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# Saint Jude Knows Us by Name and Other Stories

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Saint Jude Knows Us by Name and Other Stories

A Thesis Presented

by

ABIGAIL WOTTON

MAY 2016

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## Telling The Bees

The last time Thomas had undressed his wife was the day after her mother died. She drank one and a half bottles of cheap merlot and threw up on herself while she was sitting on the couch. He pulled her shirt off her right there, to the horror of their youngest daughter, and carried her up to bed without much ease, for she had put on fifteen pounds since she stopped smoking. But before this, before his wife went to a hypnotist to stop smoking, and before her mother died slowly and then all of a sudden from lung cancer, years have passed to bring Thomas to this night, when he realized that he felt nervous to be touching his wife's bare skin.

Thomas worked during the day and his wife headed out in the afternoon. This worked well the first few years as she was home to get the girls to school and he was home to get them off the bus and make them dinner, but it wasn't sustainable. And Thomas and his wife became more used to each other not being around than being around and one afternoon when he was placing his daughters lunch box on the table, Thomas could see his wife actually holding her breath when she realized he was in the kitchen.

Thomas' wife would be an affectionate grandmother, but as a mother she was all but dismissive of her daughters. Thomas was able to fill in these gaps with brownie batter, Lego ships and Sunday afternoon "Creature Double Feature" TV time, but after their third daughter was born and died three weeks later, something more permanent was broken. And Thomas couldn't keep them all together. With half her

brain on the outside of her head, they were told she wouldn't make it through the night. What he didn't tell Thomas was that she *might* live for weeks, and that he would wish she had died the first night.

The doctor didn't tell him he would spend the month of December watching his wife hold a dying thing that was taking her even further away from him, without even knowing it, and that he would hate himself for wanting her to not exist. The last time Thomas and his wife had had sex was to make this baby. This baby that shouldn't exist was made from the desire to have a last baby. A last stab at life. But even while they were having sex, Thomas' wife turned over so she wouldn't have to pretend to be looking at something else to avoid looking at him.

She used to love when he would come up behind her while she was standing at the counter smoking and looking out the window. She would push back into him and before he could even check to see that the doors were locked, she would start clumsily stepping out of her jeans. Leaving her socks on and abandoning her lit cigarette on the windowsill.

That year, the Christmas tree stayed up until February. Until it was so brittle and dry that needles fell to the floor if someone closed the front door. And even once the tree was gone, that was how Thomas and his wife moved around each other, closing doors, quietly breathing through their noses. Even after all the dry needles were mostly vacuumed out of the shag carpet.

As the girls got older, Thomas spent his Friday nights listening to his daughters sneaking in and out of the house and his Saturday mornings making bacon and eggs

and pancakes for his visibly hung-over high schoolers, he did this without reprimanding or questioning, because his hung-over wife was sitting at the table too. And making breakfast for them, a breakfast that they needed, was the only thing he felt like he could offer. And so he smiled to himself as he poured coffee and flipped pancakes knowing he was doing something for the girls at that table.

The next few years moved slowly and quickly at once, and three more winters went by until Thomas' mother-in-law was diagnosed with lung cancer. His wife decided to go to a hypnotist to quit smoking and it worked. The hypnotist told her to imagine worms coming out of her mouth every time she put a cigarette to her lips. Thomas imagined this, worms crawling out of his wife's mouth. He didn't tell her that he would miss seeing a cigarette hanging from her lips, on the edge of her coffee mug, the ashtray smell in her hair when he rolled over at night, awake and conscious of not bumping up against her in bed. Quitting smoking, of course, didn't make up for the years that her own mother smoked, and that winter she continued to die while her daughter sat by her bed devouring coffee rolls.

And life moved by that house at a normal pace, and then it slowed down as he carried his half-naked wife up the stairs on this night. And she smelled like sour vinegar and she was soft in places where she had always been sharp, like her collarbone. She looked older, too. Thomas wondered how long it had been since he really looked at his wife. He'd slept with his back to her and stayed out of her way during the day, and somehow he had missed her getting old.

Now he put her to bed and went back downstairs. His daughters had both headed out for the night, embarrassed either by their mother's suddenly obvious drinking problem or her grief. And he couldn't be surprised because that's what they all did; they were always avoiding looking at each other.

Thomas poured a drink and sat on the chair opposite the couch and turned on the Discovery Channel and looked at the inside of a hive. "Bees defy aging. When an older bee takes on the job usually reserved for a younger bee, their brains actually stop aging. They also recognize human faces. This might be part of why the relationship between bees and their beekeeper tends to be such an intimate one. Bee folklore says that beekeepers are supposed to tell their bees about the mundane facts of their lives and what has taken place over the course of every day and this is why bees have also been known to show up to the funeral of the beekeeper that cared for them, because they knew each other so well."

Thomas turned off the TV and went upstairs.

The next morning Thomas made his wife breakfast. The girls had never come home from the night before. His wife slumped at the table with a cigarette dangling over her coffee mug and he smiled to himself.

"Did you ever know anyone who kept bees?" he asked her, sliding a few pancakes on to her plate. She looked confused. *What?*

"I saw a thing on TV last night about bees. Fascinating."

She looked like she was going to throw up again.

"Go back to bed, baby."

He cleaned up breakfast, which no one had eaten, but he was looking out the window over the sink, imagining spring and bees and imagining himself walking around, smoking his hives.

That same week Thomas was laid off from his job at the Brigham's ice cream plant where he had made and tested chocolate fudge for the last twenty years. He stopped bringing home bunnies with broken chocolate ears and ice cream in mislabeled cartons but still woke up before the sun and went downstairs and waited to hear his wife step out of bed so he could begin making her breakfast.

And this is what they did all winter. They had breakfast together every morning. It was easier than he thought, because eating takes your eyes away from looking at the other person and your mouth away from talking to them. But they got used to being in the same space without even realizing it.

"Would you like to try some of this honey butter I made?"

"What is that?"

"Well, I saw an article that honey is actually good for your immune system, because it puts pollen in your system. It's supposed to help with allergies. And I thought about how terrible your allergies are in the early spring. I thought maybe if you start eating it now they won't be so bad."

"Okay, I'll try it."

Thomas eagerly spread some over her blueberry pancakes.

"This is good," she said, without looking up at him. Across the table, he smiled.

Thomas spent the rest of the winter making breakfast and standing over the sink imagining his own beehives while scrubbed bacon grease off the griddle. He made plans for where in the yard they would go and he ordered a suit and a smoker and more books about being a beekeeper. He also read more folklore about bees, which to him seemed just as important as facts about bees, because although he may or may not have realized it, Thomas needed the possibility of the bees more than the honey he would get from them. He read that it was important that the bees be a gift from someone, that they should never be bought. So he became friends with Frank, the old man who sold the “Wildflower Honey” uptown and who promised to give Thomas three hives in the spring.

“Once you have your hives,” his wife said through mouthfuls of pancake, “you can make this honey butter all the time, Thomas.”

He touched her shoulder and she didn’t flinch. Even the night before, when he accidentally rolled over and touched her right hip, she didn’t wake up. They had fallen asleep talking about the hives being delivered to the house the next day he told her he had ordered her a beekeeper’s suit as well, so she could help get the honey without being stung.

“You know there are actually guys who don’t wear the suits at all. It’s part of the closeness of the whole relationship, like I am taking care of you and you aren’t going to sting me because we are taking care of each other.”

This seemed to impress her. “I would still be kind of scared. I think you would be killed outright if all the bees suddenly decided to sting you at once.”

“Probably,” he said. “I wonder if they would show up at your funeral if they stung you to death.”

The hives were delivered mid morning, after Thomas’ wife left for work. He waited out in the driveway and then helped carry the boxes to the lawn. Once Frank from “Wildflower Honey” left, Thomas put on his suit and looked inside. The whole lawn sounded like it was vibrating, and it was, hundreds of little bees contained inside white boxes. His to take care of. There wasn’t much for him to do yet, so he took off his suit and waited on the porch for his wife to come home.

“Are they here?”

“Yes, outside.”

She looked at him and her eyes widened and she squeezed his arm.

“Want to take a look?”

She nodded.

“I have your suit upstairs.”

“No, I think it will be okay. I just want to take a peek. You don’t have to open the screen part. Just the cover.”

So they stepped off the deck together and into the yard and lifted the wooden covers, without the fear of being stung.

## I Am The Real Gecko

“Why are you so fat?” was the first thing he ever said to me. And I’m not fat, so I think that says something about him and maybe even about me. The teacher whose job I am taking tells me that he gets stars for “keeping his body in control” and shows me where the “calm down box” is. She hands me a folder full of data sheets. They display four columns, the first is the social setting and activity , the second is what is being asked of him, the third is what his behavior is *is he yelling, bolting from the area, refusing* and the third is what action is taken. If he is taken out of the class I have to record how long we were out of the classroom. At the end of the day I am told to put these sheets in a separate folder for the behavior specialist to collect.

“Then she can decide what to do,” she tells me.

“What to do about what?” I ask.

“What to do about him.”

All day we move the laminated and Velcro pieces that say what activity is now and what activity is next. What is now and what is next. Every moment accounted for. In class we talk about theories that say in every moment we are thinking about the future and we are recounting the past. And it is always changing, because we never stop accessing new information. Our perception of past events can change completely within one conversation. She says if that is true, then there is nothing

that exists but the present. I think if that is true, then the present doesn't exist at all.

Think of what was last and what is next. What is next. "What are we doing next?"

He needs the calm down box. We set the timer for two minutes, and I watch him stretch out the rubber tail of the gecko across the floor. I pull out the folder. *Large group. Academic expectation. Threw crayon box. Sensory offered. Calm Down Box.* The timer goes off and he packs up. I have to carry a walkie-talkie now because he is a "bolter," and I can sympathize with that impulse. If he runs away, I don't chase after him; I follow him and call for help. Remain calm. Remain calm. Unless he runs outside. I tell them all not to run in the hall and to keep their hands off the walls, but when I am at school I punch the button on every water fountain I pass.

He just started sitting with the other kids at lunch. Although, sometimes he still hides in his shirt or jacket. They say this isn't acceptable behavior; he needs to be okay with being around other kids. But it's too loud and I don't see the problem with feeding him French fries through the short sleeve of his arm, where he's sticking out his nose . Just this once at least. *Social interaction. Refusal. Plan ignored.*

"Evan's eyes are funny looking," he tells me during music class. Evan's eyes are very close together and I think they're funny looking too.

\* \* \*

Is he yelling? Not really. He is just saying “this is no good.” Over and over again. Why is he yelling? What is the class doing? What was he doing before? Is this a transition period? Is he hitting? Kicking? No, just hiding under the table. Transition period for sure then. What action was taken? Verbal redirection? Visual prompt? Sensory offered?

We take a walk. We both run our hands along the brick wall.

He punched another kid at recess yesterday. For kindergartners they’re empathetic towards him, they all immediately excused what happened.

“What happened to Leo?”

“I punched him in the face. Is he okay?”

“Yes, he is at the nurse.”

“Was that a good choice?”

“No, not a good choice. Not a good choice.”

He does worse with change than the rest of us. He called me by the old teachers name for the first two weeks I was here. The other kids would try to correct him. “That’s not her name.” I know, he would say, but that’s what I’m going to call her. She’s the New Ms.McMillan, he would say. It seemed to help. I start to water plants before I realize they’re dying and it’s really no small thing. This is living. You are living. I sit next to him on the carpet, just in case, and I hear him whispering, “I am the real gecko. I am the real gecko.”

\* \* \*

His tell is easy. He crinkles his eyebrows together and looks out of the corners of his eyes. He did it before he slapped and then scratched my face for the first time. I had been waiting for it, so I almost felt relieved once it had happened. Okay, I thought, that wasn't so bad. We can do this.

That day he calls me by my real name.

This morning we have a lockdown drill. My job is to close the blinds, if this ever happens. The lights go out and the teacher tells the students that their eyes will adjust to the dark. They squeeze themselves into the cubbies. I don't realize he is right next to me. "I am scared of the dark," he whispers to me and grabs my hand, "please come closer." I squeeze in next to him and he audibly sighs. Evan with the funny eyes is across from him. "I am afraid of the dark, Evan."

"What are you doing there, Evan?"

"What am I doing here, Evan?"

He leans into me and whispers, "I think we are hiding from tigers and bears."

He asks me to help zip up his snow jacket before he gets on the bus. I can hear him whispering as I am zipping. *Button zip snap. Button zip snap. Button zip snap.* I am supposed to record this too. The whispering. So they can try to see why he whispers when he does. I am not sure they'll figure that out. Because he always whispers. He whispers like I count my steps. My steps out the door. My steps to my

car. And then count again once I'm in my car. Just to a number that I feel good about.

*I am the real gecko.*

He throws a crayon box off the table and across the floor. He throws a chair. Was this in a large group? *Yes.* Academic demand? *Yes.* What was offered for redirection? *Sensory was offered.* We take the timer out of the calm down box and bring it over to the beanbag. He lies down and I pull the sides up around him and over him. I start calling this "taco time". His sneakers poke out of one end and his closed eyes and smile peek out of the other end. Is this good? *Yes, this is good.* I smile too. I let go of the beanbag when taco time is up, and he puts the timer back in the calm down box.

At the art table they are making puppets. I climb under the table and start an impromptu puppet show. When I sit back down at the table, he looks at me and puts his warm hand on my cheek and leaves it there for a few seconds.

## The Curator

It was two weeks ago that I had the very small and insignificant task of proof reading the contributors notes for the literature and arts magazine on campus. I sat at the only table open and near the windows, the windows that look onto the trash compactor, and spread out the proofs on the table.

I read through the contributor's notes once without marking anything, like a short story, and then I read them again, and halfway through the second reading I had rocks in my chest and the overhead lights were vibrating. I couldn't even begin to look for spelling errors or comma misplacements because I couldn't read anymore, like when you stare at something so long you realize you cant pull your eyes away but you are also not seeing anything at all.

The bio prompt must have asked the contributors all something along the lines of "What is your major and what are your future plans?" This person is going to be a teacher, that person wants to publish a book, and this other person thinks they're being funny by commenting on how they don't know what their plans are. I decided then to abandon all other work to track down the emails of everyone on the list.

I Wrote:

*Dear Contributors, We are so thrilled to have all of your brilliant work appearing in the next issue of the student journal. I know all of you already sent in bios, but I am in desperate need of a little more from*

*each of you. If you would be willing to meet with me in person, I will be on the third floor of the library in the left corner in the third chair from the wall. I will be here everyday from 2-5pm for the next two weeks. I will have a box of donuts with me. I know it is a busy time, but I can speak on behalf of the entire journal when I say that your help with this will directly impact the quality of this entire project. Please make every effort to get in touch with me, by not responding or showing up, your bio may be wrong or just not appear in the journal at all.*

*Best,*

*Frances*

The email was a bit much, but I didn't cc anyone else on the email. This was my task. People like to feel needed and appreciated. I knew I had the best chance of a decent turnout if I made them feel important as well as by scaring them a little. I finished sending the email from a library computer. I don't usually like using the computers in the library because the keyboards are not easy to type on. They are clunky and sticky and always feel like a hindrance to what I am writing, constantly one pace behind, like movies where the voice is just slightly off the mouth that is moving. I sent the email, and forgetting about the rest of my schoolwork, walked home. I stopped for a donut and then sat on front step of my house. While I ate, I thought about the meeting the night before and someone's comment that the contributor bio page was the least important spread in the entire journal. After I licked the frosting

and sprinkles off my fingers ,I sat on my hands on the front step of my own house until it got too cold, and then I went inside.

In-betweens are always good spaces to occupy. In-between the outside and inside. It reminded me of my layover in Iceland this past winter, the 4am flight that was so empty I got to lay out on an entire row of seats with my giant parka wrapped around me like a down comforter. I was so content when the sun rested on my face and fur hood around my face that I didn't quite care if I ever made it to Germany. I wanted to wake up like that every day, suspended and in-between.

The next Monday afternoon, I left my house and went to Dunkin Donuts. I asked for one dozen donuts: three chocolate frosted, two glazed, two chocolate glazed and frosted, two strawberry frosted, two maple frosted and one Oreo cheesecake, which sounded just disgusting enough that it could be good. No jelly.

I got to the library at 1:30, just to make sure I would get the chair I said in the email I would be occupying. The chair was empty. The entire floor was empty, which made sense since it was April and all of the vitamin-D deficient New Englanders were on park benches surrounded by polluted snow banks.

I realized that I hadn't really thought about what I was going to ask these people. How was I supposed to ask for a more "honest bio?" What did that even mean. I started writing down some notes. I reminded myself to use the word "we" when

describing this section of the book. I didn't want these interviews to seem like something weird, even though none of the other editors knew about it yet. I was doing this for all of us, and for them, the contributors. I am sure they would want to write different bios if they knew that even what was considered the least important spread was in fact important, or at least that it could be.

As I was thinking about this, a girl got to the top of the stairs, scanned the floor, and saw me. She walked over to me and sat down in the chair in front of me.

"Hi, I'm Emma, are you Frances?"

"I am, thank you so much for coming," I said, extending my hand, already feeling like I was conducting an interview.

"I submitted the piece..."

"No, it doesn't matter."

She looked confused and a little deflated.

"No, it matters," I said. "It just doesn't matter for this."

"Oh, okay."

"So tell me a little about yourself, Emma."

"Well, I am a junior and an English major."

"Alright, what else?" I shifted uncomfortably in my chair and tried to cross my legs in a confident way but instead almost knocked the box of donuts off the small circular table between us. She was kind enough to pretend not to notice.

"I am planning on applying to grad school..."

I recovered and started to pretend to take notes. "That's not really what I'm looking for," I said without even looking up, pressing my pen into the same small circle.

I opened up the box of doughnuts. She reached for a strawberry frosted, so that was good at least. I thought about my flight out of Iceland again. Even when she pulled back, I continued to stare where he arm had been extended across the table and over the box.

"I have an idea, why don't you tell me your strongest memory?"

People love talking about themselves, so once she stopped chewing she started talking about her family having timeshare in Disney World.

"No, I don't mean what is your best memory. I meant what is your strongest memory. I don't think that's it because you didn't mention any detail," I responded.

"I remember a lot of details about those trips," she responded.

"I believe that, but I am wondering about one specific memory. Not a series of them. Does that make sense?" I asked.

"Okay," she said, looking kind of confused and totally avoiding eye contact with me by pretending to study the mini Gettysburg reenactment to the right of us. I wondered if she maybe noticed how some of the soldiers had actually deformed into melted masses due to whatever chemical was used to make them I could only guess at least 15 years ago. I thought about how they probably needed to hire a hazmat team to get rid of it, but instead just left it on the third floor, the floor that you didn't

come to unless you were actually looking for a real book or maybe a chair to sleep in. At this point we were both staring at the battle of Gettysburg.

“Take your time,” I said, “Maybe even have another donut.”

She was clearly coming up empty, and so I had to quickly figure something out. I remembered a drawing exercise from art class. I asked her if she had to be anywhere, and, when she said no, I told her I just needed to run downstairs and print something out. That it would make things easier. I printed out Picasso’s *Igor Stravinsky* drawing and sat back down with her.

I handed her a blank sheet of copy paper and the Stravinsky drawing, upside down to her so it was facing me.

“Do you have a pen?” I asked.

She nodded and pulled one out of her notebook spine. I explained to her that I wanted her to draw this picture, but in one line without lifting up her pen.

“But it’s upside-down,” she said.

“Doesn’t matter,” I replied. “They’re just lines, all you are doing is following the line.”

She started drawing. I told her not to talk, but that I would talk to her. She nodded.

“What I mean by most vivid memory is the one that you remember best. Not because it was your best or worst day, either, not the day that you think you should remember, but the one that you remember even though you don’t know why.”

She nodded. We sat in silence while she finished drawing. I had no real idea if this would help, but it seemed kind of similar. When we did this exercise, my art teacher explained how we rely on how we think things look, without actually looking at them.

She finished drawing and handed me the picture. It was kind of fantastic and I thought about keeping it for myself.

“One afternoon, I think I was in second grade, a friend of mine came over and when he got to my house his mom was upset because she thought she had hit a cat on our street. My mom asked me to run downstairs and get a cardboard box. We all piled in my friend’s car and drove up and down the street, looking for the possibly dead cat. We never found it, and I overheard our moms talking about it dragging itself into the woods to die. Then they took us out for ice cream and on the ride home I just kept wishing the window would roll all the way down.”

“That’s perfect,” I said. “Thank you.”

“At least that’s how I think it happened, it’s hard to remember exactly because it was so long ago,” she responded.

“Doesn’t matter,” I said.

“It doesn’t?”

“No.”

\* \* \*

She left and I tucked the drawing in my notebook and typed up her new bio, saving the notebook paper that I had written her story down on and saving it with her picture.

I did the same thing every day for the rest of the week. Stopped at Dunkin Donuts, ordered the same dozen and set up in the library. I got better at talking to them, the contributors. I would have the drawing ready with a stack of copy paper and pens. I did pretty much the same thing every time. I always let them tell me something I didn't want to hear first, though. I saved the drawing exercise for after they told me about the day their grandma died or the best vacation they had.

Up until day five, the contributors hadn't really asked any questions as to why I was doing this.

He noticed me right away and jumped over the back of the chair to sit down.

"Hey! I know that, draw it upside down," he said.

"Right," I said, already confused and taken back by his entrance.

I figured I would just jump right in. "What is your name and can you tell me about your most vivid memory?"

"I'm Charlie, but what is this? I thought this was about the poem I submitted?" he asked.

"It is," I said. "I am just trying to rewrite the bios."

He looked at the box of doughnuts and the file full of trash and made a weird face.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

“Because it’s what I was asked to do, compile the contributor bios. I just need to ask you a few questions and then I’ll actually be able to wrap this up,” I answered.

“I have a few questions for you,” he said, and leaned to one side of the chair and swung his legs over the other arm. “Why aren’t you using the bios we gave? Why are you asking about a memory?”

“I just think it would be more interesting to read, like a kind of narrative. I don’t see why even this part of the journal can’t matter as much as the rest of it.”

“That’s not really the answer I’m looking for” he said, “Why don’t you come to the common tonight. I built a big, unstable ramp and my buddy is going to try to long board off of it. Should be fun.”

I declined his offer, saying that I needed to compile the interviews that I had so far, and he left before I even finished with my excuses. I called after him as loudly as I could in the library, reminding him that I still needed his bio. He said maybe he would come back.

When I got down to the last few days of interviews I started to worry about the whole process being over, but it needed to be. I had to turn in the final copy to the team in two days. I kept thinking of how I could make this process last longer, but I couldn’t come up with anything. I started saving the pictures the contributors drew with the handwritten copy of their bio in a file, organized by last name. I would flip through it at other times during the day, carefully leafing through what they offered to throw away, crumpled pages smudged with donut frosting. Trash.

Charlie came back on the last day. "Are you ready to answer my question?" he asked.

I nodded, just wanting to get this last one done. "I am doing this because I want to live in a world where things matter, and I want this to matter. I don't like the idea that this part is less significant. So I decided to do something."

"Yeah, but this obviously has something to do with you, so what is it?" he asked.

I felt the rocks in my chest move around and bump against each other and words that I usually could never get to the surface came up. "I was just thinking how some days stick with us forever, though I'm not sure why. And how they are rarely the days when the best things happened, sometimes not even the worst. But they all seem to hold a certain type of authenticity, which is why we remember them so well. I wish I could string all of these days together and always feel like I am connected to everything."

"Interesting," he said.

I nodded, immediately regretting my completely lucid monologue.

"And this is helping?" he asked, pointing to the pile of papers and drawings. "This makes you feel connected?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I get it, I really do, and I think it's a nice thought. I think it matters. But I think you need to finish it and stop."

"I still need yours, though," I responded.

“Alright, yeah I’ll write something down for you, but you have to do something with me first.”

“What?” I asked.

“I got the key to the roof of the library and I am going to drag that Gettysburg reenactment up there tonight and light it on fire. You need to help me.”

“What? Why?”

“I am tired of looking at it,” he replied. “So grab your stuff and let’s go. Throw those donuts out. Jesus. So gross.”

I started gathering up all the papers I had acquired over the last two weeks.

“What are you doing?”

“Just getting my stuff,” I answered.

“It’s not really yours, is it? That stuff?”

“I mean, not really, I guess. But I collected it”

“Why don’t we leave it here?” he suggested.

“It will get thrown away.”

He thought for a second. “Not if we hid them all over the place, in books, seat cushions, behind frames,” he smiled. “Plus you’re not going to be able to help me carry that piece of trash up to the roof with all that stuff in your hands.”

“I still need to type some of these up, though, I need to send over the new proof,” I said.

“Didn’t you get your answer though?” he asked. “I mean, it matters to you, you can’t expect it to matter to all of them. If you’re waiting for that you’ll be sitting here forever.”

I considered what he said. And he smiled.

So we did, we went around and hid all of the drawings and notes on the third floor. The only evidence that this little experiment ever took place is hidden on the least occupied floor of the library. And the bios remained the same. But tonight I helped swipe a key to the roof of the library and I have cuts on my hands from pushing the side of old plywood reenactment up the stairway and I am learning how to build a contained fire.

## Saint Jude Knows Us By Name

Yesterday, on my way home from work I got off the train at 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue and went into Whole Foods. I like the make-your-own-trail-mix station and, unlike the one in Union Square, they have a beer store attached. It's the kind where you can make your own six pack, which is appealing to the indecisive. While I was in the grocery store, filling up my container with trail mix, which was really just whole foods version of m&m's and dried papaya, I saw a girl make a b-line for the sample station and start taking orange slice after orange slice out and eating them like she was on the sidelines of a soccer game. I stood and stared. It made me wish I were the kind of girl who could stand in front of the sample station with orange juice dripping on my shirt. But I'm not, I am the girl who has to walk casually by the sample station, and then act almost surprised by it being there, and then take an orange slice like I don't really want it.

I always get to work fifteen minutes early. I unlock the office, turn on the TVs, fill the coffee pot, and distribute the newspapers. And then change into my work shoes. The boy I sit next to works 7am to 7pm every day to afford his shared apartment in Hell's Kitchen. His name is Tucker and he played water polo at Syracuse. He told me once that I should get used to working in an office because I'm an adult and adult jobs are in offices. Other than that, he doesn't talk to me, even though we sit three inches apart. I think he only likes that I am here because he has me do the morning newspaper clips. And that leaves him more time to check his

fantasy football team and watch Barstool sports. My least favorite part of the day is trying to pretend I don't see him looking at the "smoke show of the day" on the barstool sports webpage. This morning it was "Karissa from Boston." Tucker doesn't touch the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or the *Wall Street Journal*. He leaves his earbuds in so I am discouraged from asking him any questions. I get up as often as I can, and when I do I swivel my chair as far away as possible so our knees won't accidentally touch when I stand up.

Kevin has been in journalism since the newspaper clips were actually clipped with scissors, out of real paper, and glued onto another piece of paper. Earlier in the week I commented on Kevin's haircut and later that afternoon he brought me a chai tea. He said he had noticed me drinking one last week and hoped it was what I usually get. It was nice to be reminded that I probably feel about as invisible as a middle aged man who wears corduroys.

As I am sitting at my desk, Kevin walks out of his office and to the water cooler and starts filling his glass. He looks away, towards the corner of the wall, and forgets the water is still running. He doesn't notice it fill the catch tray and then start spilling onto the floor. It seeps along the brown-checkered carpet and stops at his leather shoe, looking for a reaction, but he still stares straight ahead. Not looking at the TV, not looking at me, just looking over the water cooler. "Shit," he says. We clean up the mess but can't get the water cooler to work. We don't try for that long either. But we leave the pieces on the floor so everyone knows it is broken, that was my idea. He tells me that he thinks he could have just as fulfilling of a life in

Minneapolis as he has in New York City. “As long as I can have my local bar,” he says. “Anyways, when’s the last time I went to a show or the MET or the Museum of Natural History?”

A friend of a friend recommends me to someone who is looking for a tutor for her daughter. So this afternoon I took the F train all the way to Brooklyn and met a 12-year-old girl named Fiona who seems more lazy than struggling. I sit at her kitchen table as her mom explains a group project that she needs help with. She needs this help because she refuses to be in a group so now she has to do all the work herself. “What is your project about?” I ask her.

“Bees,” she says.

On Saturday I go to David’s Bagels with a friend from home. He’s living on a friend’s couch in Queens and working at a place called “KidsWorld” on the Upper West Side while he tries to find a more permanent place in Hoboken for him and his girlfriend and their cat. After spending the last two years living at home and acting in some community theater performances, he wants to pursue being a comedian full time. His one of the saddest people I know.

“I think the default setting is despair,” he says, “with moments of joy. But we really have to work hard for those moments—seek them out.” He tells me this as he eats his peanut butter and jelly bagel and tries to answer the phone as his girlfriend calls for the third time in the last two hours. He apologizes and looks frustrated, says he’ll be right back. As he gets up to go outside he can’t slide to answer because he has jelly on his hands. When he comes back inside he says, “I just keep thinking

how much easier it would be to go home. It's like I want to be here, but I keep looking for a reason to leave."

"Why *are* we here?" I ask.

"Half hoping the good will grow and the bad will shrink, half being unwilling to admit that maybe we were being naïve in having childhood dreams of what it means to be successful, exciting people. Dreams that looked in our minds like us walking through Manhattan, coming from some interesting place, going to some important place. Then there's this third half of imagining what it would be like to explain to everyone you told you were moving away why you moved back."

I tell him about the night I spent at a tiny loft in Chelsea listening to a new bluegrass/folk band, drinking Stella and sitting on a barstool under Christmas lights and spider plants. On my walk home I couldn't imagine a place being anymore magical and I felt connected to all of it. And then the next day there was a problem with the train and it was raining and I had no umbrella and then someone yelled at me because I was in the wrong line at the taco station. Later that afternoon I sat in the Village East Cinema with three other people, watching the new movie about David Foster Wallace, eating a cinnamon cookie and trying not to cry. "Sometimes when I go into the Bean," I say, "I listen to these kids from NYU talk about their classes and discuss their film projects and I want to yell, no one cares. *None of that matters out here. You think it does now, but it doesn't*"

He tells me that he went to the MET alone last Saturday. "I just walked around crying. All I could think about was when I was here in high school." He said, "I had dreams of being here and now I am here and I've never been more miserable."

"I don't know if this is being in New York alone or being 23," I say. "Probably a little of both."

He says he needs to go call his girlfriend and leaves. I wipe the jelly off of the table and then leave.

I walk home and stop in a bar on Rivington Street. There is one guy at the bar. On his laptop. I am glad it's cold enough to have a hat on. At my second beer the bartender asks if I am meeting someone. I say no and she hands me a glass of water. We start talking and she tells me she is a singer, when she's not just trying to survive. We talk about music, "I sing folk music, because I like that it tells a story, it means something," she says. I tell her about a band and she looks them up and starts playing their album over the bar speakers.

I ask for another beer and watch as more people escape the cold and wind and drape their coats and scarves over bar stools. I order a grilled cheese, the bar's Saturday afternoon special. I eat and pick up my glass and sit on my stool and hear my music and talk to the bartender and she tells me, "Stay as long as you want."

The following Tuesday, Fiona and I start working on her project about bees.

"Why did you pick bees for your project?" I ask. Pretending to care.

"Colony Collapse Disorder," she says.

“Because bees are dying?” I ask.

“More than that, because they’re disappearing.”

“What do you mean?” I say.

“Colony Collapse Disorder, “ she repeats “We aren’t finding dead bees lying around all over the place, or even dead in their hives. They’re leaving. But they know they are leaving. So they leave the hives full of honey and they leave the queen with a few nurse bees to take care of her and the bees that are too young to leave. People used to think the bees were disappearing because they ran out of food, but when they realized the hives were full and the queen was left behind, they knew it must be for another reason.”

“So they might not be dead and dying,” I say.

“They’re probably dead,” she says.

“They may have just fled for some reason,” I say. “It’s very post-apocalyptic.”

She nods.

“Someone has to carry the fire,” I mumble.

“What is that?” she asks.

“Oh, it’s from a book,” I say.

“What book? What is it about?”

“It’s about a father and his son traveling through a pretty destroyed world.”

“We should read it,” she says.

“It’s very sad,” I say, “It makes me cry.”

“I like sad,” she says. “Bring it next week.”

Lisa the bartender on Rivington Street becomes one of my only fixed points in the city, and I visit her often. She tells me I'm in a good spot. She says that Brooklyn isn't even as cool as the Lower East Side is now. I ask her how the singing is going. "What's funny," she says "is that I am a hostess at a club for singers and a bartender and I don't even do the thing that made me want to move here in the first place." She asks me how the writing is going.

"It's not, really," I tell her. "I don't even really read that much anymore. I'm not really sure if I can say that that's a thing I do now, or even that that's part of who I am, a writer." I say.

She asks me why.

"Well, I don't really write and I haven't had anything published. I think all of my achievements are behind me. It's hard to measure progress outside of school. I'm not totally sure who I am out here, except that I guess now I'm someone who wears Banana Republic and cries on the F train a lot."

"A true New Yorker," she says.

On Sunday afternoon I pick up a copy of *The Road* and bring it to the Bean and sit and read with all the other kids who are reading for their classes.

I have been to Fiona's house in Park Slope enough times that I know what end of the train to get on and I don't have to second guess where to surface. These things make me lift my feet a little higher and walk a little faster. Claiming my part of the sidewalk like everyone else. I never before realized the happiness that could come

from knowing where you're going and how to get there. I get to Brooklyn early enough that I decide to stop in Little Purity Diner on 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. its at the time between lunch and dinner so I am the only person there. I sit at the counter and have a burger and coffee and read and when I leave I decide I will stop there again next week. And the week after that. And in my mind I place the diner on the map of places in New York where I go inside.

We keep working on Fiona's Bee project and then walk to Ladybird bakery on 8<sup>th</sup> Ave. We both get ginger cookies. She hasn't forgotten about the book. And I haven't either. We walk to Prospect Park, sit down and start taking turns reading aloud to each other. It's sunny and when Fiona passes me the book I feel that she's left sugar crumbs where her thumbs have held the pages and I wonder if I would know by looking if a beehive is empty or still alive.

We finish her project the next week. "The crazy thing," she says, "is that the bees disappearing is bad, like bad for us, but no one seems to care. That's why I knew I had to do this project alone. No one else was going to take it seriously."

We finish *The Road* that day and I let her read the last paragraph, even though I really want to. I make her read it twice and I listen.

"Maps and Mazes," she reads, "Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery."

When she closes the book, she asks "what's next?"

## Reasons We Put Our Shoes On

Yesterday my best friend as a teenage died. He was sitting at his breakfast table checking his insulin, had a heart attack and slid out of his chair, at 67. His wife found him on the ground with the dog licking toaster strudel crumbs off his fingers.

I haven't seen Neil in three years and felt guilty when I got the phone call. Guilty that I hadn't taken the time to visit him while I was home, outside of seeing him briefly at my grandparent's house. It would have been easy to visit him; all I had to do was walk across the street. .

"In order for him to not be anxious about where he's going, you have to be confident about where you're taking him. " Neil told me as he adjusted the Hikaru's bit and tapped my foot.

It was his most prized possession, the horse with the glass eye. The horse that had West Nile virus. His first glass eye was painted by an artist to perfectly match all the shades of his other eye, but once he scratched it out on a tree, Neil decided he would save the good glass eye for horse shows and leave a white one in the rest of the time. Despite only having one eye, Hikaru never turned his head to see with his other eye. It was Neil's favorite thing to say about him. "See, look at that, you would never know he can't see anything on his right side. And horses are fearful creatures," he would remind me.

I started going over to Neil's house when I was 14 and had moved in with my grandparents next door. He and his wife were retired and had kids and grandkids far away and as soon as they realized a kid was next door, they invited me over to swim and have ice cream and look at their horses. By the end of the day I was in the round pen and Neil was giving me a foot up to get on the glass-eyed horse.

I went back the next day and almost every day after that for three years. Sometimes we rode in the morning when it was still cold, and it would hurt my hands to pull the leather girth tighter, and Neil would sigh and do it for me. And then tell me that I shouldn't be afraid of hurting him. And on those mornings we wouldn't talk because it was too quiet. And if we saw a fox, one of us would just nod and the other one would know.

If we rode in the woods, he always went in front so his face would be the one to catch all the spider webs and leave the path clear for me. His horse's hooves would stumble on uneven ground and roots so he could tell me to move to the left or to the right. He never wore a helmet but made me wear one, even when I complained that it was too hot and my hair was caught in the Velcro straps.

If the horses got anxious or upset he would yell at me to stay in control, and not be scared of being thrown off. Not to pull back. "You have to lean forward, it will never be your instinct, but you have to," he told me.

Some days it was so hot we wouldn't talk either but would cut our ride short and go back to the barn and turn the hose on and wash the horses down. Starting at the top, on their backs, moving the dirt down to their hooves. Aiming the water near

their mouths and watching them stomp around and pull their heads back. Then letting them go into the pasture and watch them run and then drop and roll in the dirt.

Some days he would put his thumb on the hose and then aim it at me. And on those days he usually asked if I wanted to stay and go in the pool. I would find a float and he would sit in the shade drinking Dr.Pepper and we would talk. Him on the deck and me in the pool. He would sit and face the direction of his back ten acres and his half-a-million-dollar barn and tell me things about being older, and being younger, and things about being younger because now he's older, and how he lost his left pinky in a motorcycle accident. And how he was stepped on by his other horse and how long it took for his ribs to heal. "Everything takes so long," he said. "Now when things are broken it's possible they may never heal."

"I want you to know what it's like to fall off," he told me one day, "so you wont be scared for it to happen."

But I never wanted that to happen. "I don't have to fall," I said, "I don't think it's necessary."

"It is, it's the most necessary thing. Then you and him will really know each other. Once he's been scared and you've been hurt. Then you'll know."

And I did. A blue indigo snake slid out from under the fence as we were going back to the barn one afternoon about three months later, and he reared and I wasn't

ready for it and I slid right off the back of the saddle, landing on my tailbone in the grass.

Horses always run back to the barn, so by the time I got back up to the house he was tied up and Neil was untacking him for me. "That's my girl," he said and he messed up my hair with his Marlboro Menthol fingers and laughed and walked the horses out to the pasture. He got a Dr.Pepper and gave me an ice cream sandwich and we sat on the pool deck and listened to his wife scurry around inside.

He had a gun in the barn and I always avoided looking at it. He pulled it down from the shelf one afternoon. "When you have to put a horse down, you can either have a vet come out here and kill your horse or you can dig the grave with the backhoe and do it yourself," he said. And if you're a person worth anything you'll do it yourself."

"Have you ever had to do that?" I asked.

"I have," he said, "I had a horse with colic and so I dug a hole for her out back and walked her out there so she was standing close enough that when I shot her she would fall right in. And there is a specific spot, you shoot them right above the eye and at an angle."

"I don't think I could ever do anything like that." I said.

"What's the alternative?" he said, "watching what you love die slowly? Killing what you love, it's an act of mercy, sweetheart."

Neil and Laura decided to buy a big camper with a trailer attached, to take the horses to shows farther away. But the camper sat in the driveway for over a year and no one went anywhere. And he and I sat out on the deck and she moved mail around inside and they bought things that took up space.

“Another goddamn box from QVC,” he said, kicking it aside to open the fridge in the garage.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Who knows, I could throw it up in the attic and she probably wouldn’t even look for it.”

His diabetes had caused her to switch his Dr.Pepper to Diet Dr.Pepper and he was still upset about it. “What do you think you’ll be when you’re older?” he asked me when we sat down.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I didn’t know either, so I made lots of money. I made lots of money so I could stop working and live here and have these things. And now I’m old.”

“Why doesn’t Laura come outside?” I asked.

“She is the busiest person who doesn’t do anything,” he answered. “Today is our anniversary.”

“It is? You guys should do something,” I said, “I’ll leave.”

“No, that’s alright.” He slid his boots off.

“How long have you been married?”

“A long time. 43 years.”

“How did you meet?”

“I used to give her rides to school when we were in high school.”

“That is a long time.”

“You know, I hadn’t been so involved with the horses until you started coming over,” he said. “It gives me a reason to put my shoes on.”

When I turned 16 he bought me a show saddle. He brought me out to the barn and made me cover my eyes until he turned on the light in the tack room. He was standing next to it with his hand resting on the silver horn.

“A perfect saddle to take home high point champion with,” he said and smiled. And I did. That year Neil drove Hakiru and ma out to the National North American Peruvian Horse show and we took home all the ribbons. Laura printed out the picture she took of us holding the trophy and he framed it and put it on his desk, next to the photo from his grandson’s graduation.

As I got older, I got busier and couldn’t spend afternoons in the school year or even all day in the summer over at his house, and so we stopped working with the horses. Instead, he started coming to all my soccer games and swim meets and I would go by and visit him when I could. We would still sit outside, me with my feet in the pool and him in the chair by the edge. He switched back to regular Dr.Pepper.

One afternoon I took his cigarettes, which I knew he kept in the tack bag, and sat out by the edge of the field smoking. I didn’t hear him walking up behind me and before I knew he was there he was pulling the cigarette out of my fingers.

“What the hell?”

“You smoke all the time,” I said.

“Look at this face,” he said, “I can smoke if I want. This face has nothing left to do.”

“That face still has everything left,” he said.

At my graduation he sat next to my boyfriend, who he told me was gay. He did end up being gay, and when I told Neil later that summer he laughed like he laughed the one time I was brushing the horses tail and he shit all over my shoes. And then he stopped and handed me a cigarette.

“Just this once,” he said as he handed me his lighter and tapped on my hand.

I spent that last month of summer before college at the pool, recovering from my recent heartbreak.

“I wonder if we should move,” he told me.

“What, why?”

“It’s too much, here. There’s too much of everything. Too much house, too many horses, too much barn and too many cars. And not enough of us. It’s like we can’t even find each other anymore.”

“You and Laura?”

“Yes.”

“That might be nice. Maybe you can move closer to your kids and grandkids,” I suggested.

“I don’t know if maybe we’re beyond fixing. We could live in silence for the next 15 years, easily. We have been doing it for years. I had resigned myself to this kind of silence, and it isn’t bad.”

“I guess after 40 years there isn’t as much to say,” I said.

“There isn’t,” he said, “and that’s okay. But you’ve filled the place up. And now I don’t like the idea of going back to what it was before.”

“Quieter?” I asked.

“Lonelier,” he said.

They didn’t move. And they didn’t sell the horses. And he didn’t stop drinking Dr.Pepper. But I stopped coming home and when I did I didn’t spend much time with him. I didn’t like being reminded of being 16 and lonely. Even though I am now 22 and lonely and he’s gone.

My saddle still sits on the best shelf in the tack room, and his gun still sits on the top shelf of the garage, and his wife is still inside moving dishes from one cabinet to another.