

THE SWEET AIR

by

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ORDINARY TIME

Outside,
raindrops race in a panic
across glass. The cold wind
wrestles the youngest tree--a
backyard stranglehold, resistance lost.
In this cloistered existence I know
as home, the boys sleep, fevers
tamed by thick pink medicine. Alone,
I fold the laundry, press the clothes.
I contemplate the hiss of a slow-moving iron,
the simple creak of an ironing board's unsure
frame. The room is warm and smells like
detergent and damp cotton. Steam rises,
collects on the window. A transfiguration;
rain becomes snow through the blur
enveloping the tree's slightest branches
like connection, like dependence.
Rain becomes snow, and collects
in crevices of the window,
the struggle now communion.
In this moment, I am a Carmelite
seeking rapture in the mundane
and finding all that is sacred
in the most ordinary
of ordinary.

SNOWBOUND

1. April

1986: Wind melds sky turns to rain turns to snow turns to white closes in.

A South Dakota blizzard is a shape-shifter, undulating, hiding, revealing little of what lies beneath. In its aftermath, fallen snow is delicate, ephemeral. It quiets noise, erases the line between earth and sky. It envelops sound: footsteps, passing vehicle, a runaway dog, cannot shatter this silence. The tired scraping of a metal shovel against sidewalk is the only thing penetrating the quiet, quiet hush, as I wade through snow in my Sorels, clearing the walk. Breathing in, I feel my nostrils sting. I see shimmering, sub-zero air spinning around the sun. I take it all in: the glitter falling from frozen sky, one infinite wave of white's ascension into heaven. In this moment, I know what it means to be alive.

Today is April 16, the day after Easter.

April 2005: Idaho embraces spring. In mid-April dormant grass will give way to green, the tulips will open, kids on bikes will make their way past my house hoping to beat the first bell at White Pine Elementary. In mid-April, the Boise River will move with force, as will Robie Creek, Mores Creek, Thorn Creek, and the other waters that flow with force

from the National Forest within an hour from my home. In mid-April, I will miss my son's baseball game on the day I run the Race to Robie Creek. I will wear shorts and a tank top, the high-desert sun burning my face, and the snow will be gone from the course's 4,800-foot summit. In mid-April, my husband will fill the water tank at our Idaho City cabin, and he will clear the brush from the bridge. I will say goodbye to another Boise winter, and as always, spring will have come too soon when I find myself standing in the middle of mid-April.

2. March

1989: David had never seen a snowdrift before he moved here.

We are college students and it is Spring Break and his plane won't make it out of Sioux Falls today. He started here this semester, moving from his native Kentucky. As a child, he watched the big snowstorms in Buffalo or Chicago on the TV news, and he wondered not what it was like, but what it must be.

And standing here in the front yard of this tiny rental property, he is dumb and mute and lost in the magnitude of white, the washing over of wind. He is in awe that it's only four inches deep on one end of the lawn and over three feet on the other. That sometime during the night, the snow ran out but the wind kept blowing, leaving drifts hard enough to support his entire body weight. That its indentions are carved so perfectly, so rigid, so uniform.

That it doesn't look like snow anymore. It looks like waves.

March 2005: Two weeks of warmer temperature have erased the snow from the Boise foothills, moving water the end result. I stand on the bank of the Boise River while a cool breeze stares me down.

Idaho embraces spring: I do not.

The brown, dormant grass gives way to green.

The tulips are open: the river flows with force.

My dog Lucy—a big, husky mix—pants, her tongue hanging out sideways. She's much too warm; her heavy winter undercoat is still months away from shedding. She wades in the river, laps it up hungrily. Behind me, I hear the whirl of bicycles on the greenbelt; the rhythmic footsteps of joggers, the throbbing bass tone of someone's iPod. An old man downstream hurls his fishing line into the water, begins its slow draw back.

I know I should find my solace here, but I can't. In this water, I am not reborn. I will not fall into it; I will not allow it to wash over me. I do not feel it, yearn for it, nor do I long to live near it, on it, at its side. This tepid coexistence belies an ambivalent disregard for the water's shimmering, time-held beauty, its indigenous union with this place, these people. Almost fifteen years in Idaho, and I am still disconnected from its very lifeblood.

I left the Northern Plains, ostensibly, to pursue a graduate degree. I read *A River Runs Through It*, like everybody else did that year. I was twenty-four years old, ready to write my own story. In an undergraduate environmental science class, I learned about Idaho's native salmon runs, of a hundred rivers' uninhabited, unpredictable paths through a state that seemed so far from the my own. So foreign.

More than anything, I wanted water.

I was a child when I first thought to go to Idaho. I saw a beer commercial during a Vikings football game. *Whitewater rafting on the Snake River!* said the announcer, before the dewy brown bottle turned in slow-motion. I romanticized about the heavily wooded forests, the endless mountain skylines, the miles and miles of wilderness, a country untamed as old-time cowboys or columbine. My acceptance letter from Idaho State was mailed in March, a day when there was still plenty of snow on the ground in Brookings, South Dakota, the place where I lived. I moved here later in the year—in the middle of summer— when it was much warmer, easier.

My mother cried the day I left, even though she didn't cry on my wedding day, just two days earlier. There, in front of the house where I grew up, my new husband and I loaded a cooler with sandwiches and Cokes, and we said our goodbyes after my dad double-checked the hitch on a rusty U-Haul trailer that said *Adventures in Moving*. We drove north twenty miles north to a familiar freeway on-ramp. From that point, I watched the stretches of South Dakota trailing behind me. I thought I was leaving, thought I was pulling up the roots.

On Interstate 90, heading west out of Mitchell, I was flanked by billboards, a trail of roadside litter, windshield glass scattered on the shoulder like moonbeams on water. I drove past a familiar, neon-lettered sign: “See Elvis Presley’s Motorcycle at the Pioneer Auto Museum—only 245 Miles Ahead!” South Dakota, where Elvis Presley is a pioneer and 245 miles is only. Heading west, we crossed the long bridge over the Missouri River at Chamberlain. I saw the dead trees, skeletal and drowning in the river’s overflowing banks, the long-ago causalities of the Oahe Dam. I watched the speedboats leaving trails

on choppy waves. I felt the wind push us across the bridge, and I set the clock to a new time zone.

3. February

1993: Section C, page one, under the fold:

Snow fort collapses, boy declared dead

My mother has sent me a package from home, a vintage tourist plate wrapped in newspaper. Uncrumpling it, I read a story. A boy from southwest Minnesota was found dead in his backyard. He was building a tunnel of snow, gloved hands clutching a plastic pail to hollow out a five-foot drift, and crawling into the inside, and he reveled because it was big and dark and good. But it all fell down on him. From the kitchen window, it was the boy's mother who first noticed something was wrong. Steam from the faucet had turned to frost on the glass and she rubbed at it madly so she could see. Only a single blue boot emerged from the mound.

Twelve hours later the prairie drew another breath and awakened again for a second storm:

the frozen ambages of rising and falling and night sky spilling over.

February 2005: Section B, page one, under the fold: "Groundhog sees his shadow, more winter in store." I only glance at the headlines in today's Idaho Statesman because I have to get the kids to school. The older ones have already made the bus; I yank t-shirts over the little ones' heads, instruct them to pull sweatpants over their skinny, little-boy legs. It's the second day of February, and already winter is gone.

It's been more than a decade since I left the Northern Plains. My first marriage is long over, my second is seven years in the making. I have lived among rivers since the day I arrived here. First, it was the unadorned Portneuf at Pocatello, the river nestled near its junction with the Snake River. Then I lived in Idaho Falls, where the mighty Snake pours down from the confluence of the Henry's Fork from Island Park and the South Fork flows from Jackson Lake in Wyoming. The "falls" there are manmade, a Bonneville Power Administration project. Finally, I settled in Boise, where the Boise River draws a line in the sand, separating high desert from the Rockies. And while I am living near the one thing I used to romanticize about, I have yet to make a lasting connection to the water.

After I drop the boys off, I drive down Boise Avenue, a street that runs parallel to the river. Today, the water is low. I see a predictable pallet of color: a backdrop of brown on brown on more brown, evergreens heavy with needles, tan, naked branches of dormant trees; barren foothills behind branches behind approved paint colors of the high-end, riverside subdivisions.

My family keeps me here. The kids love it; my husband loves it even more. The teenagers have their friends, their activities, their school colors. But they've never known a snow day, never pulled plastic bread sacks over their socks to get their snowboots on—and themselves out the door—as quickly as possible. The little ones love to fish and swim and walk back to the cabin in muddy swim trunks and sandals. But they've never built a snowman that hasn't been dirtied by pieces of brown grass and streaks of mud from the unfrozen ground beneath. Me, I've painted the walls in our house blue and yellow and

green and red. I've planted pink and purple perennials in once-neglected flower beds, and I've strung white Christmas lights on the back deck to mimic snow.

Weather so rarely takes me by surprise here. Last summer, I was startled by a mid-afternoon windstorm, when wind from just over the foothills whipped up from nowhere, blowing over the cardboard box full of clothes on our driveway's edge waiting for the ARC truck, strewing its contents across the neighbor's yard. The squall offered only sprinkling of dirty rain, leaving my car filthy and leaving me thirsty and tired and re-boxing the clothes under a relentless blue sky.

Here, the landscape is inspired, and I try not to take that for granted. Growing up, I saw my home as void of landscape, but I have come to understand that the angry, beautiful weather of the Great Plains is a landscape in and of itself.

This, I did take for granted. From a rickety grandstand at a small-town ballgame, I've watched black clouds move over the cornfields south of town, go green, and swirl into a funnel cloud. The ball connected and sailed over the fence, while sirens from the fire station sounded the "take cover" warning. I've walked to the grocery store under seemingly perfect skies, and walked out into an ice storm, wearing only a light jacket and summer shoes. I've slept on the floor of a motel room after an unexpected snowstorm preempted a spring track meet making it impossible for the bus to travel the twenty-five miles home.

Most of all, I've watched the storms blow away, leaving brilliant violet- and fuchsia-infused sunsets. But here, the summer here never seems to end, and haze from distant grass fires will give this cloudless Boise sky a false pink or purple glow at dusk, and my kids will call it a "pretty sunset."

I miss the real sunsets, those which come only by way of weather.

Every day in February the snowline on the foothills disappears just a little bit more.

4. January

1977: Frost collects on the inside of the window, so thick I can no longer see out. I carve my name with my thumbnail. Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve is on television, and we're staying up late while my parents are out, and I have taken a seat on the radiator, back up against the window, where I can feel the searing heat and the bitter cold at the same time. The wind beats twigs and snow against glass, the uneven knocks of water move through the radiator like rocking, a gentle rocking like waves on water and I am slipping, I am drowning, I am drowning,

I am alive.

Six years ago, in January, when Matthew was just two weeks old, my mother and I took him for his first outing along the Boise greenbelt. She held her heavy winter coat over her arm, taken aback by the mild temperatures. We had a big snowfall on Christmas Day, I told her, but it's long since gone, melted to mud within two days. The trees were bare and the stroller was red and the river shuffled along beside us.

The river. A culmination of evaporation and precipitation, of mountain snows and spring melts—the river calls this place home. Maybe the baby will find his roots here; but I'd given up on it myself. Given up on this ancestral body of water that marks this place, this state, this life.

So long ago, I wanted water.

What I couldn't know when I lived in South Dakota is this: I had it all along, every time my tongue captured those translucent ice crystals that fall in white flakes. Heavy flakes tumbling down like dinner napkins. Zero-visibility flakes pushing and shoving in a wind-driven wrath. Sorry little flakes turning into tears the moment they hit the too-warm asphalt. Late spring flakes settling on the tulips and daffodils like home. No two alike. Ever. I could see it for myself as they landed in my mittened hands.

This is my home now, I've come to accept this. But there is something missing here, something difficult to articulate, something that the all-too-predictable water fails to live up to. Maybe it's a landscape defined by air, not water. Maybe it's snow-buried silences and sunsets made not of fire, but of rain. Maybe it's a need for clouds looming on a horizon so flat it forms an arch. Maybe it's the drifting, the wind, the unbearable cold, or one hundred million stars that find their place night after night, no matter the temperature, the season, the color. Maybe it's the way it all falls together in spite of itself—

sky into wind into rain

into snow into white

into sky.

MOMENTUM

We share no words at your mother's grave
on the hill outside Los Angeles.
Cars sit idle on the freeway below
I watch the blinking string of red brake lights
The mid-morning sun choked in a shroud of haze.

She died on Christmas day
two years before we met. I unwrap the flowers
from the small corner grocery store we found on the way.
I lay them on the flat headstone,
touch the name.

Will's up on all fours, learning to crawl.
He rocks back and forth on untested haunches
Relishing the sensation of knees on grass.
He grabs the flowers in his clumsy hand, flings them
as far as they'll go. You hush my scolding,
watch the petals fly

while Matthew runs.
Nimble steps belie his eighteen months;
feet peek through brown sandals while
his legs dodge granite and marble, evergreens and plastic crosses—
he garners speed, laughing with arms held high above his head.
He evades our reach.

Gravity pulls him faster, then faster.

There is no end to this pulsion,

this impelling journey.

His feet move him forward

and he's jumping over bones.

Aloud, you wonder how they'll change by winter.

You imagine them rattling down the stairs,

tearing across cold wood floors with bare feet

next Christmas morning—

a still anniversary greeted head on

by their small

fierce

unstoppable force.

SWEET AIR

Thin as air, he crouches until his rump hangs just inches over his skis. He is practically sitting down, a position that gleans the most possible speed. He knows this as he approaches the kicker, and he waits until the last possible second before snapping upright and launching himself into an ocean of mid-winter sky.

My firstborn is airborne.

I cover my eyes with heavy gloves and peek through only when his skis touch the ground again and I hear his trademark yell: “Oh, *yeah!*” Fresh snow sparkles like sugar, reflects off his candy-white goggles. He’s just hit the second step-down on the Claim Jumper terrain park. He is here every Saturday. He is Matthew, and he is nine, and he was born to fly.

At two months old, a tiny bundle of yellow fleece perched in the red jogging stroller, he cried big, real tears every time I slow down to a walk. Two days short of turning ten months, he took his first steps, and then climbed onto the bottom step and jumped off without losing his footing. From there, he pulled himself up and off furniture or the dishwasher door, left open. Instinctively he knew when, in my absent-mindedness, I’d left the child-proof gate at the top of the staircase open. He would run to it, hook his toes over the nosing of the top step, stopping short of toppling down. On his father’s lap, he endured a high-speed sledding mishap in which they launched off an exposed rock,

lost the sled from beneath them, and together tumbled down a steep embankment. His face covered in snow, he pulled himself out, laughing, “*Again! Again!*”

All of this all before his first birthday.

He learned to ski at three, taught himself to ride a bike at five. At six, he took his first trip to a BMX park, where he pushed his bike to the top of the steepest dirt ramp, straddled the seat, and shoved off, giving him the velocity needed to hit three subsequent jumps, catching a good twelve inches of air each time.

“Oh, *yeah!*”

“How did you do it?” I asked him. “Didn’t it scare you?”

“Oh it was really scary,” he answered with a seriousness that belied his young age.

“I just did it anyway.”

* * *

He just does it anyway.

John Bowlby, a noted psychoanalyst and pioneer in child development theory, determined that we’re born with only three innate fears: fear of abandonment, fear of loud noises, and fear of falling. I struggle to understand what drives some people—namely my son—to do the things we’re born to fear. I was nearly eight before I learned to ride a bike, a little pink number with a banana seat and sissy bars. It was called “The Debutante” written in curly letters on the chain guard, and I remember the slow rocking back and forth from one training wheel to the other as they strained against my weight. I lagged a good block behind the rest of my friends, and my younger sister, too, who all

raced to the Dairy Mart for soft-serve ice cream and nickel candy. When I finally learned to ride the bike without the training wheels, I was cautious, staying on the sidewalk, looking both ways before I crossed. Doing wheelies, riding with no hands, making blackies on the wide sidewalks at the Catholic church—these were things I never even tried.

But Matt will try nearly anything. Getting hurt happens; wounds are worn like badges of honor. For this reason, people describe him as “fearless,” but that’s not a true statement. Despite an unflappable presence on skis or a bike, he is not a confident child. Rather, Matt struggles with anxiety. He fears failure, stresses over testing, and does not easily adapt to new environments. He is a worrier. And even when he begins a new session of ski school or mountain bike camp, he is reduced to tears of intimidation. It’s heart-wrenching, but we force him to go. Because once he’s actually out there doing it, it all peels away, and he can’t help but to go faster, stronger, higher. Even though he is very aware that so much can go wrong, he does it so flawlessly. So effortlessly

* * *

Humans are the only animals that will purposely put themselves in harm’s way. Extreme sports’ rise in popularity speaks to this phenomenon. These pursuits, which include things like skateboarding, paragliding, snowboarding, and Matt’s favorites, mountain biking and slopestyle skiing, are relatively new. The seeds were planted in the early 1970s, when marathon running and rock climbing, then-fringe sports, garnered more and more “average Joe” participants. But unlike marathon running and rock

climbing—which attracted persons in their 30s and 40s—today’s extreme sports are largely youth-driven, at a time when older people often criticize children and young adults as being lazy, sedentary, and unmotivated.

Some sociologists theorize the growing interest in high-octane activities is a societal reaction to an unprecedented safety in everyday life. Generations of people born before the 1960s had to survive global war, pandemics, childbirth complications, unsafe working conditions, and more. Says Dan Cady, a professor of popular culture at California State University-Fullerton, “I just don't think extreme sports would have been popular in a ground-war era. Coming back from a war and getting onto a skateboard would not have seemed so extreme.” And while more than 4,000 U.S. soldiers have been killed in the five years since the start of the war in Iraq, the lack of a draft and the reality of an older military force (made up of National Guards and reserve troops) have kept real danger, for most young people, at arm’s length.

Other sociologists liken the activities to vision quests because modern generations lack any meaningful rites of passage. In traditional cultures, an adolescent was expected overcome a severe physical ordeal to ultimately find personal growth and a lasting bond with peers. This is even more marked for young men, according to Michael Gurian, a respected family therapist and social philosopher, who argues that sports can help fill that void. He says: “When done well, sports set up a rite of passage for males, and it’s long term. ...There’s incredible learning, and there’s a community in which he learns, and he never feels alone, and he has to deal with failure and success”.

A third theory suggests this affinity for extreme sports is a revolt against the dystopia that is an overprotected school life—as school is where young people are told

what to wear, where to sit, what to do, and how to walk in single file. This theory rang true for me when recently, my youngest son Will was watching a reality show on MTV. The scene featured teenagers interacting in a cafeteria. “You mean in high school you get to stand up—*and* you can move around?” he asked, comparing it to the buttoned-down regimen that is his elementary school lunch hour. In this scenario, extreme sports are dangerous and unpredictable and rough-edged—and authority figures don’t understand a thing about them.

So is Matt raging against the machine? Is he too safe, sequestered in his subdivision home?

Or was he simply born that way?

I am thinking about this as we watch the 2008 Winter X Games. He wears a faded Bob Lebow Bike Tour t-shirt, pulled out of the dirty clothes. He is fifty-odd pounds, face littered with freckles, blonde hair in a matted state of helmet-head, he waits for favorite freestyle skier, Simon Dumont. On television, the wind is calm and the music is loud and the athlete photos posted on the JumboTron are wild-haired and goofy. Simon Dumont drops into the superpipe at about twenty-five miles per hour, hucks it more than twenty feet off the lip of the pipe in a perfectly executed 1080 (referring to degrees, in this case, three full turns in the air), followed by a 900 (two and a half turns), and a switch 1080 (skiing backwards into three turns), and another, and he ends his run by spraying the cameraman with snow in an abrupt hockey stop. The entire run lasts about twenty-three seconds. For me, it is implausible.

For Matt, it’s sweet.

* * *

While the sociological theories may differ, the physiological explanation behind Matt's continued need for speed is widely accepted. When he does dangerous things, his brain senses danger and releases the "fight or flight" adrenaline, through his adrenal glands. This stress response is met by a boost of oxygen and glucose to his brain and muscles while at the same time, it suppresses other non-essential bodily processes, such as digestion. This explains why, before he tries something new, he often complains that his stomach hurts.

What happens next? Adrenaline boosts Matt's heart rate and stroke volume His pupils dilate, his blood sugar levels rise and the lipids in his fat cells start to break down. This causes increased blood flow throughout the body, a faster pulse, hyperarousal, and the end result he craves: peak physical performance. "That kid's an adrenaline junkie," my husband says, a phrase coined in the early 1990s, referring to people who routinely put themselves in daring situations in a search for the next big rush. Because endorphins are responsible for feelings of well-being and pain relief, this increased activity creates an increase in the body's endorphin receptor sites, which in turn can create a stronger desire for more.

Science has not determined why some people thrive on the rush, and others shy away from it, but Matt says it's easy to understand: the feeling he gets when he's in the air is "awesome." Even if it means getting hurt.

* * *

I would rather run. To run is to put one foot ahead of the other, the ground lying predictably underneath. To run is to be in control. But five years ago, an overuse injury forced me to take a few months off. I bought a mountain bike. There are miles and miles of trails in the foothills outside of Boise, and it seemed like a good way to cross-train. And while I loved the climbing part—the slow and steady crawl, the burning sensation of lactate buildup in the legs, the whir of derailleur in smaller gears—the inevitable downhill terrified me. I reacted by squeezing the brakes with my hands, and my shoulders tensed up so much it hurt, and I even forgot to breathe. Frustrated, I posted a message on an Internet forum, asking seasoned cyclists how to get over the fear of falling. “Let ‘er rip,” someone wrote. “Pretend you’re a kid again.”

A kid like Matt, not a kid like me.

Extreme sports may cop an irreverent attitude on the surface, but there is a quiet composure and discipline underneath. During the summer, Matt spends hours every day on his bike, bunny-hopping over two-by-fours meticulously laid out on the front sidewalk. Building ramps out of boxes and lumber and garbage cans. Balancing precariously on the curb. During the winter, he comes inside after dark on school days, smelling of kid sweat and cold air, soaking wet and mud-covered from building a makeshift cyclocross course in the front yard. And on the weekends, he skis run after run until his exhausted legs begin to fail him, yet he will still throw a tantrum when it’s time to go home.

And he works on something over and over again, methodically, quietly cursing himself after each failed attempt. The day he saw an adult on a BMX bike doing donkey kicks—sharp bounces off the front wheel—he was driven to master it at home. “There was nothing right about that,” he muttered, about an hour into it. And then he tried it

again: “That one was perfect!” To my untrained eye, both attempts looked exactly the same.

In watching Matt’s progress, I see that it’s as much about understanding exactly what your limitations are as it is about challenging them. It’s about control—knowing when to take it and when to let it go. Most importantly, it is about joy.

But for me, the mother, it is awe and fret juxtaposed. He has the balance and kinesic awareness of someone two or three times his age, but he still has the decision-making skills of a nine-year-old child. Once, during a ski lesson, he scoped out a snow-covered rock and decided to take an unannounced detour. He found a line, popped off the rock like he was chasing clouds, and floated over a cat-track, barely missing the head of a skier below him. Another time, on a mountain bike trail, he got far ahead of me on the downhill, as I white-knuckled the brakes and called for him to slow down. He barreled right through a stop sign on dirt road at the trail’s end, narrowly dodging an oncoming pickup truck. He’s had some terrific crashes and the scars to remember them by, but I know him well enough to acquiesce; I cannot keep him from pursuing these things. If my own deep-seated worry keeps me from doing anything extreme—it can’t stop him. For that reason, Matt forces me to dissect my own fears and try to understand his gnawing hunger for air.

* * *

It is my 40th birthday. Matt’s gift to me: a lesson in jumping.

“Just go on without me, I’ll catch up eventually,” I say to him. He is eight, and we’re on the top of Sidewinder, one of his favorite singletrack trails. He has a small, heavy bike, a beat-up 20-inch Gary Fisher Cosmo covered in stickers. His seat bag houses Band-Aids and Bactine. He’s clipped in now, after I found a pair of impossibly small women’s cycling shoes on eBay and SPD pedals at the local bike shop. It helps him on the uphill, but it still takes him forever because he’s only got six gears and he’ll walk it on the steepest parts.

Hands on the grips, his fingers relax and he starts his descent. He’s up off the saddle, keeping his weight just slightly forward on the bike. He approaches a root in the trail, so he bends his elbows, moving his shoulders forward just slightly. He stops pedaling mid-stroke so his feet sit evenly, and he pops into the air.

It’s cake.

When he lands, the tires pick up speed after the trail makes a sharp turn and the downward reach becomes more severe. He shifts his body again, gently squeezing the back of the saddle with his inner thighs to gain even more momentum. He raises his head and lifts his shoulders to better scope out his surroundings, and he finds something steep and dark and charges down to a place where blind landings make soft cushions. His knobby tires are filed with slime. His gaze is solid. His legs are beat to hell.

* * *

His lesson is this: “When you catch air in the front tire, you see it,” he tells me when we meet at the bottom. “But when you catch it with the back-- you feel it. You just *feel* it, Mom.”

We have to start out easy, so we make our way to the top of Central Ridge, a wider trail with an expansive view of the city below. It's a gentle but steady downhill with a series of water bars—dirt berms built up to slow erosion. For the millionth time, he dares me to ride it as fast as I can. This time, I actually agree to his challenge, and the advice pours out of his mouth with a frenzied, staccato tempo. ...*You're faster on the ground than you are in the air so don't be afraid to pull up but keep the handle bars straight when you land you don't want them crooked and keep riding no matter what you see coming because you only fall down when you try to avoid stuff and whatever happens do not touch your brakes okay feather if you have to and do not forget to look at the sky because that's where you'll be.*

He clips in and he's gone. So I start my descent. Resisting the urge to pull in on the brakes, and I pick up speed and see the first water bar. My front tire connects and, as Matt has instructed, I even out the pedals and I pull up. I feel both tires leave the ground. For a split second, I am in the air. And then it's done. I hit the next bump and the next, gaining more speed and more amplitude with each one. For that split second, I am disconnected, suspended, flying, returning to earth. Oh *yeah*. To my surprise, I do not fall. To my surprise, I find myself not letting go of the fear, but embracing it. But most surprising, it's fun.

Lesson learned.

* * *

Last weekend, I rode my bike for the first time this season. I headed to the trails closest to my house, the ones along the Rim that are part of the original Oregon Trail.

From there, I could see the foothills stacked up like gingerbread against the snow-covered mountains behind them. The trees were starting to bud along the Boise River below.

Alone, I barreled through a tight little trail that branched off from the main one until I hit a ditch. I could not unclip fast enough and I went down hard. Later, at home, I had a bag of frozen peas bound with masking tape to my calf, and the bruise on my thigh turned into a huge mottled-purple “L.” Matt peered at my leg, impressed. “Man, I wish that was my leg. That looks cool.”

It is cool, I thought.

Socrates is quoted: “Man must rise above the Earth – to the top of the atmosphere and beyond – for only thus will he fully understand the world in which he lives.”

Children get that. When did I lose it? Did I ever have the unabashed spirit that goes with being a kid—that intangible joy you don’t see, you just feel? And is it ever too late to find it?

Matt thinks not.

Because like all of us, he is apprehensive about what’s in front of him. He just does it anyway. Points the thing downhill and accelerates, eating up the fleeting sweetness of air.

SCATTERED

My little boy stutters.

He is two years old, and he
is stuttering. The syllables take hold,
refusing to let go.

He begins this
stuttering while watching the news,
on a Tuesday morning. He watches
with me. He sees it all

fall apart. The wife,
on a doomed airplane,
tells the husband from a cell phone:
They are being kind.

My son watches all this, and
his small words

scatter.

I pluck him from his plastic chair,
concocting each distraction
while we wait in the uneasy lurch

between
this moment now
and
that day when.

I open the orange book, the one about dogs.
It's his favorite—with car crashes
and blue trees and a house
standing in water:

Do you like my hat?

No, I do not like that hat.

My little boy, he follows my words—
his words
fall hard. They come undone.

I want it fixed.

KILLING BAD GUYS

Every day, my sons kill bad guys.

Despite every intention I held before I had children, my sons are rip-roaring, gun-toting, thing-killing machines who are infinitely more interested in shooting anything that moves than they are in coloring pictures or engaging in sing-along songs or doing anything else suggested by the “How To Encourage Non-Violent Play” Web site.

I know this much is true: little boys like guns. They like swords, they like tanks, and they like light sabers, too—but nothing compares to guns. Every day, three-year-old Matthew and two-year-old William pump imaginary lead into their pets and close family members, as well as each other, before retiring their firearms in favor of a “Bob the Builder” video or a game of tackle football on the kitchen floor. Andrew, my 10-year-old, has, for the most part, grown out of toy guns. These days, all of his shooting takes place upstairs on the Nintendo.

* * *

“I’ve never seen a game I hate so much in which all the children involved are so happy.”
Educator Jane Katch, author of Discovering the Meaning of Children’s Violent Play

--Salon.com

There are two things I did not fully understand before I had children. The first is vulnerability. The second: possibility.

* * *

Michael Gurian: "Most males, who must also contend with an aggressive nature fueled by testosterone, cannot deny their attraction to weapons. And this fascination for weapons exists in all cultures—guns are simply modern weapons."

--San Diego Union-Tribune

Once, when we first started dating, Larry asked me to swing by McDonald's to pick up Happy Meals for his kids. I ordered them in the drive-thru: chicken nuggets with a Barbie figurine for Kim, who was 6; and a plain cheeseburger and a Hot Wheels race car for Andrew, who was just 4. I brought the food home and sat the kids at the breakfast bar, plopped the cartooned bags in front of them. Andrew pulled a bent French fry from the heap, pointed it at me, and said the word:

Bang.

When we married, we agreed there would be no real guns in our home. We don't hunt, and neither of us has any desire for a handgun. I didn't think the toy counterparts were such a good idea, either, since Andrew always seemed to be picking up food or tape measures or a twig in the yard and shooting at things. And while I knew the notion of Andrew coming across a real gun while playing at a friend's house was a remote—but very real—possibility, I found myself thinking less about his personal safety—and more about what drove him to play that way in the first place. I thought it had to be stopped.

At the time, we were meeting regularly with a child psychologist for Kim, who was still struggling with her parents' divorce. During one session, out of the blue, I asked the counselor what she thought about toy guns. With Birkenstocks on her tiny feet, stick-straight hair, no makeup, and a strict vegetarian diet, her answer surprised me.

"You have to let little boys play with guns," she said.

The counselor explained to me that when little boys are troubled, as they often are when they come to see her, they use guns or swords or knives for protection in a world where they don't feel safe. She told me how toy guns are smuggled into her office all of the time, hidden in socks or tucked in the waistband of sweatpants. On the rare occasion when a parent is adamant about banning gunplay, she'll tell them she can't help their son, and refers them to someone else.

But what about Andrew, I asked, because he wasn't unhappy. The counselor told me that when little boys are fine, they play with guns for a completely different reason. The slaying of dragons, the ridding the world of monsters, the killing of bad guys – gives boys a sense of purpose, and it makes them heroes or saviors.

"If a little boy wants to save the world, who are we to stop him?" she says, reaching for her notepad.

* * *

Kristen Kinkel, sister of Kip Kinkel: "Yes, (my parents) were worried about him. He was doing things that they didn't approve of. He was doing things and interested in things that could potentially be really damaging. ... They were giving him tough love, they were giving him unconditional love, they were having him see a psychologist, they were setting rules. They were doing absolutely everything a parent is able to do. And they were hoping and praying that it would help."

--PBS Frontline

Rohan Malvo, a 33-year-old cabinet maker and son of Leslie Malvo, remembered changing the diapers of his half-brother Lee in Waltham Park, where they lived as children. It was all right growing up in that part of Kingston. It's a rough neighborhood, but our father raised us right. He tried his best to put the food on the table. He was there for us," he said.

--Associated Press

It's hard to come to grips with it—because kids will kill, and we demand a reason. We want something to blame. Kip Kinkel, the Oregon high-school sophomore who murdered his parents one night and, on the next morning, opened fire in a cafeteria, killing two students and injuring 25 others, had a close, intact family. He was not allowed to play with guns, play with toy soldiers, or even watch Bugs Bunny cartoons. Family and friends remember him as a lonely child who struggled with learning disabilities and severe depression—a child who, despite his parents' best intentions, was obsessed with bombs and guns and their potential to kill.

The aunt of Washington DC sniper suspect John Allen Mohammad was the featured guest on a cable news talk show. Her gray hair was messed, and she looked sad. She said her nephew, whom she raised, wasn't allowed to play with guns, either. That the source of his rage was a lack of a father, not the accessibility of weapons, real or imagined. Parenting expert Michael Gurian would agree—he writes that it is not society that separates moms from boys; boys naturally start to move away from their mothers by about age five or six, then strongly around ages ten to twelve. Their brains are "hard-wired" to move them to the world of men. Mohammed's accomplice, seventeen-year-old John Lee Malvo, most likely pulled the trigger that killed ten victims. He lacked a mother

during his formative years, and despite a loving, involved uncle, ultimately looked to Mohammad as a father figure, even calling him “Dad.”

Search the Internet and you will find an infinite number of Web sites touting the dangers of real guns and real children. The statistics are alarming—that 3,000 kids will be injured from accidental firearm discharge this year, and 400 more will die. That 80 percent of children doing the shooting will be boys. That 29 percent of high school-aged boys own a gun. That more children and teens died as a result of gunfire in 2001 than from cancer, pneumonia, influenza, asthma, and AIDS combined.

The experts cited on these sites blame the accessibility of weapons in the United States and parents who don’t use gun safes or trigger locks—and in some cases, they also point to aggressive video games and graphic movies. But very little information exists on the impact of little boys playing with toy guns in relation to violent behavior later in childhood, and later in life. And as far as I can tell, there is little or no evidence that shows boys who play with guns become more violent, or that keeping toy guns from little boys keeps them from one day using guns as weapons. In other words, the real danger seems to be putting guns within reach of children at play, rather than letting children play with toy guns.

* * *

“Kids want their families and their community to be speaking to them in primal language and primal stories—the great stories, the stories of heroism and fairness, justice— those are the stories kids really want.” This according to Michael Gurian, parenting expert and author of The Wonder of Boys.

--Christian Science Monitor

Will says: “Put your hands up!” while I stir a pot on the stove. I put my spoon down, reach upwards and he shoots me anyhow, “No, no, no ... if they put their hands up, you can’t shoot them, you take them to jail,” I explain for the millionth time. Then they get the dog, and then their sister. I chide them again. Lucy’s not a dog, she’s a lion, they reason, and Kim, who’s on the sofa reading a book and, cloaked in a fleece blanket, is not a sister, she’s a bad guy.

This is why I let my sons play with guns.

For Matt and Will, bad guys that deserve death include, but are not limited to: the kids from Timberline High who swear and push each other into the street while they walk to McDonalds over noon hour, Darth Maul, Darth Vader, Ja-Rule, the Albertsons bag boy on his smoke break, the entire Knights of Columbus chapter at Sacred Heart Church in their full regalia and fake swords; Jared from the Subway commercials, the neighbor kid, the neighbor kid’s dog, Boise mayor H. Brent Coles—all bad guys.

I won’t buy them a gun that looks real—they have plastic squirt guns in hot pink and purple and neon green. They have some corny western-looking pistols with bright orange tips that fit neatly into plastic holsters—holsters they wear to bed sometimes.

This is not to say I don’t question my decision. Last summer, after Matt and Will took stir sticks and gunned their dad down at Home Depot, I decided it was time to censor their gun play. I went to the [Parenting Preschoolers](#) Web site, and looked at the advice offered to pacifist parents. The site offered up this suggestion:

“Provide props for fire-fighting and capturing wild animals to doctor up and make well. These alternatives give children power over fearful situations without violence. Also, the evil is not a person.”

I bought the boys the Rescue Heroes toys—Fisher-Price’s wildly popular non-violent action figures featuring police officers, firefighters, lifeguards and other positive role models. Matt put Billy Blazes atop the NYFD Special Edition Fire Engine and used the plastic water missiles to blow up the adjacent Hot Wheels town. Will, in turn, took construction worker Jack Hammer’s jack hammer and turned it into what appeared to be an assault rifle. There are monsters in his closet he says, and it’s the only way to get rid of them.

* * *

Michael Gurian: "Males have a hunting template in the brain. Males are naturally fascinated by objects moving through space -- rocks and spears and animals, not to mention balls and pucks. Tracking movement was critical to capturing prey for early man; it was critical to survival."

--San Diego Union-Tribune

Mukta, my babysitter, tells me she’s banning toy guns at the preschool. I assume it’s because she’s Hindu, and gunplay offends her pacifist sensibilities. As it turns out, it’s not all the killing that’s the problem—it’s just that the boys get entirely too wound up and she can’t quiet them down. For that reason, she’s also banned footballs, football jerseys and anything related to Star Wars. So any killing of bad guys, she says, will have to take place on the floor, with dolls and action figures. I watch Matt and Will and three other boys from the preschool, lying on their stomachs, playing together. They come up with elaborate stories, and death scenes are usually long and dramatic, complete with sound effects and last words like: “You can have my Froot Loops! I won’t need them where I am going!” Sometimes they cover the deceased action figure with a Kleenex,

sometimes they pretend to burn him like Qui-Gon Jinn in Star Wars Episode One. Sometimes they take a Barbie doll or stuffed animal to be a monster, immune from gunfire, so the others have to come up with another weapon, like a sword or poisoned gas. The thing is, when I watch my kids play this way, they have no trouble knowing what's real and what's not. And they might fight over who's supposed to be dead and who gets to be alive and who gets the next shot—but they get over it, in a second. Then they're on to the next thing, like fake play-by-play of a soccer game or somersaulting across the carpet or having a sword duel where good always overcomes evil. Always.

I wonder when we lose this sense of honor. This unabashed confidence.

* * *

Lauren Grandcolas, on Flight 93, shortly before it crashed near Shanksville, Pennsylvania: “ We are being hijacked. They are being kind.”

-- Time Magazine

On September 11, my kids worry me most.

Kim, who's twelve, seems oddly excited by it all. To her, this is a thrilling diversion from the regular school day. I've tried to distract Matt, who's two, with books, but he's glued to images on the televisions—he loves the planes and the fire and the endless scrolling text. Will, the baby, just sleeps. He's unaffected by it, the images no more or less real than his Teletubbies and Lion King videos, and it's strange to think he will always feel detached from a moment that could define the rest of his life.

We are most concerned about nine-year-old Andrew. He's come home from school, acting agitated, and he won't eat, nor will he sit down. He stands just inches from

the television, remote in hand, watching every single station playing the same fiery crashes, the same towers tumbling down over and over again. “Turn the television off,” the experts say. But this is happening right in front of us, and how in the world are we supposed to just turn it off?

I am both numb and panicked.

I felt this way when Will was two weeks old, just a ball, asleep on my shoulder, breathing in short newborn fits. Once I could be certain he wouldn't wake up, I pulled him from my neck, and I saw a line of bright red blood trickling from his ear. My sweatshirt was covered in his blood. I called Larry, in near hysterics. He was speeding down ParkCenter Boulevard, trying to get home while I called the doctor's office, sobbing. The nurse calmly told me the baby's eardrum had burst, that he simply an ear infection we didn't know about, and it happens all of the time, and he probably felt a lot better. Two days later, an examination would reveal the eardrum was completely healed, just that fast.

A person can worry—or not worry—about her own safety or well-being. But when children enter into the picture, that perception changes forever. These brief episodes of peril are like snapshots—over and done with in a moment—but forever captured. Every fall that might warrant a trip to the emergency room; every network news report of a snatched kid; every coffee can next to a cash register with the scotch-taped photo of a terminally ill child; every single time I succumb to a sense of dread that simply did not exist before they were part of my life. Will's broken eardrum. The September 11 attacks. Just two of so many indelible moments when I fully realized how fragile they are, how delicate everything really is.

Andrew asks if I'll look at a picture he's drawn on the backside of his math homework. It's some sort of dragon-robot hybrid with long fangs and curled-back claws and dozens of guns pointed in every direction. He talks in staccato speech and stutters: "It's my invention," he says, "to get the bad guys before they get us."

"Before *who* gets us— *how*?"

"It's my invention. To shoot down the bad guys in the planes before the planes can get to more buildings!" Andrew replies. He's shifting his weight from one foot to the next, talking fast, unable to sit down, hands fumbling. I take a deep breath. I have to think. My gut reaction is to sit him down, and tell him that violence is no answer to violence.

But then, it really isn't about violence at all.

"Well, it's really good. But I think you'll need more guns," I say matter-of-factly, "like right here, and right here." And he smiles. A genuine smile. His shoulders relax. His hands stop shaking. Andrew grabs a red pen from the counter and adds more ammunition. Larry comes home, and they start figuring out how they'll clear the garage out and start building the thing. I hang the picture on the refrigerator, next to the grocery list and Kim's orthodontist appointment reminder.

I do this because tomorrow, in spite of it all, I will send him out the door.

I will send him out the door, and he's still so small. So utterly unstoppable.

REBRANDING

we are titles Titleists entitlements tied up
 suits turned mock turtleneck dot-com wannabees
 turned knee-jerk anti dot-communists
 turned tied-up suits turned stock-optioned
 corner-officed
 men

we are the rad hip-hopping now your ass is grass kicking shredding ripping a disaster
 we are boardheads stoked toked ready to catch some fucking air awesome

we are solid
 dependable affordable
 more for your money 30 percent more free
 coupon inside mail-in rebate
 and all about value

we are glasses that make you look smarter intellects by degree Bahktin and Mass
 Culture: Heteroglossia in Stand By Me leather-patched elbows
 feminists economists theorists we are
 tenure tracking trouble

we are boomers booming
 with early '70s R&B and
 strumming guitars in church and
 incorporating Life Strategists
 and early morning yoga classes we are
 praying playing paying and
 401(k) bound

we are the better half the 18-to-35 mini-vanned moms the nine to fivers
 wronged and thonged and all pushed up quietly yearning for the touch and
 feel

of cotton we are the biography of sex sells the intimate portrait
of one-step cooking tonight on True Hollywood Story

we are the pill makers credit card takers
for the masses and classes the democrats the republicans
for the money the money the money

honey turn us on

AS SEEN ON TV

I have a Magic Bullet on my kitchen counter. It is one of the three products I have purchased after seeing them advertised on thirty-minute infomercials. Fortunately, my track record is pretty good. The first was an acne treatment called Proactiv Solution. Jessica Simpson said it worked for her. It didn't work for me. So I sent it back, and the company refunded my money in full. The second product, Bare Escentuals mineral makeup, sold me on their bedazzling Before and After shots. The product worked fine, but I received a shipment every four months, and it was way too much, so I cancelled my membership and the company politely obliged.

I also bought a Magic Bullet food blender, but not by calling the 1-800 number displayed at the end of the commercial. Rather, I saw one at Bed, Bath, and Beyond and, recognizing it as the one kitchen tool that will blend, chop, or liquefy nearly anything in ten seconds or less, I bought it. So far, I love it. On Sunday afternoons, I like to kick back and puree the hell out of everything in my refrigerator's product drawer, and then freeze it in small Ziploc bags labeled with a black Sharpie. It makes me feel competent.

Truth be told, I am a bit of an infomercial junkie.

This, largely because I am an insomniac, and have been for years. I've tried medication, meditation, chamomile tea, cutting out caffeine, to no avail. With a going rate of eighty dollars an hour, a therapist once suggested I visualize a big box under my

bed. She told me to open the box and in it, place all of my worries, my fears, my apprehensions—now picture the box closing—wrap it in the most beautiful, expensive wrapping paper I could imagine—and tie it up with a big bow. This, she insisted, would alleviate any anxiety and create the peaceful environment needed for sleep. I tried this; after about twenty minutes or so, I realized the only thing worrying me was another night of no sleep, and the guided imagery of a giant package under my bed idea was a bunch of crap. So I did what I do every night when sleep escapes me—I take my pillow and blanket to the sofa, and I turn on the television.

* * *

Infomercials have proved to be the most effective insomnia remedy I can find. They're intriguing enough to turn off my brain, but not compelling enough to hold my interest over the long haul. I can usually fall asleep within thirty or forty minutes. I've seen them all: Erik Estrada hawking real estate in Arkansas, ninety-something Jack LaLanne demonstrating his amazing juicer, the incredible LandRider bicycle—it actually changes gears on its own! (As if changing gears while riding a bike is a particularly taxing activity.)

While many are benign, the more dangerous infomercials pounce on the most basic of our insecurities: we can be more beautiful, more fit, have more hair, enjoy better-behaved children, make more money, have more friends, and have less worry. We can be happier.

All in three easy payments.

And in the middle of the night, I can't stop watching them.

The smarmiest infomercials pretty on our health concerns. Most notably, there's Kevin Trudeau revealing his *Natural Cures "They" Don't Want To Know About* book and its successors, *Weight Loss Secrets* and *Debt Cures* "they" want to keep from you, the innocent consumer. "They" are the drug companies, medical community, and the banking industry, respectively. Trudeau is a modern-day snake oil salesman: he's a convicted felon who's a perpetual target of the Federal Trade Commission. Prior to his infomercials, he went to prison for a second time after running a pyramid scheme—a plan he hatched when he was in prison the first time, for larceny and fraud. Critics and duped customers alike say his books share no cures at all—readers are directed to Trudeau's Web site, where for an additional fee, he promises to provide the elusive answers. After one pays for a subscription for the online "natural cures," for instance, the secrets are nothing more than common sense and old wives' tales—lots of Vitamin C to ward off the common cold, eliminate vinegar in the diet to battle cancer. He also directs people to homeopathic medicine and organic food Web sites—sites his readers could have found on their own through a simple Google search. And if Trudeau is laughable—he's laughing all the way to the bank: his *Natural Cures* book was the number one non-fiction title on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for 25 weeks in 2005.

I've also watched Klee Irwin touting his Dual Action Cleanse product, a dietary supplement for colon health. Fashioned to look like a cable news network program, his infomercial features a dark set, a news-anchory interviewer, the ubiquitous "crawl" across the bottom of the screen, citing factoids like "John Wayne had forty pounds of fecal matter in his lower intestines at the time of his death." Klee Irwin doesn't even attempt to look trustworthy—a thin black mustache and slicked-back Pat Riley hair make him look

like the guy who takes advantage of \$4.99 lunch specials at a strip club. Yet I am compelled to keep watching him, even when he shows pictures of green, feces-engorged intestines.

Irwin's infomercial is an interesting little ditty, his "science" is based upon a long-abandoned theory called autointoxication. At one time, doctors believed the colon was a breeding ground for toxins that, in turn, poisoned the body. While that hypothesis has been disproved, Irwin paints a picture of clogged colons being the root of all illness and malaise. It is paramount that the colon not be neglected by its owner, because constipation causes fecal matter to harden and accumulate for months and years, preventing it from absorbing or eliminating properly. This, Irwin states, causes food to remain undigested—and reabsorbed by the body as a poison.

According to the medical profession, this theory really is a load of shit. Having said that, Klee Irwin has become a very wealthy man, as his Dual Action Cleanse product has enjoyed hundreds of thousands of orders—and his infomercial airs constantly.

+++

On the day following an insomnia bout, I like to visit Web sites like InfomercialScams.com and read consumer reviews of the products advertised. They are heartbreaking, maddening, and at times, hilarious.

"I got sucked into the Video Professor's vortex of lies several years ago. When some doofus tells me that I can try his product "absolutely free" except for shipping, without specifically mentioning that this offer is for a trial period, I got a problem with that," writes "Bob" regarding the Video Professor Computer Learning System, a set of CDs sold by John E. Scherer.

Or there's "Tommy" who purchased the Sauna Belt, a heating pad worn across the torso to burn off stubborn abdominal fat while relaxing at home. *"The Velform Sauna Belt is just a DEATH trap waiting to happen, its [sic] going to burn someone up before they get what they deserve. My wife bought in on that buy 1 get 1 half off DEAL (WOW DOUBLE THE CHANCE) it set our couch on fire before the belt got HOT on the skin. I would like to know if anyone knows of a class action lawsuit against these people."*

I do this because I am completely fascinated by two things: that people will say anything if their audience is anonymous and desperate; that anonymous and desperate audiences will believe nearly anything they're told. And that phenomenon reaches beyond the humble infomercial. A few weeks ago, I saw one starring Tanya Roberts, one of the lesser-known Charlie's Angels, the one who joined the cast long after Farrah Fawcett bowed out after season one. At four a.m. in the morning, she's shilling for Tahiti Village. I actually sit up on the sofa and squint at the screen, which is blurry because I'm not wearing my glasses. *Hey wait...I've been there...*

* * *

We are in Las Vegas to celebrate my husband Larry's fortieth birthday. Larry, having done some pre-trip Internet research, wants to see the naked Cirque de Soliel show, and he's disappointed to learn that it's sold out for the entire weekend. We realize we'll need to find something else to do, she we decide to play it by ear. It's not difficult to set that plan in motion, because when we arrive at our destination—the New York, New York hotel and casino—and we exit our shuttle, we are immediately immersed in the noise and lights and clutter of the casino floor. I am sure we look like typical tourists,

overwhelmed in our search for an elevator that can take us to our room, a "Broadway Deluxe" suite perched on the eighth floor. I am sure they zoom right in on us when we pass the small kiosk flanked by hotel employees in black vests and bow ties. There's a purple poster that screams "Zumanity!" and features a near-nude woman contorted in a huge martini glass. "Would you like free tickets to tomorrow night's show? It's sold out!" a vested woman asks in her lipstick, Zoom-whitened smile.

"Of course!" Larry replies. The woman looks pleased. All we need to do is attend a three-hour vacation presentation the following morning, light food and beverages provided. All we need is to be a married couple with a checking account, at least one credit card, and a minimum household income of \$30,000. We sign up with no hesitation at all.

The next morning at 9 a.m., we report back to the kiosk, along with a dozen other couples who look downright embarrassed to be there. To fill the awkward silence, people blurt out justifications like "we really wanted those show tickets" or "there's nothing to do in this town before noon anyway." Like us, they have absolutely, unequivocally no intention of buying a timeshare—and they want that made very clear to this bunch of strangers. It's early by Vegas standards, and the slot machines are sparsely populated, so it's easy to spot the suntanned guy wearing a pair of designer sunglasses and a FUBU polo shirt with the color turned up. He approaches the group and introduces himself as Steve, a sales manager for Consolidated Resorts, Limited.

Steve leads the group into a bus that's idling in the parkway. Larry and I take a place near the middle. The bus smells faintly of cigarette smoke and Krispy Kremes, and on the seat, there's a clipboard with a pen attached by a white string. An oversized

postcard under the clip asks us for information like our name and address and how did we learn about Consolidated Resorts, Ltd. We don't fill it out. Instead, we read messages left by former passengers, doodled in ink all over the clipboard. *Escape while you still can!* Or *You are now entering the gates of Hell!* I look out the window to a faded Las Vegas, dull and dreary without the aid of neon lights. It's nearing 100 degrees already, and the dusty air and desert sun cast a hazy beige on everything. And we drive south, off the strip, passing the predictable patterns of urban sprawl—strip malls, convenience stores, tire centers, new housing developments.

Steve tell us (his voice breaking up over the intercom system) about the boom in Las Vegas real estate, firing off statistics on tourism dollars and building permits. He thanks us for joining him and promises "an exciting premier destination resort property opportunity" and a "very exciting special guest!" later in the program. We come to a stop at a brown expanse of new construction. And here we are: Tahiti Village.

We're herded from a bus to a lobby that looks less like a premier destination resort and more like a Holiday Inn Express, and then to a conference room with a dozen or so round tables decorated with helium-filled balloons, curling ribbon, and tissue-paper streamers. In front, there's a lectern, a microphone, and a small speaker propped in front a large foam-backed poster shouting; **TAHITI VILLAGE: YOUR VACATION OASIS!** Each couple chooses a table, while a woman in a too-tight floral dress encourages us to take part in refreshments—a small table of uniformly round cookies and tiny paper cups of lemonade. Looking around, I see that everyone looks more uncomfortable than ever. And I think—okay—this could be fun.

Steve's schpiel goes something like all timeshare schpiels, which incidentally, mirror all infomercial schpiels. In an all-to-enthusiastic voice, he begins with The Greeting, a verbal high-five letting us know we're about to get in on something big. He then moves on to The Intent, where he glosses over what's going to happen during today's exciting presentation. There's a smooth segue into The Warm-Up, small talk intended to sound like chatty conversation with your new best friend—but here, it feels more like the awkward conversation you have with the weird guy who sits next to you on the plane—and the plane will not be landing anytime soon. "Where ya from?" he points to the couple at the front most table. Amarillo, Texas, they answer. "Amarillo? I spent a week there one day!" Steve forces a laugh. "I'm just teasing...I know better than to mess with Texas!"

Steve delves into how this part of Vegas is *on fire* in real estate circles. How hotel rooms in this part of the city are 100 percent booked *all of the time*. *Vegas is hot hot hot*—why would you *rent* your vacation when you can *own* your vacation, he implores. Planted among the would-be buyers are fake customers, couples who weren't on the bus, a bunch of Tahiti Village employees who feign enthusiasm with every exclamatory statement made by Steve. "Do you want to *own* your vacation?" he asks again, this time with feeling. Whoops and cheers and applause ensue, sounding nearly as awkward as Steve's speech. He gives everyone a thumbs up, and calls for the sales team.

At this point, a fleet of sales people appears from the back of the room, each choosing a table and taking a seat. They wear thin plastic leis around their necks. Ours is a blonde woman named Brenda. Her lei is blue. It's Brenda's job to break out The Product Pitch, so she's tasked with introducing the details of timeshares, of "fixed weeks" and "floating weeks" of "trading" and "points" and finishes up with "resale value" before

proposing the next step of the pitch: The Solution to Your Vacation Problem. Our solution? Tahiti Village, of course. Why rent when you can own, she asks us again. And then she hands a worn catalog of timeshare opportunities, showing how we could trade weeks with vacation owners all over the world.

Next, Steve introduces the Very Exciting Special Guest. "Ladies and Gentlemen, let's welcome Bernie Kopell, The Love Boat's very own 'Doc'!" At this point, the fake customers let it all hang out, screaming and yelling and a few even standing and clapping wildly. Bernie Kopell is to Tahiti Village what the Beatles are to Ed Sullivan.

Bernie Kopell is wearing off-white Tommy Bahama slacks and a lightweight silk Hawaiian shirt. He has the same teardrop-shaped glasses he wore on "The Love Boat", along with a spray tan and a bit of lip gloss. He looks just like Doc, if Doc were older and thinner and sort of ashamed of himself. Bernie Kopell gives a ten-minute PowerPoint presentation about the joys of a Vegas getaway—enough golf courses and restaurants and shopping for fun-filled weeks year after year—and more! And hey, did we get a load of that pool out there?

We then move to the next part of Steve's schpiel, The Tour. We're guided through a door and into a courtyard. Steve points out the new landscaping, palm trees and tropical plants bordering a swimming pool with a "natural sand beach." We're taken to a one-bedroom unit, the fake customers ooing and ahhing the moment the door is open. The room décor carries over the Holiday Express theme. The door is big with an ornate carving of a pineapple in the middle, but it's hollow and the knob flimsy. While the kitchen boasts handsome gray granite countertops, the sink's hardware is uncaulked and cheap. And the air conditioning unit knocks loudly as it tries to fight the rising outdoor

temperatures. Outside the window, nothing to see but dirt, construction, and pavement. Steve shows us the two-bedroom unit across the hall before leading us back to the conference room. The cookies have been restocked and Bernie Kopell is nowhere to be found.

Now that we've seen the units, "The Buy" is the final step. We find our chairs, and Brenda hands us a price sheet. In bold, 24-point type, we see what the industry calls the "puke price" because it's so ridiculously high. For us, that's \$25,000 plus a \$200 monthly maintenance fee. Shortly afterward, Brenda asks a sales manager named Terrance to sit with us. In this business, Terrance is "The Take Over." It's his job to come in and say something about the puke price being the cost for anyone in the general public. And because of the hotness of the Vegas market, it would be a cinch to sell it at that price. But today's our lucky day, because we're not just anyone who wandered in off the street. Terrance the Take Over pulls out a different sheet. "I'm not supposed to show you this," and offers a much cheaper price, known as "The Nosebleed Drop." For us, that's \$18,000. Brenda and Terrance settle into a good cop/bad cop routine worthy of a "Law & Order" rerun. Sometimes I watch those on insomnia nights, too.

Alas, we tell Brenda no. We're not ready to make this decision in haste. We tell Terrance no, could we go home for a few days and talk it over. They won't take no for an answer. Terrance fiddles with his lei (a green one) and calls in the "Director of Financing"—a guy sitting in a large leather chair in an office adjacent to the conference room. His name is Roger, and he wears a suit that's supposed to look expensive and freshly-polished shoes. Roger wears no lei. He's a take-charge guy, a guy who sits down with a purpose, a guy who doesn't crack a smile. He asks us if we'd rather rent our

vacation or own it. "Rent it!" I answer, giving Roger an unrequited knuckle bump, and Larry snorts some lemonade out his nose. And then Brenda asks for our credit card number. "We're not ready to make this decision," Larry repeats. "Do you have a Web site?"

Roger is unflappable. He points to the pricing sheet and reminds us that the \$18,000 price is a mere \$184 per month (plus the \$200 monthly maintenance fee) and it's only good today and we're getting in on the ground floor of this *crazy* Vegas market. I find Roger particularly annoying. "I don't really go for this hard sell stuff," I say. Roger looks at me and says (without any hint of apology): "Ma'am, this is how we do business and it works." He balks. He looks at Brenda, as if insulted by our hesitation to buy. "Look, I don't have a lot of time here. I need a credit card number first. It's fine, because we won't be charging anything today." I take a deep breath.

"You're right, you're right. This place is a dream," I say. I pull my wallet from my purse and reach for my MasterCard. Larry, for a moment, looks mortified. "You can try this one, it might work. We maxxed it out last month getting our plasma TV." Roger believes me at first. I see a look of concern. He asks if I have another. "I've applied for a few more—that's why we need your Web site. So we can sign up after I get the new card, you know?"

One of the sales people across the room stands up and shouts: "RICHARD AND LINDA OWN THEIR VACATION!" A portly couple in matching track suits smile and clap along, while the fakes do their requisite whooping and hollering. Richard and Linda are signing some document, and the sales person hands them the balloon centerpiece from their table. The cookie lady comes rushing in and places yellow leis around Richard

and Linda's necks. Roger claps politely, and returns his sights to us. By now, Larry knows what's going on. He reaches for an American Express, saying it was cancelled a month ago but as long as they weren't charging anything anytime soon, it should work fine. He just needs to reconcile the account.

Roger's next attempt: how about a checking account? Brenda's unrelenting grin fades as she watches her commission evaporate, and she scans the other couples in the room. "We just need a deposit slip so we can get the account numbers." I take my checkbook out.

"Got in a little trouble for this one, if you know what I mean. I actually got arrested for insufficient funds, but my lawyer got me off."

"Don't we still owe him money?" Larry says, and I shoot him a dirty look and tilt my head toward Roger, to shush him up.

Roger looks pissed. He says he doesn't think we're ready to become vacation owners today. "Are you sure?" I ask—we're confident we'll win big at the craps table tonight. It's our ticket to financial freedom. Can we get a two-bedroom unit? Are there any poolside ones available? Which one does Doc live in? Roger does not appreciate the pride of vacation ownership being mocked. Ignoring me, he directs Brenda to take us to see Cyndra and get checked out. We're back to the lobby, where a thin young woman with heavy makeup has us fill out the same oversized postcard that we saw on the bus. "It's for our mailing list, when you're ready to buy," she says.

"I'd like our tickets now," I say—not even attempting to be polite anymore. Tickets? Or course, she says, handing us the envelope and adding that the shuttle will be here shortly.

We leave the building, and the front door to Tahiti Village closes, and I can hear more muffled cheers as another couple chooses to own their vacation. It's close to noon, and the overbearing Las Vegas sun beats down on the pavement, waves of heat shimmering up from newly poured asphalt like the whole place is one big mirage. Another couple is waiting too, a middle-aged man in a cowboy hat and his wife. She wears a plastic visor over her curly hair. We say nothing until we get into the shuttle, and begin retracing the steps back to our hotel. The couple is from California and they own two timeshares already, and didn't need a third. They're disappointed to find out that while we scored tickets to the Cirque de Soliel show, they only got a couple of steak dinners.

We spend the rest of the afternoon in the ESPN-themed sports bar at New York New York, watching a college football game on TV and talking with a young waitress, a senior at UNLV majoring in hotel management. The first thing she'll do, she says, is require her wait staff to wear comfortable shoes, pointing to the stiletto heels on her swollen feet. We order beer and bar bites and brainstorm potential personas for future timeshare presentations, which we've vowed to do again. Next time, we'll wear costumes. Because when it was all said and done, we remember that part more vividly than the Cirque de Soliel show.

* * *

Once, on the ski hill, I stood beneath a chairlift with my teenaged stepdaughter, waiting for Larry to catch up to us. Her heavy braids hung from a pastel stocking cap and her goggles were perched on top of her head. In short, she looked adorable. The lift, for whatever reason, was stalled. Two young men dangled above us, and the more outgoing

of the two started yelling at her. "Heyyyyy-YOU! Where you been all my life? What's your cell? I know a guy who wants to text you!"

Her face turned into a scowl and she snapped back: "Yeah RIGHT. Get an effing LIFE."

She's never spoken like that in front of me, and I was perplexed as to why this exchange took place in my presence. But here's the deal. I was wearing a gator, ski hat, goggles, boxy snowboarding jacket, and baggy pants, rendering me both genderless and ageless. This kid had no idea I was an adult, let alone her parent.

Anonymity+desperation=sales pitch.

It's amazing what people will say when they are talking to the anonymous.

Because with anonymity, you can say anything you need to say. At some level, we're all just acting.

Lately, my insomnia has been getting better. I'm only up once or twice a month rather than a couple of times a week, so I don't see as many infomercials as I used to see. But I am thinking about buying the SharkSteamer, an amazing tool that will clean my floors more quickly and effectively than an old-fashioned bucket and mop. It's all mine for three monthly payments of \$39.99, which includes free cleaner and a squeegee. I won't be doing the SMC Distributing thing—that's the infomercial starring Tom Bosley of "Happy Days" fame. You pay money and get a bunch of kitschy knick-knacks to sell to your friends and neighbors. InformercialScams.com is all over this one. Nor will I become a member of Buyer's Direct, a club that supposedly puts you on the inside track to furniture and home improvement supplies at a much lower price than the MSRP. Thing is, you pay a couple of hundred dollars to join Buyer's Direct, only to find out that prices

are cheaper at Home Depot or your local furniture store, because retailers never really charge the MSRP. That's the puke price.

But the SharkSteamer, this one has potential. It's the middle of the night, and they're talking to me, and I am desperate for cleaner, brighter floors.

THE SALE

The spotless SUV dodges the Volvo with the ski rack,
 slips behind the perfect yellow re-introduced Bug,
 and grabs the handicap stall—noon-hour cars all in the hunt
 for the trophy spot smack dab in front of Old Navy.

Inside is color and cotton. The women
 in high heels or company badges or doctor's office
 smocks filter in and out. Flying solo, stuffing blue mesh
 bags with tank tops, flat-front khakis, multi-striped T's
 and this season's must-have So-Low miniskirts.

There's a shiny-haired kid in a cart, all Gymboreed and scowling
 and his name must be Cody or Justin or Jordan
 but instead his mother calls him *Silas*. She's holding a T-shirt
 with a vintage 'Windy City' silkscreen—*Silas, isn't this cute?*

But Silas, he doesn't have much time for cute.
 There's an orange sweater within reach
 and a plastic purse to teethe on and he's chewing it up
 while his mother rifles through the sale racks,
 looking for that elusive 2T .

Silas plays it cool, so cool—he's got young and hip
 down to a tee. *We just want to look*
 says a slingback-toting woman to the salesgirl,
 all sunned and mooned and headset-miked,
 We just want to look the look—
 that look so low you can't say no—

Look out! There's soon to be another
 near-miss in the Old Navy parking lot:
 Silas all latched in his car seat like a reluctant astronaut
 and the SUV honks, jets away from the handicap spot
 and the slingback woman crams shopping bags
 into lemon-yellow passenger seat
 making way for the Voyager.
 The Expedition. The Outback.
 The Windstar. The wind, the stars—
 all ours for the taking.

HONEST AS YOU ARE HONEST

From: "Miss Binta Wahid." <bnta_1980@voila.fr>
Sent: Wednesday, February 16, 2005 5:30 AM
SUBJECT: TRUST FROM YOU

From Binta Wahid
B . P : 5244
Dakar Senegal
Email:miss.b.wahid@voila.fr

Dear Respectful,

I am pleased to introduce a business opportunity to you, i hope you will not be embarrassed receiving this mail as we have not had previous correspondences on this. I decided to contact you based on the clearance and assurance i got from source that linked me to you. I hope you will not impede the trust and confidence I repose in you. In brief introduction, I am Miss.Binta Wahid, an Sierra Leone National. I'm 24 years of age now, However i will not forget to ask you about your condition of health i hope you are in good health, Meanwhile i will like to ask you if your interesting to help me, because i will like you to take me as your Sister or adopt me as your daughter.

My late father was working in Gold and diamond company for 17 years but was killed during the crisis in my country, then i managed to escape with my father's important documents that wor th (8.3 million dollars) which deposited in my name for shipment out from Dakar city of Senegal to your Country. Meanwhile i am here with all the vital documents that covery the Money such as death certificate and statement of account,Secondly if i receive any positive response i will vividly forward all the related documents to you base on interest. Please, I await your very Urgent and Positive reply as soon as you receive this message. Please, Also send me your private phone and fax numbers so that I can contact you for our oral discussion and also fax you the related Documents to emiciated the claim. Have a great day and extend my regards to your family.

Thanking you for your understanding. I look forward to your earliest reply true my private
Email:miss.b.wahid@voila.fr

Your's truly
Miss Binta Wahid

Did you receive this email? Perhaps it slipped past your Internet Service Provider and the safety nets put in place to weed out the majority of mass “spam” emails before they reach your inbox. Maybe it landed there despite these filters, and you simply deleted the message and forgot about it. Maybe you contacted your ISP to keep them apprised of unwanted junk mail, or maybe you forwarded it onto the sender’s ISP, clicking on the Internet fraud address provided under security information.

I, on the other hand, prefer to write back.

From: “Wilma J Flintstone”
Subject: TRUST FROM YOU

Binta,

Oh my goodness. What a sad story. Tell me how I can help you.

Wilma F.

The Nigerian e-mail scam dupes Americans out of tens of millions of dollars a year, according to the United States Secret Service. Also known more generally as advanced fee fraud, it’s just one subspecies in the family of confidence tricks (or “cons”) which tap our own inherent greed.

The successful scammer knows it’s impossible to con a completely honest person, and the honest person knows if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Nevertheless, plenty of people believe that there’s easy money to be made, and they repeatedly fall for

this swindle, despite caution from local Better Business Bureaus to state attorney general's offices to the federal Homeland Security department.

From: "Miss Binta Wahid." <bnta_1980@voila.fr>
SUBJECT: TRUST FROM YOU

From Binta Wahid
B . P : 5244
Dakar Senegal
Email:miss.b.wahid@voila.fr
Dear Mr Wilma Flintstone.

Thank you very much for your response to my proposal. As a matter of fact, i got your contact information from a business directory made available to me from Senegalese Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Please i would like to know more about you. I deem it necessary to introduce myself in detail for you and the need for your assistance to claim and invest my inheritance for me. I am Binta Wahid, 19yrs of age, a Sierra-Leone Nationality and the only Doughter of Late Dr. Ammed Wahid, was the Director of rawnbow gold and diamond company in my country sierre loene and personal adviser to the former head of state before the rebels attacked my house one early morning, killed my father and other peoples . It was only me that is alive and i managed to make my way to a near-by country called Senegal where i am living now. For safety with the assistance of Red Cross people after the brutal murder of my late father by rebels and declared asylum. However, despite my hasty departure from Sierra-Leone, I was able to come with vital documents of my late father which includes the deposit documents of funds he has with a Diplomatic Shipping Company here in Dakar Senegal which i was made the next of kin. Unfortunately, due to my present status as a refugee, i could not do anything to claim the money hence my decision to seek for a trusted individual or corporate organization to stand as the beneficiary on my behalf

I would therefore like you as a matter of urgency to provide me with more information about your self such as your full Name and Address, Nationality, Age, your direct telephone and fax number also include a copy of your international passport. After your informations is recieved i will give you the contacts informations of Diplomatic Company i will meet a lawyer here who will draft application form and letter of nomination on your behalf which you will use and contact the Diplomatic Company in Dakar Senegal here as my trustee foreign partner.

On receipt of the requested information, i shall contact the Diplomatic and introduce you as my trustee and also give you more information about the deposited consignment and how to contact them and initiate the claim. You can reach me through the Refugee camp telephone number 00 221 518 13 50 if you want to speak with me orally. Yours truly,
Miss Binta Wahid

Nigeria is the world capital of the advanced fee fraud. Here, scammers are known as “419ers”, referring to section 419 of Nigerian Criminal Code, which makes it illegal to scheme to extract money from investors living in wealthy countries in Europe, Australia, or North America. While well-intended, this law has had little impact on the practice; some reports estimate 419 scamming nets billions of dollars a year, making it the third to fifth largest industry in this West African country. During the Internet boom of the 1990s, the problem grew at such a fast rate that the Central Bank of Nigeria made it a priority to warn foreigners of the scam, going as far as launching a 1998 advertising campaign that featured half-page ads in major U.S. newspapers. Since then, the practice has also been detailed in news stories through television, print, and Internet sources, and ISPs have worked diligently to fight the fraud as well.

Nevertheless, people continue to be swindled, believing wholeheartedly that that they’ve been singled out from millions of people (even though they must keep everything secret from close friends and family members); that they communicate with a powerful person (who can only seek assistance from a complete stranger); and that the person will share with them his enormous wealth (though for some reason, he uses a free e-mail account).

What the scammers haven’t figured out is this: scambaiters register for free email accounts too.

From: "Wilma J Flintstone"
Subject: Re:TRUST FROM YOU

This is such a sad story. I can really relate to what you have to say because I, too, have lost my father under less than humane circumstances. You see, my father, Roy, was a famous animal trainer who bred and showed beautiful white lions at a large casino in Las Vegas. During a strange and unexpected turn, one of the white lions, Snowball, suddenly attacked him and drug him offstage like a limp bloody rag.

My father died on arrival to the hospital, and his partner, Seth has been forced to do the show by himself. Seth wants me to invest my large inheritance into the show, called "Curiosity!" to find a new partner. Frankly, I am pissed at Seth because he stole my gold lame pantsuit and won't admit it. Tell me what to do next, my sister.

Wilma

PS: I have attached several photographs of my family's white lions.

My latest pen-pal is Miss Binta Wahid, a teenage refugee living in a Senegalese camp, having fled her home in the war-torn Sierre Leone. Statistics suggest Miss Binta is really a thirty-something man, sitting in an Internet café somewhere in West Africa, confident I will wire \$1,700 USD to his nearest Western Union office in exchange for ten to twenty percent of a fictional family fortune. When I write Miss Binta, I go by the name of Wilma J. Flintstone. I sometimes grow tired of the moniker and consider changing to something else, like HRH Princess Camilla Parker Bowels or Mrs. Britney Federline, but I'm much too excited about writing back to take the time and register a different fake name. Because of this, Wilma J. Flintstone has had many incarnations in her ongoing correspondence with scammers. She's been a Vegas showgirl with a prosthetic leg, a lonely trust funder/prizewinning hamster breeder, a mostly drunk Montana cowgirl, and what could be best described as Keanu Reeves' character in the

movie *Speed*. (By that I mean she communicated via a Blackberry from a bus that was going to explode if the red-needed speedometer dipped below 65 miles an hour.)

From: Binta Wahid
SUBJECT: SEND YOUR INFORMATIONS TO MY ATTORNEY

Dear Wilma Flintstone.

I am very sorry to hear your father story it's also like me because my oan father was killed by rabel during the government political problem in my country sierra loene, I am just coming back from the Diplomatic Company to know the requirements to ship the consignment to your door step you have to contact them with your full contacts informations therefore you are advise to contact the diplomatic company with the below email adress and also send me your telephone and fax number with your international passport copy.

I am waiting for your informations as required above

Thanks and God Bless
Your's Truly

Miss Binta Wahid.

From: "Wilma J Flintstone"
Subject: Re:SEND YOUR INFORMATIONS TO MY ATTORNEY

Yo Binta--

Good news from here! Seth has informed me that Snowball's life partner Coconut has given birth to twin lion clubs, both female! I have named one Dr. Evil and the other Binta, after you! So here's the deal. It will take several days to get you a copy of my international passport because I keep it locked up in a safe in my summer home in Las Vegas. Please send me a photo of your homeland so that I might compare. Do you have any timeshares? Maybe we can trade weeks!

As far as my phone and fax number, here you go. You can call me at 1-(702) 791-7111. You can ask for me or my assistant, a very nice man named Ray Horn who will be very discreet. Please advise: shall I contact my lawyer, Col. Monty Kilgore? Please note that I have added a numerous pictures of my dad and Seth and the white lions. Again, send me a photo of Senegal, wherever that is.

My best,

Wilma

The advanced fee fraud dates back to the 1920s, when it was known as “The Spanish Prisoner” con. Here, successful U.S. businessmen were contacted by mail from someone desperate to smuggle a wrongly convicted prisoner out of Spain. The letter, urging complete discretion, promised a substantial monetary reward to the person who helped secure the safe release of the prisoner, purported to be a vulnerable young man from a wealthy family. Those who fell for the story were repeatedly duped into paying for one failed rescue attempt after another, the prisoner’s accomplice pleading for one last chance to secure the boy’s safe release.

In the twenty-first century version, a huge sum of money, as opposed to a wealthy young man, awaits release. But the basic con hasn’t changed. An alleged foreign official, dignitary, or royal sends a correspondence offering to place a sum of money into your personal coffers if you are willing to help the aforesaid official transfer funds, documents, or even a cash- or jewel-filled trunk. The scammer urges you to send confidential information such as your bank account details, passport scans, or social security number. They then ask for money (the advanced fees) for various taxes, attorney bills, transactions, or bribes. Sometimes that’s all the scammer needs. You send him, say, \$2,500 to cover his expenses, and you never hear from him—or your money—again.

Other more elaborate hoaxes encourage overseas travel to complete the transaction. If that’s the case, getting ripped off is getting off easy. People chasing shady deals outside of the country regularly disappear, becoming victims of false imprisonment, rape, kidnapping, or murder. But no matter the extent of the crime, there will be no

justice or restitution, because the transactions take place in other countries, and victims have no protection under U.S. law.

From: Binta Wahid
Subject: CONTACT THE LAWYER IMMEDIATELY FOR CHANGING
OF OWNERSHIP TO YOUR NAME
Date: Thu, 17 Feb 2005

Dear Wilma Flinstone,

Thanks for your urgent respond to my today email, well there is no need of contacting your lawyer in this transaction because it required a resident attorney here. Contact the lawyer with the below informations.

Email salami@post.com Tel +221 563 5018 Name
Barrister Habib Salami Esq.

I am waiting to receive your passport copy as you said and your full postal and resident address where the consignment will be delivered upon arrival of the diplomat in your country. I will also call you with the nominated telephone number which you gave to me this afternoon.

The requested photo of senegal dakar i dont know how to send the picture of the countries because we only allow to write email from our camp computer but i will still search for it and send to you very soon.

Best regard Your's Truly

Binta Wahid.

I am just one of many people who enjoy the hobby of scambaiting. Described by one tongue-in-cheek Web site as an “emerging literary form,” scambaiters take on outlandish personas as they correspond with 419ers with a simple goal of keeping them writing back as long as possible. Often sophomoric, always improbable, and ever creative, scambaiting email threads can even be found on various Web sites, including the U.S.-based Scamorama.com and the British site Quatloos, which strive to uncover the scammers for who they are. As the baiter’s emails get more outrageous, the scammer’s

turn more desperate, even rude. The game ends when the scammer gives up or grows suspicious of emails that get just too ridiculous, or when the scammer is exposed as a fraud, also known as “getting the flip-off” in scambaiting terminology. I’ve yet to flip a scammer off; my pen-pals have ended all correspondence after several weeks of generating no money transfers from Wilma.

From: "Wilma J Flintstone"
 To: Barrister Habib Salami
 Subject: MONEY TRANSFERS

Dear Salami:

Is that your real name? Snowball loves to eat salami! I guess that's not so funny given the fact that Snowball mauled by father in a violent rage. I am sure Binta has told you my sad story, which is why I want to help her escape. I am 30 years old, female, living in BoiseTown and Las Vegas, and am trying to figure out what to do with my life now that I have a large inheritance. Please send me a picture of Senegal because Binta has limited email access at the refugee camp.

I can't make a long distance phone call to you -- I only carry a cell phone and roaming charges are a bitch! You can call me at (702) 791-7111. You can ask for me, and if I am not there, ask for my assistant, a very nice man named Ray Horn who will be very discreet. I have also added a picture of Ray at work in the Las Vegas production of "Curiosity!"

Regards,
 Wilma
 XOXOXOXO

As far as careers go, the 419er has it pretty easy. In most cases, they attain addressees through Web crawler software or cheap mailing lists made available to nearly anyone with five or ten dollars to shell out. Because my email address appears on my company’s Web site, I’m ripe pickings for the scammers, who go to work in a small, pay-by-the-hour Internet cafe with outdated dialup connections and rotary-dial pay phones.

While this scenario is most likely, not all scam with obsolete technology. In 2002,

Amsterdam police raided a suburban flat and found a mountain of fax machines and phone lines, mobile phone cards, and in a back bedroom, a fully operational private branch exchange telephone system, programmed to be “The Anglo American Bank” or “The City Express Finance & Trust. Companies”— official-sounding enough to fool their more suspicious victims.

From "Barrister Habib Salami Esq."
Subject: Money Transfer

Attn: Mrs Wilma Flinstone.

This is to acknowledge the receipt of your mail Well Miss Binta Wahid already inform me that you will be contacting my Chamber on her behalf for issuing an CHANGING OF OWNERSHIP for claiming of the consignment box from Diplomatic Company on her behalf of which i have informed her the cost of the changing of ownership in question will cost the sum of \$1.700.00.Dollars equievlent to our local currency

You are advise to payment with the below information through western union money transfer for quick comformation and urgent proceeding of the legal job as promised.

PAYMENT INFORMATIONS BY WESTERN UNION MONEY TRANSFER
NAME : SUNDAY .P. ADAMS.
ADDRESS : RUE 22 X 33 MEDINA
COUNTRY : DAKAR-SENEGAL

Thanks for your patronage.
BR'S H. Salami Esq.
Dakar-Senegal)DK-SN.

N.B.PLEASE INCLUDE YOUR PASSPORT NUMBER OR YOUR DRIVING LICENSE NUMBER ALONG WITH THE PAYMENT INFORMATION BECAUSE IT'S IMPORTANT FOR ISSUING OF THE DOCUMENTS.

Initially, I set the bait. Even completing getting the first step is tricky, because only a precious few emails will make it to my inbox at work. I then have to forward the message to my alter-ego, Wilma, and open it up when I return from the office. I then cut

and paste and formulate a response, and send it, but several hours will have passed before this is done, so many of those replies go undelivered because the scammer's account have been shut down by the time I get home.

I start my replies with a short, often one-line note, saying "are you sure this was intended for me?" or "I implore you to tell me more of your plight!" If the scammer gets this email, I almost immediately get a long, explanatory email describing his or her unfortunate situation in response. From there, my emails will teeter-totter between cluelessness and business savvy, each one promising to take action with the next email, each response growing more cumbersome and ridiculous than the last.

I tend to assume I have one of the old-school scammers, and I write them accordingly. For instance, I know to use Google's image search to find the largest photo files, inserting them as attachments that will take forever to download and subsequently cost the 419er a lot of money. I will ask them for something, too, a photo or a postcard or anything that costs time and money to send. When I give them Wilma's phone number, I choose direct-line telephone numbers for places like Yankee Stadium (and its very confusing voicemail menu), a psychic hotline, or my nearby Old Navy store, where I can depend on frazzled employees putting my scammer on hold for ten minutes or more, again costing them a lot more money.

Accomplished scambaiters have their cons place calls to the Virgin Islands or other locales with U.S.-sounding telephone numbers that charge disproportionately high long distance rates. Even more ambitious scambaiters take the time to dig up free fax numbers and voicemail services to communicate with their 419ers. Some get the scammers to send them photos of postcards, or even money.

I'm not that good yet.

From: "Wilma J Flintstone"
Subject: Money Transfer

Mr. Salami Barrister:

Thank you for the quick reply. I must tell you, I am a bit confused. I thought I had to help Miss Binta with some document transfer, but that involves sending money? That seems like a lot so I need verification of how the money will be used. I once got ripped off on eBay, so I am very careful about where my cash goes.

How soon do you need the passport -- I have already communicated that I keep it in a safe in Las Vegas! In other words, it's in another state. Why are you guys in such a hurry?

My driver's license number is Nevada MJ621785. My mailing address (in Nevada) is Wilma J Flintstone, 3400 S. Las Vegas Blvd. Las Vegas, NV 89109. My birthday is August 16, 1974, making me (you guessed it!) a Leo!

I am spending a great deal of my time and effort in order to help this poor girl and all I ask is a picture of Senegal. Or Sierra Leone. Whichever is easier. I know that your lawyer's office isn't located in a dirty old Refugee camp and you can actually send me one so please do so.

Hugs,
Wilma

As long as we've handled money and currency, the scams have followed. For example, early in the middle ages, when swine was a rare commodity, a scammer would convince a buyer to pay for a suckling pig in a bag, called a "poke" --only to discover the bag contained a rat or a cat, bearing little chance to grow into a fat hog to feast upon. Hence, the phrase "pig in a poke" is still synonymous with being a sucker for a quick buck. Likewise, the expression "letting the cat out of the bag" is still a common colloquialism.

Furthermore, “pigeon plays” have been documented for the past two centuries—a scam in which a fictional elderly or infirmed person’s money is “protected” by a would-be victim, a scam popularized in movies including *The Sting* and *Paper Moon*. And just as the pigeon play’s distant cousin—the Nigerian scam— is a high-tech reinvention of the old Spanish prisoner gag, Ponzi schemes have found reinvention in every decade since the Great Depression. Italian immigrant Charles Ponzi, credited for devising the modern pyramid scheme, went from penniless anonymity to a well-known Boston millionaire in six months. Starting the scheme in 1920, he had amassed \$10,000,000 before it fell apart. These scams are common even today, sold under euphemisms such as “multi-level marketing programs” or “a high-yielding investment opportunity”. And in 2009, former NASDAQ chairman and Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities LLC founder Bernie Madoff was recently charged perpetrating what may be the largest investor fraud ever committed by a single person, in what he himself called a giant Ponzi scheme.

From: “Wilma J Flintstone”
Subject: CONTACT MY ATTORNEY AT ONCE

Dear Binta--

I have not heard from you today, so I think perhaps something bad has happened at the Refugee camp, like a plague or attack or a major loss of Internet service or something. Please let me know of your continued safety. I was a little confused by your lawyer's email, so I had my friend Col. Monty Kilgore take a look at it. He is a trusted, reputable attorney who not only has a timeshare next door to mine at Tahiti in Las Vegas, but he is a good guy who sincerely wants to help me help you. And he has only been disbarred in one state, so he is good at what he does.

Please email me as soon as you safely can

Wilma

To: Wilma J Flintstone
CC: Binta Wahid; Barrister Salami
From: COL. MONTY KILGORE
Subject: NEGOTIATIONS

Wilma --

Thank you for seeking my counsel in your putative transactual ratification on the Dark Continent. I will look into the deal sua sponte and conduct a full de novo review of the terms, conditions, covenants, provisos, and any disclaimers in the aforesaid transaction. Given the significant distances involved, the nefarious character of many native transactions, and the scurrrious nature of the aforementioned terms, conditions, covenants, provisos, and disclaimers, I will need to review all documents before counseling your payment of the requested funds. I am copying the parties of the second part to better expedite my receipt of any and all documents underlying or otherwise memorializing the said transaction.

Mr. Salami -- When can I expect copies of the aforementioned documentation? Haste makes waste, so chop chop! Let's get this thing properly papered before transferring funds and getting the well-monied Ms. Flintstone involved in this deal.

Thank you,
Col. Monty Kilgore, Esq.

In scambaiting, a few tricks can help ensure success. First, you must establish yourself as having some disposable income. Nothing makes the scammer more greedy than believing he or she not only has a dupe—but a rich dupe at that—so I usually provide Wilma with a surprise inheritance, trust fund, or winning lottery ticket purchased at her favorite Big Smoke. Second, I make her somewhat well-traveled or powerful, knowing at least a few key people in high places. This can be accomplished by using long, multi-syllabic names and uppity titles. For example, Wilma has brought into her fold many different lawyers, boyfriends, business associates and landlords with official-sounding names such as Ignatius P. Freeley, Marshall Mathers II, Vice Admiral James Stockdale, or the Honorable Roscoe P. Coltraine.

It's important to know that scambaiting gets very time-consuming. To keep the cards and letters coming, so to speak, my brother Kevin has taken on the identity (and free email account) of abrupt, oft-disbarred attorney Col. Monty Kilgore. When work or family obligations keep me from writing my 419ers, I send them Monty's way.

From: Binta Wahid
 Subject: DELAYING IS DANGEROUS FOR THE SAKE OF MY LIFE!

Dear Wilma Flinstone,

Thanks for your mail and your caring for me, well we are having our new year festival yesterday and today all the muslims, also here in the camp we did not allow to move outside until this afternoon. Please tell me what is confusing you in the email of my lawyer??? I will like to know because the lawyer is a nice man also i dont see anything that will make you to be confuse as you said,

Mr Wilma so you insist to disclose this transaction to your lawyer which i stop you now understand that my consignment is going to ship and transfer to your country how can you assure me the safety of the total contents fund?? because your lawyer may arrange bad boy to kill you and collect the total fund from you this is burdering me aloy because i dont want to lose the consignment and the fund cos it's the only hope of my life also it's only thing that lift for me to further my education when i fly down to your country u.s.a,

Mr Wilma here are my conditions and suggestion now because my mind are telling me that you and your attorney lawyer will betray me when this consignment. You must stop involving your lawyer or your friends in this transaction. I am crying waiting for your help the must thing that is worrying me much is that i called your telephone number and they told me that is hotel room why??? are you being honest with me or not? Are you playing game with me? why you telephone line will be hotel room??

Please explain this in your next mail before any further communication regarding the shipment and the payment involve

Your's Truly

Binta Wahid.

From: "Wilma J Flintstone"

Subject: Re: DELAYING IS DANGEROUS FOR THE SAKE OF MY LIFE!

BINTA, quit wiggling out.

I am honest as you are honest.

Oh the phone number can be confusing. My sincerest apologies. That is my Las Vegas timeshare main number and the only way I can get to my voicemail when I am out of state, as I am now. The number goes to the The Mirage and they have both motel rooms for guests and the Tahiti time share with my Senegalian-decorated apartment. (WHERE IS MY PICTURE OF SENEGAL??) If you can't get to me, Ray Horn can find me. So can my brother Sigfreed. So if you call again and can't get Wilma J. Flinstone, simply ask for Sigfreed and Ray.

Toodles,

Wilma

My father practices law. So do my two brothers. While the bulk of their work involves mundane things like planning estates, writing contracts, and doing taxes, every once in a while they take on a client who's been cheated out of money in one way or another. My younger brother Chris has gone after dishonest contractors who've taken payment from would-be customers, leaving half-constructed remodels in their wake. His wife, also an attorney, sits as an advisor to the local Better Business Bureau, where the latest round of complaints has circled around phony Asian tsunami charity aids.

On the other side of the coin, my dad once had two strangers come to his office and hand him an empty glass Pepsi bottle with the partially decomposed corpse of a mouse in the bottom, asking him to help them sue the bottling company. He told them to find a different attorney. And Sara, my sister, is employed by the South Dakota Attorney General's office, where she's worked in consumer protection for many years, doing things like helping elderly widows who have unwittingly paid off non-existing credit card

bills from people who scan the obituary columns, take down names, create official-looking bills, and follow up with high-pressure phone calls.

I can't keep the scammers from stealing money. I can't arrest them, prosecute them, or power down their computers. I can't keep people from actually believing them.

But there is one thing I can do: I can waste their time.

From: BINTA WAHID
Subject: SEND MONEY TRANSFER IMMEDIATELY

Dear Miss Wilma Flinstone,

Thanks very much for your email of yesterday and how you are you doing over there, Well dont think of the lawyer will have chance to find senegal picture and send to you because he is a very busy man as you can see been a lawyer, please do not worry for the. Thank you again for keeping your friend lawyer out from this deal because i am afraid please there is notting to worry about cos the contents of the consignment is 8.300.millon Dollars I want you to send the \$ 1.700.00.Dollars as soon as possible because it's only thing that delaying our mission I am worroied waiting for your respond.

Your's Truly Sister

Miss Binta Wahid.

From: "Wilma J. Flintstone"
Subject: SEND MONEY TRANSFER IMMEDIATELY

So to clarify -- I get 8.5 million dollars, and all I have to do is send you a personal check for \$1700? That sounds fair. What is the mailing address to the Refugee Camp?

Love,
Wilma

From: BINTA WAHID
Subject: SEND MONEY TRANSFER IMMEDIATELY

Dear Wilma Flinstone.

Please Miss Wilma i want you to go direct to the western union transfer office and wire the money direct and be in mind that as soon as the payment id confirm the lawyer will pick the money immediately today so that by tomorrow all the documents will obtain then he will send the document for you to

contact the diplomatic company for the shipment of the consignment

Miss Wilma What i told you that is inside the consignment is the total \$ 8.3 million USDollars not \$ 8.5 as soon as you send the \$ 1700.00.Dollars for the document the shipping company will ship the box to your address in u.s.a

Your's Truly Sister

Miss Binta Wahid.

The scammers are getting smarter in that they're starting to count on compassion as much as greed in their would-be victims. Like Miss Binta, orphans and widows are the new askers, often saying their lives are in danger to add to the sense of urgency. Other takes on the scam include people who need help getting Saddam Hussein's fortune out of Iraq, or reclaiming a fortune lost in natural disasters. Yes, the emails are fake, but the victims are real: an elderly man in Tampa, a Catholic priest in Sioux Falls, a mother of four in Modesto.

From: "Wilma J Flintstone"
Subject: TRANSACTION ON ITS WAY, DO NOT DELAY

Binta the Sistah--

I would love to go straight to the Western Union office and wire your Salami the \$1700 but today is President's Day in the United States, a national holiday of great importance. I have purchased a lovely poster of a small white kitten clinging to a tree branch. It reads "Hang in There!" For this reason I would like your mailing address, not for the money transfer, but rather, for personal correspondence.

Cuddles,

Wilma

PS In honor of Presidents Day, here are some photographs of important presidents. Try to pick out which one is the president of Senegal!

Subject: TRANSACTION ON ITS WAY, DO NOT DELAY

Dear Miss Wilma Flinstone,

Thank for your respond,

In issue of holidays in united state which will delay the payment today, please when the holidays will finish then you can wire the payment as you promise?? let me know because delaying is dangerous??

In the pictures of the presidents the black man at the last position of the pictures are the president of senegal his name Abdula Wadi he is the president of this country,

I am waiting for your answer about when the payment will be ready because it's the only thing that delaying the payment. Note, the address of the camp are as follows
Rue 39 x 27 United Nation Camp Dakar Senegal .

Regards

Your's Truly Sister.

Miss Binta Wahid.

Talk about a double-edged sword. Victims not only lose money, but they can find themselves in legal trouble at home as a result of the scams. In February 2005, a part-time Florida A&M University business instructor who fell for not one, but two, 419 cons faced grand-theft and bank-fraud charges in Tallahassee.

In an email, James Clay Edwards was offered part of a Lagos inheritance, despite the fact he already had been warned by police in July 2004 about the scams, after he lost \$3,400 to a 419er. Edwards, an adjunct professor, taught in the university's vocational education program and was paid \$602.41 biweekly, according to a university spokesperson. Per the scammer, he was instructed to cash checks sent to him, eventually expected to wire some of the money back to Nigeria and keep a portion for himself. In the first days of January 2005, he deposited a \$29,250 check into his savings account and

withdrew \$100, though there was only \$55 in the account, according to the police report. The next day, he deposited a \$37,500 check into the credit union account and took out another \$100, the report continued. Both checks bounced. Two weeks later, Edwards tried to cash a check for \$12,765 at a different bank, where the teller identified the check as counterfeit and called the police.

After his arrest, James Clay Edwards lost his job. He had no prior criminal history.

A more desperate victim (also with no prior record) made the mistake of taking matters into his own hands. In February 2003, Michael Lekara Wayid, Nigeria's consul in the Czech Republic, was shot dead by a 72-year-old Czech at the Nigerian Embassy in Prague. The shooter had become distraught after he discovered his bank account had been emptied by a 419er posing as a Nigerian official, and had repeatedly visited the embassy in hope of recovering some of the money.

From: Barrister Salami
Subject: Do Not Delay

Mrs. Wilma:

Send the payment to the Western Union office at once.

Mr. Salami Esq.

From: "Wilma J. Flintstone"
Subject: Do Not Delay
CC: Binta Wahid

Salami and Binky: Why do you call me Mrs. Wilma Flintstone? I am MISS Wilma Flintstone. Are you calling me an adultress as you know I have a boyfriend by the name of Monty Kilgore?. Perhaps it is best you terminate my files in you Chamber and she can find a new adopted sister through business directory made available to her from Senegalese Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Another few weeks in the refugee camp should be of no problem. Your emails are very rude. After all of the time I have taken to help you and cheer you up with photos of presidents, white lions, and smoked meat products! Are you playing games with me?

Because what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Offended,

Wilma J. Flintstone

Our last correspondence to Miss Binta was sent on March 1, 2005. Col. Monty Kilgore authored a lengthy email to the young refugee, in which he offered an additional \$2,000 if she agreed to travel to a Western Union office in the neighboring country of Gambia because, in his words: “I’ve contacted some former comrades from the 1st Infantry Battalion of the Senegalese Army and they give it to me on good account that a Western Union agent in Kaolack is of unrepachable reputation.”

We haven’t heard from her since.

Chances are, she’s made connection with another pen-pal—maybe a real sucker, maybe another baiter. Meanwhile I’ve received another email at work, this one from a man by the name of Shaduk Shari, who lies in a hospital somewhere in the United Arab Emirates, dying of terminal espophgeal (sic) cancer and looking for someone other than his distrustful relatives to handle his massive estate. This time, Wilma is a fabulous Manhattan socialite with problematic fits of memory loss and violent nausea brought on by excessive Botox treatments, and Col. Monty Kilgore is once again her hapless attorney.

Let’s face it. I’m a busy woman. I’ve got a job with deadlines, a family to attend to, a dog to walk, homework to do, laundry balled up in the dryer. It’s hard to justify the time I devote to this, but once I have a Miss Binta on the line, the everyday ins and outs often fall by the wayside. I could say it’s rewarding and noble to beat a scammer at their

own game, but the truth is this: it's fun. It's a lot of fun. In fact, I feel downright giddy when I see the "new mail" icon blinking in Wilma's inbox.

And my glee won't be taken from me anytime soon. These emails just keep creeping in—and I know that people keep on falling for them. The Nigerian government tells 419 victims to file a complaint with the Nigerian embassy, email the Central Bank of Nigeria, or contact the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission. But most attempts will prove fruitless. So long as greed and dishonesty exist, so will the scam. Wilma J. Flintstone is my only weapon.

COMET'S TAIL

1.

You were lying

on the sofa.

I stood in the doorway,
fresh laundry in the basket at my feet.
You just kept staring at the television,
eyes shifting under the brim
of a tired King Ropes hat

You gave no reason
but your secrets were unraveled
your cover blown

You
 promised til death
She
 promised for all eternity

discovered outside together
on a cold Sunday in December.
You didn't have the courage
to say the word: affair. You just said
you had a space to fill, you had to move on,
like a message scrawled on cheap ruled paper
and passed to me in class.

2.

After you left,

I sat in the kitchen,
the Christmas decorations still hanging.
Marydell from work
called her bishop with the news.
She held my hand,
she said she had no choice.

A month later,
 Marydell was on the phone again,
 this time with the judge.
 They were in the same ward and
 she told him I was a friend.
 He moved the papers
 to the top of the pile. He signed them
 on a Monday morning.

Marydell told me to feel my feelings,
 I didn't know what she meant
 until later that day, in the parking lot,
 I threw mad punches in the air
 until my shoulders ached.

I watched the wind
 push geese across the sky.

3.

For us, the two never did become one.

We were two bodies,
 two souls, living one life together.
 And you took the pictures,
 I wrote the words.

I thought about those Saturdays
 when we lit out together,
 hoping the sun would drop at the right angle,
 hoping clouds might converge,
 hoping for that
 single moment
 when light strikes silver
 in all the right places.

you were the one who promised
 we would hold the prairie in our hands:
 Maybe it would be reservation basketball
 Maybe it would be the winter sun sinking
 on cold Badlands soil

You
 the image
 Me

the indelible ink

4.

I saw the wreck on the interstate
 outside of Butte:
 a surprise August blizzard
 someone lost control on a road
 that should have been easily navigated

I watched the ambulance limp away
 no lights, no sirens, leaving behind the

white pickup
 mid-somersault
 clothing
 scattered like poppies
 stock pot
 lid missing
 small table
 right legs snapped off
 pillow
 resting against a mile marker

And I just kept driving, because
 the snow fell hard
 and I still had to cross the Divide.

5.

But there was a time

we lay side by side, in the sage,
 on top of a sleeping bag,
 your boots pointed right into the sky--
 a hundred thousand pinholes
 pierced the black,
 while whispers of another galaxy floated north.
 Not even the lights from town
 could touch the dark.

We watched Hale-Bopp burning in sky

a radiant force marking a discourse
with such confidence
we forgot about
the doomed journey.

WORTHY

Oh Lord,

The groom's family leaves the reception just moments after the first toast, because the Rite of Holy Matrimony started at two--and if you take communion before five, it doesn't count. These people mean business; they're more Catholic than Jesus, genuflecting not once but twice every time they enter the Heart of the Blessed Sacrament church. They file out of the Legion Hall into a summer thundershower, but the groom stays put because he hasn't gotten his roast beef dinner yet, and all his drinking buddies from State are here.

I am

happy, she says to herself. The toasts, the dollar dances, the hokey pokey played by a '50s cover band starring the local weatherman and the grade-school music teacher. And plenty of Old Milwaukee Light, just a dollar a can, with the proceeds going to the local Legion Auxiliary and their city park memorial fund. People dance and drink and celebrate two wide-eyed kids that are simply meant to be. This is all meant to be.

Not

that it matters four years later, when the marriage is over and the not-so-wide-eyed bride sits in the corner office of the Diocese headquarters, writing out the twenty-five dollar check that will begin the process of annulment. Sister

Tough Love stares her down. Father Birkenstock speaks in a gentle, help-desk kind of voice. This is not a divorce court, he says, we are not marriage counselors. We just need to look at all the facts and judge, in view of these facts, whether there was a bond of marriage in the first place. The bride is here alone. The groom and his girlfriend didn't see the need. Besides, her impetus is not dissolution of a sacred union, but rather, she wants to again be

Worthy

to take the bread, to drink from the cup. Like a purificator, this document will wipe her clean, keep her intact, make her holy. In the state of sin, the body and blood remains locked in the tabernacle--a plastic key chain dangling against ornate gold doors. She wants again to receive You, but instead, she sits alone in the back pew, moving her legs to the side as the others squeeze by to take communion. Week after week she stays put, making everyone wonder what she's done to warrant this—the unforgivable act of remaining seated.

To receive

Your pardon, the bride dutifully fills out paperwork, finds witnesses to testify, writes out well-versed paragraphs as to how she committed the greatest sin of all—giving up. Those vows were real, she remembers: it was the groom who broke them. But Sister Tough Love says it takes two to make a marriage, two to break one. How, she implores, are you responsible? The bride sits on dreary, dark furniture purchased on the Office of Canonical Affairs' shoestring budget, crying. A vintage reel-to-reel tape player captures every word: this is her case,

her testimony, her story. Sister Tough Love puts a PhD in church law to work, saying sign here, sign here, we know you're still hurting, we know.

You

are begged for forgiveness by the mother of the groom. She calls her prayer circle and recites Rosaries in the hope her son will be saved. The father of the groom drinks the hard stuff alone in the dark when he thinks everyone sleeps. He stammers when he gives the First Reading in Sunday Mass, he thanks You for Your many blessings before every meal. They call the bride on occasion, on weekends, when there's nothing on TV.

But only

after three years of waiting is the judgment handed down. Father Birkenstock is long gone, having left to get married, and it's Lorraine, the church secretary, who gives the bride notice. Indeed, the papers read, this is a situation where the Bond of Marriage was not intact, that the Parties Involved were not prepared to take the Vows--and the Facts clearly demonstrate this was not a Marriage, but a Mistake. The Plaintiff, the bride, is awarded an annulment upon payment of an outstanding \$225 balance, and the Defendant, the groom, is told to seek psychological counsel with a qualified Church priest.

Say the

groom, when notified, tosses the envelope aside. Say he's bought a new house, leased a new car, and tries to make jokes when his old college buddies call to ask just what in the hell happened. Say his new wife, still sealed for eternity to her first husband, worries when she tucks her child into bed at night. Say her

child's the newest member of the first-grade Banana Splits divorce group. Say that later, while the new wife sleeps, the groom pulls the letter from the trash and touches the Tribunal letterhead, the notarized seal, the signatures. He finds it strange to see the

Word

annulment. The explanation: mistake. But for the bride, it was no mistake; it was marriage. It was wedding guests tapping plastic silverware against beer cans and paper cups until an embrace, a kiss, and applause. It was Ave Maria and Panis Angelicus. It was navigating an aisle of two-toned church carpeting. It was let this ring be the symbol. It was the two shall become one--until one wants out.

And

with a single piece of paper, it's over. She rises from the pew and walks forward. She takes the host in hand and tells herself finally,

I shall be healed.

GRIDIRON

Room 3C Language Arts
My Very Best Things: by Andrew

1. My new cleats

*your foot shifts, tearing the new grass
from tender, shallow roots*

Homework finished,
you're ready for football.
We find our place on brown winter grass,
next to the bare rose bushes
and Amanda's driveway.

2. My Star Wars Legos

*there's a lost piece
but not forgotten—he still
knows it's part of the whole*

I throw the ball, watch it bounce off
the one star
on your small chest

the most important piece is missing

3. Augustine the Cat

*balled up in a corner, eyes fused shut
abandoned on the street
I bottle-fed him for seven days.*

You give me that
youknowhowtodothat? look--
 I'm full of surprises.
 Of course I know how to play,
 I have two brothers, you know.
 My dad was the biggest Vikings fan
 in the world

4. Camping

*that night an unexpected storm
 ripped the tarp off. I crawled outside
 on my hands and knees to pound the stakes
 as deep as I knew how.*

You toss it back with clumsy fingers
 I grip the laces, put a spin on it
 the football lands square
 in your palms

5. Chocolate chip cookies

*elusive, warm,
 sweet on the tongue,,
 the yearning,
 the wanting more*

you burst toward me
 through imaginary chalk lines
 Amanda's tomato stakes are out of bounds
 my goal is where the sidewalk begins
 you carry the ball opposite, over dormant tulips--
 your flower garden end zone.

you say you catch like Randy Moss
 I say you couldn't catch a cold.
 You surrender a smile.

6. My mom

She chose to leave

We wage our war
over unmade beds and breakfast dishes,

the front yard calls the truce
we toss a purple football
your name magic-markered on the seam
cloth dinner napkins pulled through belt loops
Amanda's dog barking through the fence
we charge we rush we sack
we have

7. Playing football with my stepmom

and I chose to stay

lost
so much. But
in this moment, we win.

These are the very best things.

THE STEPMOTHER'S BALL

*Once upon a time
there lived an evil stepmother.
She was evil only
because she was there.*

My transformation into the “Evil Stepmother” has been—and will always be—inevitable. I know this to be true: stepmothers will be evil, whether it’s our intention or not. It’s simply the nature of the relationship between a woman and her husband’s children.

I never planned to be stepparent. I grew up with the notion that I would someday meet my Prince Charming, get married, and live happily ever after. That’s what happened on TV, and that’s what happened in the small town where I spent my childhood. There, parents were married, grandparents were married, the teachers at school were married, the ladies who worked at the drug store were married. Families stayed together.

As a child, this is what I knew of divorce: Cindy Heggen is the only kid in my class with divorced parents. She has only one friend, Wanda Stirling, whose dad is gone but still married to her mom. Cindy doesn’t have a lot of nice clothes and she has to go to the principal’s office a lot and every week she struggles with spelling.

This is what I knew of marriage: My parents smile in a wedding picture that hangs on the wall in the hallway upstairs, near by bedroom. My father wears a black

tuxedo with thin lapels and bow tie; my mother dons a sophisticated, simple gown and pillbox hat, with a bouquet of gold chrysanthemums in hand. “Very Jackie Kennedy,” she said—an explanation lost on me at the time. As far as I knew, my parents had been married forever and would stay married forever and the simple gold rings on their left hands were the outward sign of that forever.

*The father, a King, had kept his perfect children
in a perfect tower
until the evil stepmother arrived
with her black cloak and dreaded spindle.*

No one goes into parenthood completely prepared, but becoming a stepparent is even more unpredictable. While I’d always wanted a family, I couldn’t know what was in store when I married one. In 1996, still stinging from a divorce I didn’t really understand, I lived alone in a one-bedroom apartment and worked constantly. A colleague introduced me to friend—his neighbor Larry—an also-divorced, single father of two children: Andrew, who was four, and Kim, six.

Shortly after we met, Larry explained that his ex-wife had left when Kim was only three and Andrew just a year old, and how she had since moved out of state. And because he was largely on his own, we didn’t have much of a courtship. There were no lingering nights with drinks and dinner, no movies and clubs, no weekend getaways. Instead, we spent nearly all of our time at Larry’s house, where he initiated me into the world of parenthood by taking trips to the Discovery Zone, by sending me to McDonald’s for Happy Meals, by heading to the video store for Disney movies to watch with the kids. It was rarely the two of us. It became the four of us.

*They moved to a little cottage in the woods—
After the children's castle had
crumbled to pieces.*

We step into any family idealistically, if not realistically.

Because he was a single parent, I knew Larry was responsible and dependable. I found him warm and funny and low-key—and those traits came out strongest when he was with his kids. But he wasn't without shortcomings. He was raising two small children alone, holding down a demanding job, having no family in the area to rely upon. He was maxxed out. Exhausted. Financially stretched. At times, he ran out of patience. He was doing the best he could, getting home at night around seven, after working all day and picking the kids up from a small in-home daycare. He would take something out of his freezer and stick it in the oven for himself, while he plopped the kids on barstools next to the breakfast bar, and slapped together sandwiches or poured cold cereal into plastic Lion King bowls.

He needed me. *They* needed me.

*When the evil stepmother fed them poisoned apples
it was by accident
because the children refused to touch their dinner.
And the poison looked like sweet, delicious brown sugar*

This is what I believed. I thought I could fix everything in one fell swoop, but it doesn't work that way. The first hard lesson a stepparent learns is this: if you're not part of the problem, you can't be part of the solution.

“I can get married as many times as I want,” Kim announced in the car, the day before the wedding. We were driving to Joyce’s Flower House, and she was strapped into the back seat of my parents’ car, drawing imaginary pictures in the air. “All I have to do is get a divorce. Over and over and over and over I can get married and divorced, married and divorced. When I get really mad I can just leave.”

How do I define “permanence” to a child who’s only seven? How do I explain “marriage” when she only knows “divorce?” And how do I grapple with the fact that in this case, she’s right?

*The children longed for the Real Mother,
a Fairy Princess who lived in a land far away
She traded the family cow for a sack of golden beans.
And sent the children postcards from Mexico
and Beanie Babies from airport gift shops*

Larry and I were married in July 1997, in the living room of my parents’ house. Kim was the maid of honor; Andrew was the best man. The ceremony was tiny, just my immediate family and the local mayor, who officiated. We drank champagne, cut thick wedges of white cake and covered them with strawberries, took pictures and let the kids swat at a piñata my father had hung from the hackberry tree in the front yard. That night, we slept in my parents’ Airstream camper, the kids sleeping less than four feet away on a single bed transformed from a small table. My wedding ring was not a thick gold band like the one on my mother’s hand, but three thin bands—gold, white gold, rose gold—to show my new family that I was committed to three people, not just one.

It should have been enough.

*She sent them into the woods
only because it was a school field trip
to a house made only of gingerbread,
They spent the trip fees on video games and gum
The fed their sack lunches to the birds.
She told them so many times not to do that.*

But two days after we married, the four of us flew back to Idaho on separate flights—Andrew and me in the morning, Kim and Larry later that night. We landed in Boise on a beautiful midsummer day, and together, Andrew and I took a cab home. We let ourselves into the house, empty save the two cats. It was hot inside, the early-afternoon sun bearing down on the kitchen floor. I heated up a bowl of chicken noodle soup in the microwave and carried it to table, where Andrew was sitting.

“Eat your soup,” I said, flipping through the stack of mail the neighbors had left on the table. With his face perched at a sharp angle as his hand supported his chin, Andrew just stared at the bowl. He wasn’t a great eater, so this was something I’d come to expect out of him.

“I don’t want it,” he answered.

“Eat your soup,” I repeated, pulling bills from the stack, making a pile.

“No. I hate it; it makes me sick,” he replied.

We’d been through this drill before, so I knew what would happen next. I would continue to insist he finish eating. He would tell me he didn’t like the food, no matter what the food was. I would threaten him with the inevitable: no snacks, then no TV, then, finally, no going outside. After the third threat, each time and raising my voice, he would acquiesce, and he would eat, and he would tell me how good it was after he took

the last few bites. Then I would get him something sweet from the pantry while he cleared his dishes.

“You ate it last time. Now eat it.”

“No. I hate it.”

“*Eat it,*” I said without looking up.

“I just want you to move back to your apartment,” he blasted. “I want my mom to have her couch back.” This line wasn’t part of the drill. I sat down. Pushed the bowl aside. Explained to him that I didn’t have my apartment anymore, that his Dad and I were married, and marriage meant commitment, and commitment meant, as far as his dad and I were concerned, forever.

Forever isn’t a term that kids of divorce take a lot of stock in.

*The stepmother stayed home from the ball
because the homework wasn't finished.
Stories of the ripped gowns and
lost slippers were mere exaggerations—
and while the children waited
for the return of the Fairy Princess,
the evil stepmother cleaned up the mess.*

That’s not to say I’ve regretted my decision. In fact, it’s the lack of regret that makes stepparenting so bittersweet. We had been dating less than three months when Kim gave me a handmade invitation to her kindergarten graduation. I took off from work early to be there, watching her stand in line with sixteen other kids, all wearing oversized mortarboard hats and too-long gowns and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. We took pictures, ate sugar cookies, and thanked the teacher for her hard work. That night, Kim pulled from her Pocahontas backpack a construction-paper book, three neatly positioned

staples binding it together. It was called “All About Me.” On various pages, she had crayoned a self-portrait, written down her height and weight, her favorite foods and television shows, and traced her hand. On a page entitled “My Family,” she had drawn stick figures. Underneath, they were labeled Daddy, Andrew, Kim and much to my surprise: Ann. Beside me, she had added my two cats.

I think, too, of another day when, after announcing we were engaged, Kim asked me when I would change my last name. I wasn’t planning on changing anything, because I didn’t do it the first time I got married, and I had no intention to do it this time. “You have to change your name,” she pleaded in earnest. “We have to be a *family*.”

I once read a compelling first-person account of international adoption, where the writer, John Towriss, noted that “being a ‘mother’ or ‘father’ has so little to do with reproductive biology and so much to do with sobering responsibility.”

Sobering, yes. Responsibility, always. It is hard, hard work. But the “sobering responsibility”—along with the unfettered joy that family brings—was as strong in those unexpected moments with Kim as it was the day I brought my newborn, first-born home.

*The King, sensing distress, put the children
in their glass carriage,
and whisked them off to the school therapist—
a wise old godmother to whom the children
told rich tales of witches and princesses and
broken bicycles left in the rain.*

The years following our wedding blur like someone pushed a fast-forward button and left the room. Within a year, I was pregnant. We had a baby together in 1998, a son named Matthew. Another son, William, came just a year later. When each baby was born,

it was Kim and Andrew who stayed in the hospital with me. It was Kim and Andrew who helped address and stamp the birth announcements, and open the gifts that arrived in the mail. As far as my stepkids were concerned, they were not my babies, they were our babies. Unlike me, they embraced their new siblings with no strings attached, no disclaimers, no awkward “half-” hanging before the word “brother.”

And while I was overjoyed and overwhelmed by the reality of bringing a tiny baby home that’s part me, part someone else, I soon discovered that the nuts and bolts of parenting and stepparenting are really the same thing. Set the limits. Guide. Advise. Dole out rewards. Enforce time outs and groundings. Sign the permission slips. Measure the medicine. Pick up the clothes. Pack the lunch. Change the diapers. Yearn. Mourn. Fail. Cherish.

*It was an accident, too,
When she really didn't mean to eat them
the next morning.
But they begged for candy and cookies
and new scarlet hoods.*

After seven years together, Kim and Andrew have come to accept me for who I am: their dad’s wife, their brothers’ mom, the Stickler for Homework and Bedtime, and the best person for proofreading writing assignments. They find some sort of comfort in the fact that I am here and not going anywhere, that I make good potato soup, and that I can get the printer to work when it breaks down. Kim is still proud to have a patch on her old Brownie vest that reads “Leader’s Daughter” (they don’t make patches that say “Leaders Stepdaughter”), while Andrew is happy that I took snowboarding lessons, and none of his friends’ moms do that yet, which makes him cool.

But it's never easy. In my family, we have good days, and we have bad days. The same holds true for every family, but things get especially complicated in a stepfamily. I've driven both kids to family therapy; I've signed permission slips for the Banana Splits divorce group at school. I've watched my stepchildren squirm uncomfortably when a stranger refers to me as their mother. I've heard them struggle to explain to soccer teammates or kids at Sunday school that they live with Dad and Ann while their mom lives somewhere else.

*She apologized profusely to the King
and thanked the neighbor,
a hunter, who stuck the cold knife in her gut
and set the children free.*

We marry for better or for worse—but we divorce for better and worse, too.

Too often, divorce disguises itself as easy fix to situation that might be as dreadful as abusive or as benign as boredom. Some find that a marriage is impossible to keep together. Others, like myself, just give up. I know this because I was divorced in my 20s, before I had children, when it's easy to justify. When marriage gets tough, we fantasize about how much better it would be to be alone. Easier. Better. Happier. But doesn't happen that way. You file the papers, get the judge's signature, and you find you've traded all of your problems for a set of new ones.

Add children to the mix, and that new set of problems is exacerbated.

No matter how bad a first marriage is, or how good a second marriage can be, divorce hurts kids. It doesn't necessarily doom them to an unhappy, unproductive lives. It doesn't mean they'll divorce their spouse one day, that they won't finish high school or

that won't hold down a job or find true happiness. But it leaves a scar. For children, it's always there, always a part of the person they will one day become.

My stepchildren have shown me that no matter how much stability and love you give them, there is a place in them that's always a tiny bit sad. It's hard to admit that our good marriage will keep their fairy tale dreams from every coming true—the far-fetched-but-not-quite-impossible-possibility of their parents reconciling. It's hard to come to terms with the fact that they blame it on themselves for happening, and they blame it on me for keeping it from ever being fixed.

*They kept waiting,
while, the evil stepmother washed her black cloak
with the stained party clothes and white school socks
and everything came out a dingy gray.
Pulling damp fabric to her face,
she felt the burning sting of salt.*

And I remember this:

It is a cold Thursday morning, the last day of school before Christmas break, the dreary fog hanging on to the streetlights and headlights of my neighborhood. Our tree is beginning to dry out, but it sparkles with ornaments and lights and a new blown-glass star tops it. The house still smells faintly of gingerbread men cooked last night. We received a package the day before from my brother in Minneapolis, and there's no more room under the tree for gifts, so we had to stack the new ones on the window seat.

I take Kim and Andrew to school, two-year-old Matthew following behind, so we can deliver small presents to their teachers: coffee mugs and gift certificates to the neighborhood Starbucks. I drop Kim off at her classroom. She gives Matt a quick hug

and runs into greet her friends, saying, “Bye, Annie!” as I place the cup on a small desk overflowing with candy, gifts, cards.

I take Andrew to his chaotic classroom: a thousand fourth-graders in a holiday-induced frenzy. His teacher grabs my arm, asks me if I have a minute. She says today is the annual fourth grade holiday brunch, and Andrew’s real mom has volunteered to work it, and she signed up to bring a dozen eggs and a gallon of milk, and did I know where she was because she was supposed to be here by now.

Like so many times before, I have no idea. Like so many times before, she didn’t call, and we don’t know where she is or when to expect her. I call my husband and hear one-year-old William crying in the background, and Larry says he can drop off ten eggs and almost a gallon of milk that’s in our refrigerator, along with the baby, on his way to work.

I stay. I correct spelling tests, cut out little yellow stars from construction paper for next month’s Super Reader contest. I help cook eggs on an old electric frying pan someone’s mom dropped off. I pass out napkins and extra forks. I watch Matt and Will pull up small chairs to Andrew’s desk, so they can eat with him while I sit in the back of the classroom and tidy up. After the brunch is over and the kids head outside for recess, a red-haired boy with a Pokeman sweatshirt stops, sizes me up. “Are you Andrew’s mom?”

“Yes,” I answer, picking up plastic silverware and putting it into a trash bag.

“No. She’s just my *step*-mom,” Andrew corrects me. He’s standing behind the red-haired kid, pulling on his coat. And then he’s gone.

He's gone, and I stay, and I understand things clearly. That no matter what I do, I will never quite measure up. That no matter what they do, there will always be a divide to cross. That I may never be real to them, but they will always be real to me.

NOVEMBER

a single leaf wavers on rawboned branch
thin yellow scatterings beneath give shape to wind
already we've hung Christmas lights—
we covet the false color, the electricity
when pellucid sun lends no distinction
between limpid foothills and late afternoon sky
& glassy horizon is lost to gray erasure of
dormant sagebrush, the predictable cutbanks

Kimberly's skin pales in winter-thin light
I finger her weightless hair while she reads,
anticipate her every breath

AN ACT OF CONTRITION

It wasn't hard, reading the letters he wrote her from jail, LaDonna told me. I was sitting in her cube, waiting for a report to come off the department printer. It wasn't hard, meeting with the lawyer, and filing for divorce. It was hard, though, going to church on Sundays— she was sure that everyone was talking about it. And it was hard, going back to the Temple that first time after he was gone, wondering how many people knew the truth: that for ten years her ex-husband had molested her children and she hadn't a clue, until the afternoon she came home early from the quilting club and found him there, in her daughter's bed, his suntanned hand cupped over her small mouth. She called the police first, then her bishop.

The first 50-minute session is a complete bust. Kim spends the entire time staring at the shelves and shelves of toys, unable to choose which one to play with first. She picks up a Barbie doll, then puts it down. Runs her fingers across the side of a box: *The Game of Life*. Considers the dollhouse, the farm, the box of army men. Not that it matters to Cindy, the play therapist, who is scrawling notes on a yellow legal pad.

At \$80 an hour, it's hard not to expect more.

It is early September, and I have been married for three months. Kim is my stepdaughter. She is eight years old, a second-grader, and Cindy has explained that she has the emotional maturity of a three-year-old. Kim was only three when Larry's ex-wife—her mother—chose to leave. “She just stopped growing after she experienced the

trauma,” Cindy says without intonation, like this is common knowledge. Like we shouldn’t have to ask why.

Kim is sad, that’s all I know. From the time I started seeing Larry a few years ago, her behavior problems have grown worse. She obsessively picks at her food, refusing to eat almost anything set in front of her. She hordes trash in her bedroom – Tootsie Pop wrappers, the clear plastic rings that hold six-packs of soda together, scraps of fabric and balloon strings and rubber bands and beer-bottle lids. She often speaks in a baby voice, or acts like a lost dog, wandering the house on her hands and knees. She spends recesses at her new school following behind groups of kids but can’t talk to them. And time and time again, the seemingly insignificant minutiae of the day crashes in on her, sending her into unstoppable outbursts—she’s on the floor kicking and screaming and nothing, not anything, can calm her down. “I need a spoon,” she says the day we start therapy, a bowl of Cheerios waiting for her on the table.

“Then get yourself one,” I reply, not looking up from the newspaper.

“I *can’t*,” she says, voice teetering toward tears. She stands there, hands in her pockets, six inches from the silverware drawer.

She is sad and she is broken, and I don’t know how to fix it.

I used to love going to confession—walking out of the church without a single sin on my soul, knowing I could go straight to heaven, thanks to Father Keating’s whispered absolution and a fistful of Hail Marys.

It was the Tuesday before Easter, and church was packed. Father Keating’s line was twice as long as the one for the priest who had driven in from Emery. I chose the shorter line because I wanted to get in home in time to watch Happy Days. I closed the door behind me, watched the dim light fade to black when I dropped to the kneeler.

*Bless me Father, for I have sinned:
I was ten years old and praying for forgiveness.*

“Get that child in therapy! It’s done wonders for my girls.” That’s what my friend LaDonna told me on the phone a few months earlier. “And pray. You can’t forget to pray.” We are driving Kim to her second play session; my husband is sullen and mute behind the wheel. He reluctantly agreed to try this after a birthday party at the end of summer, where Kim had insisted on wearing an outfit that was three sizes too small for her, and she wouldn’t talk to anyone, and she started crying when a boy offered her a piece of cake. “Play is the language of children,” Cindy tells us, and she’s throwing out things like “a clear case of learned helplessness” and “signs that mimic an attachment disorder” and “a paralyzing inability to make a decision.” She explains that while there is no “good” time for parents to divorce—three is a particularly bad age, because at three, a child first comprehends there are consequences for her actions.

At three, a child knows that something really can be her fault.

I am thinking about LaDonna as we drive away from that second session. I am not a particularly devout Catholic—I go to Mass on Sundays alone, but the confession, the Holy Days of Obligation, the Stations of the Cross—most of it has simply fallen away. And while I take most of LaDonna’s Latter-Day advice in stride, I do have a great deal of respect for her—and the unshakeable faith that helped her survive a mother’s worst nightmare.

I decide to take Kim and her brother, five-year-old Andrew, to Mass with me. Larry is out of town on business and I promise the kids we’ll hike up Table Rock if they’re good, if they sit still and stay quiet. When we walk into the church, Andrew sees a statue of the risen Christ, and says: “Who’s that guy?” I am trying to explain things,

like the open wounds on His outstretched hands, and I turn around to find Kim gone. Before I can panic, I see her crooked ponytail peeking over the front pew. I take Andrew's hand and we sit with her, front and center, I am self-conscious in cut-off shorts and hiking boots.

The kids sit quietly, watching, listening, even kneeling, until Kim sees the single-file lines for communion. "I want to go!" she says loudly, crawling over my legs.

"You can't," I said, stopping her, knowing full well that this was the kind of thing that sent her into one of her emotional tailspins.

"Why not?"

"Because you and your dad aren't Catholic and you have to be Catholic to go."

I hush her, and I don't rise to take communion, either. Three times on the hike to Table Rock, Kim asks if she could be Catholic, because she wants to get in the line and get a cracker. I don't have the energy to explain that's it's not a cracker, but bread, but it's not really bread either. Every day that week, she asks if she can be a Catholic and get in the line like everybody else. The next weekend, she expects us to take her to church, and I show her how to fold her arms to get a blessing. "You give yourself a hug," I explain. This time, Larry is with us, and she makes him go up for a blessing too, arms folded over his chest like a pretzel. Day after day, she keeps asking, and finally, he tells her it's OK to sign up for the preparation classes for First Communion—and for all practical purposes, join the Catholic Church.

Kim grins when she finally hears yes, but to me, the smile looks less like happiness and more like relief.

I told him my sins: I was mean to my sister, I said a bad word. I told a lie. I awaited the absolution, the penance, the being pure again. But the priest, in an impossibly old voice broken apart by a thick German accent, said is that all, is that really all? Yes, I said, I think so. The confessional was dark and I could see the outline of his slumped shoulders and mussed-up hair through the screen. Have imbibed in alcohol? Have you taken illicit drugs? No, no, no Father. Have you fornicated? I sat silent – I didn't even know what that word meant. Well? he said, have you fornicated? I don't know, I said. Have you had sex outside the marriage bed? By now his voice thundered and shook and I was sure everyone in the line outside could hear what he was saying No! I yelled, then ran out crying, slamming the door behind me, running the three blocks home.

We go to play therapy every other week. Kim should go more often, but it's all we can afford, since Larry's insurance only covers psychiatrists and medication they might prescribe—and Cindy is a licensed counselor, that's all. Kim plays with her, while we sit in the waiting room, reading magazines and drinking complimentary coffee in Styrofoam cups. After 50 minutes, they come out, and we spend ten minutes discussing how the session went. Cindy never tells us anything concrete—just “we had a fun day!” or “we played with Barbies, and I got to be Ken.”

Cindy assigns Larry and Kim a twice-weekly session for home. The rules are simple: Kim picks a “game” and Larry plays with her, on the floor, for one hour with absolutely no interruptions. Cindy explains that he can never state an opinion, nor can he make a decision. He can only make observations—but Kim must do the work. The first night, she brings out piles of stuffed animals and lays them out on the coffee table. “What should we play, Da-da?” she asks in her baby voice. “I don't know—what should we play?” he'd repeat the question back. It is boring for him, insufferable, sitting for a

full hour just playing with dolls and saying insipid things like “It looks like you love animals!” or “I notice you chose the blue cat,” while Kim falls apart with every unanswered question.

But slowly, the play starts to change. She starts telling Larry what his toys are supposed to do, what his dolls are supposed to say. She comes up with elaborate stories, acted out by stuffed Simbas and Barbie dolls, stories where kids are in trouble or storms are coming and moms are always dead. And no matter what her characters are running from, they always stop and go to church. Her behavior shows signs of improvement, too. The baby talk has all but disappeared, and while her outbursts are still frequent, their intensity has diminished. She starts choosing her own clothes, and she starts eating more.

She joins a Brownie Troop at school, and during a meeting, she raises her hand and corrects the leader—it is the single most confident act I had ever seen her commit. She still can’t tie her shoes, and she still can’t ride a bike—but for now, I’ll take anything.

*The old German priest from Emery
was committed to an Alzheimer’s unit
shortly after that Lenten season.
As an adult I still went to Mass. I still
lit candles on my Advent wreath and slipped small checks
in the donation basket. But twenty years later,
I never made another confession. I told this story to Father
Thomas, saying I hated the way that old man made me feel
and that’s why I refused to go back.*

“I get to have my First Reconciliation,” Kim says, a hint of confidence in her little-girl stride. It is December, and she recites the Act of Contrition, which has changed since I learned it years ago. “Help me do better” the prayer says— I can only remember the “for your just punishments” part, which has since disappeared. And like the newly-

revised prayer, there will be no dark confessional, no litany of prayers to say afterward. Father Thomas doesn't talk about sin or damnation or guilt at all. "God forgives you," he says, peeking his head into the Sunday school class.

"What does forgive mean?" Kim asks me later, when she's lying in bed.

I don't know how to answer this. "Does forgive mean you and Daddy won't send me far away?" I am taken aback by the question, and respond by, talking much too fast. Why in the world would you say that? We would never send you anywhere. That's what forgive means, that no matter what you do, we won't send you away. And we will always forgive you, no matter what you ever, ever do. Forgiving is everything—and Kim, the other part is you have to be forgiving to be forgiven.

LaDonna wants to know what an annulment is in the Catholic church. "I guess it's sort of like a Temple divorce—a cancellation of the seal," I threw out.

"You did that, right?"

No, she said, because I just know we'll all be together one day.

During the Reconciliation Mass a week later, Father Thomas gives a homily to the kids, who together with their families take up the first three rows of pews. He asks us all to stand up. "God forgives. You are forgiven—" he says with a huge grin, "you are all forgiven." Now hug the person who brought you here." Kim wraps her thin arms around my midsection and closes in. And suddenly, she is sobbing. Her shoulders heave beneath my arms. I hear her throat close up as she gasps for the next deep breath, and I feel the strange warmth of tears soaking through my blouse. Father Thomas glances over and tries to move on, making a few announcements over the sound of her cries.

All of the others have sat back down. The kids stare at us, and the parents give me uncomfortable half-smiles. I see a cross on the wall, a cluster of pictures drawn by the pre-school class, the altar, a candle burning. I feel a chilly breeze through an opened door, see the mid-winter sun hunkering down on the etched-glass windows. I am still standing, and she is hanging on—she is hanging on—and in that moment, all is forgiven.

*It would have been easier to criticize LaDonna.
It would have been a given, you know—
telling everyone I know how awful it was,
she's either brainwashed or crazy.
I could have rolled my eyes and went back to my desk
That would have been easy
But she had forgiven him, and then let go.
Had I stood in her place,
I would have fallen short.*

On the last day of play therapy, Cindy sends Kim out the door with a squeeze and a Snickers bar with a Christmas bow. She calls us in, says she's never seen such a dramatic turnaround. "Something else is at work here," she says, not a single note taken on her yellow notepad, "some things I just can't explain."

*I went to confession the very next day.
I sat in the folding chair, facing Father Thomas.
Help me do better today, help me do better.*

It is spring and things have changed. Cindy warned us that we might see regression, but nothing—none of the behavior has returned, not even once. My husband

and I are still stunned by the change—and day-to-day, we try to fathom how normal—how ordinary it all really feels.

We are done with play therapy, and now I am the awkward one, still clumsy in this role—the uneven part between her braids and poorly matched outfits the outward signs of my shortcomings. She never once says “you’re not my real mom,” but I don’t pretend to take that place.

I am picking Kim up from soccer practice so we can go shopping. We try to do things, just the two of us, once a month, and today we’ll find a twirly white dress for First Communion. We’ll make a veil out a plastic headband and a yard of white tulle.

From the car, I see the team running up and down the field in some sort of drill. I see the group of girls, shin guards stiff under thick yellow stockings, clamoring together in a pack. And then I see Kim. She’s falling behind. But it’s clear that she isn’t running at all—but skipping. Each arm extends back and forth in perfect time, her braids kissing her cheeks as they sway from side to side. She is skipping now, not running. And she is happy.