd been dating for a month, my thoughts were somewhat divided. On the one hand was my unquestioning joy and excitement for her upcoming motherhood. On the other, my trepidation about her financial and emotional circumstances. Was she signing up for exactly the kind of stress that Beverly went through in *Riding in Cars with Boys*—a shotgun wedding and financial insecurity? Or was she one of the lucky ones who just happened to find the perfect situation right out of the gate?

As it happened, she and her baby daddy (a free spirit raver named Josh) split up before she reached full term, but she figured it out. She found a little ground floor suite for her and her new daughter, Juniper (June/Juni/Oogie), and she enrolled in a paralegal program.

As a single mom, naturally, she's faced most (if not all) of the financial and emotional pitfalls of raising a baby on one's own while also attending post-secondary school, but she's done amazingly well. June just turned three years old, and even through a pandemic and financial strife and all the various and sundry stresses and fears of the 2020s, Britt and June are doing wonderfully. In fact, both of my sisters and my nieces are doing wonderfully, and not once have I looked at their lives and thought, *Oh god, why would you do that to yourself?*

I love both of my nieces dearly, and I can't imagine life without them anymore.

But I still don't want kids of my own.

There are all kinds of perks to being a childless auntie who lives nearby—most of which I'm sure you've heard before. You get to spoil the kids and you never have to discipline them. All the fun and none of the responsibility. They'll love you forever and never resent you for disciplining them or ruining their lives. All of that's true, for the most part.

I also won't get to be the person they come to in the middle of the night when they've had a bad dream, the person they thank at graduation, or their weddings, or at the Oscars. They won't look up at me and call me Mom. They won't lie in bed at night, realizing that one day their mommy will die, and feeling that deep, cavernous fear over my sudden and irrevocable absence. And yes, it makes me sad to write these words. I would like to have a child wrap their tiny arms around my neck and say, "I love you, Mommy."

But beyond that, I don't really think about it. Weeks will go by without my thinking of it.

Once, a year or so after my second niece was born, my dad and I were out for a walk around the neighborhood. I'd finished my teaching degree, and I was looking for work. Dad was congratulating me on going after a career, when he and Mom had struggled so much of their

lives with my mom being a homemaker, and then a housekeeper, and Dad being a mechanic who could never seem to find the right jackasses to work for.

“Well, that’s what I want,” I said. “I want a career. I don’t want to struggle along like you and Mom had to, trying to raise kids and never having any money.”

It sounded so mean in my ears, and I wanted to apologize. Before I could say anything, though, in a voice much smaller and softer than anything I’d heard from his mouth before, my dad shrugged and said, “Eh, we wanted our family.”

There’s a scene in the movie adaptation of *Eat, Pray, Love* where Elizabeth Gilbert’s (Julia Roberts’) friend (Viola Davis) says that “having a baby is like getting a tattoo on your face; you really need to be certain it’s what you want before you commit.”

I have felt certainty before. I have felt desperately driven to do or see or accomplish or obtain something. I know what it’s like to feel an aching hole in your life that needs filling, and not once have I ever felt that about becoming a mom. I’ve felt curious about it. I’m not immune to all the “you don’t know what real love is until you hold your own baby for the first time” rhetoric. I understand that some things are impossible to truly understand until you’ve experienced them for yourself. And yes, I’m curious to know if I would feel that kind of overwhelming love gazing down at my own baby for the first time.

Obviously, I can’t have a baby of my own, genetically speaking, but I could always adopt. I don’t go in for the idea that a biological child is inherently any different from an adopted one, simply by dint of shared genetics (due in no small part to my own beloved adopted cousin,

and the genetic cousins I have nothing to do with). But even then, it's only a fleeting curiosity. More than any of that, I worry about what it would be like to lose my nights to myself, and my days, and my years. As a writer with very little financial drive and a visual artist for a husband, there is a lot of free time in our house, and that free time is more often than not filled with writing and drawing. If we're not doing those things, we're playing computer games, watching our shows, walking the dog, knitting, painting models, or just hanging out talking about life. Where on Earth would we have the time to do all those things if we were suddenly parents? Which of those completely beloved, totally irreplaceable pastimes would we have to sacrifice first, just to keep our kids safe, fed, clean, played with, watched over, picked up, dropped off, educated, and emotionally/spiritually/mentally/nutritionally sustained? I'm not saying it's impossible to have a kid and still do the things one loves, but I am conscious of the way my mind immediately goes to all the things I'd have to give up in order to become a mom, and how little my mind went to those places when I decided to buy a dog.

For years, I'd been saying I would buy one as soon as I had my own house, and a mere four months after we bought our first place, I got my beloved Pointer pup Charlie. Charlie's needed all kinds of things since we got her—emergency vet visits, food, walks, the middle section of our bed—and those things have cost money and time, but not once have I begrudged her any of them. Maybe that means I was only ever meant to be a dog mom, and maybe that means I'm totally off base about the misery of self-sacrifice in the name of child rearing. I really don't know, though, and it seems a terribly large gamble to bite off a minimum eighteen-year commitment that might prove to be a mistake within the first five minutes.

Yes, there are times I would like very much to experience the feeling of being pregnant. Sometimes I'll look at Marshall and feel such an overwhelming rush of love, I can think of no

better way to express that love than to create another human being with him. I don't know exactly where this sudden push for procreation comes from, but I imagine there's a whole Darwinian volume devoted to it. At any rate, it does overwhelm me from time to time, and yes, when that happens, it makes me feel terribly sorry for myself. Even if I never truly do want to be a mom, I would have very much liked to have had the choice to become one biologically. To be excluded from the conversation entirely before I was even born seems terribly unfair.

But then, as that undeniably true, ever-present maxim states, life isn't fair. It's not fair that I'll never get to decide for myself whether or not to bring new, conscious life into this finicky world of ours. It's not fair that I'll never get to feel any of the telltale signs of pregnancy, that I'll never get to gaze into my husband's eyes and ask if he'd like to make a baby. It's unfair that I'll never get to look down at a tiny, pinched face and pick out a resemblance to my own hooked nose, my long jaw, or my middling blue eyes. All of that definitely hurts. There are simply no two ways about it. But as I implied with the lengthy list of my favourite pastimes, I already have a lot that I like to do. Life is terribly short, and I already won't get to do all the things I want, and *will* want to do. Why bother lamenting the fact that one of the millions and millions of things to do will never be mine?

Chapter 15—Trip to Vancouver

Me—What were your fears/worries during the diagnosis/surgery? What were your hopes?

Britt—I can't quite nail down what my exact fears and worries were at this time...I remember going to the children's hospital and staying in that establishment and realizing for the first time that you were scared. I just never saw you as scared. I think this was also the first time that it all became real to me and not just a faint afternoon murmuring from a room away of concerns expressed by you that you may have cancer. I do recall you and Mom both telling me your own take on the diagnosis and what was going to happen next after we'd been at the hospital, but it didn't seem to make much sense to me. I worried that you were unhappy and scared, but I didn't worry much about the surgery itself because Mom and Dad told me it was going to be fine and I was still young enough to believe everything Mom and Dad said. All in all, I feel like I somehow worried more when you went away to Revelstoke with Dad that one summer and I clutched that school picture of you and cried every day. I imagined that after the surgery, you would have the boobs you always wanted and then you'd be happy. Suffice to say, I did not understand the full extent of everything in the slightest. I just hoped that you would be happy.

Saturday raced by as Mom and Dad phoned around and made plans. We were going to stay at the Easter Seals house one of the doctors had mentioned before. It was free as long as your family had a kid in the Children's Hospital. Mom and Dad had both mentioned "the itinerary" about a million times before lunch.

The words made me shudder when I thought of them. *Children's Hospital*. Like I was one of those poor, bald kids with sunken eyes and huge smiles meeting an actor in a Spiderman costume, or standing in front of the castle at Disneyland with a big set of Mickey ears on top of my bald little head. Was I more like one of those kids than not? Would I benefit now from all those Make-A-Wish Foundation days where cops served burgers at Wendy's and all that? It didn't feel like it fit—not when I was already sixteen years old, and I wasn't bald or dying or anything. But who knew? We were soon about to drive over four hundred kilometres to go to the Children's Hospital. You only did that if you were an especially awful case. Like the stories you always heard on the news of families commuting back and forth to the hospital so much they couldn't pay their bills and they had to raise money with those crowd fundraisers. We were like that now. Or close to it.

My sisters didn't say much throughout the whole thing, and I didn't say much to them, either. Everywhere we went, they seemed to be a phalanx of dark eyeliner and moodiness that I couldn't quite relate to. Britt was always hanging out with edgier and edgier people. Her hair had more hairspray in it every day, and her pants had more holes. Her arms were wrapped in rubber bracelets I knew people called "sex bracelets" for some reason. She was still the same little sister I'd always had—my "dear friend Britty," as I called her when we were kids—but she was also something else. She had a private life now that I didn't understand, and of which I did not know most of the details. She was always furiously writing things in a binder that she hid under her mattress, and the walls around her bed were covered in posters of Led Zeppelin and *Trailer Park Boys*.

Ari was similarly moody, but toned-down. Her hair was choppy, her makeup was dark, but she seemed less hostile and more bored. She had *Trailer Park Boys* posters of her own, and a

burgeoning obsession with Kurt Cobain, but beyond that I knew very little about her life. Four years is an eternity in your teens, and with a full four years between us, our lives seemed as different as if we'd been raised on separate continents.

For the most part, though, I knew Britt and Ari were simply happy they got to miss a few days of school. I'd tried to talk to them on the preceding Thursday about the whole thing, giving them some of the basics, but they didn't seem to care much.

“So, you're not dying?” Britt asked.

“No,” I said.

“Good,” she said.

And that was pretty much that.

We packed the car Sunday morning. The plan had been to get up at 7:00 and be out by 8:00, but by 9:00 we were still filling Dad's old Escort up with pillows and bags full of clothes. The Escort was mostly rust red in colour, but it also had a black driver's side door from when a deer had T-boned the car, and a blue hatchback from the time the window had blown out on a hot summer's day. The car, being a 1985 model that only cost dad \$300 to begin with, was not worth repairing properly, so Dad had simply pieced it together with a few trips to the Pick-n-Pull wrecking yard in town. It was hideous, but for that exact reason, it was the car chosen for the trip to Vancouver. It didn't matter what happened to such a cheap, hideous car, and my Dad—ever the pragmatist—argued that made it perfect for a road trip in the winter.

Dad yelled almost constantly, saying that we weren't moving fast enough, that we hadn't left room for his emergency kit ("What do you think you're gonna do if the car goes off the road? That highway's way up in the mountains—without road flares or extra jackets, you're dead in an hour"), and so on. It was mid-December, and reasonable to worry, but still.

Mom was mostly quiet. I could tell she hated having to leave her safe, comfortable, familiar home and her daily routine to go all the way to the big city for something she wasn't even comfortable talking about. I felt bad, but I also felt plenty miserable all on my own, and had very little energy left to make her feel better.

I stayed out of everyone's way, listening to The Smashing Pumpkins and Our Lady Peace on an endless loop. With only 64 megabytes of memory, my mp3 player could only hold about fifty songs, so I made sure I picked the best ones to get me through the long, boring, stressful days ahead.

We hit the highway just before 10:00. It was a bright, sunny, blue-sky day, and bitterly cold outside. The thermometer by the front door said it was minus fifteen when we left.

"Roads are gonna be bad," Dad said, over and over again as we left the city limits and merged onto the Coquihalla highway. "This cold out, everything's just gonna be a sheet of ice."

As soon as the city disappeared behind us, the hills beside the road became covered in snow. There was none on the road, but every now and then, the pavement glittered, and Dad reminded us about black ice.

"It could be anywhere—you never know. Road looks perfectly clear, but you're going too fast, you tap the brake, and that's it."

I kept pausing my music when I saw his lips moving, so he'd have someone to respond to what he was saying and he wouldn't get annoyed, but it was irritating having to do it. Mom didn't have music in, but she often didn't respond when Dad was talking about things that didn't necessarily need responses, and sometimes that annoyed him. I'd learned long ago that it was better to keep listening and try to keep Dad happy, especially when we were doing something new and stressful.

The lumps...or *testes*, rather—*my testes*, I suppose—were hurting in the hot, somewhat nauseating way they usually did in the morning, but not too badly. Knowing they were going to be removed soon made the pain so much easier to handle. In the same way it was easier to think about periods now. Knowing there was no hope that I would *ever* have one somehow lifted the weight of the whole thing off my mind. With no reason to hope that my first period might still sneak up on me in the middle of the night, I could finally let it go and forget about it.

I looked out the window at the rocky, snowy mountains passing by, and I thought about Jake. Did he *know* I liked him, and he was just too shy to bring it up? Would he even notice I was gone? Looking out at the snowy mountains, all I could see was his dark brown hair, and the way he always walked a little hunched over, as if he was trying to get out of the way of someone more important. It was bizarre to think he was back home, wearing his green winter jacket with the red lapels, just going to class and thinking about the normal things people thought about just before Christmas. He'd be planning Christmas parties with his friends and trying to finish up stupid school projects. Nowhere in his mind would he be picturing me on my way to Vancouver to consult with doctors about my intersexuality. He'd probably long since forgotten our brief chat the other day, but I was still holding onto it.

I'd only actually talked to him a few times. Everything outside of that was in my head. There was almost no reason I'd be on his mind. But the feelings I had around him were so strong. I only had to see him to get butterflies and start imagining what it would be like to date each other. Maybe it wasn't the same for him at all, but it was that way for me, and that was something.

He always looked so sad whenever I saw him in the halls at school, and I was super attracted to that. Whether he was actually sad, or whether that was just the way his face looked, I didn't know. But he felt like someone who might understand the great, aching sadness inside of me that had started with the whole puberty thing and blossomed into the majority of my personality. To be sad and moody was (to my mind) to be aware of the world as it really was. There was so much to be afraid of and so much to mourn, and I felt like Jake got that. Whenever our gazes met, I felt like he just got it. I could have been completely off the mark, of course, but I felt quite sure that I wasn't.

A few hours passed, and nothing bad happened to us. The Escort never slid off the road, Ari never got car sick, and there were no major arguments. For the most part, I think we were all lost in our own heads, worrying about our own problems, and maybe thinking about Vancouver looming up ahead. What would the hotel be like? Was it one of those places with families fighting on the other side of the thin walls, and parents weeping in waiting rooms? Emotions would be high there, after all, for everyone; no one was there to have fun. I hoped it wouldn't be too depressing, or grungy. How clean and awesome could it possibly be, though, when it was run by a charity? It was in Vancouver, sure, but cities always had crappy parts to them.

I'd only been to Vancouver once before, when I was six or seven years old and my parents took me and my sisters to the aquarium. I didn't remember much about it.

I was excited to be going to a real city for once, but why did it have to be for this?

Bored and tired and feeling more or less secure that we weren't about to slide off the highway, I fell asleep for a little while.

When I woke up, we were going over a very high bridge. There were huge ships below, carrying hundreds of colourful bins. There were train tracks running alongside the water's edge, and dark, rust-coloured trains making their way slowly along them.

On the hillsides were thousands and thousands of houses overlooking the harbour. They flowed upwards from the water, washing over the tops of the hills and down the other sides.

"Look at all these damn people," Dad was saying. "Everybody in a big damn hurry to get nowhere."

The bridge ended, and the Escort slipped into the far right lane as cars and semis passed by us on the left. Overpasses appeared out of nowhere, stretching around and over us like the tentacles of a great, concrete sea beast that tossed cars over our heads and into neighbourhoods and suburbs. I pulled my headphones out and listened to the static on the radio as Dad searched for a station with some good, slow Blues.

"Well, what do you guys think?" he asked.

"It's cool," I said. "I like it. It feels like we're Somewhere."

He shook his head.

“You’re always Somewhere. This is just somewhere everyone else wants to be, and that’s how they get you. Soon as you think this is the only place to be, they charge you two grand a month just for rent. And people pay it.” He shook his head in wonder.

We took the exit marked ‘Grandview Highway’ and followed the road all the way to Oak. A sign said we shouldn’t turn left between certain times of the day, but we turned left anyway. People honked at us, but Dad ignored them, telling us to keep our eyes peeled for the Easter Seals house.

“Should be on the right, just a little ways up here,” he said. There was so much happening all around us, though, I found it hard to focus on any one place. Cars *swarmed* around us, streaming in from all over, passing each other constantly, like it was a game. It was snowing a bit, and the whirling flakes only added to the feeling that a lot was happening in a very short period of time.

My stomach clenched as I realized there was nothing between me and the appointments tomorrow but a few hours. We’d made it to Vancouver. There was nothing to stop me from walking into that Children’s Hospital tomorrow and becoming a patient. Nowhere to run if I decided I couldn’t do it. It was going to happen whether I wanted it to or not.

A building rose up ahead—three or four stories high with creamy paint the colour of dead flesh. There were statues in front of it: a bear in a Batman costume, some flying eagles, and a few others I couldn’t make out right away.

“I think that’s it,” I said, pointing.

Dad followed my finger.

“I think you’re right,” he said, pulling quickly into the parking lot.

We parked around back and the five of us climbed out, taking with us as much stuff as we could carry.

The lobby was brightly lit and obviously trying to be cheery. There were paintings of rainbows and sailboats sailing happily into bright, beautiful sunsets, and the floor was colourful tile. But there was a strange smell in the air—antiseptic, or something like it. Cleaning agents for sure. And something else I couldn’t quite name—something heavy and horrible that meant ‘death’ to me, even if I couldn’t say why.

“Ferguson family checking in for two nights,” Dad said to the smiling woman behind the desk. “Possibly three, depending on how late things go on Tuesday.”

“Okay, I’ve got you right here, sir,” she said, her long, brown ponytail waving happily behind her. “Can I see some ID?”

As soon as I heard the words ‘two nights, possibly three,’ I felt trapped. Almost three whole days to get through with my family, going from appointment to appointment, talking to strange, big-city doctors about my body. I was already tired of it, and we hadn’t even gotten started.

They gave us two rooms with a door between them. Britt and I got the two beds in our room, and Ari got a cot.

“I don’t feel well,” Ari complained as soon as we were settled in our room. I pictured her throwing up throughout the night, churning my stomach and making me lose sleep, and I wished

more than anything that we could fast forward to a few days from now when we were back home on the delta, and I had some places to hide.

Mom suggested we go out for a nice dinner.

“It’ll be like we’re on vacation!” she said, obviously trying to make the best of a bad situation.

We all rested a while, reading, listening to music and watching TV on low volume until it was time for supper. We always ate early, so it was only about 4:30 or so when we headed out.

It was still snowing, but more slush than snow. We walked a few blocks down the street and found a pizza place with some nice, dimly lit booths. There were small, white Christmas lights running along the ceiling, and little bouquets of holly pinned to the ends of the booths. Outside our window, the snow was falling in big, fat flakes past the streetlights. It would have been magical, if I could have shaken the feeling that I was completely alone in the world.

When I was a kid, everything about Christmas was magical to me. The lights and music and snow and stories about Jesus and Santa were all exciting and just so much fun, there wasn’t any way for me to be sad in the month leading up to Christmas. There were presents and parties and dinners and decorations and every day was the most magical day of the year. Now, though, sitting in a restaurant in Vancouver with none of my friends knowing or caring where I was, Jake probably not thinking of me, all of them off having sex and dating with their normal, grown-up bodies (I imagined), I felt completely forgotten. It was like I’d died, but I could still see the world happening around me—see everyone moving on with their lives.

“This is fun, hey?” Mom asked. I looked at the little smile on her face as she so clearly tried to make me feel better about everything, and it made me feel even worse.

“Yeah,” I said, forcing a smile of my own. “It’s not too bad.”

We got two large, fancy pizzas to share, but I could hardly force any in around the lump of unhappiness in my throat. Every bite I did manage to swallow rested against the tight knot of my stomach like discarded beer cans plugging the grate on a drainage ditch.

Conversation was at a minimum, but I didn’t add to it at all. Instead, I sat and stared outside at the snow falling past the streetlights.

It occurred to me that I hadn’t asked for anything for Christmas.

We all got up early. There wasn’t any other choice. The first appointment was at 9:30, and we couldn’t miss it. There was a Tim Horton’s between the hotel and the hospital, and we grabbed coffees and bagels along the way.

“Pretty nice that it’s only a few blocks’ walk from the hotel to the hospital, eh?” Dad asked. It was snowing again as we walked, and his two-day beard was full of flakes.

“Mhm!” I said. My stomach was clenched hard against the bagel I was trying to force down my throat, and already I had to go to the bathroom.

The hospital loomed on our left. It was a massive, sprawling series of buildings divided into the women’s buildings and the children’s buildings. The building we were headed for had a huge sunshine emblem drawn on it, the kind I’d seen in commercials for the Children’s Hospital

a million times. It was made to look like it was drawn in crayons, as if the kids themselves had drawn it, as if the kids who'd needed the hospital had loved the hospital *so much*, they wanted to give something back. It made me sick to look at.

We entered through a series of automatic doors and found ourselves in a brightly-coloured lobby with orange and purple walls. There was a gift shop jam-packed with baby clothes, helium balloons, and stuffed animals. A directory with a big red You-Are-Here arrow pointed at the lobby. Our first stop, Genetics, was several hallways away, through a maze of stairways and lobbies for different medical specialties.

We walked past doctors hurrying around in face masks and hats, carrying clipboards, discussing things in hushed voices. Stretchers lined the walls the way they did in regular hospitals, but the walls were all painted with bright purples and oranges, as if they were trying to make the hospital look like an arcade or a pool or somewhere else fun. Somewhere the opposite of where we actually were. The colours stretched from floor to ceiling, solid, and without patterns. They were so aggressively bright and cheery, I almost felt the teensiest hint of light creeping into my perpetually dark mood.

We found the Genetics wing and sat down in the waiting room. Mom and Dad talked to the receptionist, who told them we could go right in as 'they' were waiting for us. Mom told Britt and Ari to wait in the waiting room, and she and Dad and I walked into a big conference room with high-backed leather chairs and a long wooden table.

Three doctors in long white coats were seated together on one side of the table. Two of them were older men with grey hair and wrinkled skin. One of the men had thick black glasses and a beard, while the other was balding and pale and kind of doughy looking. The third doctor

was a woman with dark, poofy hair and an expensive-looking watch. They all stood up and shook our hands, telling us to take a seat across from them. I didn't catch any of their names. I was already going somewhere else in my head.

“So, we finally get to meet the *famous* Brianna,” the doctor with the beard said. “I'm very pleased to meet you. You know, we don't get very many cases like yours around here—maybe two or three a year. So it's always very exciting when one of you comes along,” he said, flaring his white coat behind him as he sat back down. “You're very rare, you know. Very rare, and it's always exciting to learn as much as we can when we find someone like you.”

I blushed, but I couldn't think of anything to say. All I could think about was keeping my heart rate down enough that I wouldn't panic and feel the need to flee the room.

“Now, I know you have a busy itinerary and you're probably getting a little tired of talking about all this over and over again to different people, but we have some questions we need to ask you. Would that be all right?”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug.

“So, as I said, your condition is very rare, and we still don't know everything there is to know about it.” He ran his fingers down either side of his mouth, his beard making a bristly sound as he did. “Because it's so rare, we like to ask as *many* questions as we can to try and get the *best* and *fullest* picture of it that we can. So, some questions will seem off topic, or invasive, and you don't have to answer all of them, but if you could answer as many as possible, as accurately as you can, we would really appreciate it. The future of medicine depends on people like you, you know.”

I smiled.

“I’ll help as much as I can,” I said.

“Excellent.”

He started out by asking the same questions the doctors back home had asked—questions about the testes and when I’d first noticed them, questions about how I hadn’t had a period, about how much I’d grown in the last couple of years, and so on. It was all pretty normal, and I started to relax a little.

“Now,” he cleared his throat, “when did you first notice your clitoris had started to grow?”

My stomach lurched. The word ‘clitoris’ hung in the air, beating my parents and I over the head again and again with its horrible sound as it waited for me to connect it to my body.

“Uhh, I’m not sure, exactly,” I said, painfully conscious of my Dad’s arm on the armrest beside mine. “Maybe two years ago? It’s hard to say.”

“So, not sure, but long enough ago that it’s been going on for some time.”

“Sure.”

He made a note on the paper in front of him.

“Okay. And my notes here say you’ve got quite a narrow, blunt-ended vagina. Now, have you managed to do any more exploration there, or expansion exercises?”

I blushed furiously. I wasn’t 100% sure what he meant, but I assumed he meant sticking things inside me. Like the girl I’d heard some girls talking about on the bus once, who’d been banging herself with a hotdog when it broke off inside her and she had to go to the ER.

“No.”

“Okay,” he said, making another note.

I cleared my throat and looked over at Mom. Her eyes seemed to have glazed over completely.

“So, while you’re here, we’re going to get you to see an OBGYN we work with on cases like this—have you already got Dr. Keller on the itinerary?” he asked my mom.

“Oh, uh...” Mom said, pulling a wad of stapled papers out of her purse.

“Keller...Keller...yes, here she is. 1:30 today.”

“Excellent. Dr. Keller has plenty of experience in this field.”

I nodded.

The questions went on for a few more minutes, and I answered them as best I could while trying to turn my brain off to the whole thing.

When the questions seemed to be winding down, my dad spoke up.

“So, is there anything external that could have led to this?” he asked in his slow, careful way. “Like, say, when we were trying to get pregnant, Cheryl here had to take a pill that would make our blood types mesh properly, so she could conceive. Is there any way *that* might have affected Brianna’s development while she was in the womb? Or could she have been exposed to any kind of radiation or anything like that?”

“Well,” the bearded doctor said, clearing his throat noisily, “I can’t speak to whether she was exposed to any radiation while in utero, but if she was, it wouldn’t have caused this. Nor would the blood treatment. Things like this...they just happen from the get-go, and there’s no

way to prevent them. Not that we know of yet, anyway. Some cases are passed down on the X chromosome, and some appear to be completely random mutations. There's just no way to know, or to prevent it. In the case of family history, where there are other women in the family who've been intersex in this way, we can predict, to some extent, the odds that a child will be a carrier, or have the condition themselves, but there's not much that can be done to prevent it." He looked at me and smiled. His eyes had deep, crinkly lines that scrunched as he smiled. It was easy to picture him on a motorboat with a flock of beautiful women.

"With every new case, though, we learn a little more."

He turned to look me right in the eyes. "You can do a lot of good, Brianna—not just for other people like you, but for people with new conditions that haven't even been discovered yet. You can help us learn about human genetics and what it means to be human more than someone who fits a more typical genetic mould ever could. We've got all sorts of questions about where we come from and what makes us human, and the only way to answer those questions is through people like you and the unique things you bring to the table. You're a very special girl, Brianna."

He smiled, and I smiled back. Put like that, it was hard to keep feeling so shitty.

"Now, the thing is," the woman doctor spoke up, "we've had special cases like yours before, Brianna, where people have gone around telling anyone they wanted that they were intersex, and some bad things happened." She paused to clear her throat. Her lips looked dry and cracked as she pursed them together. "People don't always know how to handle things like this—they don't understand the realities of it, they come into it with stories and understandings of their own, and they don't really hear you, necessarily, when you tell them what it's all about.

Some people with AIS have told the wrong people and it's caused problems for them. So, my advice to you would be to keep it to yourself, as much as you can."

I got where she was coming from, but I knew I could trust Stephanie and probably most of my other friends with it, too. They were all good people and I couldn't imagine any of them wanting to hurt me, or being careless with something as big as this.

"I would never say you *can't* talk about it, or that it's anything to be *ashamed* of in the *least*. But we *have* had a few cases in the past where people said something to the wrong person and it ended up being used to hurt them. I'm not saying for a *second* that anyone using it against you would be in the right to do so, but we've had cases where people ended up being bullied for it so badly that they ended up going through a lot more pain than they needed to. A couple of them, you know, through the years...even killed themselves."

She nodded sadly to drive home the gravity of the situation. "Yes, it's very sad. Again, though, I'm not saying you *can't* tell anyone about your condition—I would never say that, and I'd never want you to walk away from here today thinking it's the type of thing you *can't* bring up with those close to you. It's just that there is a lot of ignorance out there, and you never know how the wrong people are going to handle information like this. Just be careful about who you tell. No matter how much you might think you can trust someone not to say something, try to think of it as telling one person basically means you're telling three or four people, because they're *going* to tell other people—their family, or other friends, or whoever. It's just what people do. So just keep that in mind, and make sure you're okay with the story getting out there beyond your control."

She smiled at me in the all-knowing way I associated with Sunday School teachers and other religious types who liked to think it was preposterous to even consider something outside the usual habits of Christianity. The word “patronizing” didn’t occur to me at the time, but it would later on, looking back.

I nodded.

“So, have you got any more questions?” the bearded doctor asked us, spreading his hands out in front of him as if to say “you have the floor.”

I looked from Mom to Dad as we all shook our heads.

“Great, all right. Well, it was great to meet the three of you,” he said, standing. “Who do you have next?”

My mom glanced over the itinerary.

“Dr. Angeliki Kon—Konstantine—.”

The doctor laughed.

“Angeliki Konstantinopolites. I know, it’s a mouthful. We just call her Dr. Angie. You’re gonna want to go straight down this hall and make a left at the end,” he said, motioning with a hand. “Brianna, all the best to you,” he said, taking my hand. “It was a real honour.”

We grabbed my sisters and headed for the room at the end of the hall. They were whining that they were hungry and had to go to the bathroom and they were bored and couldn’t Mom take them to see the city while Dad stayed with me?

“We’re not here for fun,” Dad said. “We can go out later, if we feel up to it, but we need to get through a lot of appointments first. So, collect yourselves.”

They were still groaning and rolling their eyes as we entered the waiting room of Dr. Angie's office.

"What's this place again?" I asked.

"Uhhh...this one is...your hormonal consultant," Mom said, once more pulling the clump of papers from her purse.

We checked in at reception, and once again were quickly ushered through to a brightly-coloured room where a woman with a big, black mane of hair sat behind a desk.

She half stood as we approached, holding out a hand.

"Hi, hi, I'm Angeliki Konstantinopolites," she said, shaking our hands. "You can just call me Angie. It's great to meet you." She sounded busy and slightly out of breath, as if we were already the hundredth family she'd seen that day.

"Quite the handle you got there," my dad said, chuckling as he settled into his chair.

Angie let out an airy half-laugh.

"Yeah," she said, sitting down.

Once again, I sat down between Mom and Dad. There were plastic brackets on the wall beside us holding pamphlets advertising support groups for different intersex and transsexual conditions. I hadn't actually thought about it before, but I could see there were a *lot* of different types of conditions that were similar to mine: conditions with names like Klinefelter Syndrome, Swyer Syndrome, Turner Syndrome, and 5-Alpha Reductase. One of the pamphlets said "Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome," and there was a picture of the circle and arrow representing 'male' linked with the circle and cross meaning 'female.'

“Okay, so, I’m sure a lot of the questions I’m going to ask you’ve already heard before,” Dr. Angie said, “but it’s important we all ask as much as we can, so nothing slips through the cracks.”

I nodded.

“So, you’re sixteen now, and you’ve never had a period…”

My mind trailed off almost instantly as she made her way through the exact same things I’d just said in the other room.

Next, she measured my height and weight.

Then, she asked my mom and dad to leave the room.

“There are some things teenage girls just don’t necessarily feel comfortable discussing in front of their parents,” she said.

Mom and Dad looked relieved as they stood up and went out to sit with Britt and Ari in the waiting room. To be honest, I was happy they were going.

She smiled at me as soon as they were gone. “Better?” she asked.

“Oh yeah,” I said, stretching out a little in my chair.

“How long have you been in the city?” she asked, leaning back.

“We got in last night.”

“And you’re here another day or two?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I said.

She looked me in the eye for a minute, then she slowly nodded. “I know it’s a lot that you’ve got going on right now, but I just want you to know that if there’s anything at all you want to talk about, you know, away from your parents—any questions you might have—you can ask me. I can’t guarantee I’ll have the answers, but I can probably steer you in the direction of someone who does.”

The orgasm pain came to mind, but how could I bring it up with someone I just met? I looked into her deep, brown eyes—eyes that sparkled with intelligence and big-city knowledge—and I realized that even now, I just couldn’t force myself to bring it up. Not if it might still go away on its own. Surely, once I’d had surgery to remove the testes, it would stop. I wasn’t sure how, but I just knew the two were connected. And if I could get through it without confessing to anyone that I masturbated, all the better.

I shook my head. “Nothing I can think of.”

She looked at me for a moment, as if deciding whether to believe me. Then she slapped her hands down on the armrests of her chair and leaned towards me.

“Okay, well, I do have a question, Brianna, and it’s kind of a big question, so you can take your time answering if you need to, all right?”

I frowned. What could possibly be big enough now, after everything I’d already taken in, that she would need to give a disclaimer?

“Sure.”

“The thing is, the nature of your condition, of *all* intersex conditions, is complex. Things aren’t always as clear and straight-forward as we’d like them to be, and I find it helps to have a

place where you can really discuss those complexities without feeling like you have to respond in any particular way.”

“Okay.”

“Great. So, I have to ask about your upcoming surgery.”

“Okay.”

“Are you *positive* you want to have it?”

I paused.

“Because once we take them out, there’s no putting them back in.”

“Of course I want to have it,” I said. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Well, they’re a part of your body,” she said. “The testes. It’s not like they’re these foreign things that someone stuffed inside of you. They’re as much a part of you as anything else, and I just want to make sure you *understand*.”

I frowned. Understand what? Girls weren’t *supposed* to have testicles, and I was a girl. The whole thing should be a no-brainer.

“Like, what do you *think of* when you think of life after the orchiectomy?”

I shrugged. “I think of how I won’t be in pain anymore,” I said. “And how I won’t have to worry about them turning cancerous.”

“Well, the risk for cancer is still very low with the testes; even located where they are. But that said, when you think about having them out, you feel happy?”

“Well yeah, I just want to be a normal girl.”

“So you definitely want to be female?”

“Yeah...of course.”

“Because you don’t have to, if you don’t want to. You’re in a unique position that you could really come down on either side of the fence, if you wanted to, and we could help you. If you wanted, you wouldn’t even need to come down on one side at all, necessarily.”

I paused. Was she saying I could be a man if I wanted to?

“Like, you mean, you could give me testosterone if I wanted instead of estrogen?”

She nodded.

“That’s one thing we could do. I can’t promise it would necessarily turn you into the *Hulk* or anything, given the nature of your condition and your unique inability to *use* testosterone, but you’ve got the height, and you’ve got pubic hair, so we know that testosterone works in your body on at least a partial level.”

“And—what—you’d make a scrotum for my...for the testes and everything?”

She nodded. “If that was what you wanted, there are several options we could look into for you.”

I hesitated, but only for a second. Maybe not even a whole second. Just long enough to consider a reality where nothing on my body needed to be cut away for me to be happy.

“No,” I blurted. “No, I just want to be a normal woman.”

She exhaled softly through her nose.

“Try not to think of it in terms of ‘normal’ or ‘not normal,’” she said. “The body is a spectrum. Human beings exist on a spectrum. You can be all the way at one end with a crew cut and Arnold Schwarzenegger muscles,” she spread her arms, “and you can be all the way over here with huge boobs and hair down to your waist and a thousand kids.” She pressed her hands a little bit closer together. “Or, you can be anywhere in the middle here, where most of humanity is.” She rested her hands back on the table. “You’ve noticed, I’m sure, that most people aren’t really, fully, at either extreme end of the spectrum.”

I nodded. “I guess so. Yeah.”

“Most people are somewhere in the middle with traditionally male traits and traditionally female traits all mixed together—not, you know, necessarily biologically, but interpersonally, the *vast majority* of people are more than just, you know, a super guy’s guy or girl’s girl, and that’s perfectly fine. There’s a lot of overlap between men and women, anyway. Not just in intersex conditions, but in a multitude of other ways. There are women who shave their heads and only wear pants and never have kids, and there are men who wear dresses and braid their hair and never sleep with women in their whole lives. There are tall women and short men, strong women and weaker men. You can be anywhere on that spectrum that you want, and it’s okay. There are no rules about how you *have to* look or live or dress. As long as you’re healthy—mentally and physically—I mean as long as you’re not hurting yourself, it’s perfectly fine to be whoever you want to be.”

I swallowed hard. The air seemed to have been sucked out of the room.

She smiled at me, and I smiled weakly back.

“You’re *allowed* to be in the body you were born with,” she said. “It’s not a crime to be different. But it is a shame to spend your whole life *wishing* you were something else. Life is an amazing gift—far bigger than just ‘male’ and ‘female,’ ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ and you deserve to be happy in the body you were given.”

I felt my eyes fill with tears. My mouth contorted as I tried not to cry. And Dr. Angie stayed quiet as she let me work through it.

“I still want the surgery,” I said after ten or fifteen seconds. “I want to be as female as I can.”

I knew, as I said it, that it was true. There was a fluttering someone inside me that wondered if I wasn’t ‘meant’ to be a boy, but it was an easy fluttering to silence. I’d had dreams I was a boy, and been very confused to wake up female. I’d occasionally wished that I could be a boy. It looked so easy to go through life with short hair and no need for makeup or dresses or modesty. I’d felt the pull towards a deep voice and a high sex drive. But all those things were simply things that had happened to me, or that had crossed my mind. Just because they were “natural” to me, and thus easy (at least some of the time), didn’t mean they were right for me. I was starting to understand there was a rightness to going with the path of least resistance and letting whatever wanted to happen, happen, but there was also a rightness to resisting, and creating the reality you wanted. Just because it took no effort to feel like certain parts of me were male, didn’t mean I was *happy* feeling that.

It was easy to spend a whole day on the couch, chilling, achieving nothing, but when the day was over and the guilt set in...that wasn’t easy. I knew, somehow, that’s how I would feel if

I did decide to go the male way. If I let my body go that way, I'd be giving up some kind of a fight, which would feel good to an extent, but that didn't make it right. Not for me, anyway.

I pictured running my fingers over my beard, and it made me sick. I pictured having a scrotum hanging down between my legs, and it, too, made me sick. Even the thought of having a penis, or some workable version of one, made me sick. I didn't quite understand it, but I knew I didn't want any of those things.

I did wonder, though, if it was "me" who was sickened by those things, or just the version of myself that had been created in response to the years of social conditioning and sculpting I'd gone through as a young, feminine person in society. Anytime I'd acted in an unfeminine way, people had let me know it. And their scorn felt bad. Maybe I'd only come to understand "maleness" as sickening and bad because of the punishments I'd received for acting outside the female box.

All these things went through my head in a swirl that was both discombobulating and utterly clear. I didn't quite have the language for it, but I recognized the questions. I recognized the doubt, and I pushed it away. It didn't feel bad to push it away. It felt good. It felt good to imagine myself becoming more and more feminine, and whatever the cause or causes of the goodness, I ran towards it.

Dr Angie hesitated a moment, digesting my answer. I wasn't sure if she could see anything going on behind my eyes, but a moment later, she nodded.

"All right, as long as you're sure."

I nodded.

“There are some things you can reverse a little bit if you ever change your mind, but we can’t make new testes for you; once they’re gone, they’re gone.”

I waited a second or two for any doubt to come crashing in, but none came.

“That’s fine.”

“Okay.” She pulled a folder off the wall beside her monitor. “So, I’ve got the results of all those blood tests they made you take back home, and there were some very interesting things in there...” She flipped through a few pages before settling on one. “It would seem that your body has been producing testosterone for some time—a few years, at least—but because of the insensitivity part of your condition, there wasn’t any way for you to *use* it. So it’s just sort of sitting there in your system. Currently...it looks like you’ve got the testosterone levels of a forty-year-old man with a very hairy chest.”

I laughed.

“Now, *obviously*, you’re not a hairy forty-year-old man, which further underlines the diagnosis of androgen *insensitivity* as correct. But it’s very interesting to see how hard the body can work to be one thing, and end up being something else entirely.”

“Mmm.”

“Even if your body is *only* producing testosterone, as yours *is*, a certain amount of that testosterone just naturally gets turned into estrogen. It’s partially why men can get breast tissue and women with the other kind of AIS—Complete Androgen Insensitivity—often develop breasts and don’t realize they’re intersex until they realize they’re in their twenties and they’ve never had a period.”

I laughed.

“How could they go *that long* without noticing they hadn’t had a period?” I asked, thinking back to the minute-by-minute anticipation of my first period I’d experienced since the Sex Ed class in grade six.

She shrugged.

“You’d be amazed how long some people can avoid dealing with things. Anyway, I’m thinking that since your estrogen levels are so low, we’ll start you out with the smallest dose we have. Only a few micrograms. The trick is that we’re basically restarting your body’s puberty from scratch, and puberty is a very complex thing. It doesn’t go in this perfectly straight line of incremental hormone increases; it goes in fits and starts. Sometimes, it gets started, and then it just stops for a while, and then there’ll be this massive *explosion* of hormones and you’ll hear guys’ voices going all over the place, and they’ll get acne, and girls will go from an A cup to a C cup almost overnight. It’s just chaos.”

She threw her hands in the air as she spoke, the thick black cloud of her hair waving around her head like a halo with a burnt-out bulb. Everyone outside the room felt crazy, but not us. We could laugh at their ignorance and their silliness—she and I—because we knew better. We knew you had to face things head-on to get anything done. Even if it took a little while to get started, sometimes. The only way to move forward was to move. I could see that, and I mentally patted myself on the back for having come so far.

I pondered her “chaos” remark as she typed a note or two into her computer. On the desk beside her keyboard was a framed photo of a tall, dark, handsome man with his arm around her

shoulders. They were standing in front of a fireplace in a rich-looking house, smiling out at the camera through perfectly white, square teeth. It could have been a magazine ad for a ski hill.

“With you, though,” she continued, looking back at me, “we’ll be doing a steady dosage increase over several months, so you shouldn’t feel too many emotional or physical side effects. We don’t want to go too fast and stick you on a full dose right away, because breast tissue can come in strangely when you do that. You get these conical sort of breasts that are like long tubes with nipples at the end. That’s not what we want. We want nice, you know, usual-looking, rounded, even breasts, yes?”

I nodded, feeling giddy at the thought of perfectly round breasts sprouting on my chest. I could just imagine all the bras I’d buy! I’d have denim ones and lacy ones and push-up ones that made me look like I had implants. Men and women would stop and turn to watch me pass on the street. With my height and skinniness, I’d have literally the perfect body.

“I’m gonna write you a prescription right now, and you can get this filled in the pharmacy downstairs,” she said, typing lightning fast on her keyboard. A printer I hadn’t noticed sprang suddenly to life, expelling a sheet of paper with an electric hum that was about a thousand times quieter than the clank and chug of our old bubble printer back home.

“Thanks,” I said, grinning away like a madman as she handed me the piece of paper.

“You can start today, actually,” she said. “Now, there’s another pill I can give you as well—a hormone blocker—and it’ll stop the effects of continued testosterone until you’ve had your surgery. The thing is, though, there are side effects that can come with it—mostly nausea and vomiting—and it’s rather expensive, unfortunately. It would block the little bit of testosterone getting through in your body—the bit that gave you pubic hair and regular body

odour and the height and all that fun stuff—but, if you’re going to have surgery pretty soon, it might honestly not be worth the bother. I imagine you want to have the orchiectomy done as soon as possible?”

I nodded.

“Right, so it probably won’t be that long, then.” She grabbed a pamphlet off of the wall. “I know you live out of town, but I’ve got a couple things for support groups here in town that you can get in touch with if you want. Most of them are groups that meet in physical locations around town, but some of them are online. Is that something you’d be interested in?”

“Definitely.”

“There’s a lot of disagreement over how frequently *your* exact condition pops up in the population, but some estimates go as low as one in a hundred thousand births.”

“Holy shit.”

She chuckled.

“Kelowna—you’re from Kelowna, right? I think you’ve only got about that many people in total who live there, right?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“So yeah, if you’re potentially the only person in town who has this condition, you might want to be able to reach out sometimes and talk to other people with similar experiences. You don’t have to, of course, but *if* you want to, here are some resources.” She handed me a few pamphlets, which I stacked on top of my prescription.

“So,” she said, throwing her hands up in front of her, “that’s about it for me. Do you have any questions before you go onto the rest of your itinerary?”

I shook my head.

“All right, great.” She checked a calendar on her desk. “I’m thinking I’d like to see you again in a few months to check in on how the hormones are going. We can touch base over the phone in about a month, and I can up your dose then if things seem on track. But around the three-month mark I’d like to reassess in person.”

I frowned.

“I know, it’s a huge hassle coming back here again and again, but I promise, if we don’t do this right the first time, it’s a lot harder to fix them down the line. I could maybe push that to six months, but I would like to see you again.”

I sighed, but nodded.

“Well,” she said, rising to her feet and holding out a hand. “It was very nice to meet you, Brianna.”

I shook her hand and smiled. I wanted to say something more that would let her know how much she’d helped to put my mind at ease about things, how much I’d appreciated the whole conversation about choice and the human sexual spectrum, but it was all too big to me and too jumbled in my mind, and the words just wouldn’t come.

“It was very nice to meet you, too,” I said. “And thank you.”

Chapter 16—The Gynecologist

The OBGYN's office was on Broadway, which sounded to me like the biggest street in the biggest city imaginable. Dad dropped Mom and me off at the doctor's office, then he took Britt and Ari to get some food and wander the city a bit.

I watched the traffic creep up and down the narrow lanes of Broadway from the second-floor waiting room. We were a bit early, so Mom and I had a good fifteen minutes or so to sit among all the pregnant women who'd come for their checkups. There were a half-dozen couples, and all of them were made up of one very pregnant woman and one very anxious/excited-looking father. Every one of them looked happy to be here. Not a single one of them looked anything but normal, healthy, and completely stoked on life.

The sky was a thousand shades of grey, and the mountains were covered in a haze of rain or snow. Horns honked and people shouted at one another. Christmas lights and Hanukkah decorations filled the storefront windows as people went in and out on errands of their own. It was exactly like every city scene I'd ever seen in the movies. There was so much going on, it was hard not to feel a little excited, even with my stomach in knots.

I sat back down in my seat and let my mind wander a bit through the conversations I'd had so far. I wasn't sure what my prevailing emotion was, exactly, about the whole "would you rather be a boy or a girl" conversation, but it was something close to embarrassment.

I thought about the boy, Adam, back in elementary school who'd called me "boy or girl." What would he think now if he could see me sitting in Vancouver, consulting with specialists on

that exact subject? I pictured the dickish, triumphant laugh of Nelson Muntz in *The Simpsons* coming from Adam's mouth as he pointed at me and laughed. "Ha-ha!" he'd shout. "I was right all along."

I told Mom about the hormone stuff, and she said she was happy I'd be starting estrogen soon. Other than that, though, we didn't say much to each other. There was still so much time left in the day, and we were both exhausted. Tomorrow, I knew, we had a consultation with a surgeon, a consultation with a sexual therapist, and a ton of other blood tests and things. And there was still the whole huge terrifying appointment ahead of me to get through. Obviously, with a couple of doctors having already examined my most intimate areas, I had some idea of what to expect, but I was still terrified. This wasn't just a little appointment in Kelowna. This was an official Big City OB-GYN. She might have seen pregnant movie stars and other famous people in the past. And now, she was going to examine my messed-up little bumpkin bod. Not to mention, I was tired, in general, of people looking at me and poking and prodding my body. I didn't want it to happen anymore. What could this woman tell me, anyway, that the others hadn't already said?

It was almost half an hour before they called me in. I started to head in alone, but they said that Mom should come along, too. "For legality's sake," they said, "since she's a minor." Mom and I exchanged glances and followed after the nurse in the scrubs.

They weighed me and measured me again, then left us to wait in a room with a very short bed and fold-out stirrups. I sat down on the bed and Mom sat in a chair behind the door with her purse bundled in her lap.

"Well, I'm about done for the day," Mom said. "How about you?"

I let out a long, deep sigh. I was starting to get a headache and my mouth felt dry. “Yep, I think I’ve had about all I can handle. And I guess we still have to do it all again tomorrow.”

“Well, hopefully it won’t be quite as long tomorrow. We’ve only really got the two appointments, and then I’m going to insist we just drive straight home. I don’t care how late it is.”

“Amen.”

The door opened a moment later and a tall, slender woman with shoulder-length, dirty blonde hair walked in. She was in her mid-forties, with large, wide-set eyes and the kind of body that told you she ran a hundred kilometres a week and ate nothing but celery and water.

“Hi, I’m Doctor Keller,” she said, shaking Mom’s hand and then mine. “And you must be Brianna.”

I nodded.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said, sitting down on a wheelie stool that was dwarfed by the length of her body. “We don’t get a lot of your type of cases out this way. It’s nice to have something different to talk about for a change.” She flashed me a brusque, professional smile, and I smiled weakly back.

“So, what I would like to do today, Brianna, is I’m going to do a full pelvic exam, and then...well...why don’t we do that *first*, and then we can talk about your options afterwards, okay?”

I nodded.

“All right. I’m just gonna get you to slip into this robe here,” she said, handing me a small, blue bundle, “and I’ll be back in a second. Mom, do you want to pop out with me for a second?”

“Oh, yes, yes, sure,” Mom said in the muttering way she had when she was shy. I could always tell she was feeling nervous by the way she’d say something quietly, then again louder.

“We’ll be right back,” the doctor said, waiting for Mom to leave, then closing the door on the two of them.

I shrugged into the robe, piling my clothes on the chair Mom had been sitting on.

“All right, Brianna,” Keller said as she and Mom came back in, “I’m just gonna get you to put your heels in these two stirrup-looking things right here.” She wrenched these two extendable structures out of the end of the bed and snapped a pair of gloves on. Her voice was energetic and a bit barky, like a gym teacher, or a bad stage actor. It was familiar, but a little alienating, to be honest. Why couldn’t she just talk like a regular person? It made me feel like she saw me as a little kid. But then, she probably did. I felt like, at any moment, she was going to call me ‘sport.’

I put my feet in the stirrups, surprised by how exposed I felt. My legs felt obscenely wide apart, and as much as I bent my knees towards each other, I still felt more exposed than I’d ever felt before. I could feel Mom’s presence burning away in the corner of the room, and I wondered which of us was more embarrassed.

“Okay, now, just relax those knees,” she said, wheeling her stool a little closer and leaning in under the hem of my robe.

My heartbeat started to race as I felt the usual cold, foreign feeling of gloved fingers pulling at my body.

“Okay, you can sit back up,” she said, wheeling away and peeling off her gloves only a few seconds later. I looked over at Mom as I sat up and realized she was staring up at a corner of the ceiling with a strained look on her face. I pulled the gown tight around me, making sure everything was covered. I thought about reaching over and touching her on the shoulder, but it felt too intimate, given everything that was happening, and the fact that I was wearing nothing more than a paper robe.

“You can probably step outside now, Mom,” she said, looking at Mom. “The exam portion is done, and it can be a little easier sometimes to discuss things without anyone listening in.”

Mom muttered something that sounded like “okay” and disappeared from the room faster than I’d ever seen her move.

“So, couple things, Brianna,” the doctor said, wheeling around the side of the bed and crossing her arms over her chest. “You’ve got a normal pattern of growth for female pubic hair, normal growth of the labia minora and the labia majora, but your clitoris has definitely grown to a point that I could notice right off the bat. Nothing crazy—clitorises in general can actually get quite a bit larger in, you know, women taking hormones and transitioning to men, for example—but it is something I noticed. Now, there are some procedures we can do to get it down to a little bit more of a typical size, if you wanted—hormonal and surgical procedures. With surgery, though, there’s always the chance that you might lose some sensitivity.”

“Oh, no, I don’t want any surgery there.”

“No?” She raised her eyebrows.

I shook my head. “I mean, as long as it’s not, like, freakish or anything...”

“Oh, no, not at all. Just, you know, I could notice quite quickly that it was on the larger end of the spectrum. But certainly not to an extent that it’s anything out of the ordinary. Everyone’s different, anyway, so as long as you’re good with it, that’s all that matters.”

“Oh yeah, I think I’m fine.”

“Well, perfect, that settles that then. No need to go into it further.”

She typed some notes on a computer to her left, and I glanced around the room. There was coffee-coloured wainscoting that ran the length of the room, and pale, pinkish walls. No cheesy paintings or anything. And none of the usual bottles of gauze and industrial-sized Q tips. Just a pamphlet or two about STDs and pregnancy.

“Okay,” Dr. Keller said, wheeling back over to me. “The other thing is that your vagina, internally, is quite underdeveloped. I would say that right now—” she held up her pinky finger, “you’ve got about that much space in there. Now, obviously that’s not the size of the average penis,” she laughed, “and, I’m not assuming anything about, you know, your sexuality, or that you necessarily *want* to be having intercourse just yet, but *should* you want to in the future, or to use toys or anything, then you’ll want to make sure there aren’t any nasty surprises when it comes time to use them with a partner. The best way to make sure you’re good to go, whenever you decide to become sexually active, is to do some vaginal dilatation, which is something you can do on your own, at home, with a minimum amount of mess and tools. There are also some surgical interventions we can do, if you prefer that, but those can have all sorts of complications,

and you'd still need to do some dilatation anyway to maintain the length and girth obtained *by* the surgery."

I shook my head.

"Nah, I think the first method, just the dilation is better."

"Dilatation it is." She slapped her thighs. "You just sit tight, and I'll be right back." She stood up and left the room. I saw Mom standing in the hall as the door swung open. She was facing away from me, reading something pinned to the wall. She didn't look over at me as the door swung shut. She looked lost in thought.

I sat on the edge of the bed, swinging my feet and wondering if I should change back into my clothes. The doctor came back a second or two later, though, carrying a cardboard box. I could see crepe paper sticking out of it, the kind used to hide presents so you couldn't see them through the open top of a gift bag.

"So, this," she said, sitting down on her wheelie stool and taking out a white plastic object, "is a size two vaginal dilator."

It was maybe five inches long and tapered to a rounded point. It was cylindrical—clearly shaped like a penis—but it had none of the veins or realistic bits that you'd expect on dildos and toys. It was sleek and sterile and it looked way bigger than Dr. Keller's pinky finger.

"So, there really isn't a wrong way to use these," she said, pulling a tube of lotion out of the box. "I'll get you a prescription for some hormonal cream, and then pretty much all you do is, every night for the first couple of weeks, you'll put about this much onto the dilator," she squeezed a loonie-sized circle of cream into her palm, "and you'll spread it evenly over the top

part of the dilator, just like this.” She demonstrated, smoothing the cream over the tip of the very penile apparatus with the pads of her fingers. She stared, unblinking, into my eyes as she worked at it.

“And then you’ll find somewhere comfortable and private, and you’ll insert it into the vagina, and hold it there, pressing—not hard—but firmly, against the back of the vaginal wall for about ten minutes. You do that every night for two weeks, and, honestly, you’ll probably be ready for the third size by the end of those two weeks.”

She pulled another dilator out of the box. The third one looked twice as large as the size two, and I felt a little thrill of premature accomplishment. Would I seriously be able to take a normal-sized penis after just a few weeks of this?

“You don’t want to move too quickly from size to size—I’d say don’t go any faster than two weeks per size. The vaginal skin in someone your age is quite elastic, so things will go quickly, but you don’t want to strain yourself unnecessarily. Some women have had bleeding and cracking when they moved up in sizes too quickly, and we don’t want that to happen to you. Mokay?”

I nodded as she got up and rinsed the dilator off in the sink.

“The great thing about the hormonal cream is, it’ll plump the skin of the vagina and make it susceptible to expansion in ways that regular lubricant won’t, so make sure, at least for the first few months of using these, that you only use the hormone cream when you’re dilating. It’ll also help with any incontinence you might have experienced by plumping up the skin around the end of the urethra and making a better seal.”

My face flushed as I thought back to the two times I'd wet the bed. Had that been all it was? The skin down there just wasn't plump enough?

"Okay," I said.

"Any questions about any of this?"

I shook my head.

"Nope, I think I'm good."

"I will mention that these are pretty expensive, so as soon as you're ready for the size four and five, I'll get you guys to mail these back to me here at the hospital, and we'll send out the next two as soon as we get them."

I thanked her and tried not to imagine how many other vaginas my new dilators had already dilated.

She placed the dilators back in the same cardboard box they'd come with, and handed the box over to me.

"So, any questions?" she asked. She was standing over by the door now, and the appointment felt quite finished. Luckily, nothing came to my mind besides the exhaustion creeping in, and the little glimmer of excitement that came when I thought of dilating. It was going to be painful and tedious—I got that—but by the end of it I'd be able to actually have sex. Something I'd barely ever allowed myself to consider before. I'd be able to actually have sex. Like everyone else. It was too good to be true.

Mom was still in the hallway when I stepped outside.

"We good to go?" she asked.

I pushed the box under my arm, like Dad did with the paper whenever he headed off to the bathroom for a long-haul.

“Yep, we’re good,” I said.

Chapter 17—The Surgery

Me—What were your fears or worries about the surgery? What were your hopes?

Dad—The only fears that I had were for your personal well-being and that you would be able to overcome any misconceptions of your own or ours that would possibly hinder what should be a complete recovery from your surgery. My hopes for you have always been for a life of health and happiness.

Dad and I woke early on the morning of January 11th, 2005. It was freezing cold outside, the kind of cold that freezes the moisture in your nostrils and makes you feel like you're breathing around shredded cotton. It wasn't snowy, but Dad kept going on about how bad the Coquihalla probably was, and how much trouble we'd be in if we slid off the road.

“Dress warm,” he kept saying. “If we were to slide off the road, it could be days before anyone found us. Boots, coats, whole nine yards.”

It felt like we'd just done this whole thing, but in fact, it was almost a month since we'd been in Vancouver for the initial round of appointments. Christmas had come and gone, and with it, I'd received my first gaming console. I don't know how he knew, but Dad had gotten my sisters and I a GameCube for Christmas, along with *The Legend of Zelda: The Wind Waker*. I was absolutely obsessed with the game, and even though I'd wanted a console for most of my life and would soon (I imagined) be too old to play it, I couldn't have been happier.

I hadn't seen much of my friends, what with Westside Road being so treacherous in the winter, but I didn't really care. I'd called Stephanie on Christmas morning to talk about all we'd gotten, and to wish each other Merry Christmas, as we'd always done, but other than that, my mind was on other things.

At school, the semester was winding down, but again, I'd hardly noticed. I was only just passing Chemistry and Biology, but I was passing them. Math, on the other hand, was another matter. I'd missed so much school for doctor appointments, and I'd tried so little to catch up that, for the first time in my life, I was actually failing a course. Originally, I was meant to have a spare in the second term, but if I wanted to graduate on time (I did, desperately), then I'd have to surrender my spare and take Math 11 again. In a semester school like ours, you had the same four classes every day for the first half of the year, then four new classes every day for the second half. The thought of another whole semester of daily math made me feel I was on the verge of a hysterical breakdown, but I pushed it from my mind. There were far more pressing matters on my plate, like the impending surgical removal of my testicles. For instance.

I didn't have a proper suitcase, so I emptied out my school backpack and replaced my binder and textbooks with my pajamas and a comfy change of clothes for the following day. The people at Children's Hospital had said to wear something loose and comfortable for after surgery, and since we were only spending one night, I wouldn't need much. We didn't have to stay at the depressing Easter Seals place this time, thank God. Dad booked us a room at the Comfort Inn instead, because he said they had the comfiest beds. "It's in the name," he kept saying. It hardly mattered to me, though. Just as long as we didn't have to stay with all the sick kids and sad families I still hadn't really seen, but that I was sure were lurking around every

corner just waiting to ambush me with their sadness. The more we could pretend that this was just a fun mid-winter trip to the big city, the better I'd feel.

Mom and Britt and Ari were all staying behind. It was only Tuesday, and Britt and Ari had school. "No sense in all of us going. You'll be back before you know it," Mom said. I hoped she was right. More than being excited about getting the whole thing over and done with, I was terrified I might die on the operating table. You heard stories about people who'd never been put under before having terrible reactions to anesthetics and dying mid-surgery. I mean, the stories were rare, and usually not of sixteen-year-old girls, but still, you never knew until it was too late.

Despite getting up early, Dad went about his morning with his usual disregard for the passing of time. He ate his cereal and sipped his coffee. He stood in the driveway and listened to the wind in the trees. He checked the oil in the car and smoked a cigarette. He sat in the bathroom for close to an hour, and when I asked him why he was taking so long, he said you can't rush the body; it's gonna do what it's gonna do.

It was about a four-hour drive from our house to Vancouver, but Dad budgeted a good six hours at least. Most dads would find ways to shave time off the trip, like eating fast food and using gas station bathrooms. But not my dad. Every restaurant we ate at along the way, no matter how small the meal, meant a sit-down experience with a proper bathroom. To be fair, the only thing we needed to accomplish before tomorrow was getting to Vancouver—everything else important happened tomorrow—but as much as I wanted it to be a fun little vacation, I couldn't shake the urgency. On so many levels, I just wanted it to be over and done with. Obviously, I wanted the surgery itself done, and not just for the relief of an end to doctor visits and physical exams.

Ever since learning beyond the shadow of a doubt that the painful lumps in my groin were testicles, I'd felt almost frantic to have them out. Every second they were there was another second I had to remember I wasn't a girl like all the other girls around me. Where other girls were worried about finding the right guy (or girl) to fool around with, I was terrified of anyone touching me at all. The idea of a guy (or girl) seeing or touching my completely flat chest was preposterous. The idea of them slipping a hand down the front of my jeans and feeling the lumps in their hands was preposterous. How would I ever explain, "Oh yeah, those are my testicles"? I couldn't even explain it to myself. It felt like there were two humiliating little alien invaders living just below my skin in the front of my jeans, and I couldn't wait to cut them out.

It was decided that Dad would take two days off work and drive me to Vancouver, rather than Mom (who didn't have a job), because he was the most comfortable with driving over the high mountain roads that led to Vancouver. We were only going to spend Tuesday night, then head home Wednesday around noon, once the surgery was done. The surgery was only supposed to take about an hour, then there was recovery and prep and all that. We were due to be at the Children's Hospital at 7:00am Wednesday to get checked in and prepped, and then the surgery was going to happen a little after 8:00.

"I wonder if they'll have to use any extra anesthetic on you," Dad said the night before we left. "Redheads need ten percent extra anesthetic, and you've got some red in your hair. Not as much as your sister, but still some red."

"What would hair colour have to do with calculating anesthetic?"

“Just something about the chemistry that makes up a redhead. The body’s a complex thing, Nanny. You think one part’s got nothing to do with another, but it’s all tied up together in there.”

We headed south on Westside Road. Every twist and turn of the road was so familiar to me, I could draw a bird’s eye view map of it, if I ever needed to. As kids, we all used to joke that we knew exactly when to take a sip from our water bottles and when not to, having mapped out every bump and pothole.

We reached Highway 97 and turned right. The highway would take us through West Kelowna (which was just plain old Westbank in those days) and onto the Connector. From there, it was a little over an hour to Merritt, another to Hope, another to Chilliwack, and so on. At least, the way Dad drove, it was.

As soon as we were on the Connector, Dad slipped into the far right lane and let everyone pass us. Cars, trucks, SUVs, semis, everything flew past us on the left. Soon, we were completely alone, rumbling along in the rusty red (and black and blue) ‘85 Escort.

The Connector gave way to the Coquihalla just outside Merritt. Thus far, the road was bare and dry, but the real mountains, the Zopkios Summit and so forth, were destined to be covered in thick snow as tall as some of the trees lining the highway. The sky was clear blue, though, and the radio said there was nothing but clear skies in the forecast. Still, Dad crept along just below the speed limit.

“No reason to rush things,” he said, “we’ve got all day to get there.”

We passed a few cars in the ditch, and a few parked on the shoulders, with unhappy families gathered around them.

“Probably burned out the engine going too fast,” Dad said as we passed one particularly unhappy smattering of people standing around a bright orange Jeep. “You get some people in a 4X4 and they think they can do whatever the hell they want.”

We listened to Dad’s whole tape collection as we bumped along: Supertramp, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Eric Clapton. We listened to staticky CBC stations whenever we could. The Payolas came on at one point, singing “Eyes of a Stranger,” and Dad sang along, changing the chorus to “You’ve got the eyes of a strange nerd,” as he liked to do whenever the chance came along.

Most of the time, there wasn’t even a tepid radio signal.

“I’ve been meaning to get some more Blues, but it’s so hard to find tapes anymore,” he said after a good half-hour of shared silence.

“You should get a CD player,” I said. “You’re a mechanic; I’m sure you could find a used one cheap and wedge it in there.”

“Yeah, but then what would I do with all my tapes?”

We stopped for lunch in Chilliwack. My stomach was so twisted up with anxiety, all I could manage was a bowl of corn pops. As if to try and squeeze in every last drop of agony that they could, the testes were boiling away in the nest of my jeans, reminding me of their presence every time I crossed my legs. I excused myself more than once to rub a cold paper towel over them in the bathroom, but nothing seemed to help.

We didn't talk about the surgery much. Dad pointed out places he'd like to buy farm land one day, and places he'd gone camping with buddies as a teen, but he steered clear of the real reason we were headed to the city. I didn't mind, though. Talking about it meant thinking about it, and thinking about it meant I might lose my mind.

The Comfort Inn we checked into was at the edge of town, in a bit of an industrial area. As a former long-haul truck driver, Dad was used to staying in the outskirts, but I think he also preferred it to the city center. Fewer people, less noise, and less chance for nonsense.

We checked into our room with two double beds, but Dad complained that he couldn't sleep in a double bed, and they upgraded us to two Queens.

"You just have to ask for what you want in this world," he said. "Squeaky wheel gets the grease. Trust me, I'm a mechanic."

We went out for a sit-down dinner in a Chinese food place with a buffet and a hideous neon Panda as its mascot. Only once we were seated in our booth did Dad bring up what was going to happen tomorrow. Maybe it was the pathetic excuse for a buffet plate that I was picking at, or the way I was slouched over my dinner like a scolded child. Maybe it was just the fact that there was only one thing on either of our minds, and it wasn't going to go away by not talking about it. Once we were seated across from each other, though, with the evening stretching out in front of us, he decided we couldn't avoid it any longer.

"So, are you nervous about tomorrow?"

I set down my forkful of peas and carrots and took a sip of my Coke.

Over Dad's shoulder, I could see a family of four arguing about something. The mom and dad were horribly out of shape, and the kids were red-faced and angry looking. There was so much rage flying around the few square feet of their table, and all I could think was "Why?" What reason could they possibly have to be so mad? None of *them* were just about to go in for surgery. None of *them* had to deal with a potentially life or death situation. At least, I didn't think so. The only issue they seemed to have was with something on the bill. It seemed preposterous for them to be so upset, but then plenty of people seemed to run at 100% rage capacity no matter the circumstances.

"I'm less scared of the actual surgery and more of the anesthetic."

"Why's that?"

"I've never been under before. What if they don't calculate it right and I die on the operating table?"

Dad shook his head.

"That won't happen. These people know what they're doing."

"Yeah, but, so do all the other surgeons and anesthesiologists in the world, and people still die on the operating table every day."

"Eh, I think they've got a pretty good track record here. This is one of the top children's hospitals in the world, and they didn't get that way by losing patients during simple surgeries. These are people's kids we're talking about. They always do their best when it's kids."

"You think it's a simple surgery?"

“Shit yeah! In and out. They don’t even think you’ll be there past noon—it’s just the latest you’re *allowed* to stay there. I bet we’ll be out of there before 11:00.”

That made me feel a bit better, but feeling better didn’t necessarily mean things *were* better.

“I’m still scared, though. You just never know.”

“Well, no, you never know *anything* in life, really. At any moment we could all have brain aneurysms and die in this very restaurant. But it shouldn’t stop you from doing things. You wouldn’t stop getting into cars just because millions of people die in car wrecks in a year.”

“I guess not, no.”

“Of course not. You understand there’s a certain amount of risk in getting up and being a person in the world, but you’ve still gotta live. In your case, you’ve got these things growing inside you, and they’re holding you back from living the life you know you want to live, so you’ve just got to face this thing head on, and get them out. Of *course* there’s a risk—there’s always a risk—but you can make *decisions* based on how much or how little risk there is to doing something, and I think there’s very little risk associated with this surgery, in this hospital, at this point in history.”

“You think so?”

“Oh shit yeah,” he said, waving a hand.

I smiled.

“I *am* pretty excited for it to be done and over with.”

“Well, no doubt!”

“I’ve just been in pain every day for years now, and I can’t wait for it to be over.”

He frowned. “It’s been that bad?”

“Oh yeah.” I told him all about the daily homemade ice packs down my jeans, and how I couldn’t wear pants that were too tight or sleep on my stomach or get hit with a football in P.E. I couldn’t remember if he knew all this already. Had we discussed things, just he and I? He’d certainly heard a lot at the doctor visits, but I couldn’t remember for sure.

He took a sip of his Coke and sat quiet for a moment.

“I had no idea it was that bad. Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

I shrugged, staring down at my plate. “I don’t know. I was embarrassed.”

“Of what?”

I shrugged again. “Of where the pain was coming from, I guess. Of the fact that I wasn’t really going through puberty. I thought if I said anything, it would snowball into...well, honestly, pretty much all this. And I was afraid it might be cancer, and I didn’t want to deal with that. I know it’s better to catch things like that early, but if you just never face it, you can kind of make yourself think it’s not happening.”

He shook his head. “But you can’t just be in pain forever. You need to speak up.”

“Well, yeah, I did. Eventually.”

He pursed his lips and nodded, slowly. “And I’m *glad* you did, but just think how much pain you could have been spared if you’d spoken up earlier?”

“Yeah, but, what if I had, and it had been cancer or something? Then I wouldn’t have had the happy years I had, cancer-free.”

“Well, for starters, were you really that happy when you were worried all along that it might be cancer?”

“Well, no, but—”

“You’ve got to bring things like that up, Nanny. If it *had* been cancer, you might have let it go too long to be treated and cured.”

“Yeah.”

“And you ended up suffering over it, anyway. Thinking and worrying about it every day, being in physical pain every day. I know it was scary to face, but some things just need to be dealt with whether you want to deal with them or not. Some things just land in your lap, and you can’t make them go away by ignoring them. All you can do is...you know...kind of try to get out ahead of them and lessen the damage a bit.”

“Yeah.”

We ate in silence for a minute or two. The family over Dad’s shoulder kept squabbling until the moment they left the restaurant. I watched them through the bank of windows that faced the highway as they made their way out into the parking lot. The mom and dad were still arguing, though the kids had run ahead to their vehicle. I couldn’t be sure, but it looked like they were standing beside the same bright orange Jeep we’d seen at the side of the highway. There was a tow truck parked a few spaces to the left of the Jeep as well. I couldn’t tell if it was picking up or dropping off, but whatever was going on, I was thankful it wasn’t us. As ugly as our car

was, it was still running fine. Getting to the children's hospital was annoying, but struggling to get there would have been even worse. I wasn't exactly happy that the family was having such a bad day (if that was what was happening), but I did feel a little better. Maybe they didn't have the same problems going on that we did, but things weren't perfect for them, either.

It made me think of the time we had a substitute teacher in PE who taught yoga professionally. She spent the whole block teaching us stretches to alleviate tension and help with stress.

High on my suffering horse and totally unable to accept that anyone besides me (in the grips my endless, mortal dread) could have stress in their lives, I snorted to this girl, Katie, seated beside me, "What stress?"

Katie frowned. "Just...stress. Any kind of stress. People have stress."

I felt stupid then, and I felt stupid now. Of course other people had stress. Life was stressful regardless if you were dealing with a tow truck driver or heading for an orchiectomy.

"Anyway, no sense thinking about all of that for the rest of the night. How about we stop off at a gas station and we get some chips and snacks and whatnot, and we go back to the room and see if there's a good movie on the TV? I'm sure they've got all the new releases. Hotels usually get movies a month or two before they're on DVD, right after they leave the theatres."

I smiled. For the first time since we'd left Kelowna, it really did feel like a vacation.

Somehow, I slept right through the night. It took me a while to fall asleep, but I guess you *can* be exhausted enough to sleep, even when you're super amped up on adrenaline.

Surprisingly, we got to the hospital on time. Walking through the brightly coloured halls to the room where the surgery was going to take place, we passed a gift shop. I peered through the window at all the Ty beanies they had lined up out front and noticed Patrick the starfish from *Spongebob Squarepants*. My dad and my sisters and I were all huge Spongebob fans.

"Oh cute," I said, pointing out Patrick.

Dad said something in Patrick's voice, and I chuckled, though I wasn't really in the mood.

They took my weight and height measurements and put me in a hospital gown and asked Dad and I to sit in a waiting room full of other kids waiting to have surgery that day. There weren't any bald kids, but there were a bunch of kids in wheelchairs and kids in robes with tape and wires and tubes coming out of their bellies. They were all way younger than me.

I sat near the end of a row of black plastic chairs, and Dad stood a few feet away, reading a poster on the wall behind me.

A woman with long sideways bangs and short hair in the back came over to me after a few minutes. She looked just like the receptionist at my family doctor's office back home.

I was sitting with my hands folded in my lap, counting the ceiling tiles when she jarred me out of my reverie with her perky greeting.

"Hi, Brianna? I'm Melinda," she said, "I'm the nurse who's going to be looking after you during the procedure."

I shook her hand.

“How are we feeling? Do you have any questions for me before we get started here?”

I shook my head.

“No? No worries or concerns or anything?”

“Well...I’m a little worried about dying on the operating table.”

She actually laughed. “Why on Earth would you die on the operating table?”

“What if I have a reaction to the anesthetic?”

“Oh, we have plenty of procedures in place to make sure nothing like that happens. Even if you did start to have a reaction, we’d pull you right out of it and you’d be just fine. Trust me, though, you won’t have a reaction. The odds of that happening are like zero point zero zero one percent, or something way out there like that.”

I nodded and tried not to think of how much the odds were against me having AIS to begin with. Or what the odds were against all the other poor kids in the room dealing with whatever they were all dealing with. Surely, the whole room (including myself) was full of odds-defeaters for whom reassuring numbers and percentages meant very little.

Two little girls ran past us, playing tag. Or, at least I thought they were playing tag. One of them looked like she was crying, or had recently been crying.

A woman with brown, curly hair followed after them. She was on her phone, though you weren’t allowed cell phones in the waiting room.

“I know. It’s just hard for her sister. She’s so young,” I heard the woman say.

“Mkay?” Melinda asked, resting a hand on my shoulder and pulling me back to our conversation.

I nodded, only half aware of what we’d been talking about. It felt way too early to be making big decisions, or tackling anything as important as surgery.

“Okay. Has anyone explained the procedure to you yet?”

I shook my head.

“Okay, well, it’s pretty straight-forward. First off, the doctor will perform a quick procedure called a colposcopy, which means he’ll be snaking a small camera up the urethra to make sure that all your lines are straight-forward for releasing urine, and there aren’t any surprises when we remove the testes. Here’s a little bit of information about what you can expect in the next few days from that,” she said, handing me a pamphlet.

Dad swooped in and took it from me, so it wouldn’t get lost. I glanced around to see if anyone was listening to what we were talking about, but there was no one nearby. The eight or ten chairs to my right were empty, and Melinda was sitting in the only chair to my left. I wasn’t surprised that no one had tried to sit with me, given I was the oldest patient in the room by at least five years, and I was thankful for the isolation. I didn’t need strangers thinking about my urethra, or the horrifying implements about to be inserted into it.

“Next, he’ll be making two small incisions just below the bikini line, and removing the testes. That part won’t take long at all. Then he’ll stitch you up and you’ll be off to Recovery. How does all that sound to you?”

I nodded. So far as surgery was concerned, it sounded just fine. Especially the part about the scars. The last thing I wanted (well, maybe not the last, after all, death was still a possibility. but anyway) was a big honking scar across my abdomen just in time for my breasts to come in. Surely, I deserved at least one good bikini season in my life.

“Yeah, that sounds fine.”

She smiled a big squinty-eyed, close-mouthed smile that was so broad and enthusiastic, given the circumstances and what we were talking about, she looked slightly unhinged.

“Now, there is one thing the doctor would like me to ask you.” She looked up at Dad. “Dad, you might want to hear this, too,” she said. Dad stepped a bit closer and leaned in. “We’ve got several medical students in the building today, and, since your case is such a rare one, we were thinking it would be a wonderful opportunity for them to look in on the procedure. It’s not very often we have someone like you in here—maybe a couple times a year, if that—and it would be highly beneficial for them to see the procedure take place. You absolutely do *not* have to agree to this, if you’re at all uncomfortable with the idea, but we *would* wait until you were under anesthetic to bring them in, and they’d be gone before you woke up. So you wouldn’t even need to see them, or feel them watching or anything like that. Again, though, it’s entirely up to you.”

“Oh, sure,” I said, shrugging. “I don’t mind if they watch.”

“No? Are you sure?”

“Yeah, no, I don’t mind at all,” I said, and I didn’t. The last thing on my mind was who was going to be in the room, or what they’d think of me.

“Well, thank you very much, Brianna.”

She stood up.

“It won’t be much longer now. We’ll call you in a few minutes.”

Dad watched Melinda go, then he sat down beside me. “You sure you don’t mind them watching like that?”

“Oh, yeah. If it helps them learn. I’ll be out, anyway. It’s not like they’ll be staring at *me*. Just my body.”

“Well, good for you,” he said before eyeing a DIY coffee set-up on a small table across the room. “Back in a flash,” he said, rising to his feet.

I’d never had a cup of coffee before, and I wouldn’t until a few years later. But it looked nice to have something to do besides just sitting and waiting. We’d been told I shouldn’t have anything but water the morning of the surgery, but even if I’d been allowed coffee, I doubted I would have been able to get it down around the lump in my throat and the knot in my stomach.

Dad sat back down beside me with a small Styrofoam cup, and we shared a few minutes of silence as he sipped pensively away. I tried to imagine the rest of the day ahead, when I’d be free of the hospital and the testes and the daily pain, but I couldn’t really picture it. Not while I was in that big, bright room with all those imperfect little bodies running and crawling and sitting and trying to survive. There were a few small boys in wheelchairs—one that looked as if he had a few other things going on with him, both mental and physical, and one who looked as if he’d just had an accident at some point. There was one very small, very skinny girl who looked as if she’d never had a proper meal in her life. Her knees bulged in her leggings like a skeleton’s

knees might. Other than that, I couldn't really guess what had brought the other kids into the hospital that day. For the most part, they looked like any other kids you might see running around a playground.

I felt my heartrate picking up as the seconds ticked by. I squeezed the arms of my chair and tried to calm down. It wouldn't do any good to panic now. Not when I was so close to the end.

“Brianna?”

I looked up and saw Melinda coming towards me with a clipboard.

“They're ready for you. Do you want to follow me? Your Dad can wait here, if that's all right.”

I gave Dad one last smile, and a quick hug, then I followed after Melinda and the spiky hair on the back of her head.

She led me down a hallway where doctors and nurses were washing their hands in large, plastic sinks that lined the walls. There was a large double door on the left, near the end of the hall. Melinda opened it and ushered me into a spacious, brightly-lit room with a bed in the middle.

“You can just lie down on that bed, there,” she said, pointing to the surgical bed in the middle of the room. There were various sinks and IV stands lining the walls of the room. Two or three people in blue scrubs were walking back and forth, mumbling from under their masks.

I walked over to the bed and lay down.

“This seems so weird,” I said as I adjusted my legs and looked up at the bright lights above me. “Just walking over to the bed and lying down. You always see people getting wheeled into surgery on shows and in movies and stuff, like they can’t walk and they’re barely clinging to life, and then you get there yourself and you just...lie down...like you’re lying down on a towel on the beach. It’s just weird.”

She didn’t answer. A tall man in scrubs and a face mask had come into the room, and he was asking her questions.

“Brianna, nice to meet you,” the man said as he left Melinda and looked down at me. He introduced himself as Dr. Such-and-such and told me he would be performing the surgery. It didn’t matter to me who he was. His eyes were warm, though, and his voice was even warmer. He seemed quite young, and—if I was honest—pretty attractive, even with his doctor get-up. His eyes were that warm, dark brown I was starting to realize I liked, and I could tell under his mask that his jaw was angular and tight. Like a model’s.

“So, how are you feeling today?” he asked.

“Pretty good,” I said. What else could I possibly say? *“Panicked beyond words?”*
“Mortally terrified?”

I lay still and listened to the metallic sounds of tools being placed on trays, the swish of fabric as nurses hurried around, asking questions I couldn’t understand and confirming or fixing things as needed.

“Well, that’s good,” he said, squirting some foamy white antiseptic into his hands and rubbing them together. “Did Melinda talk to you about the med students coming in to observe?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, good.” He looked toward the end of the room past my feet. I followed his gaze and saw several young bodies in scrubs filing into a narrow room, like a hallway, separated from the surgical room by a bank of windows. Most of them were facing me, and I felt my face go hot with embarrassment. Of course, they didn’t know me as a person, I wouldn’t have to do anything but lie still, but I still felt shy. Some of them were laughing and joking, and I wished more than anything that we could trade places.

I also wondered why Melinda had said they’d come in once I was asleep. That was one of the few things she’d said, and she’d lied. Or, at least, she’d said something she believed to be true, that wasn’t. Did that mean I was at more risk of dying on the operating table than she’d said? Did she not really have a clue what was going on?

“All right, Brianna, we’re going to get started here,” the hot doctor said, placing a mask over my face. A nurse stepped forward, wrangled my gown a bit, and stuck a sticker on my chest. I heard a heart monitor beating, and I realized it was *my* heart it was keeping track of.

“Now, I know this is gonna feel weird,” the doctor said, looking down at me, “but this is not going to take long at all. This is your first time on anesthetic?”

“Yeah.”

He chuckled.

“It’s gonna be the strangest thing, but I bet you’ll be asleep in ten seconds here.”

My heart skipped a beat. Was it already happening? Was the anesthetic already in my system? If it was, there was no way to back out now.

“Is it already in my system then?” I asked.

“Hm?” the doctor asked.

“Is the anesthetic already hooked up?”

“Oh, yes, you’re all good to go,” the doctor said, chuckling. “Won’t be long now. Why don’t you start counting backwards from a hundred for me?” he asked. Just like in the movies.

I looked up at the lights. Faces and hands floated in and out of my vision.

“I bet you won’t make it to ninety,” the doctor said. It sounded like a challenge to me.

“One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven...”

I might have said ninety-six, but if I did, I don’t recall.

When I woke up, I was lying on my right side, and I was shaking. I was naked in a bed somewhere, in a room where all the walls were curtains. My hands were curled protectively around my groin, which was covered in puffy cotton and long pieces of tape that curled away from my body as they started to unstick, tickling the backs of my hands and the insides of my thighs. I was aware only of the puff balls and the tape, the shaking, and the curtain walls. Everything else before seemed meaningless.

I fell asleep, woke up, took stock, and fell asleep again.

This happened a few times, until I woke up and stayed awake long enough to notice that I was shaking so badly, the bed was creaking and groaning beneath me. A woman appeared out of nowhere with a big, folded blanket in her arms. She opened it up and draped it over me.

“You’re awake,” she said, though I still couldn’t keep my eyes open for more than a second or two. “How are you feeling?”

“F-fine,” I said as my teeth chattered together.

“You’ve got the shakes pretty bad, but that’s normal. Do you feel nauseated?” she asked.

I considered her question.

“N-no.”

“Good.”

She left, and I fell back asleep.

When I woke up, Dad was sitting in a chair across from me. He smiled as he saw me looking at him. He had another Styrofoam cup of coffee, and he set it down on a low table beside him as he leaned towards me.

“Well, hey, Nanny.

“H-hi.” I said, smiling. I was still shaking, but it wasn’t as bad.

“How are you feeling?”

“Pretty good, actually,” I said, realizing it was true.

“You were shouting for a while there,” he said, laughing. “Saying some pretty interesting stuff.”

“R-really?” I laughed. “W-what d-did I s-say?”

He shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it.” He stood up and came over to me. “I got you something,” he said, opening a white paper bag. I saw a small, pinkish shape emerge, and suddenly I was gazing into the happy, embroidered face of Patrick Starr.

“Is this the one you wanted?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you first came to, you were saying you wanted the Patrick beanie from the gift shop. Is this what you meant?”

I laughed. Had my first conscious impulse really been to demand a stuffed *Spongebob* character?

I grabbed hold of Patrick and pulled him into the blankets with me.

“Thanks,” I said.

Dad waved his hand, as if to say “don’t even think about it” as he settled back into his chair.

“I c-can’t w-wait to get h-home.”

He looked around the room. “Well, you and me both.”

“What time is it?”

He checked his watch. “10:30.”

“Oh good, s-so we’re r-right on schedule.”

He smiled. “You should rest a little more. I’m just gonna go down and get another coffee.”

I stuck my hand out of the sheets.

“C-could you stay h-here with me?” I asked.

He looked down at my hand. “Of course,” he said, taking my hand firmly in his and pulling his chair closer to the bed. “If that’s what you want.”

I woke up again a little while later and saw Dad talking to a slender nurse with a greyish bob. They were standing in the corner of two curtain walls, with Dad inside and her outside. I could just make her out as the curtains fluttered from all the activity of people passing by with carts and wheelchairs and IV stands.

Dad smiled when he saw my eyes were open.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Good,” I said, noticing the shaking had stopped. I also noticed I was boiling hot beneath the blankets and more than a little hungry. There was so much noise as well, I realized, with the squeak of beds on wheels and soft shoes padding by outside my room. It felt like the whole hospital was being disassembled just outside my curtain room.

“They have some more recoveries that need this room,” Dad said. “Do you want to try sitting up?”

I nodded, and he offered me his hand. I took it and pulled myself up.

“Easy does it,” he said. “Don’t want those stitches to come undone.”

The room crept a little sideways, but no worse than if I’d just been lying on the couch a little too long.

“I think I’m okay,” I said, remembering suddenly that I was naked, and that the blankets had fallen down my shoulders.

“Let’s get you dressed,” Dad said, reaching behind him and grabbing my clothes off of the back of the chair he’d been sitting in. “You think you can do it yourself? Cause if not, the nurse can come in and help you.”

“Oh, no, I’m okay,” I said, realizing as I said it that I actually felt quite spectacular. I had no pain anywhere, and, oddly, I felt completely at peace with everything in the world.

“Okay. Take your time,” he said as he pulled open one of the curtain walls and left the room.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and looked down at the puffy clot of medical supplies coating my groin. Even with the bulky pile of gauze and bandages, I could see that my groin itself had deflated. Instead of the chin-shaped hump it had been when it was bursting to contain testicles it wasn’t designed to hold, it was now as flat and empty as any image of a female groin I’d ever seen.

My pants were harder to get into, but I'd remembered to wear my comfy pants, and they gave quite a bit as I pulled the flannel waistband up around my belly.

"You all good in there?" Dad whispered through the curtain a second later.

"Yeah," I hollered back.

A wheelchair was pushed through the curtains, followed by my dad's face which was grinning apologetically.

"They gave us this for the walk down to the car."

I'd never been in a wheelchair before, but I climbed in and rode happily out to the elevators and down to the parking garage. I could feel strangers' eyes on me as I was pushed along, but for once, it didn't bother me.

"I feel amazing for some reason," I said, barely holding in a giggle.

"That's the morphine," Dad said. "It'll do that."

The Escort was sitting right outside the doors, and I realized Dad must have gone and pulled it around to the front of the hospital while I was unconscious. I had to move slowly to climb into the front seat, which made me feel a bit like one of my grandparents struggling to climb into an armchair. But I still didn't feel any pain. I didn't feel much of anything, actually. Like my whole body was numb, but not asleep. It was unlike anything else I'd ever felt before.

A few minutes later we were on the highway out of the city. The sun was brilliant and the sky was bluer than I'd ever seen it. But there were dark clouds reaching towards us from the east.

“Weather’s supposed to turn right about the time we’ll be reaching the summit,” Dad said, sticking a Blue Rodeo tape into the tape deck. “But we’ll be okay. We’ll just take it slow.” He looked at me. “You still feeling okay?”

I was smiling out the window at the buildings rushing past.

“Oh, yeah. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so good in my life.”

“There’s some T3s in the glovebox for when the morphine starts to wear off,” he said. “You can take one every three hours. I’d probably wait ‘til the pain starts to creep in, though. I don’t know exactly how much they gave you back there, but it looked like they gave you a lot of stuff.”

It wasn’t even an hour before the morphine had mostly worn off and the pain started to creep in. It was itchy, too, down there, but I knew I wouldn’t be allowed to scratch.

I took a T3 with my cheeseburger we picked up from McDonald’s in Chilliwack.

“They said you maybe shouldn’t eat for a while until we know how the morphine was going to affect you, but if you feel all right...”

“Oh yeah, I feel totally normal now,” I said, “except for the pain and itchiness.”

“You must be starving, having had to miss breakfast. But don’t overdo it,” Dad said. He was smoking a cigarette with the window down, and he blew a steady stream of smoke out into the chilly air. The black plastic ashtray he’d bought to hang on the window sill—the one that

looked like a coffee cup with only a tiny hole in the top—clanged against the door as the breeze ripped through the window and tried to pry it from its perch.

“Yeah, surgery’s weird that way,” he continued, as if answering a question I’d just asked. “I don’t know why it always has to be that way—the itchiest things being the things you absolutely aren’t allowed to scratch—but, I guess that’s life.”

The clouds had closed in around us. Just as Dad had predicted, the snow started to come just as we reached the Zopkios Summit. Immediately, cars and vans started to pop up all over the ditches like toys forgotten by some giant baby.

“Idiots,” Dad muttered, cruising slowly past them. “Every winter they hit the roads thinking they can go just as fast as ever, and they pay the price the second the snow shows up. Everybody’s always in such a goddamn hurry. And for what?”

The sun was already setting behind us, and the snow had started to come in a steady sheet that filled the windshield faster than the wipers could carry it away.

“We’ll be okay,” Dad said. “Just gotta go even slower.”

He dropped the Escort into fourth, and then third. The engine groaned and the hood gave a little lurch, but I felt the tires grab hold of the snow, and it made me feel safe. Even so, cars continued to whizz past us on the left.

“I don’t mind,” I said. “I mean, I don’t wanna die out here, but I don’t mind taking longer to get home.”

“Well, that’s good, ‘cause we don’t really have a choice,” Dad said.

He stubbed his cigarette and didn’t light another one.

“I asked them about the uh...the testes, after they’d taken them out. They said there were no signs of cancer starting to form or anything like that. Which is good. But then, they didn’t think there would be.”

“Well, that’s good,” I said.

“I guess, to hear the doctor describe it, they were just straight-up regular testicles like you’d see in any guy. Structurally, I mean. They weren’t half ovary or anything.”

“Huh. Did they say anything about them...like...working? Like...did they produce sperm, or whatever? Could I have, like...fathered a child...if they’d harvested them right?” The questions came easily now. With the morphine in my system and the testes out of my body, it was like I was asking about something academic and not at all tied to my body. I also realized just how much I’d been worried that the orgasm pain had been because I was ejaculating somehow, deep inside of my body. It was possible, wasn’t it? The pain always came in waves, like semen spurting from a penis, and it only ever happened when I had an orgasm, or when I was so excited that I might as well have just had an orgasm. It felt so strange to simply ask about, but it was also suddenly so easy. I wasn’t confessing to anything as heinous as touching myself. I was simply asking a medical question. Easy peasy.

“Nah, they didn’t say anything about that. But I doubt it, what with them being where they were inside you. That was the whole problem, wasn’t it? They’re supposed to be a certain temperature, and that’s why they’re kept outside the body in guys. Otherwise, the sperm dies.”

“Huh. Yeah, maybe.” I didn’t mention anything about how you can still ejaculate without sperm, or without live sperm, anyway. That was too dangerously close to a confession. But I did continue to wonder.

“It’s still crazy, though, to think of,” I said. “Like, not just that they were testicles, but that they’re not part of me anymore. They’re in a lab somewhere being poked and prodded. Makes me feel weird, like I can still feel the pain of them just imagining that.”

“Yep, the human body’s a pretty crazy thing. The doctor was saying they’ll be all cut up and sent off to other parts of the country to be studied. Probably already on their way now, actually. They told me they had to get them sliced up and sent off quickly, before they started to degrade, or something.”

“No shit.”

“Yep. Ah well, good riddance. Hopefully they can help teach somebody something.”

I looked out the window at the swirling, white world around us. The world we’d seen on the drive down was totally changed, now, wiped clean by the snow, and hard to see.

It was strange to consider the testes...my testicles...cut up and sent around the country, but it wasn’t sad. I didn’t care. I’d hated them every second I’d been aware of their existence. It was easy to picture them still hurting me, somehow, as people cut at them and examined them, but I knew that was impossible. Mentally, I knew that, but emotionally, they didn’t feel far away. At any rate, I was happy they might be able to help someone. Maybe they could help stop AIS from happening to other people. It seemed unlikely, but not impossible.

“Yeah,” I said, wistfully. “Hopefully they can.”

Eight hours managed to pass from the time we left the hospital to the time we pulled into our driveway. The snow had ebbed off at the edge of West Kelowna, but it picked up again a few minutes out from our house. Mom had the Christmas lights on as we pulled up, and the house looked every bit like the little gingerbread house we all liked to say it was. I'd taken another T3 about an hour before we got home, but the pain was already creeping back in as I walked slowly into the house.

Mom was there waiting for us as soon as we opened the door.

"I'm so happy you're home," she said, pulling me into a long, warm hug. "I heard on the news that there were so many crashes on the Coquihalla, and I was worried sick that one of them was you."

"It was pretty insane up there," I said, "but Dad just went super slow."

"Oh, that's great," she said, smiling. "How are you feeling?"

"Not too bad," I said, holding onto the wall as I pried one boot off with the toe of the other. "It hurts a bit, but more than anything I just want to pee and have a bath."

"Is it okay for you to bathe with the stitches still in?"

"Yeah, as long as the water's not too deep, or too hot."

"Do you have to go anywhere to have the stitches taken out?"

"No, they just dissolve, apparently."

"Oh, that's great," she said, sitting down on the couch and turning the TV on. I could hear Britt and Ari in the bedroom, laughing at something on our little TV. Britt poked her head out and said hi as I headed for the bathroom. I'd have to tell them all about the trip, but not until

after I'd had a bath. I felt filthy and distracted because of it, and all I wanted in the world was to be left alone for a while and to do something normal.

I ran the water and climbed in as soon as there was enough to sit down in.

The surgery site was covered in weird, yellow smears of something I vaguely remembered someone saying was antiseptic. It came off easily enough with soap, but I couldn't say the same for the surgical tape covering my brand-new scars. I peeled one piece back a little bit, but there was a black, curly stitch clinging to it, and I didn't want to pull too hard in case it started to unravel things. I could see the scars, though, like two angry eyes pointing down towards my crotch. They were both about an inch or so long, and bright red. The skin around them, although still a little swollen, was as flat as I could remember it ever being when I was a little girl. Within a week or two, I knew, I'd be able to do belly bounces on the trampoline (once the snow cleared) and sleep on my stomach and get hit with footballs and wear tight jeans, and there wouldn't be any pain whatsoever. I could have sex one day without blinding pain erupting in my groin every time the guy came down against my body. I could be a confident, sexy woman like any other woman.

I kept the water running so I could laugh and cry as long as I needed to without my family hearing me. As I rubbed a light lather of soap over the scars, I listened to my family in the next room over. Dad was talking about the highway. Mom was opening and closing cupboards. Britt and Ari were laughing and talking. Our Beagle, Buster, was walking back and forth over the hardwood; his nails clicking with each sleepy step. I listened to the familiar, homey sounds, and I cleaned myself up as delicately as I could.

When I was done, I pulled the plug out of the drain and I watched as the water took my blood and my tears and the antiseptic filth of my old life and flushed it all away.

Chapter 18—Taking the Wheel (that’s a metaphor)

Me—What can you remember about my personality in those years—age 14/15/16, roughly 2001-2004? What was my confidence like? My mood? My loves and hates?

Britt—I remember you being very reserved and almost condemning of other teenagers. Not always, though. You and I had very open talks at times, during which I remember crying a lot out on the trampoline and hearing how you really felt about things. I always saw you as extremely confident though. I remember you being very driven even through the anxiety. Even though you were probably far more anxious than I was, I just remember viewing you as strong, together and definitely smart enough to warrant your occasional sneering at other teenagers and their blocky make up, choppy haircuts and angst over nothing real. You were really competitive. Especially with Stephanie. Although you always seemed much older and wiser than I was, you still had a childish way to you at times. It seemed as though you didn’t want time to keep moving and you didn’t want to move forward, but also desperately just wanted to reach the end and an outcome of some kind. From what I recall, you loved playing in the creek with Ari and I, making forts in the woods, swimming, scootering and riding bikes. You hated any time I was a typical stupid teenager complaining about my acne and the fact that I didn’t have straight blonde hair that boys liked. You also hated being told what to do by Dad. And metal music.

It was the summer of grade eleven that I really started to feel anxious. I didn't know the word 'anxiety' at the time. I had to Google my symptoms to find out. Once I did, though, I was like *Oh...that.*

As children, my sisters and I struggled with several normal day-to-day activities that one would be hard-pressed to describe as being in any way difficult. Riding in cars was one. Like so many other insidious fears that creep into our heads and eventually overwhelm our subconscious minds, I can't remember when I started to feel the teensiest bit uncomfortable around people. Living as far as we did from town, we'd only drive to Kelowna maybe once every two weeks to get groceries and run errands. My mom always treated grocery day like this huge, horrible undertaking that needed to be dreaded and prepared for—emotionally and mentally—for days prior to the excursion.

As kids, the three of us had fit quite snugly into our compact little '81 Tercel. The only problem was my baby sister Ari's propensity for car sickness. We had an ice cream pail on hand in the car at all times, just in case disaster should strike mid-drive. In such a small car, the pail would sit at our feet as a constant reminder of the noisy, smelly mess always waiting to erupt around the next corner. If it was on my side of the car, I'd take pains not to jostle it, lest the sound trigger something in Ari that would remind her of its *raison d'être*. This made for very unpleasant drives, during which I spent every second praying to a god I very much believed in, offering all kinds of services in exchange for one more car ride without the desperate, sweaty, heaving, splattering, stinking mess of my poor carsick sister. Most times, it seemed, those prayers were answered, in that no vomiting took place. But all those answers did nothing for my nerves. Every chance I could get to avoid or delay a car ride with my littlest sis, I'd take it. Often that meant pitching a fit like a toddler, or disappearing into the woods until my parents were

forced to drive the winding mountain roads behind our house, hollering my name. I could tell it was silly to make such a fuss simply because I didn't want to sit in a car for hours with a vomiting person, but I couldn't help it.

When I was going through the process of medical consultations, examinations, tests, diagnosis, surgery, travel to the children's hospital etc, my anxiety over cars and public spaces diminished, and was replaced with anxiety over whether or not I would survive to see my next birthday. Every new set of pursed doctor lips, every new pair of gloved hands digging away at my lumps and various oddities only increased my fear until I was afraid every moment of every day that the phone was just about to ring with a cancer diagnosis, or something else as of yet undiscovered and somehow even worse.

Unless you count the near-dead, exhaustive semi-coma of the spiritually, mentally, and physically exhausted into which I would occasionally slip, I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat anything without developing terrible stomach cramps that landed me in the school bathrooms at least four times per day.

Once I was through surgery, though, and I knew I wasn't going to die, things simmered down. I had time to think about my body as a more permanent thing, and that set my mind off in all kinds of directions. I'd only just begun hormone therapy, and my breasts hadn't yet begun to grow. My hair, which had always been quite wavy, was now aggressively curly in all kinds of discordant ways. I was getting hot flashes from the sudden hormonal changes in my body (ie. the

total cessation of testosterone, and introduction of estrogen) and I was constantly sweating through my clothes in class. I was still growing, and at over six feet tall, I was taller than most of the boys and all of the girls in my school. Flat as a board, frizzy haired, sweaty, red-faced and six-foot-one, I was an easy target in the halls. I felt eyes on my body all the time, whether I was at school, the mall, or just walking down the familiar, quiet streets of my neighbourhood. No one else seemed to be going through any of the same things I was going through.

Each night, I'd lie on the bathroom floor after dinner and dilate my vagina with the medical dilators they'd sent me home with from Vancouver. I'd try to make it fun, listening to music that got me in the mood and thinking about cute guys from school, but the whole thing was agony.

The pain that used to happen from masturbating (or just getting excited) ended with the surgery. Thankfully, I had that one thing. I could once again pursue pleasure and not have to worry that it would actually lead to more pain. I was thankful for that.

Also, I hadn't wet the bed again since starting to use the hormone cream. The skin around my vagina had indeed plumped up to a healthy pink colour, almost immediately, and I wasn't the least bit worried about having another accident.

Still, the dilatation—for all that it was helping me become physically able to have sex—messed with my mind. No one else I knew was going through anything even remotely similar. Lying on the bathroom floor, pressing a cold, ceramic implement into my vagina for ten minutes a night felt absurd. I felt like the only person alive who had to go through such bullshit just to be able to function on the most basic levels within the dating world, and it gave me all kinds of anxiety.

I started skipping classes—mostly just French and Math, the ones I hated most—to sit in the baseball dugout down past the farthest field from the school. I'd sit in the freezing, late winter/early spring air, retracing initials and other graffiti in the much-abused benches, and I'd wait for the school days to end.

Eventually, I couldn't even make it to the afternoon before I started calling my mom to pick me up at lunch. My friends would ask me, from time to time, why I wasn't in class, but I also had some lame excuse about another doctor's appointment or an issue in the family. Eventually, they just stopped asking.

Then, in grade twelve, I stopped going to school entirely.

The thought of sitting for hours on the school bus, packed tightly with all the backpacks and jackets and bodies of my peers—so tightly I couldn't stand—made me frantic. The thought of walking the halls and feeling eyes on my freakish body made me frantic. The idea of listening to one more conversation about a hookup at a weekend party, a job offer, a new car or something else I couldn't have made me frantic.

"You're so close to graduating," my mom would say each morning. Standing in the door to the bedroom I shared with my two sisters, her shoulders slumped, a deep, frustrated frown etched on her face, I could see that she didn't understand at all what I was doing. But then, neither could I. All I knew was, I couldn't be around people anymore. The thought of so many people staring at me, picking out all that was wrong with my body, living their superior lives, made me hyperventilate. What if something happened while they were all staring at me? What if I shit my pants or threw up or just started screaming? They'd all think I'd gone insane, and instead of helping me, they'd laugh, as they'd laughed at all the other struggles written on my

body. I couldn't give them that chance. The fear was absurd and over the top, perhaps, but I didn't know how to feel anything but insecure and frightened anymore. If there was nothing actually wrong in a given moment, I'd make something up. I couldn't help it.

The school called a meeting with my teachers and my mom and me. They offered up a bunch of part-time options for me to complete my schooling on campus. They asked if there was anything they could do to help. They asked what had caused this "sudden change" in what until now had been an A/B student who never missed school except for the occasional (legitimate) sickness.

I stared at the stained carpet of the counsellor's office, I bounced my foot, and I shrugged. I couldn't find the words. I could hardly hear their questions. All I could think about were the seconds left in the meeting laid end to end in front of me like a thousand different tree roots waiting to trip me up. Eventually, the vice principal said she would send in a requisition for me to finish the last semester of my high school career (and the remaining modules and exams of my as-of-yet unfinished first semester classes) via correspondence, and we left.

It wasn't relief that I felt, though, as I walked on rickety legs through the foyer of my high school. I passed clumps of kids I'd known almost my whole life, laughing, eating lunch, comfortable in each other's company. One or two that I knew asked me where I was going, but I just shrugged, offered something about not feeling well, and kept on walking.

By the time I got to the car, I knew I'd made a horrible mistake. Sliding into the passenger seat and closing the door on my school, my friends, and what should have been the best year of my life up until now, I didn't feel relief. I didn't feel lighter, I didn't feel like my cares had disappeared and I was finally free to focus on myself without the distractions of a toxic

environment. Rather, I felt like I'd given up on myself, and there was nothing to do now but go home and shut myself away from the rest of the world. I had no job, no diploma, no money, no car, no friends, and no real reason to believe any of that was about to change. If there was ever a time I was truly worried I might hurt myself, it was right then, sitting in my mom's car in the teachers' parking lot on a cold day in January, 2006.

I didn't see anyone outside my immediate family for fifty days.

Every morning, my sisters would get up and go to school, and I would lie in bed until nine or ten o'clock. All the sounds were the same. The same bickering took place when Mom would open the bedroom door, turn on the light and announce that if everyone wasn't up and out the door in fifteen minutes, the bus would be missed. Either Britt or Ari would get up first, take too long in the bathroom, and ruin the morning for the other. Dad would march back and forth in the kitchen/living room, complaining that he didn't feel well, or he was about to be late for X reason, or he hated his job. Britt and Ari would complain about the heat, the hair straighteners, the breakfast options, the ticking clocks, peering out of half-opened eyes as they hastily applied makeup, bitching and crying over the fact that their cover up wouldn't actually cover anything up. And I would wait for the noise to die down so I could go back to sleep.

Eventually, I'd get ready for the day in all the usual ways, then I'd sit on the couch. There was nowhere else for me to be.

At noon, I would watch *All My Children* and have lunch with my mom. Sometimes, in the afternoon, I would step outside into the yard, or even take a walk down the street, but I'd

always hurry back as if the truancy police were hot on my heels. I could feel the neighbours watching me through their windows, wondering why the oldest Ferguson girl was home all day, every day. Surely, they knew I wasn't old enough yet to have graduated. Surely, they'd pieced it together that I was simply throwing my life away.

The correspondence school modules started to arrive, and I felt more hopeless than ever. Concealed within the kind of brown boxes that recently-fired characters on TV shows always used to haul their personal items away from the office, the modules for my two remaining courses, English Literature and History 12 seemed to contain more papers, textbooks, and assignments than the entire last two and a half years of my school combined. Sitting on the couch, prying open the boxes with a paring knife, it was hard not to wish I could simply run the blade over my wrists instead and be done with it. How on Earth I was ever going to find the will to dig in and teach myself my last two courses of my thirteen years of public education all on my own, sitting on the couch in our isolated little home without even the distractions of lunch hours and friends and silly daily drama was completely beyond me.

I put it all aside, and I prayed for something to come along that would save me from the direction my life was going.

I started emailing a guy named Andrew that I'd been seeing a bit (just in school, and the occasional movie) before my whole life imploded. He was hesitant, at first, to respond, and I didn't blame him. After all, I *had* broken up with him twice already. And now, having dropped

out of school and retreated entirely from every facet of our high school lives, I didn't have a great deal to offer.

We kept talking, though, and soon we were back to our usual weekend movie dates and daily emails we'd settled into before I dropped out. Naturally, Mom had to drive me into town whenever I wanted to see him, but it was nice just to have a reason to be somewhere.

Going out at night seemed not to bother me that much, in terms of anxiety. Sitting in a dark room, watching a movie with a bunch of silent strangers who couldn't see my body felt good. Holding hands with a boy felt good. Being desired felt good.

One night after our movie, as Mom and my sisters were idling in the parking lot nearby, I leaned in and kissed Andrew on his lips. It was almost a play-by-play recreation of my first kiss, except, instead of going in for a hug and being surprised with a kiss, I got to do the surprising.

When I got home, there was an email from Andrew saying he'd had a wonderful night.

"I've never...umm...had a kiss before," he wrote.

It was adorable. But more than adorable, it was a huge shot in the arm for my ego. For once, I was ahead of someone else in the dating department. I'd already kissed a boy before—many times, in fact—and it gave me a taste of worldliness I'd never felt before.

The only thing nagging at my confidence (apart, of course, from the crippling daily anxiety and the fact that I was finishing high school all alone on my parents' couch) was that Andrew had his N license and a newish car his parents had bought for him. His parents were quite well-off, and they had no trouble ponying up the money for a 2000 Toyota Echo. Right around the same time, Stephanie got her N and a Jeep Cherokee from her parents.

I'd technically had my Learner's license long enough that I could take the N test, but my anxiety was still so bad, I couldn't handle driving in the daylight. Even with Mom in the passenger seat beside me, I could only handle driving on Westside Road. As soon as we'd get to the highway intersection, I'd have to pull over and let her take the wheel. I just couldn't handle the thought of potentially fucking up and crashing in front of all those people who knew what they were doing better than I did.

I mentioned my fear to my dad one night while he was sitting at the computer. I was perched on the wooden railing that ran along the foot of his and Mom's bed—the same railing Britt and Ari and I used to crawl beneath, and under which I'd now be lucky to fit my head.

“What makes you think they all know what they're doing?” Dad asked.

“Well...they're all fully licensed,” I said. “They've been doing it longer.”

Dad chuckled and shook his head.

“If everyone out there knew what they were doing, there wouldn't be a thousand accidents every day.”

There was more to my anxiety, though, than just the AIS and the dropping out of school and everything else. More than I'd told anyone, or even hinted at.

I was having trouble breathing—most often at night when I was trying to fall asleep—and I didn't know how to address it. I was terrified of going back to the hospital for any reason. My parents' mantra through our childhood of “don't get hurt 'cause it's an hour to the hospital” rang

again and again in my head each time my head hit the pillow. The anxiety around actually getting up and wheezing my way through a request that my parents abandon their peaceful evening and drive me to Kelowna for what could quite possibly all be in my head was even greater than the anxiety around suffocating in my sleep. So, night after night, I wheezed myself into catatonia.

Each time, it started with this slight thickening in my chest and a sound when I exhaled like birds chirping. I'd become aware of it, and that would instantly make it worse. Each breath seemed to be shallower than the next. It started to seem preposterous to me that there was air in the room, and that I could suck it into my body. I'd be sitting on the couch watching TV with my family, or sitting at the computer, or even out for a walk and suddenly I'd hear the chirping. I didn't even have to be thinking about my breathing and suddenly there it was.

Regardless of how much I wanted to hide from the collective medical professionals of British Columbia, however, I was on their radar, and they weren't going to let me go without a fight. Someone in Vancouver talked to someone in Kelowna and before I knew it, I had an appointment with a therapist. With Andrew back in my life and my need to graduate on time with him and the rest of my peers reaching desperation, I'd been making steady progress on my schoolwork. But I was still such a bundle of anxiety and sadness, I could hardly go anywhere or do anything without breaking out in a cold sweat and having to escape by the shortest route possible. I couldn't enter big box stores or supermarkets with the bright lights and the people milling about. I couldn't handle being anywhere exposed and without a clear, quick exit strategy. I'd never felt so lost and panicked in all my life, and I didn't put up much resistance when I learned of the appointment with the therapist. I was nervous about the car ride, and the hour or so locked in a room with a stranger focusing all their attention on me, but I was also desperately

unhappy every minute of every day. I didn't know if they'd be able to help me with all my anxiety, or the breathing issue, or anything else, but it seemed like a step in the right direction.

The therapist's office was in her home in the affluent Kelowna neighbourhood called the Mission. It was a big, beautiful house in the middle of a labyrinth of streets with big, beautiful houses.

The only therapist I'd ever talked to before was the sexual therapist I saw that one time in Vancouver on our first visit as a family. Being that it was just a quick conversation that time, I hadn't gotten much out of it besides a sense that being attracted to guys and girls at the same time maybe wasn't that big of a deal. I hadn't told the therapist anything about my sexuality, so either she'd picked up on it, or bisexuality was just something common enough to talk about. Either way, I'd only seen her the one time, so it hadn't really affected me much.

The new therapist was a small, blonde, beautiful woman named Annie. She wore crisp pantsuits and stared benevolently at me from across a dimly lit, well-appointed room as I told her about my troubles and tried not to cry.

I only saw her a handful of times, but each time added something new to my understanding of the peril I was or wasn't in. She let me know that no matter how badly it felt like my throat was closing up on occasion, it would never and could never actually close. She let me know people weren't actually staring at me and that no one really gave a damn.

"How much time do *you* actually spend thinking about other people and judging them and scrutinizing their every move?" she asked.

“I don’t know. Like...not very often,” I said with a shrug.

“Exactly.”

She got me tested for all kinds of allergies and asthma, and while it came up that I did have mild asthma, and I was given an inhaler for it, we hammered out that most of my issue was anxiety. We talked a bit about potential medication, but I was adamant that I didn’t want to try any. I’d heard so many unsubstantiated stories about dependency and side effects, and besides all that, I didn’t want one more pharmaceutical I’d have to rely on just to seem normal.

“Some people really benefit from medication, and some don’t need it. It’s hard to say which you might be unless you try,” Annie said. But I refused to try. Whatever was going on with me, I maintained, could be cleared up if I just had some freedom and power in my life. I knew I might be wrong, but I also knew I had to try and figure it out on my own.

My dad had a customer show up at his shop one day who happened to work for a driving school. The school, according to Dad, was a super chill place that would be happy to have me pop in for however many or few classes I wanted, whenever I wanted.

I asked him to book me a lesson, and within a week or so, I was behind the wheel of this bloated, white SUV that was roughly the size of Mom and Dad’s cars combined. Looking at it from the curb, I didn’t think I’d be able to handle it. Even with my height, I had to climb up into the driver’s seat. I felt as obvious and conspicuous as if I were driving a parade float.

“We just need to get the seat and mirrors tuned to your body,” the instructor said. “Once it’s all properly set up for you, you won’t even notice the bulk.”

And he was right. As soon as the vehicle was arranged to fit me, everything clicked. I could parallel park without worrying I was going to smash into the curb, or the car behind me. I could reverse-stall-park into even the tiniest spots in the least accessible parking lots. I was still a little nervous on the highway, but after two more classes, everything just made sense. I'd seen enough of what went on on highways—people running red lights, merging without looking, cutting each other off—and I did enough right that I knew I wasn't the worst one out there. Somehow, simply not being the worst was enough for me.

I booked my N test and passed it on the first try.

“Guess we'll have to get you a car then,” Dad said when I showed him the little yellow piece of paper with my name on it. “Can't be borrowing your mom's and mine all the time.”

Summer was just around the corner, and with it, my high school graduation. As it worked out, I technically wouldn't graduate until two months after my peers, due to a marking backlog in the Distance Ed program, but with my driver's license burning a hole in my wallet, I was desperate to finish school and move on with my life. Somehow, knowing I could get my license like anyone else gave me the confidence and patience to actually sit down and do my school work. Suddenly, what had seemed so impossible before now seemed ridiculously easy. All I had to do was chip away at each module, and eventually, there'd be no modules left. It was inevitable. There weren't infinite things to do. Just a lot. And besides, I was working towards something now, even if that thing was as small as driving a car and having places to go.

It's fun to say that, now, but at the time, sitting and sweating away on the couch as the summer grew closer and my work pile never seemed to shrink, I felt certain I'd lose my mind before I ever finished it. Even if the work was technically easy, there was SO MUCH OF IT.

Every day was a marathon of English Lit and History. I'd get up between eight and nine o'clock and sit down on the couch, surrounded by textbooks. I read *The Tempest* on my own. I read a whole textbook about World War 1. Though I'm an English major and a lifelong fan of the written word, I have never been a fan of The Bard. Nor have I ever enjoyed dry, interminable, political missives.

In addition to the dryness and the lengthiness of the materials, I had to keep my mind off of the constant parties and announcements from my friends about Grad functions. There was Dry Grad, Grad itself, the dinner, the stage ceremony, Grad Kidnapping, and all the various other non-school-sanctioned grad parties that were constantly going on. And I had to avoid them all. If anxiety hadn't precluded my involvement in the merriment, my workload would have. I spent all day every day working, breaking only to go for walks. I'd never had to stick to anything nearly so tenaciously, but the shame of not completing school along with Stephanie and Crystal and everyone else I'd ever known was too much to handle. I didn't know exactly what I was working towards, but I knew what I was avoiding. Shame has always been a fantastic motivator for me.

I didn't go to a single Grad celebration, but I didn't really care. That whole chapter of my life seemed closed and done with, and it didn't matter to me that I wasn't going to walk the boardwalk in front of the Grand Hotel in a fancy dress, or that I wouldn't walk across the stage to get my diploma. It all felt like something from another world, and one to which I didn't belong anymore. Miraculously, and despite the marking backlog, I finished my schoolwork the same time as everyone else. There was no one around to celebrate with me when I dropped my last assignment into the mailbox for pickup, but I did finish. Now, I was free to start looking for a job, the same as everyone else.

Mom and Dad found me a 1997 black, two-door Dodge Neon. It was as shiny and round as Andrew's Echo, and even sleeker and cooler in my eyes. They paid \$2700 for it and gave it to me as a grad present. I still didn't have a job to pay for gas, but I had a car, a license, and for the first time in my life, the freedom to go where I wanted, when I wanted.

I drove the length of Westside Road daily. I drove all the way to Kelowna and Vernon at least once a week, just to hang around the malls and take my time exploring neighbourhoods we didn't usually go to as a family. I drove every country road around my neighbourhood that I could find, and I started planning my life.

In the new year, I got a job at the Lordco in Kelowna delivering car parts. As many churches and fast-food places as Kelowna had, I quickly learned there were nearly as many auto repair places, too. Driving eight solid hours per day through Kelowna traffic, it was also confirmed and reconfirmed several times a day that any insecurity I'd had about my driving ability was completely unfounded. I was eighteen years old and only just going through puberty, but I could see that a lot of people twice, three times, even four times my age had no idea what the hell they were doing behind the wheel.

With a job and some money in my pocket, Andrew and I spent the whole spring and summer together. Any chance we had, we were together. One weekend in May, we went camping together down in the south Okanagan. It was the first chance we had to be fully alone together, and my first chance to test out the results of all my dilatation.

All those nights spent lying on the bathroom floor, moulding my body into the shape I wanted it to be (I was happy to discover), had not been in vain. Nor had the months and months of slowly increasing hormone dosages. My chest was starting to look the way I'd always

dreamed it could. My body worked the way I'd always hoped it would. Even my breathing problems had started to sort themselves out, with the help of my puffer and the knowledge that I had at least something to help when the whistling sound started up at night.

Things were happening fast for me now. Every little and not-so-little thing I'd been so worried about all seemed to be falling away. For once in my life, I had more to be happy about than sad. It was intoxicating and empowering beyond words.

The Lordco job was a great place to start out in the working world, but I could see I wouldn't be able to last long without getting horribly bored.

After only a few months, I enrolled at Sprott-Shaw College in the Tourism/Hospitality program. If driving had given me that much of a sense of freedom and accomplishment, I reasoned, then what would traveling the world be able to give me?

For the first time in a long time, school was a place of relaxation for me. I cracked jokes in class and people laughed. I got invited out to drinks and bowling and parties. I made friends on my own, rather than having them made for me by nosy teachers or long bus rides or simple proximity, and I started to see how I might fit into the world.

In April, 2008, I graduated from my program with honours. The school needed a valedictorian for all the Tourism/Hospitality people, the accountants, the legal assistants, and the nurses, and they chose me.

Two years before, I'd been unable to cross the threshold of my high school without panicking. Now, I was on stage with the faculty of my college, giving a speech to hundreds of strangers. It was like a dream.

Or like waking up.

It wasn't an overnight thing that my anxiety went away, but I did start to understand how to deal with it. I started to realize that no matter what I did, every moment of my life—good or bad—would come to an end. No matter how anxious I felt, or good, or confident, no matter how exciting it was to give a speech to an auditorium, or to take my first solo trip to another country, every moment would end. I'd still get anxious from time to time, and then I'd snap out of it; it was inevitable.

Andrew and I broke up while I was in school, and I started dating Jake. The same Jake from school. As if some divine hand had reached down and decided to give me a shot at everything I'd ever wanted. Jake was working at the Safeway around the corner from Sprout-Shaw. The same one I walked to for lunch every day with my new friends.

One of the first hangouts Jake and I ever had, we took a drive down to Washington. I drove the whole time, as Jake sat in the passenger seat and told me his life story.

My dad had tried to get me to learn to drive standard while I was preparing for my N test, but it was just too much for me at the time. Not long after Jake and I had moved in together in 2009, though, there was a day when I had to go get groceries, and the only available car was Jake's little 5-speed Honda Civic. Mom's old Tercel—the car I was forced to drive after returning, penniless, from Australia—had lost its muffler, and Dad was currently welding an old fence post into a makeshift muffler back home. Faced with necessity, I just got behind the wheel of the Civic and drove it. I didn't even stall once. It was like I'd been doing it every day of my life.

I won't say driving has saved my life, exactly. Nothing is as simple as that. But I will say that freedom and achievement, however humble, are two of the biggest reasons I've ever been able to pull myself together and start to feel better about anything. The ability to choose where I'm going (either in life, or just geographically) and to go there has meant more to me than almost anything.

Even now, being with my husband, Marshall, for eight years, the first thing I'll do when we have a fight and I need to clear my head is go for a drive. If I haven't written anything for a while, I'll take a drive and get all kinds of ideas. If one of my sisters is in trouble and needs help, I'll drive anywhere they need me to go, even if it's just to Tim Horton's to grab them some lunch when they can't get out with their kids. It might seem small, but having gone from a child growing up at the edge of the woods, fearing trips to town and all the vomit and stress that might go with them, to being an adult who can drive anywhere I want (even driving a 5-speed rental car around the whole of Ireland one time in 2017), I feel free.

My grandma was the exact same way. She drove right into her mid 90s, and only gave up her car after she'd bumped into Ari's friend's car once when the car was parked across the road from the end of our driveway. The day she had to give up driving was one of the saddest days of Grandma's life.

"That's my freedom," she said to me, sitting in her armchair, her arms folded miserably across her chest. "And now it's gone."

I know, eventually, the same thing will happen to me. I don't know how I'll handle it, but I hope that by that time, the idea of freedom will have transferred to some other arena in my life. For now, though, as long as I've got my car and a full tank of gas, I'm good.

Chapter 19—Meeting Marshall

It was the summer of 2011, and I had a crush on a girl from Vancouver.

My best childhood friend, Stephanie, had met a guy named Chad at the mall in town. She'd been shopping and the guy had come up to her out of the blue to tell her he liked her outfit. He was a skinny guy, handsome in a shy, nerdy kind of way, with close-cropped, curly hair and big dark eyes framed by thick, but not unwieldy eyebrows.

She thanked him for his kind words, and they started to walk around the mall and chit chat together. By the end of their conversation, phone numbers had been exchanged and a plan had been made to hang out. Right away it became clear he had feelings for her, but she wasn't into anything romantic with him, and she was quite upfront about that. Nevertheless, they continued to hang out.

One day, Stephanie introduced the two of us to each other. There was that strange tension in the air when an old best friend meets a new one, but it only made us talk more and get to know each other faster. By the end of the first hangout, we had plans for a second solo one. To be honest, I thought he was kind of cute, and he was definitely interesting. He often spoke in metaphors, and he liked to drop anecdotes about writers like Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald that I never would have found out on my own. My whole life I'd been obsessed with movies—I could tell you almost anything about some films like *The Bridges of Madison County* or *The Hours*—and there were books I loved, too, but I'd almost never read *about* a writer. Much less had I read most of the lengthy tomes deemed “classic.” Suddenly, I had someone rolling out

story after story about these legendary literary figures who were always half-mad, half-alcoholic, and a whole lot misogynistic. They were fascinating, and that made Chad seem fascinating to me.

After a hangout or two, Chad invited me back to his house.

His house, as it turned out, was his parents' house. Not that there's anything wrong with that. At that point, I'd moved home so many times, it was hard to pin down when I'd actually really first moved out (or if I even had). His parents invited me in, offered me Coke Zero, and asked me questions about my life. They were jokey and warm and comfortable with each other, and they treated me as if they'd known and loved me every year of my life.

Chad and I retreated to the basement and watched YouTube clips from old black and white movies. Rather than a TV, he had a projector that played everything out on a wall, as if the whole wall was a TV screen. I'd never seen something so big outside of a theatre.

We talked about writing in general, and about how much we'd both always wanted to write. To be honest, up until then my deepest, truest dream—and one that I'd never dared articulate to anyone—had always been to become a famous actress. I was starting to realize, though, that such a thing would probably never happen. I'd never actually acted in anything, or even tried to. I'd never auditioned for a single production, or even a casual, just-for-fun thing. All I knew was movies, and all the special little movements my favourite actresses made whenever they were speaking. I knew what hidden thoughts and deep, smouldering truths looked like behind Hollywood eyes, and I thought that, if anyone ever gave me the chance for a close up, I could hint at all kinds of things with my own eyes.

Talking to Chad, though, about his love for the written word, I started thinking about all the little poems I used to write as a kid. I had a whole collection of parody songs I'd composed for my friends' amusement, and a bunch of original poems I'd written about my dead cat, my family, and various other little things that had come to mind. There'd been a few assignments in school, in English class, where I'd decided on a whim to really dig in and try my best, and I had a few poems and bits of writing left over from those, too. I hadn't thought much about it at the time, but something about English got my mind going. It seemed like it might have something to do with my life in a way that graphing parabolas and conjugating Être never had. Talking to Chad and listening to his passion for writing, something suddenly started to click in my head. Stephanie had been working on her fantasy stories and novels for as long as I could remember. Chad loved writers and the idea of writing more than anything else. And suddenly, I realized, I did, too. Writing was something I could do. I could be kept out of acting by people who didn't think I was good enough or pretty enough, but no one could tell me I couldn't be a writer. I'd always had an ear for language, so there was no way I'd be the worst writer. All I had to do was write, and I'd be a writer.

I started talking about "my writing" and the things I liked to work on. Chad perked up.

"I didn't know you were a writer, too," he said.

"Oh yeah, I've always written," I said. "Poetry, mostly. But I'd love to write a novel."

"What would you write about?" he asked.

Immediately, I thought of my intersexuality and all the little aspects of it that I'd never told anyone. I'd never come across a book that talked about any of it, and I felt certain I could blow a lot of minds if I basically just told it how it was.

“Oh, I’ve got an idea or two,” I said. “Mostly day to day stuff. Gender and Sexuality and that kind of thing.”

He nodded, knowingly, as he scrolled through his phone. “You don’t know Dani, do you?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Is she someone famous?”

“She’s a model I know,” he said. “She’s bisexual. She lives in Vancouver.”

“Oh,” I said, sitting up. “She sounds cool.”

“Yeah, we’ve been friends for years,” he said as a red-haired girl appeared on the projector. Her Facebook page filled the wall with shots of her in moody positions, wearing a sundress and staring out of various windows. Her hair was long and naturally red and she was definitely pretty. Pretty and bi. I couldn’t help feeling excited.

“Do you hang with her much?”

He shrugged. “Not anymore, no. We met way back in the day on Nexopia. Just totally randomly”

I grinned. “I remember Nexopia. My username was “Cheeznrice.” Like when Britney Murphy wants to swear and say “Jesus Christ” in *Just Married*, but she says “cheese and rice” instead.”

Chad looked at me. “I don’t think I’ve seen that.”

“Ah, it’s not very good...”

“Anyway, Dani and I started talking one day and we became friends and yeah, it’s been years now.”

“Did you guys ever date?”

He grinned and shook his head. “Nah.” He scrolled through a few more shots. “You guys would probably like each other,” he said. “You want me to tell her to add you or something?”

I sat up on my heels, my heart beating nervously in my chest.

“Sure, yeah,” I said. “As long as you don’t think that would be weird.”

“Nah, she’ll like you.”

The next day, a Facebook message popped up from Dani. She said a few things about how Chad said we’d probably like each other. I complimented her on her modeling shots (which, it turned out, were just some pictures she’d taken with a friend who was an “aspiring photographer”), and she asked if I was heading to Vancouver at all. Spring was just starting, and I was in the middle of breaking up with Jake, who’d been my boyfriend for four years. We hadn’t made a clean break, exactly; we still met up for sex and walks and sometimes just to sleep in the same familiar bed. I didn’t know what was going to happen between us, but I knew I was technically single and free to do whatever I wanted.

I happened to have a week in the middle of July booked off, and I floated the idea that I’d come down to Vancouver then. Originally, I’d booked the week off so Jake and I could travel up to Pemberton to see his relatives. With us on the rocks (or over), though, I had the week off and

nowhere to go. I wasn't sure if I was ready to drive all the way to Vancouver to see a girl I was attracted to when I hadn't even told anyone in my life yet that I liked girls as well as guys, but I was curious, and I was untethered.

Dani and I talked every day for weeks. Just texting or messaging on Facebook, but it was exciting. I didn't know if she liked me in any kind of romantic way, but I knew she was bi, and that it was possible. If she didn't have a crush on me right away, she might have one down the line, and the possibility was endlessly exciting to me.

We made plans to hang out the weekend of July 9th. I was going to come down to Vancouver, hang with Dani, then take her back to Kelowna with me so she could visit her family. There was a free concert in Stanley Park with The New Pornographers and Neko Case playing. My friend Sara from elementary school had room for me to stay over, and a shared love for live music.

I arrived early on Saturday. The sky was a perfect blue and my stomach was in knots. I was so energized I could hardly sit still. I could hardly focus on Sara, even though I hadn't seen her in a year at least. Dani and I kept texting each other about how excited we were to see each other. Most of our messages had hearts in them. I know girls text with hearts all the time, but I was definitely flirting with mine, and I hoped she was with hers. It was so hard to tell, though. So much of female interaction is intimate until you admit to feelings of intimacy.

The day wore on and Sara and I headed to Stanley Park for the concert. I kept texting Dani to ask where she was or when she was getting there, and she started to waffle a bit. She said she had things to do and she wasn't feeling great and it might take a while to get out, and I started to worry she wouldn't show up.

Sara and I found a good spot near the stage and set ourselves up for the show. By the time the hot July sun had finally set and Neko Case was finishing her set, Dani had texted that she wouldn't be able to make it. I told her it was fine, sent a few hearts, and spent the evening making eyes at one of the women in *The New Pornographers*. It was so strange to suddenly publicly present myself as a woman interested in women, but it felt so right, so exciting, and so liberating.

The next day, Dani and I made plans to meet at Granville Island.

I was so nervous going to meet her, I felt like throwing up. I decided to let my hair be its natural, wavy self, and I wore my customary jeans and plaid. I circled the island a time or two in my Jeep, looking for a spot. I'd arrived earlier than I normally did for hangouts, but even so, I was worried I'd be late. My hair started to frizz and expand in the stress and the humidity, but I tried not to let it get to me.

I was sitting on the boardwalk when I saw Dani walking towards me. She was wearing a bluish sun dress and expensive-looking sandals. Her hair was long and red and perfectly smooth and straight. She was taller than I expected. Not as tall as I was, but quite tall. The perfect height to make out. I wouldn't have to stoop at all. Not that we were going to make out. But it was nice to know it wouldn't be awkward if we did.

She moved slowly, like a cat deciding, or pretending to decide, whether or not to come inside from the rain.

We said hi, shared a quick hug, and sat down beside each other near the water.

Right away, there was none of the gushing we'd used in texting each other. None of the emotional outpouring or flirtation or hearts. Suddenly, we were just two women who didn't really know each other, sitting beside each other at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

We made our way through all the pleasantries we could think of, though, and soon we were chatting for real. She told me all about her most recent boyfriend who she'd just broken up with, and I told her about mine.

I was too shy to talk about our shared sexuality, but in talking about relationships and things like that, we eventually got around to a place where I felt I could tell her about my intersexuality. I was still a little shy with her, but I wanted her to know everything about me, and I felt certain that she'd understand.

She listened with curiosity, asking questions here and there.

"I mean, you know I'm bi, right?" she said. "I don't care what...you know...sex somebody is. I grew up in Kelowna where everyone was super Christian and I was just like yeah, I'm an atheist, and I'm bi."

She paused, as if she'd just said something hilarious and was expecting a reaction. I forced a chuckle.

"Yeah, I mean, you know, being from Kelowna myself, I totally know what you mean. But it's like, who cares if you're male or female or somewhere in between? I don't understand this obsession with gender."

"Oh, totally."

We went for a walk and she told me about her absent father who lived on the streets and with whom she'd had no contact for most of her life. She told me about the art she did and the places she'd lived. We stopped at a convenience store because she wanted some lip balm. I tried to buy it for her, but she said she was fine getting it on her own. My stomach was still doing flip flops when she said she needed to leave, but that she was looking forward to driving back to Kelowna with me.

I gave her a lift back to her house, and we chatted and laughed the whole way. I walked her to the front door of her apartment. We stood and stared at each other a moment as she fumbled with her keys. I'd been on first dates before. I knew the awkwardness of debating privately, while staring at each other, whether or not to lean in for a kiss. I knew it wasn't a date we'd just been on, but it was also the first time I'd ever hung out with a girl I was attracted to, who definitely knew I was attracted to her and who might be attracted to me. I was excited and nervous and I didn't know what to do.

“So I'll pick you up tomorrow at 2?” I asked.

“Sounds great,” she said.

“K, cool,” I said, stepping back. “Well, it was great to meet you.”

She laughed, of course. After all, it was as if we'd known each other our whole lives. Imagine the preposterousness that we'd only actually just met.

Sara and I hung around her house the next day, doing very little as I counted the hours to 2:00. We took one last walk down by the sea, took some pictures, and promised to hang out again as soon as we could.

I was still nervous to see Dani, but I felt a little more at ease as she slid into the passenger seat of my '91 Jeep Cherokee and said we should take a selfie. Now that she knew what I looked and sounded and acted like, and she was still happy to see me, I could relax a little and make some jokes.

We wound out of the city and onto Highway 1, heading east. It was another perfectly beautiful summer day. I had the whole week ahead of me to relax and hang with Dani and Chad. I didn't know exactly how Dani felt, but I felt like we were on the precipice of some wonderful new thing. The only time I'd ever kissed a woman was the time a few months prior when I'd been walking with my married friends, Matt and Trazanna. Tazz had suggested we should kiss, as a joke. I'd been too nervous to initiate, even within the jokey context, and eventually she'd just had to grab me by the shoulders and plant her lips over mine as we walked along the beach. It was fun, and it felt like a hurdle I'd cleared, but it wasn't what I wanted. I wanted a girl to want me. To want to kiss me, and to do that. I wanted to make out. I wanted the breathy, clingy, desperate clawing at each other I'd had with guys. I wanted to get close and breathy and excited and press as much of our bodies together as we could.

We were an hour or so outside of Kelowna when Dani got a barrage of texts. We'd been outside of reception for some time, and as soon as we had a signal, her phone lit up again and again from friends and family asking her where we were on our journey and gushing about how excited they were to finally see her.

One text came from someone named Marshall. Or "Marshmallow," as she called him.

"This guy's so obsessed with me," she said. "We've been friends since we were kids, and he's so clearly got a crush on me."

I laughed at the silly boy who clearly didn't have a chance.

"He's got a girlfriend, though," she said as she grinned and texted and texted and grinned.

I dropped her off at her aunt and uncle's house in a part of town I'd never had the occasion to go to before. We hugged in the driveway, promised to hang soon, and parted ways.

That was Monday.

On Wednesday, I got a text from Chad asking if I wanted to come for a drink with him and Dani and some of Dani's friends. Normally, sitting at my parents' house forty minutes from Kelowna, watching the afternoon turn into evening, I'd have said no. I wouldn't be emotionally ready or physically presentable, and the spontaneity of suddenly committing to a many hours-long outing would have overwhelmed me. But as fate would have it, I'd straightened my hair that afternoon, and I looked good. I was bored, the sun seemed determined never to fully set, and I had the following day off, so it didn't matter if I had a drink or four.

I said yes, I threw on my tightest jeans and tank top, and I jumped in my Jeep.

The pub I was to meet them at was right downtown, as close to my parents' place as you could get while still being within the city limits. Kelly O'Bryan's is an Irish pub with a few branches around BC. It's got these fabulous lattice-style fries called Pachos, and my favourite kinds of beers and pub foods. As a teenager, I'd had every birthday dinner at Kelly O's for as long as I could remember. As an adult, it was a fantastic downtown location for drinks and pool. It was right by Okanagan Lake, and if you sat upstairs in the adults-only addition (Carlos O'Bryan's) you had the longest view of the setting sun of anywhere else downtown.

I headed up to Carlos O'Bryan's and found Chad and Dani sitting at a long table up against the bank of windows that overlooked the lake.

I took a seat opposite Dani, ordered a pint, and was soon buzzed enough to act like myself.

Dani told me about the day she'd had with Chad, Chad's sister, and some old friends from elementary school (including Marshall, or Marshmallow). They'd all gone to the beach and hung out in the sun for hours, catching up. Dani and I made eye contact a bunch of times, smiling and looking away as she talked. I wasn't the least bit jealous about all the people she'd been hanging out with without me. I knew she had friends and family to see, and it made sense she hadn't invited me with so many reunions to tend to. Besides, we'd been texting a bunch since I'd dropped her off, and everything still felt exciting and new and full of possibility.

A few minutes later, a guy appeared at the entrance to the pub. He was tall and squarish with puffy, wavy hair and aviator sunglasses.

"Oh, that's Marshall," Dani said, turning to look.

Marshall approached us, glancing at me as he came closer. I smiled, and he offered a tepid smile back.

I'd moved around the table a few times since we'd arrived, so the seat across from me was open. Marshall sat down in it, offering a quick hello to Dani and staring me up and down with this appraising look.

The conversation around the table was mostly confined to whoever was sitting across from whomever else, so Marshall and I started talking. With so few things in common, I decided

to ask Marshall what his last name was. Kelowna's not that big of a city. Marshall's not that common of a name, and I was curious if he was the Marshall Reeves whose name I'd heard in my high school halls from time to time, and with whom a few of my friends had been friends.

He said he was indeed the same Marshall, and I started gushing about this quotation of his I remembered from our grad yearbook. It was a line on a random page where he confessed to having collected thousands of erasers over the years, and how he needed to get that off of his chest.

Marshall laughed. He looked taken aback, but flattered that I'd know his quotation. He told me all about his time on the yearbook committee, and we reminisced about friends we had in common.

It came out that Dani and Marshall had not only known each other since elementary school, but that Marshall also knew Trazanna, the girl I'd kissed.

"Small world," I said. "I was a bridesmaid at her wedding. Her brother, Darren, walked me down the aisle."

Marshall and Dani traded glances.

"I had a crush on Darren when I was a kid," Dani said.

"Darren was my best friend," Marshall said.

"Jesus," I said. "I had no idea you guys were so connected."

I asked Dani if she also knew Trazanna, and she said not really. Marshall laughed and said Trazanna had asked him out in school at some point.

"Yeah, that sounds about right," I said.

“She did ask everyone,” he said. “But I said no. I didn’t want to be just another guy she’d dated for a week.”

I liked that.

I ran through my memory of Marshall Reeves from high school and remembered he’d had a girlfriend named Lesley, who I also hadn’t known, but who knew a few of my friends.

“Are you and Lesley still together, then?” I asked.

His lips flattened out and he slowly bobbed his head.

“Wow, what is that, like...seven years? Good for you guys.”

He nodded, but didn’t say anything.

I ordered another pint and flirted and laughed my way through the evening. There was so much going on—so much possibility and excitement—I hardly knew where to look. I liked Marshall, though. He felt significant to me, although that might have been because of our shared past. I didn’t believe in fate, but bumping into someone I’d tangentially known for so many years, in such a roundabout way, piqued my interest, at least.

We all decided to go for a walk. As Marshall stood up, I noticed he was the same height as me. Like, exactly the same height. Feeling just buzzed enough to appreciate the significance of this (and to comment on it) I ran a hand over the top of my head, and then over his as we headed for the door.

“We’re the same height,” I said.

He smiled and opened the door for me.

The evening was perfectly warm and perfumed in that sunscreen, baked concrete, boat-gas summer way. Marshall said he needed to grab something from his car, and I followed him, leaving the group behind on the sidewalk. His car—a sleek looking grey-green Olds Alero—was only fifty or so metres away. By the time he'd extracted his water bottle and we'd gotten back to the sidewalk, though, our group had moved on a bit.

We talked and walked and walked and talked. There was an easy familiarity between us, like we'd been friends for years.

We caught up to the group, then overtook them. We talked about record players (we both owned one but didn't know how to use it), about art and writing and what we'd been up to since school. Eventually, we ended up at a little grotto out in front of the Grand Hotel on Kelowna's waterfront.

The group caught up to us, and we splintered off to talk to some of the other people. I ended up talking to a guy with a nasal voice, and Marshall talked to Dani. I could see him out of the corner of my eye, though, looking at me through the twilight.

I saw Dani get up after not too long and wander down to the water. I excused myself and followed after her.

She was sitting on a little footbridge when I found her. Chad was standing sentry beside her as she gazed sadly down into the black water.

“Hey, what's up?” I asked, kneeling down.

She didn't respond.

“Are you okay?” I tried again.

Still, no answer. Her knees were pulled up, and she was resting her chin on them.

I looked to Chad for help, and he stared back at me with this strange look in his eyes. Almost protective. Like he was a bouncer at a club and I was an unruly patron.

“I think she just wanted to talk to Marshall more,” he said.

“Oh, well, feel free,” I said. “We were just talking. And we’re both fast walkers. Do whatever you want.”

She muttered something about it being no big deal, but I could tell something was up.

The next day, I found myself at Trazanna’s house for a party. It was the birthday party of her half-sister or daughter or something, and nothing of particular interest to me. Sober and bored and thinking only of the night before, I texted Dani to see what she was up to.

“Just hanging with Chad and Marshall,” she said. And then, “Marshall sure can’t stop talking about you.”

My stomach flip flopped.

“Really?”

“Yep. You sure made an impression on him.”

I didn’t know what to say. I was excited and flattered, but I sensed a trap. She didn’t strike me as the type of person who would be happy to act as a go-between. If I asked her to say

something to Marshall for me, or to give him my number or something, I sensed she'd either say nothing, or she'd get mad at me.

“Well, he seemed pretty cool,” I texted back, as noncommittally as I could.

She said nothing else, and I didn't press the matter. But I couldn't think of anything else for the rest of the day.

The next day, there was a message on Facebook for me. It was from Marshall.

—It was great meeting you the other day, it began. Not many people have the power to drag me onto The Facebook...

My heart skipped a beat.

—...I know we don't know each other that well, and I don't know if it's my business, but I couldn't not say something, he continued. Dani's been saying a lot of weird stuff about you. Like, super rude stuff...”

I messaged back.

—Hey! Great to meet you too :). Umm...what's she saying, though?

There was a pause, then I saw he was typing back.

—She's saying you used to be a guy, and that you have a penis.

My stomach sank and my fingers started trembling as I messaged him back.

—What?

—Yeah, I know. I wouldn't have said anything, but she's down here at Mosaic Books with Chad saying all this stuff super loudly. And I just had to say something. People can hear her, and I know you shop here and I just had to say something.

I slumped in my chair and didn't respond right away.

—I told her I don't care one way or the other, he wrote after a few seconds. She kept on saying all these things and I just said, 'Oh yeah, that's cool.'

—Thanks, I finally typed back. I don't know why she'd be saying all that.

—I don't know, he said. But she's pissed about something.

—Well...thanks for telling me, I said.

I wanted to text Dani and ask what the hell was happening, but I didn't know what to say. What could I possibly say that would get her to explain this sudden, vicious change?

Dani and I barely spoke over the next few days. We made a few tentative plans to hang out, but they all fell through. Once, we started to talk about things, but the conversation died quickly. I didn't see her again before she went back to Vancouver. Nor did I see Chad.

I did keep talking to Marshall, though. We messaged each other every day, as much as we could. He left once, for a week, to go camping with Lesley, but he told me soon after he got back that he'd broken up with her. He was still living with her, but he was sleeping on the couch

and looking for a place to live. He told me they'd broken up a couple of times before, and even before he met me, they'd been talking about ending things again.

I told him a bit about Jake, though I still wasn't sure what was happening there. Jake and I had officially stopped seeing each other at all, but he was still often on my mind, in spite of myself.

I also told him the truth about my body not long after. He reiterated that he wouldn't have cared if I currently had, or had once had, a penis. He asked questions about my condition: could I have kids? How long had I known? How did I feel about it? And he shared my confusion about Dani's reaction. How could someone so supposedly sexually accepting and progressive have tried to hurt me by exaggerating my truth and trying to appeal to the backward, hurtful ideas of sex and gender lurking in so many people's minds?

I wasn't nervous telling Marshall about myself, but then, I'd already come out to my two ex-boyfriends that preceded him.

In the spring of 2007, when I was eighteen years old, I was dating Andrew. He and I had explored each other's bodies a bit, though we hadn't had sex yet.

One night, on the phone, he told me something about a scar of his. Something small on his hand.

"I have scars, too," I said.

After a moment, he said, "Yeah, I noticed."

"Do you want to know why?" I asked.

He was quiet for a beat or two. Then, in a voice even lower and deeper than his usual speaking voice, he said, “Yes.”

With Jake, I told him the whole thing early on. All he did was raise his eyebrows, go, “Wow,” and move on. From time to time I’d ask him if it bothered him at all, and he’d always frown and say, “No. Why would it?”

That’s not to say, though, that I haven’t had any issues.

There was a guy I hooked up with once, during my undergrad. We met at a party and spent most of the evening chatting. Somehow, we ended up on the topic of gender and sexuality, and I told him all about myself.

He was super interested the whole time. He asked intelligent questions. He told me about a script he was writing that had a transgender character in it.

Wow, I thought to myself. This guy gets it.

A few nights after the party, we went for drinks and ended up back at my place.

Everything went well, until right after. I was walking across my room, and he quickly pulled his cell phone out and shone his light on my body.

I froze. I didn’t know what else to do. I felt like a criminal under a helicopter spotlight. I couldn’t think of anything to say.

Afterward, I wondered why I didn’t just ask what he was doing. Was he trying to give me some light to find my way around? Was I misinterpreting the situation? If he was trying to help me, though, why did he simply sit there, shining the light on my body as if to clarify for himself what exactly he’d just slept with, rather than panning the light around to help me find my

clothes? The whole thing had taken only a few seconds (during which I stood frozen, facing him like a murder suspect in a police line-up), but it left me feeling like a freak, or a sexually anomalous pit-stop on his road to self-fulfillment.

Marshall and I dated in earnest for the rest of 2011 and a bit of 2012, but we both had too many loose ends to tie up. I was still hung up on Jake, and Marshall hadn't yet been single once in his adult life.

We broke up and didn't see each other again for a year and a half.

The whole time we were apart, though, we were never far from each other's minds. I missed the thought-provoking conversations he and I used to have. I missed Marshall's humour and his body and almost everything about him.

When we finally bumped into each other again a year and a half down the road, we were both half-involved with other people, but nothing serious. We spent the whole night dancing at the club in which we'd bumped into each other (a place neither of us ever went except that one fateful night), then talking, then kissing on the beach. We spent a few months dancing around the idea of getting back together, but by January of 2014, we'd made our decision. And we've been together ever since.

I never hung out with the cell phone flashlight guy again, though our circles overlapped quite a bit. From time to time, I'd thought about asking him what the hell had happened, but the whole chapter with Dani trying to use my body to hurt me was still vivid in the back of my mind.

I'd asked Dani once during the year and a half Marshall and I were apart just what had happened to make her say the things she said about my body, but she didn't have much of an answer. She and I had more or less patched things up, and I was once again in Vancouver,

hanging out with her for Pride Week. While we were sitting on the beach, watching the fireworks, I asked her what had happened.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I was a little jealous.”

She didn’t clarify if she was jealous of Marshall’s attention or mine, and I didn’t ask. I’d learned my lesson, and it didn’t really matter what her motivation was. Whatever people profess to—however open-minded they might claim to be—you never really know how they’ll act when they feel the pressure is on. It’s made me nervous about really opening up to people since, but who hasn’t struggled with intimacy for one reason or another? I’ve been luckier than a lot of people. I have a husband who knows me and loves me. I’ve had loving relationships that have lasted years with very few issues. For the most part, I feel accepted. There’s a little voice in the back of my mind that asks sometimes if that acceptance is real, or if we simply haven’t yet stumbled upon the one truth that could throw it all out of balance, but I doubt anyone’s immune to that, whatever body they happen to be in.

Chapter 20—The Teacher

Me—What confusion/questions might you still have surrounding my diagnosis, or around the gender and sexual spectrums in general?

Britt—The first time I heard the diagnosis, I was confused about the fact that you said you were more male than female. I did remember you saying at times that you felt more male, but I didn't understand any of it from a medical standpoint at all. I still don't feel that I have the firmest grasp I possibly could on the full scope of it. When you received the diagnosis, I think it was the first time that I both began to understand and be completely baffled by the concept of gender. To me, you were and always would be my sister, but at the same time I felt like, "Oh, or she could not be and that would also be perfectly fine. Maybe we're all just kind of nothing in particular, and that's cool." I hope that makes sense. It's more eloquent in my mind.

In 2017, I was living in Vancouver with Marshall, and I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I'd finished my Bachelor of Arts the year before, and Marshall and I had decided we should move to the city before we got too old to really enjoy it.

My bachelor's degree was in creative writing, and I had dreams of being a screenwriter, though I'd never actually written a script, or read a script, or taken any classes devoted to screenwriting. The only things I ever wrote were poems about bodily functions and unhappiness, and short stories about monsters with modern (often sexual) problems. I was in love with

movies, though, and I thought that made me enough of an expert that I'd be able to break into the market without any real preparation.

When we first decided to move to the city, we realized we'd need somewhere to live. In order to get a place to live, I needed a job. Marshall hadn't gone to school, which meant he'd been working hard at a custom clothing company for the last ten years, while I'd been in school writing my sad poems and drinking far too many craft beers. Thus, I decided it was time I go back to work and give him a chance to be creative. At least for a while.

With my 5+ years of reception experience under my belt, I applied and got a job as a receptionist at a construction company. The pay was mediocre, but the company was solid and the owners—only a few years older than I was—were super chill. With very little foot traffic and only a few clients at a time, it was the perfect job to sit all day and get some writing done. Naturally, of course, I did very little of that. Alone all day at my desk, I played Minecraft and sipped at the myriad microbrews my bosses always left for me in the company fridge.

Meanwhile, Marshall worked both as an artist doing commissions from our house, and as a background actor with various companies in the area. Naturally, as a lifelong cinephile, I was heartbroken to have arrived in the big city with a degree and cinematic dreams, only to find myself right back where I'd started (professionally speaking) while Marshall spent each day either making art in the comfort of our own home, or wandering movie sets and television sets, fraternizing with actual famous actors and learning the tricks of the trade. I wanted to quit my job and join him, but we needed a dependable source of income, and even though the background stuff paid very well at times, it just as often didn't pay well (or at all), and it was just too much financial insecurity to bite off.

I started looking for something else to do with my degree.

Before long, like so many other lost and financially-strapped creatives, I landed on teaching. As a movie buff, all my romantic ideas about teaching came from movies. I imagined myself as Mr. Coulson in *Never Been Kissed*, strutting around a palatial classroom, coffee in hand, discussing beautiful, overarching thematics like how disguise loosens rules and allows us to be truer versions of ourselves.

Or perhaps I'd be more like Paul Rudd in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*—sardonic, open, a little bitter, constantly assigning extra credit reading like *The Catcher in the Rye* to my more precocious students who couldn't ever seem to get enough literature in their lives.

Either way, I saw myself as a high school English teacher catering to the oldest, most capable grades (basically a college professor at that point) spending my days talking about great works of literature without the pressure of having to produce any of my own. Of course, I'd also be writing and publishing small pieces on the side, but only until the day an agent or publisher stumbled across my work, declared it genius, and secured a healthy grant for me to write my book, or movie, or whatever.

To get into the teaching program, I had to have letters of reference detailing my aptitude, and (most unfortunately) my many years spent volunteering with youth. Naturally, I had never volunteered a day in my life, outside of the one lunch-hour poetry session I showed up for on a single occasion in my third year. I hate obligation and I can only stand kids on a case-by-case basis, so I only went the one time, as a favour to a friend. If I could just sell my passion for the written word well enough, though (I logicked), then they'd have to let me in. When I thought of all the burnt out, stoop-shouldered teachers that populated my various high school memories, I

felt sure I'd not only get in, but that I'd wow everyone with my gusto. No way I'd be worse at teaching than those oldsters who were always a semester away from retirement. I'd show up with my youthful ideas and my enthusiastic ignorance, and I'd show them all how it was done.

I gave my notice at the construction company and I started my teaching program in September 2017. I promised everyone financially interested in me that it would be my last degree, and that at the end of it, I'd be rolling in the dough. Whatever the movies and TV shows would have us believe, the pay grids for Canadian teachers assured me that no matter what district I ended up in, I'd be making almost twice as much per year as I had at any other job.

In the first semester of my B. Ed, I had a class that focused on social institutions surrounding education and the philosophies behind various pedagogies. I didn't really know what all that meant when I showed up for my first day, but the prof—a squat, sturdy, middle-aged lesbian with ready quips and a slight anarchist streak—struck me as cool enough to either bring clarity to my confusion, or to be secretly fighting the confusion of The Institution from the inside.

The class was largely built around discussions of teaching strategies in the vaguest of terms, and debates around what it means to be a teacher. The debates mainly focused on our roles as teachers (are we purveyors of knowledge, curators, creators, or what?), while the lectures themselves were about the various circumstances from which our students would be coming to us. Some would be poor, while others would be world travelers with trust funds. Some would come with every piece of cultural capital imaginable, while others would be so far behind the

starting line, it was almost impossible to see them. It was the perfect class in which to embrace the beauty and diversity of life, free of judgement and drama.

The first time that biological sex came up was in a discussion about trans students. The discourse surrounding trans people—and in particular trans youth and our responsibilities as adults towards them—was just starting to really ramp up in the media. Trump was president, and he had just recently tweeted that American transgender service members would no longer be allowed to serve openly in the American military. It was a fraught topic, to say the least.

We were discussing trans students and how best to make them feel included and accepted in classroom settings when my prof suddenly said something about transgender women being “men going around as women.”

There was a deathly silence in the class. Someone asked what she meant by her remark, and she said a few things about society’s need to keep women safe and away from the prying eyes of male perverts.

“Whenever you hear about violence being perpetrated, it’s men doing violence to women,” she said, “not the other way around. It’s important to keep men out of spaces that are reserved for women. Women need to have spaces where they can feel safe.”

We broke up into small groups for discussion soon after, but I couldn’t get her remarks out of my mind. As soon as class was over, I emailed her to ask if we could talk in private about her views on sex and gender. She emailed me back right away that I could come by the next day.

When I arrived at her office, I noticed that there was a document taped to her door. It was a printout of a tweet from an account called “LiesOfThePatriarchy.” The document was a rambling missive about how all women are united in their possession of certain “chromosomes,

ovaries, uteri, vaginas, ungendered brains, and, almost without exception, a lifetime of being treated as less than men.” It stated, in no uncertain terms, that “there [was] literally no way of feeling, thinking, behaving, expressing, speaking, or wearing anything that makes anyone LIKE A WOMAN” because every woman is innately female, and innately different in so many ways (besides those biological and behavioural ones) from every other woman. I’d never been met by quite so raving and discombobulating a greeting, and I’d once sold raffle tickets in a retirement community. Curious what others might think about the printout, I snapped a picture and stepped inside her office.

It was a dim, sparsely decorated room with two computers and two chairs. The offices for the faculty of education were all at the end of a long hall in a very open and very quiet building. Hers was the last one at the very end, and almost no light (natural or otherwise) managed to make its way in.

My pleather bomber jacket squeaked as I sat down in the genuine-leather chair opposite her. I’d straightened my hair and put on my usual makeup (a few swooshes of mascara and some eyeliner below my lower lashes) and was feeling quite feminine without making a big show of it.

Right off the bat, my prof (let’s call her Alice) started talking about how sex and gender are two totally different things. I don’t know if you’ve taken any university classes lately where they talk about that kind of thing (in almost every class, it seems) but I’m pretty familiar with such concepts. If you’re not, though, sex is generally agreed to be (more or less) the physical parts of a body coming together to form a whole, while gender (more or less) is the myriad ways we see ourselves and conduct ourselves in society. Sex is about chromosomes and hormones and the bits that we pee with and fool around with and hide or bare in the summer, and gender is the

clothes and mannerisms and expectations about who gets to clean the whole family's dishes after Thanksgiving dinner.

When she'd finished her lecture about sex and chromosomes, I told her about my intersex condition—about my XY chromosomes and the testes I'd had removed at sixteen—and about the many ways that such a diagnosis had affected my life. She listened attentively, commiserating when necessary and laughing when appropriate.

“So, do you think I'm male?” I asked her outright.

“Well, if you've got XY chromosomes,” she said, “then yes, you're male.”

I laughed.

“But you can see that I'm not. I mean, I'm obviously female. I've got breasts and a vagina—well, you can't see it—but I've got a vagina and a woman's voice and everything...”

“Sure, but your sex is in your chromosomes. It's...I mean, I don't really know the science, but it's written in your chromosomes. It's not offensive to say you're male if you've got male chromosomes, it's just the way it is.”

If I'd been out to get her—to nail her ass to the wall for the crime of ignorance—I'd have laughed out loud. What clearer confession of ignorance could there be than that?

“But there are so many chromosomal make-ups in humans,” I said. “You can literally have XX or XY or XXY or XXXY or XYY, or so many others. I have a friend who's XXY with Klinefelter Syndrome. Would you say he's female because of the XX part of his XXY?”

“Well, no...it's...if you have a Y, then they're male.”

“So, you could have forty X chromosomes, but if you’ve got one Y in there, then you’re male no matter what?”

“Y makes you male, yeah.”

I could see she was shaky on the details of her point, but confident regardless that she was on the right side of the fence.

“Okay, but...doesn’t that sound exactly like the ‘one drop’ policies of the fifties when they said you were Black if you had even a drop of black blood somewhere in your family tree?” I asked. “It seems way too simple to just say *Y means male*. And honestly, it sounds kind of like eugenics, or something. Being obsessed with the minute, invisible parts of people like that.”

“Well, it’s complicated, and I don’t know all the science. But the chromosomes are important. I mean it’s not just *me* saying you’re male if you’ve got male chromosomes. And it’s not offensive to say so. You can look female and present as female, but it’s not the same as *being* a woman. I...it’s not just me. You know, I think that we, as a society, need to stop attacking people for saying things are the way they are.”

“But chromosomes are only part of it,” I pointed out. “Like, in my condition, I’ve got XY chromosomes, but my body couldn’t use the testosterone it was creating, because there’s a problem with the cell receptors, or whatever they’re called. Like, that’s why it’s not as easy as just saying, “Oh, this person has high testosterone, so they’re male.” Like, before my surgery, I supposedly had ten times the amount of testosterone that a forty-year-old guy would typically have, but I couldn’t use any of it because I didn’t have the right receptors on my cells. That’s why I’m not all hairy and whatnot.” I was getting excited, but I knew I’d have to keep it together if I was ever going to make a decent point.

I took a breath and continued.

“Chromosomes are just a blueprint, and just like with a blueprint, you can have this whole perfect plan about how to build a house, but then you get there and it’s like, they don’t have the right materials you want, so you have to sub something else in. Then you’ve got the blueprints and a house and they don’t match, but they’re both still just fine.”

“Well, okay, I guess so...” She was starting to look annoyed, like she knew I was wrong, but she didn’t want to get into it with me anymore. But I wasn’t done.

“But there’s more to sex than just chromosomes,” I said. “Like, reproductive organs, and the way you look. I mean I haven’t had, like, vaginoplasty or breast implants or anything, but even if I had, what would that matter? I don’t have any ovaries or a uterus, but I don’t have anything at all. I mean, I *had* testes inside of me, but you couldn’t see them, I couldn’t use them, and I haven’t had them now almost as long as I had them. Doesn’t that *mean* something?”

“Well...”

“And what about women who lose their ovaries or uterus because of cancer? I saw that thing on your door that says every woman has ovaries and a uterus, but what about all the ones who don’t? What if they had them removed because of cancer or something when they were just kids, and they didn’t get any hormones from them and didn’t get to go through puberty without help? How would that be any different from me taking hormones to go through puberty? Or what if you were a trans woman who had a uterus transplant down the road? It’s not impossible to imagine we might be able to do that one day. How would she not be a woman, but a cis woman who was born with a uterus and later lost it to cancer *would* be? It just doesn’t make any sense.”

The air in the small office had taken on that charged, ready-for-battle feeling that so often arises around the dinner table when someone drops a political opinion or a thought on religion. The little tingling of Fight, Flight, or Freeze was racing along my extremities, but I willed it to go away. My argument was sound, I felt, but it would get weaker with every hint at a primal, emotional reaction.

“It’s not about...it’s about lived experience,” she said. “If a man’s been living as a man for thirty years of his life, and then he decides to have surgery and start hormones to try to be a woman, he hasn’t had the lived experience of being a woman in the world, so he doesn’t understand what that’s like. It’s different being a woman in the world versus being a man.”

She leaned towards me.

“You know, when I was growing up, the boys would bully me, they’d throw pennies at my head...” She trailed off. Her hands were around her head, as if she was still fending off a barrage of pennies.

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

“Okay, but, what if someone transitioned from male to female when they were ten years old, or sixteen, or twenty-four?” I asked. “I mean, it’s a slippery slope argument, and who gets to decide when someone’s had too much male experience to get to live as a female?”

She didn’t have an answer.

“I have to say,” I continued, blushing furiously from the embarrassment of personal confession. “It really hurts to see things like that sign on your door. Obviously, I don’t have a uterus or ovaries or Fallopian tubes, or whatever, but I’ve lived every day of my life as a girl. I

have a vagina, I've taken estrogen since I was sixteen, so I've got boobs, I wear my hair long, I wear women's clothes...I'm just like my sisters, except for not being able to have kids. If you didn't have a microscope and a blood sample, you wouldn't have a clue that I've got XY chromosomes. So what about me is male, and what good comes from sticking to an opinion like that?"

She leaned back in her chair and looked at me.

"You know, in all my years of teaching and—you know—meeting people, you're the first intersex person I've ever known," she said.

"Well, the first intersex person you've *known* to be intersex," I said. "I'm sure you've met others. The usual estimates are that it's about two percent of the population. They always like to say it's about the same frequency as people with red hair."

"I didn't know that."

We fell into an awkward silence. I felt a bit like crying, but I kept it together.

"Like...if I'm male, do you think I should be using male bathrooms?"

The words were oddly hard to say.

Her eyes filled with compassion as she looked deep into my own.

"Of course not. Not at all. Your whole life you've lived as a female, so no, absolutely not."

I smirked.

"*Lived* as a female, but not *been* a female, you mean?"

“Well, like, you know, you were *born*, and the doctors looked at you, and as far as I understand it, nothing looked out of place, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Right, so, you know, they didn’t know any better at the time, and they declared you female, and now you’ve lived your whole life as any other female. So your lived experience is, you know, not the *same*—because every person is different—but it’s a female’s lived experience, not a male’s.”

They didn’t know any better...

Her words hung in the air like the smoky lettering in a cartoon, slowly dissipating. Now I really felt like crying.

“You mean, if they’d known better at the time, they would have declared me a boy.”

“Right.”

“And then I would have lived life as a boy.”

“Well, yeah.”

A picture flashed through my mind of my sisters and I as children, standing in front of the ‘Welcome to Drumheller’ sign in Alberta where we’d gone on one of our few family vacations, each one of us only an inch or two taller than the next, making a perfect cell signal of our bodies. I thought of my Auntie Gloria’s nickname of “The Three Little Girlygoos.” Three little girls that people always remarked on. If I’d been a boy, none of that would have happened. Everything would have been different in all the ways one can try to imagine, and all the ways one can’t. We’d have been two little girls and a little boy. And I’d have been a boy without a penis.

Without a scrotum. I'd have had to pee sitting down while my male classmates eagerly lined up at the urinals.

I know enough to know that not all boys have penises. After all, I'm a girl without a uterus or ovaries. I'm not the least bit confused about these kinds of things. And yet, I also know how badly it hurt me to go through middle school and high school as a girl without any discernible trace of typical female puberty. Whatever I understand about the nuances of sex and gender, I know the world doesn't often get it. Not yet, anyway. And it can suck when you don't measure up to the publicly-agreed-upon norms. What kind of person would I be now if I'd grown up as a little boy without a penis? Maybe I'd have been happier, and maybe I wouldn't. It's impossible to say.

Sitting slumped in my chair, Alice pointed to my posture and chuckled.

"You're not particularly feminine anyway, are you?" Her tone wasn't mean or accusatory, but full of the all-in-good-fun levity one might employ when ribbing a close friend.

I straightened up.

"What do you mean?"

With my hair reaching almost to my nipples, my tight tank top showing off my boobs, and my skinny jeans hugging my long, slender legs, I looked (to my mind, anyway) every bit the typical twenty-something woman.

By contrast, Alice had close-cropped hair and the legs and arms of an Olympic male shot-putter. She wore no makeup, and the only free-flowing garment I'd ever seen her wear was the

kilt she wore on orientation day. Again, not that these things mean anything in particular so far as the gender card one might carry is concerned, but it did give me pause.

“I’m just slouching,” I said. “I like to sit comfortably. That’s not a gender thing, it’s just how I like to sit.”

“But that’s what I’m saying,” she said, leaning forward. “It’s not how you act or dress that makes you what you are. You are what you are. You’re born a certain sex, and that’s that. It doesn’t matter how you dress or what you do, or even the hormones you take later on. You’re born a certain way, and you can’t change that. There’s no way to *feel* male or female, you just are male or female. You can say that humans are bipedal creatures, and it’s not offensive—or, it shouldn’t be offensive—to someone who only has one leg, or no legs, to say that. It doesn’t mean they’re not human, it just means that humans, as a species, have two legs. There are always outliers, but those outliers don’t mean that certain truths aren’t true, or at least largely true. There are always rules and exceptions; that doesn’t mean every exception carries as much weight as the rules.”

She leaned back in her chair. “I think we agree more than we disagree on this,” she said.

For a second, I was about to say I thought so, too, but I held it in. After all, I agree that things are what they are, to a point—I don’t think the sky is yellow when it’s blue, even though I know that to other creatures, seeing in different spectrums, the sky might very well be yellow. Everything’s relative, sure, but there are definitely truths inherent to being human and existing in the world. Some of those truths, though, are harder to find than others. Up and down might be easy, given gravity, which doesn’t care how you feel about it, but others are clearly a bit more complex.

That night, pacing back and forth in our tiny, sweltering apartment, Marshall and I went over every detail of the conversation that I could remember.

“That’s why prefixes are important though, right?” I said to him from across the living room. “I mean, it used to be confusing to say I was intersex and also a woman, but now I can say I’m an intersex woman, the way anyone else can say they’re a trans woman or a cis woman. We’re all women with qualifiers, same as anyone else. Like how we’re all people, but we can be short people, people of average height, or tall people, and even those are all relative. Like, I might think I’m tall at 6’ 1”, and that might be true for now, but twenty years from now that might be short. A hundred years ago that was probably gigantic, but it’s more common nowadays. I mean, these things clearly change. The point isn’t to dumb down language, or to overcomplicate it with a bunch of made-up words, I mean, even though, yeah, language evolves over time...”

I was rambling, and I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself. The strange reality that a professor in the twenty-first century—a supposedly educated person, a woman of the world—had told me with absolute conviction, over and over again, that I was male was simply too much to take in. Did I really have no power over such things, or was she just simply wrong?

“She’s obviously wrong,” Marshall said. “I mean, there’s no debate over that at all. You’re obviously not male because of your chromosomes, I mean you know that and I know that. It’s just obviously way more complicated than that. There’s just no debate about that at all.”

I blushed and nodded. His certainty was heartwarming, even if it carried a slight hint of my dad’s old mantra that I was “just a woman like any other woman.”

I emailed the associate dean of the department about the conversation I'd had with Alice, and she called me back later that night to arrange a face-to-face meeting.

It felt terribly official to agree to meet her, but I felt I had no other choice. The wheels were in motion now, and if I said nothing, I'd be leaving Alice to continue her rampage.

I showed up in her office the next day after class. I was nervous, but as a naturally anxious person, I told myself what I always tell myself in moments of anxiety: I can leave at any moment. Any time I've had enough, I can simply back out and leave things be. No one has the right to keep me here.

The dean sat me down in her office and asked me to tell her everything I could remember from the conversation.

"I just think she's a dinosaur with a chip on her shoulder," I added after relating the whole tale.

The dean thanked me for coming in, made a couple notes, and said they'd be in touch.

I was called back a couple more times to tell the whole story from start to finish again. One time, it was with a director of some sort in the Faculty of Education. One time, it was the associate dean again, with a few other official-looking people whose names and titles I immediately

forgot. Each time I told the story, I was a little less emotionally connected to the whole thing, and a little more ready for it to be done and over with. I was, after all, going through a teaching degree at the same time, prepping for my practicum and writing papers, and the whole thing was turning into an ordeal.

Finally, a private investigator was brought in to take my story. I was told I could bring someone for support, so I brought Marshall.

We got up early on a day with no school and drove to the campus together. We got coffee on the way, chatting about how sunny it was and how excited I was for my practicum to begin. In just a few weeks, I'd be installed in an actual classroom as a student teacher, teaching actual students with lessons and materials I'd prepared myself. It felt unhinged, like someone had made a horrible mistake and now I was about to embark on an actual responsible task that required knowledge and maturity far beyond what I actually possessed. How would I know if the things I was saying in class were true? Textbooks were always getting updated, new material was always being produced, and material on that material, and I couldn't help what part of the knowledge river I was about to enter at. What if I said something totally bananas and defended it as fact? How many years would it take for my students to unlearn my mistakes?

In high school, I had a psychology teacher who said with absolute authority that bisexuality didn't exist. "You're always more one way or the other," he declared, mid-lecture. "True bisexuality doesn't exist."

One of Marshall's psychology teachers repeated the whole "humans only use ten percent of their brains" thing, which just isn't true. What phony little mistruths had I incorporated into

my own pantheon of knowledge without realizing it, and how would I ever avoid passing them on to my own students?

The investigator was a youngish, blonde woman who looked perfectly at home in a pantsuit. She asked me once again to tell the whole story from start to finish. At this point, I'd told the story probably four or five times in official settings to official-looking people, and I was tired of talking about it.

"How did it make you feel when Alice said these things?" the woman asked.

I sighed.

"I mean...I've had *years* to sit with this topic," I said. "It didn't blindside me that badly, I guess, other than the fact that it was coming from someone in a place of authority. I'd be more worried about people who are just coming to grips with their bodies."

"But how did it make *you feel*?" the woman asked again.

I blushed.

"I mean...it hurt," I said. "I know she's wrong. I'm obviously not male...but it hurt to have someone who's supposed to be a teacher, and to know more than me, sit across from me and argue that I'm male no matter what I do. I know sex and gender are different things, but I'm just not male. I've never been male a day in my life. I'm intersex. It's different."

I didn't have to talk to anyone else after that. I started my practicum at Point Grey Secondary (Seth Rogen's old high school, and the namesake of his production company) teaching English to the rich and the gifted, and I focused on the positive I could do for the next generation.

In my grade eleven gifted class, there were several boys enamoured of dictators. All their poems and short stories were about Kim Jong-un and Mussolini and Trump. They constantly made jokes loud enough for me to hear about all the good things accomplished by dictators throughout history.

One morning on the way to work, I glanced at a headline on *Newsweek* referring to Trump's vocabulary. I didn't bother to read the article or to ascertain whether it was a true news article or just an opinion piece. The headline simply stated that Trump spoke at a fourth-grade level.

Later that morning, one of the grade eleven boys said something about Trump, and I chimed in.

"You know he speaks at a fourth-grade level, right?" I said.

"Huh?" the boy asked, turning from his friends to look up at me.

"Yeah, like, his diction has been analyzed by speech specialists and his vocabulary is at a fourth-grade level."

I felt my face go hot as other clusters of chatting kids stopped their conversations and turned toward me.

"Like, how do you know, though?" the boy asked.

"It's just official," I said. "Like, it's been analyzed, and whatever a fourth-grade vocabulary is, that's what Trump speaks with. You can look it up."

He rolled his eyes and went back to his conversation, and I was overcome with relief that no one decided to challenge me.

On the bus home, I was filled with shame. I was sure my students all forgot the conversation the moment it was over, but what if some of them didn't? What if one of them took what I said and held onto it, re-shaping their political identity in direct relation to something unsubstantiated I'd rattled off in class?

I vowed to myself, then and there, that I'd never rattle off another headline as fact. It was just too easy to muddy the waters, and I desperately didn't want to be part of the problem.

Months later, after I'd finished my degree, I found myself back in Kelowna. Marshall and I had decided to leave Vancouver and to try and buy a trailer somewhere up in the North Okanagan/Shuswap area. I had a job lined up as a teacher on call with the school district up there, and Marshall was planning on commuting to Kelowna a few times per week to work at the sister shop to the printing company he'd worked for almost all his professional life. We weren't living our dreams yet, but we were closer to something solid and secure than we'd ever been before.

One afternoon in late summer, I was sitting in my car downtown by the waterfront, and I got a call from the university.

The Dean of Education's voice, which I recognized from orientation, greeted me on the other end. We fumbled through pleasantries, then he told me they'd reached a conclusion in the investigation. There was language surrounding the specific human rights codes deemed to have been breached by Alice, and then a short, quick declaration about the whole mess.

"As to the claim that you are not female...", there was some noise as he adjusted the phone, "we found that no one in their right mind could reasonably think such a thing."

A family of rollerbladers toddled past my car, laughing and hooting, oblivious to the tears on my cheeks, or the declaration of my femaleness bouncing around my old Honda.

“We would ask that you use discretion as you go forward,” the dean said, his voice contrite. “Just...in approaching the media or anything. Obviously, the professor in question will not be invited back next semester. Her contract will not be renewed at this institution.”

I nodded, though he couldn't see me. I hung up, and I stayed sitting in my car.

You're just a girl like any other girl.

No one in their right mind could think otherwise.

The words were nice, but were they true?

Chapter 21—The Maybe Regret

Me—What can you remember of me as a young child, in terms of gender performance? What did I like to wear? How did I talk/play/act?

Ari—I remember as a kid you would wear pretty typical '90s fashion which was usually just some elaborate patterned pants or shorts and a basic t-shirt. I don't remember you wearing anything super girly like pink or purple with frills or lace or anything. It was always kind of gender neutral, possibly leaning closer to a bit of a boyish look, I guess. I can't remember you ever experimenting with wearing different jewelry or asking to wear any of Mom's makeup. You seemed like you just wanted to play a lot and explore outside and create games and make lots of rules and play with dinosaur or tiny animal toys. It kind of seemed like Mom would always get kind of the same toys and clothes for Britt and I but you would always get something different, and I remember you mentioning it one time. Like when we got TY doll toys for Christmas and Britt and I both got a girl doll and you got a boy one. Or we would get the same girly shoes, just different sizes and you would have just simple gender-neutral running shoes or something. I also remember you always playing with slingshots and stuff like that.

Britt—I suppose I remember you wearing baggier clothing (although it was the '90s) and walking in more of a stride than I did. I also remember you always putting a male persona on your toys. I did too, but I think I did it more in a protective type of way. I felt that males were stronger, and therefore I wanted male dog toys to protect me, etc. I think you did it in more of a

relative way because you felt closer to males. I remember being jealous of how easily you got along with Thomas, Barry and Josh. You had a lot of male friends, and I felt silly and stupid next to males. I remember playing with you at Hudson and coming across that boy that called you “boy/girl,” and I remember always just scoffing inwardly and thinking the poor kid was clearly demented because you were clearly my sister and you were clearly a girl. I remember you being very fast and athletic and I was always a little jealous of that. I hoped to be as fast and athletic as you one day. Looking back, I suppose I see now that you had a masculine disposition at times in the way that you liked Power Rangers and action figures and things like that, but I didn’t view it as anything.

Sometimes in a movie, there’ll be a guy with the perfect Ken-doll body. His hair will be parted on the left side and gelled into such a coif, he’d give a plastic doll a run for its beauty money. He’ll be in a suit with polished shoes. At some point, through circumstances beyond his control, he will shed parts of the suit and roll up his sleeves to reveal subtly toned arms. Think Colin Firth in *A Single Man*, decadently clad and gelled, with his face framed by thick black glasses and just a hint of stubble.

I’ll see this man, and rather than the surge of sexual attraction that many women will profess to (though I might feel it, too) I’ll experience the sudden disequilibrium of envy. I’ll want to *be* that man in his tight suit, with his capable arms and male economy. To try and press a suit down over breasts, while maintaining crisp lines, can be difficult. Breasts, when pressed, show themselves for the water balloons they are. Like wet eels, they can’t be held onto. They drag and flop as you try to run, tossing their bulk about in the breeze. Nothing about them is streamlined

or efficient. But Firth's chest in *A Single Man* is efficient. It carries with it the weight of professorial knowledge, a man's confidence, and a god's immortality. It's marble and flesh in one.

Whenever I get it in my head that it's time for a new wardrobe, I hit the Orchard Park mall in Kelowna with my head held high. This time—I tell myself—will be different from the others. I may have struggled to find things in my size before, but that was just a fluke. After all, I'm not such an abnormal size or shape that local newspapers write articles about me or children point and laugh. I'm 6'1". That's nothing spectacular. Noticeable, perhaps, to a classroom of seated thirteen-year-olds, but not so exceptional as to be un-clotheable by the standards of fast fashion. I'm 160 lbs. Nothing insane. Nothing *TLC* would want to pick up for a limited series.

I'll find several medium shirts and a jacket and some pants that look pretty long, and I'll stick myself in a changeroom. If I'm lucky, a couple of the shirts will be billowy enough to fit poorly, but fit. The rest will be sewn as if for dolls. The pants will be no wider than sleeves, and terminate calf-high. The shirts will struggle to span my shoulders, like that fourth wrap of the hair elastic that'll either burst or finally, properly hold the ponytail up. There will be no space to lift my arms. No way to lean forward and tie my shoes or pick something up off the ground. For a brief moment, I'll be a Barbie or a Ken at last—totally frozen, unable to move outside the up/down parameters of my plastic joints.

I'll try the shoe store next.

Naturally, I wear size 11 shoes. If you've never tried to find size 11 shoes, here are some of the stores that don't carry them in women's styles: SoftMoc, Sportchek, Walmart, Ardene, Winners (outside a few practical fishing waders and perhaps a pair of matronly Birkenstocks).

Every once in a while, some kind of special shipment will land a pair or two of attractive shoes in Winners or SoftMoc, but god help you if you're not there at dawn to claim them. Should you desire anything in a heel, a cute flat, a slip-on, or a sexy boot, good luck to you. It's beige orthopedic piles of material or nothing at all.

A while back, I learned I could buy size 9 men's Converse and they would more or less fit. They chafe the tops of my feet, so I've always got these dry, scaly patches on the bridges of my feet, and they flop around the sides of my feet like I'm wearing Kleenex boxes, but they more or less do the trick.

How do you pair Converse with anything cute, though, you might ask? Well, don't worry, because as I said, nothing cute ever fits me in shirts or pants either.

Clothing isn't the only thing that's just never quite worked for me, though. There are myriad little and not so little things out there that have just never seemed to fit for me, despite landing on the "feminine" side of the aisle.

Handwriting, for one. I have never in all of my life had anything even approaching legible handwriting. I've seen countless portrayals in movies where someone is discovered to be female because of their "feminine handwriting." A secret admirer. A murderess. A genius. Over and over again they're given away by the feminine swoops of their penmanship.

My writing, on the other hand, is a barely legible collection of lumpy letters placed without care or attention. The message, to me, has always been far more important than the medium, but what if that medium is hardly recognizable as English?

In middle school, I tried writing in all caps, which seemed to help quite a bit. One of the popular girls, however, informed me that only men wrote in all caps, so I stopped doing it. It

wasn't until years later when I was working at the construction company in Vancouver and totally unable to communicate via the written word that my boss asked me to write in all caps. Suddenly, the gendered quality behind upper or lower case seemed of little objective consequence, and I've been doing it ever since.

Singing would be another arena I've had issues with.

For whatever reason—the early exposure to testosterone or the length of my vocal chords or something else entirely—my voice isn't the soprano I sometimes wish it were. If I'm alone in the car with no one to hear any potential breaks my voice might make on the high notes, I can usually belt out most songs with confidence. I can't sing in anything approaching Florence Welch's register, or Taylor's or even Adele's (throaty songstress that she is) but I can usually hold my own. Singing around anyone else, though, conscious of the pubertal embarrassment lurking in my vocal cords, I suddenly turn into Tom Waits. I can sing the low parts to almost any song in a voice that doesn't sound masculine per se, but also definitely doesn't sound like a lady voice. If I had to pin it down, it's like Catherine Keener's voice in *Get Out* when she first hypnotizes Chris and sends him to the sunken place. One minute, she's a beautiful woman asking questions with a breathy, feminine lilt. The next, she's quite possibly possessed.

It's that possessed voice I can do. I can do it like nobody's business.

I'm not saying that if I were suddenly male, everything would start to make sense. There'd be a million different ways I wouldn't quite fit in (in my mind, or elsewhere). Brand new issues and insecurities would present themselves, and I'd have to deal with them as they came. I'm simply saying...what am I saying? Nothing's perfect? The grass is always greener? I wish I could buy some goddamn cute shoes in size 11? I'm tired of having to knit my own

sweaters? Colin Firth is really hot? Handwriting isn't gendered? I taught myself to whistle just so I wouldn't have to sing?

I don't know. Whatever I'm saying, though, I'm saying it from within a men's hoodie and pants that are two inches too short.

Chapter 22—The Robot

Anyone acquainted with the struggle of imposter syndrome will no doubt be equally familiar with the story of Pinocchio. An old man creates a puppet, and bestows upon this construct the title of “boy.” After that, every waking moment of the puppet boy’s life is spent trying to prove his father right. Crazy adventures are gone on and dangerous scenarios are faced, all so that the boy can escape the depression inherent to appearing as one thing while feeling all the while that you are something else.

When my diagnosis first came to light, my dad had a habit of telling me that I was “just a girl like any other girl.” He’d always say this with the utmost sincerity, and always when I was at a particularly low point, emotionally speaking. As a sixteen-year-old girl who’d just been informed she would never menstruate, never have biological children, and only develop breasts through medical intervention, the fear that I might not be a “real” girl was never far from my mind. From time to time I would lament the realities of my situation I’d deemed to be the most depressing, and Dad would respond with the words I wanted most to hear. I was normal. I was a normal girl like any other girl.

The problem, though, was when I would inevitably come across something regarding the plights of women and their bodies. Maybe it would be an article in *Cosmo* talking about the monthly struggle of menstruation, and how men will just never understand what it’s like. Maybe it would be a woman on TV talking about child-rearing, and her own struggle with imposter syndrome as she struggled to get pregnant.

In one of my all-time favourite movies, *The Hours*—a film from 2002 that follows Virginia Woolf as she begins to write *Mrs. Dalloway*—a 50s housewife named Laura Brown is pregnant, and fighting the unhappiness that her pregnancy (and her life in general) has brought her. There's a scene where Laura (played by Julianne Moore) is discussing reproductive difficulties with her friend, Kitty (played by Toni Collette). Toni's character is a married woman who's been struggling to get pregnant, and who is about to go to the hospital to have an exploratory procedure regarding a growth in her uterus. Envious beyond description of Laura's current pregnancy (and living son), Kitty says, "You're lucky, Laura. I don't think you can call yourself a woman until you're a mother."

This is a refrain I've heard many times. This, or versions, of it. You're a child until your first period makes you a woman. You're not a real woman until a man has made you one through sex. You're not a real woman until you're a mother. I've heard it all and obsessed about most of it at one time or another.

I didn't see *The Hours* (or fall in love with it in all its hammy glory) until my twenties, but I did see *Erin Brockovich* as a teenage girl (several times, in fact), and there's a scene in that movie that absolutely destroyed me.

Erin (Julia Roberts) is at the home of a woman, Donna Jensen (played by Marg Helgenberger), who is one of her clients in the class action lawsuit against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company. Donna has suffered various cancers and conditions from contaminated water, and as a result, she has lost her breasts and uterus to various surgeries. Sitting up in her bed, completely flat-chested, barren, unwell, she asks Erin (the bracingly beautiful, explosively female Julia Roberts), "You think if you've got no uterus and no breasts, you're still technically a woman?"

Beautiful, intact, and undeniably a woman, Erin smiles and says, “Sure you are, yeah, you’re just, you’re actually a happier woman because you don’t have to worry about maxi pads and underwire.”

As a teenager, the horror of having to redefine my own future womanhood was acute. As a fifteen-year-old without even the hint of breast development or the shadow of a period, it was impossible for me not to ask my mom if I was like that poor, breastless, barren woman. Mom, of course, told me, no, I was still young and there was still time for all sorts of things to happen for me, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was EXACTLY like Donna, and that I had better find a way to be okay with that, because there was simply no escaping it.

My first obsession with robots came from the 1999 film *Bicentennial Man*, starring Robin Williams. The film didn’t do that well commercially or critically, and as an adult who rewatches it on occasion, I can see the glaring corniness, but as a child who was only eleven when the film came out, I was instantly drawn to the displacement that Andrew the android (Robin Williams’ character) feels in regards to his own humanity.

Like so many other robot stories, Andrew dreams of becoming a human. He is unique, his owner tells him, because he carves animals from wood, he’s inquisitive, and he displays preferences. He likes some people more than others. He yearns for a home of his own. He reads about—and dreams of—freedom. Eventually, as technology progresses and he manages to find the right android scientist to help him, he is given an upgrade that makes him appear human, while still retaining his robotic inner workings (including immortality). Eventually, he gets a

girlfriend, though this girlfriend is reluctant, at first, to date him, or to accept his humanity. She argues that “a thing is itself, Andrew, a tree is a tree, water is water,” to which Andrew counters “What about ice? What about steam?”

In the 2004 Will Smith movie *i, robot*, the main robot around which the film revolves, Sonny, is also made differently. Sonny has dreams, he draws pictures, and he can choose to disobey the three laws of robotics that govern all robot behaviour. The film carries a much more threatening message than *Bicentennial Man*, with the threat of robot evolution heralding a world where robots can cause harm to humans if they deem it necessary for humanity’s continued survival, but it carries a similar message regarding the inherent value of intelligent beings.

In the 1999 film, *A. I.*, we have a young boy robot named David (played by Haley Joel Osment) who gets abandoned by his adoptive mother and spends the next several hundred years trying to prove his humanity and make his way back to her. He is immortal, while his mother is not, and while immortality might appeal to some, for David, it’s a curse. He only has his mother for a brief while before she rejects him, and rather than live his own life, enjoying the unique gifts of his body, he can think only of turning himself into something worthy of his mother’s love.

Ex Machina, released in 2014, was the first movie I saw where the robots use their perceived humanity to fuck over the humans circling around them. Kept like a rat in a maze, the experimental robot, Ava (Alicia Vikander), uses her beauty to seduce the scientist studying her (Domnhall Gleeson) into betraying her creator and releasing her into the world. Rather than yearning desperately to be human, Ava eventually steals artificial (and very convincing) humanoid flesh from other discarded robot prototypes and walks coolly past a very trapped and very frantic Domnhall Gleeson to escape into the world. It’s the perfect “fuck you” to the old

narratives of insufficiency and desperate longing. It's about owning your body and not wasting a second of your time on anyone who won't accept you as you are.

Everyone knows that one of the hallmarks of the Pinocchio story is the puppet-boy's inability to tell a lie without his nose growing. The slightest untruth, and the little wooden nodule on his face grows before one's very eyes. Depending on which version of the tale you're interacting with, Pinocchio also has the ability to shrink his nose back down to its usual proportions by telling the truth and setting things right.

If you've only seen one version of *Pinocchio*, chances are, you've seen the 1940 Disney version. Early in the movie, soon after Pinocchio's been awakened by the blue fairy, Pinocchio declares to Geppetto that one day he will be a real boy, and his nose doesn't grow. Now, is this because he believes his own statement so much that it qualifies as truth? Or is it because he's aware, on some wavelength, that he *will* be a real boy, so it basically qualifies as truth?

Regardless of the reason, he says it, and his nose doesn't grow.

There is a paradox named after Pinocchio which is a version of the liar's paradox, wherein a statement is both true and false. A common example of the liar's paradox is "this sentence is false," which can only be true if the statement is false, and so on. The Pinocchio paradox relies on Pinocchio's unique nose-growing curse, wherein a lie causes his nose to grow. If he says, "My nose is growing," when it's not, then his nose must grow. In doing so, however,

the nose itself would make a truth teller of Pinocchio, thus negating the curse and returning him to the predicament of having declared his nose to be growing, when it isn't.

Much like Pinocchio, since learning of my diagnosis, I've struggled to declare myself simply female without feeling like I'm opening up a whole paradoxical discussion. If I say I'm female, but I have no uterus or ovaries and my hormones come from the pharmacy, it sounds like I'm deluding myself (at least, it does to my own mind on my lowest days). If I say that I'm an intersex woman instead, well, isn't intersex different from woman? How can I be part male and part female if I'm also a woman like any other?

What if we were to go with male? If I'm male, where's the evidence? Where's my confidence walking down a dimly lit street at night? Where's my upper body strength? To say nothing of all the other physical trappings often associated with maleness, the legacy of voting rights and land ownership, the income, and so on.

Without those things, maybe it's not quite the right term. Intersex on its own, though, good lord, what a broad term! Am I the same as the intersex person who identifies as male? The one who didn't know they were intersex until they tried to get somebody pregnant and couldn't? How ironic, the mistaken, antiquated belief that intersex people, with their varied mishmash of bits and pieces, might be twice as fecund as the rest of the population.

Personally, I'm fine with the title of "intersex woman." Like the robots in all my movies, it doesn't feel exactly like the real thing, but it's close enough. More similar to a cyborg, I guess—half human and half machine—than a full-blown robot, but that hardly matters. With a simple "intersex" tacked onto the front of "woman," as easily as "cis" or "trans" can be tacked on, there's suddenly a zillionth of the confusion.

In her landmark show, *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby famously declared, “There is too much hysteria around gender.” I would not only agree completely, but I would like to extend it also to physical sex. Specifically, in terms of genitalia.

It was only a year or two ago—I was already in my thirties, and embarking on my Master’s degree—when I saw a YouTube video by a trans man from the UK that delved into the various ways to interact with genitalia that might fall more on the “female” side of things, or the “male side.” The creator—a trans man who has openly undergone “bottom surgery” in the form of metoidioplasty—made the video very much from the assumed position that people with genitalia that may or may not fit the moulds of male or female are already fine, already desirable, and already confidently having sex. There was no discussion of “somewhere down the road, if this is ever okay.” No hints that such manifestations might ever cause or have caused anyone distress. It was simply “if and when you encounter someone who looks like this, or this, or this, it might feel good to try *this*.”

I realized, watching that video, that I was still carrying shame about my body. I was still terrified I wasn’t feminine enough to be properly loved, and I’d been holding back a lot from real intimacy, always watching and judging my body as if I were outside of it, an unhappy, regressive little fly on the wall.

Like Hannah, I don’t understand this obsession with making sure everybody’s body is exactly what we think they should be, with all the pieces we think they should have, performing the functions we think they should perform, pretending all the while that the conventions around all those expectations haven’t changed a million times over between cultures, decades, families, zeitgeists, millennia, and whatever other category you can think of. Nothing about any of it has

remained true, except perhaps the necessity of healthy spermatozoa and ovum in making a new child. And even that can be done in a petri dish.

My MFA supervisor, Michael, told me once that he had a revelation while he was in grad school. He was in a university stairwell, struggling with how to understand and accept himself, as a gay man, just as he was. Was he masculine enough to be a man? Did he act and look like a man? What did that even mean?

And then it hit him. He was already a man. Nothing could change that or take that away from him. So, it didn't matter how he acted or looked or how he felt about how he acted or looked. He was a man, acting and looking the way he did, and so, his body and his behaviour was part of the whole story of what it meant to be a man. His was a man's life, the same as any other man.

At the end of the day, whatever someone feels they need to call me, whether I truly qualify as a woman, or if, like my beloved robots, I'm doomed to spend the rest of my life yearning for something I'll never be, I guess it doesn't really matter. I know what I am, what my body looks like, and I can say with absolute honesty that anytime someone's asked me, I've always answered that I'm a woman, and not once has my nose ever grown.

Chapter 23—The Party Trick

Me—What confusion/questions might you still have surrounding my diagnosis, or around the gender and sexual spectrums in general?

Mom—I really don't have any questions or confusion about AIS. I just see you as a confident, happy woman that knows what you want and are going after it.

Dad—I don't really have any questions that I haven't already found answers for. I am glad that you are our daughter and that we have all been able to go through our lives together in the time that we have had so far. I have had to learn quite a bit about a lot of human differences that I wasn't always aware of, and that has made me feel guilty about the ignorance that I carried, but I think that we're all getting better at acceptance of perceived differences as just being a perfectly normal part of the human infliction.

I have spent so many years obsessed with my body, I hardly know how to talk about anything else. For the first several years after I discovered alcohol, I held onto the story of my body like a party trick. While others were de-corking bottles of wine with machetes or folding their tongues into eighths, I would corner someone who didn't strike me as particularly worldly in a gender-critical sense, and I would unfold for them my tale. I usually preferred to open with something shocking like “I'm not really a woman,” or “I can't have kids.” Of course, there'd be a bit of preamble—you don't just walk up to someone and say something like that out of the blue—but I'd always make sure we found our way down that lane.

“What do you mean?” they’d ask, their eyes wide, their bodies leaning toward mine.

“Well, I’m intersexed,” I’d say. “I’m not totally female or male. I’m like one of those people you see on TV sometimes.”

“No shit,” they’d say, their eyes bright. “When did you find out?”

“Sixteen,” I’d say, letting the word and all the connotations of it hang in the boozy air between us. Sweet Sixteen. The year you come online. The beginning of your big exciting journey through the adult world. Still not old enough for most things in any legal sense, but definitely on your way. A happy time, at the very least. A time of promise. People have done great things at sixteen. They’ve accomplished *real* things, not just childish versions of things. Sixteen is about driving and stealing booze and having sex. It’s about saying yes to questions you’ve never been asked before. It’s about beautiful new possibilities.

If I was lucky, they’d repeat it back to me.

“You found out you couldn’t have kids when you were only sixteen?” they’d say. And I’d nod solemnly. “Jesus, what was that like?” they’d ask.

At this point, I’d draw a bit of a blank. After all, how many sixteen-year-olds have the faintest idea about what it could possibly mean to have or not have kids? Most conversations around becoming a mom at that age are in hushed tones that focus primarily on accidents that have to be cleaned up and flushed away before parents can find out. Most pregnancies happening at that age are either nobly carried to term (and subsequent adoption) or terminated after an older sibling offers a clandestine ride to the clinic. Few conversations, if any, focus much on the ramifications of bringing new life into the world, the gravity of signing up for a lifetime of responsibility, or the big question of what it all means.

“Hard,” I’d say, eventually. “I mean, mostly, at the time, I was just focused on how I wouldn’t have to deal with periods.”

I’d say nothing about the years I spent PRAYING for my period, or the nights spent sleeping with one of my mom’s adult-sized pads in the crotch of my teenage panties, on the off-chance my evening indigestion might have been a harbinger for something more exciting.

“Yeesh, no doubt,” they’d say, shaking their heads.

There would be a moment of shared solemnity, during which I imagined we were both thinking about the various gigantic, unfair things that had happened in our lives (and indeed in the lives of everyone who’d ever lived), and then I’d see a new look come into their eyes. This look usually meant they’d remembered there was a lot more that went into not being fully male or female than just reproductive capabilities. This was, after all, a sexual topic, and sexual topics always carried intrigue, no matter who or what they concerned.

“So, how did you first find out?” they’d ask. “Unless you don’t want to get into all that.”

“Oh no, it’s fine,” I’d say with a dismissive wave of my hand. If they could detect my excitement at this point or not, it hardly mattered. I’d not only been asked to share, but it had been established, whether they’d realized it or not, that I now had complete immunity to be as honest as I wanted. They couldn’t touch me, humble and inviting as they were. I had the floor, and I was not going to waste the opportunity on phony humility, or a rounding off of edges.

“So, the way it starts,” I’d say, affecting a knowing tone, “is in the womb. You see, every fetus starts out with gonads, which turn into either ovaries or testes, depending on the hormones present...”

A little dry, sure, but they probably needed a crash course. After all, most people don't spend a lot of time thinking about how their bits and pieces came to be. Oh, they think about them sometimes, sure—they complain and enjoy and just generally engage with them as much as anyone else—but they don't spend a lot of time thinking about how they were made. After all, that whole part of the journey was before they really had to think about any of it. That portion was beyond their control, so why bother considering it?

“Well, sometimes something would go wrong,” I'd say. “Or, well, maybe wrong isn't the right word, but something unexpected would happen...”

By the end of the conversation, more often than not, there would be tears in my listener's eyes. At the very least, they'd be shaking their head in disbelief at the chaos of the universe and the unpredictability of the human condition. Phone numbers and Facebook pages would be exchanged. Promises of future hangouts. If I was lucky, they'd tell me I was a very special person, or some version of that.

We'd part, then, to freshen our drinks and carry on with the evening. And I'd be good for a while. My story would live on in one more mind, and all the bullshit I went through wouldn't be for nothing.

And not just the bullshit, but the other stuff, too. It'd keep me going through the pregnancies and birth announcements so common to everyone but me. It'd keep me calm through the randoms in public bathrooms asking for tampons, through the randoms asking for Midol or cramp remedies, through the battery of confusing magazine articles about how “men are more prone to this illness” or “women should get checked more often for signs of this” when I never know on which side of the fence I land in any particular arena.

I've stumbled across a few LGBTQ+ creators on TikTok lately who've talked about the mourning they feel over their lost youth in the wake of all the public changes surrounding queer people. There are so many out queer creators now, sharing their lives with the world, which is, of course, wonderful, but that wasn't even close to the case when I was growing up. Nor was it when most people were growing up. And while it's exciting to see now, there's a shadow of jealousy and frustration attached to this new light of openness. Why couldn't I have been born at a time when it was simply okay to say to people, "I like guys and I like girls" or "I'm intersex?" How many years of confusion and self-loathing could have been shortened into a few brief moments of self-exploration? Who else and where else would I be in my life if I'd simply been allowed to embrace the things I knew to be true about myself at the same time as those for whom their inherent selves happened to align with the norms of their time?

These questions are nothing new. And my story isn't new. But it is my story, and one that isn't told very often.

In January 2021, I decided on three things for my New Year's resolutions: I would finally submit my poetry manuscript to publishers, I would lose the last seventeen pounds to reach my goal of 150 pounds, and I would get the stupid mess of a tattoo on my wrist properly removed once and for all.

Right away, I submitted my manuscript to four Canadian publishers.

Within a month, I had a contract with Mansfield Press in Toronto to publish my debut collection.

Within two months, I was down seven pounds and hovering at 160.

Within three months, I'd had two tattoo removal appointments, and the process was going well.

Then, I ran out of money. The scholarship I'd fully expected to win came back with my name on the Alternate list, and little reason to expect that my status would change. The pandemic had been raging for over a year, and people were strapped for cash. Many workers were like myself—a teacher on call with little desire to spend each day in a different classroom, with different sets of living, breathing incubi—and in need of money.

The first thing to go was my schedule of tattoo appointments. At over a hundred bucks a pop, they were simply too expensive. I had very little money to throw around, and an annoying, skin-deep blemish on my wrist just didn't register as a necessity.

With little to no work and nowhere to go (pandemic limitations, low funds etc) I got less and less exercise. Where the first twenty-five pounds of my weight loss had been relatively easy to shed, the last ten were proving impossible. I kept walking at least eight kilometres every day, but every night in the quiet boredom of my rural trailer, the need for chips or candy or beer or all three was insatiable. Sitting at the end of a cul-de-sac, at the bottom of a hill, with no next-door neighbours and not even the sound of the highway to break up the static buzz of my own ears, it can get terribly quiet. Every day I tried my best, and every night I'd forget my goals and go off the rails. Eventually, by late Fall, I just stopped trying.

And with that throwing in of the towel, a new quiet started to creep in. Quieter than the shellshocked hiss of my country ears when the TV is finally turned off at the end of the day. I won't say it was a quiet of perfect answers—I don't think I could ever claim something that absolute—but it was a quiet that didn't need the snap of a laser burning away the black lines on

my wrist, or the scale seeking purchase on our bathroom tiles. It was a quiet that didn't need a listening ear and the blank canvas of a stranger's beery mind. I may be somewhere on the line between male and female, straight and gay, average and skinny, Gemini and Cancer, but that doesn't mean I'm nowhere. Like my dear, blurry black blob of a tattoo that no longer bears any similarity to anything. It's a bruise that never heals, a pressed flower from a spring so ancient and forgotten, one wonders how the fibers continue to hold together in anything resembling a floral. And yet, to imagine it plucked from my wrist and crumbled into the trash fills me with something remarkably close to sadness. It's a mess, yes—by any objective standard, it's nothing more than an ugly mistake—and yet, it's a mistake unique to me. Or, rather, a picture of the many mistakes I made on the path to self-expression. Or, what I thought self-expression should look like. Of course, if I could snap my fingers and have the tattoo resolve itself into something perfect and beautiful, I would; it is, after all, a stupid purplish blob that clashes with almost anything I want to wear. But, it's here, and there's no such cure. The only way to remove or change it is the slow, expensive chiseling away that I started so long ago, and on which I'll continuously work until it's gone or I give up.

Or not.

The thing I didn't realize about my story until just recently, though, is that no one can take it away from me. No matter how many or how few times I decide to share it with somebody over a pint, it's there in my scars and my lengthy leg bones. If my skin and my bones were gone tomorrow, it'd be there in the aether. It will always be my story, whether it's allowed to be told or not, whether it's rolled out for a little shock at parties, or if I never mention it again. It won't matter what regressive old professor gets it in their hands and decides to relabel it, or what ignorant playground boy child decides that it (like the rest of me) is something other than what I

know it to be. Just as nothing can change the fact that my sisters and I are the Three Little Girlygoos to my Auntie Gloria whether we're three years old or thirty-three, cisgendered or intersex. We just are, and it just is.

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