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I Survived Hopscotch Hill

A Collection of Nonfiction Essay About Homeschooling

Mialise Carney

Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

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Dr. Sarah Fawn Montgomery, Thesis Advisor

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Critical Introduction

When I first set out to work on this thesis project, I was apprehensive. For years I had done my best to distance myself from my experience growing up homeschooled because I didn't want to be marked by it. Throughout my life, I sought out fiction or nonfiction accounts of homeschooling, yet the identities never seemed to align with any part of my experiences or observations. During this project, however, as I read homeschooling nonfiction books like *Running with Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls, or *Real Lives* edited by Grace Llewellyn, I began to see a stronger resemblance with other un conventionally schooled people, an unfurling identity that both challenged and connected with my own. The following four nonfiction essays serve to do the same with the homeschooling narrative that is currently being told in the creative writing community—to both connect with it, in experience, educational methodology, and voice as well as to challenge it in the same respects.

The first essay in this collection, “Shelved,” uses books as a both a framing device to transition between scenes and time periods, but also as a way to resist how homeschoolers are represented in young adult novels. In a section about *Stargirl* by Jerry Spinelli, I argue how the characters behaviors are stereotyped to either create humor or teach the intended public-school audience something about being different. I write, “She [Stargirl] was the perfect kind of homeschooled because she went to real school and people liked her...but I think I like these books out of obligations” (19). Here, I argue how homeschool characters in literature serve to teach public schoolers something about themselves: that they can be free spirits, naïve, or weird. Yet the actual representation of a homeschooler in the book does nothing but further isolate and misrepresent a homeschooler—the character Stargirl herself drifts in and out of a public schooler

life, dropping in only to teach the main character something before disappearing altogether, never actually claiming an identity that doesn't rely on his perceptions of her. This was paralleled in my own life, where I felt pressure to try to be a "good" homeschooler so that public schooled peers would value me.

A major theme throughout much of both homeschooling-centered nonfiction books as well as homeschooling methodology is the importance of reading as a form of education. Throughout this collection but primarily in "Shelved," I tried to represent this experience as well—reading books, particularly fiction, was a large contribution to shaping my identity and education while homeschooled. Reading is important in almost all the homeschooling nonfiction I researched, primarily *The Glass Castle*, *You're Never Weird on the Internet*, and *The Year of Learning Dangerously*. These nonfiction books all place a deep emphasis on the educational values of literature in shaping learning and identity.

In "Shelved," I argue the importance of books to shaping a homeschoolers' identity as well as an educational tool which is not often recognized in traditional public school settings. I write in a section titled *Dead End in Norvelt*, "I read on the back porch in the sun while my younger sister Karina tried to make up for all the school she hadn't done that year" (12). Similar to the previously cited examples, although we did both traditional and unschool, in this example I show the intersection between those two places. Often times a main argument against homeschooling is that children cannot learn outside of the classroom atmosphere, that learning can only be done via lecture by a state-certified teacher and a room of other children. However, here I resist this idea, showing that education can be achieved both through traditional means (as Karina is using a workbook) while I am learning through fiction books.

In the second essay, “You’re Always on the Phone,” I argue how the educational practices and methods used throughout my homeschooling experience were negatively impacted by family and social expectations. Throughout this essay, I explain how my mother had to constantly modify and change my education, always conflicted between what she wanted to do and what others around her expected her to do. While she was constantly changing and confusing her methods, the one she stayed consistent on was self-teaching. The method of self-teaching is employed often in homeschooling practices, especially in situations where students take themselves out of school and chose to educate themselves. I write, “She must have read somewhere about how self-taught homeschoolers were smarter, more driven, confident. She never really asked us if that was what we wanted...it was a lofty goal, like she thought it would make us geniuses” (27). In this sentence, I argue how homeschooling expectations can often be too high for the student: homeschoolers are portrayed in media as being extremely smart, self-driven, and confident, and for parents that can be a pressure to try to keep that tradition going in their own children despite what the child actually needs or wants for their education. This became apparent in my own, where my mother’s insistence that I self-teach myself in order to become independent made me resist schooling to the point of having to redo the fourth grade.

In this second essay, I follow a theme presented in Quinn Cummings *The Year of Learning Dangerously*. Throughout this book, Cummings explains the research methods she used in order to effectively school her child for a year. From attending deeply religious conventions in disguise, to hours of online research, she captured the immense pressure and research that goes into deciding to educate your children. Stereotypes that homeschoolers don’t actually engage in education is perpetuated in literature, like *Educated* by Tara Westover or *Running With Scissors* by Augusten Burroughs, where the children’s education is severely

neglected or intentionally limited, however in my second essay, I further Cumming's argument, to show the immense pressure placed on parents to accurately educate their children.

In the third essay "At the Edge of Spooky Hollow," I argue how homeschoolers perceived lack of socialization or social awkwardness can be attributed to both parental attitudes towards society as well as society's attitudes towards homeschooled children. I write, "Mama didn't like us to do sports, especially not ones with teams. She hated things like soccer and baseball and lacrosse because they all meant having to collaborate with people. She is a die-hard individualist, stone set on the value of never dragging anyone but yourself down" (44). Here, I argue how my mother's reluctance towards collaboration with other people and acceptance towards peers in collaborative activities like sports influenced my inability to interact easily with peers. Criticism of homeschoolers socialization is often misattributed to their personalities, and in this essay I resisted this stereotype, rather arguing it is often parental influence that changes how homeschoolers interact with public school peers.

Additionally, because of societal stereotypes that homeschoolers are weird and unsocialized, public school peers often perpetuate these stereotypes and don't engage with homeschoolers, further isolating them. These two situations—where parents enforced certain behaviors in children, and where peers also enforce a similar one—is often portrayed in homeschooling literature. For example, in Tara Westover's *Educated*, Westover is taking dance lessons and her parents tell her she isn't allowed to wear the dancing costumes because it would be sinful. She writes, "That Wednesday, I wore the leotard and tights with my gray t-shirt over the top. The t-shirt reached almost to my knees, but even so I was ashamed to see so much of my legs. Dad said a righteous woman never shows anything above her ankle. The other girls rarely spoke to me, but I loved being there with them. I loved the sensation of conformity" (78). Here,

Westover is conflicted between wanting to conform and be like her peers, while also trying to adhere to what her father has taught her about society. Further, the girls isolate her from them by ignoring her because she has to dress differently than them. Her perceived inability to conform or socialize is not out of personality, but out of necessity to maintain a family expectation. I similarly parallel this in my essay, in order to resist the ideas that the methodology of homeschooling itself creates unsocialized children, but rather parental influence does.

While strong family influence can be negative for homeschoolers if they are not allowed to explore other modes of socialization and interaction, family relationships are positive atmospheres for social and educational support. In “At the Edge of Spooky Hollow” I write, “Mama made up for all the stories her mom didn’t tell her by telling us everything she ever thought, or saw, or felt...We always read books at night. First out loud, big cardboard books that later melted into soft paper backs, yellowed newspaper print...This night was different, though, because she was telling stories” (40). Here, I argue how homeschooling families often mix education with family interactions—reading books was a night time ritual alongside family storytelling. Later I develop more into what her stories were about and how they influenced me as a person, both teaching me about life as well as inspiring creativity and a sense of curiosity. While homeschool families are often portrayed in literature as being cold, emotionally distant, and educationally stifled, I argued how the opposite is often true if the education is woven throughout the family activities promoting it as a constant experience.

In the final essay, “Hermit Crabs Must Never Feel Quite at Home” I present a subtle resistance against how gender roles for female homeschoolers are perpetuated throughout homeschooling life. For many homeschoolers, the mother is the primary educator while the father works to provide funds for the education (which is true in *Educated, You’re Never Weird*

on the Internet, and *The Year of Learning Dangerously*), as well as the roles for who is allowed to teach a given subject. Fathers are expected to teach math and science, while mothers are supposed to teach reading or history, which was presented in those same three books as well. Throughout writing these four essays, gender was a constant theme in both conforming to, and also breaking out of typical gender roles for women.

In the final essay, I push against the expectation that female homeschoolers especially are to adhere to the tradition of getting married and having children. The tradition is perpetuated by homeschool parents who don't want to lose control of their children, and further want their children to continue homeschooling in their own future families. I write, "When I say I plan to leave Massachusetts and never come back, Anna calls me a traitor...Mum agrees, looking at me with sympathy. 'I didn't want kids either...But it's just what you do.' I know Anna wants nothing more for me to stay—this is the only way she knows how to say it" (55). Here I argue that, although my family expects me to follow the homeschooling tradition, it's not out of malice or a selfish need for control. Rather, it's the parents own loneliness that create this dynamic, wanting to keep their children near them to further their own ideologies.

In the last essay, I argue against the societal pressures of what a homeschooler should be or act like at the end of their homeschooling experience. In most homeschooling representations, there is a moment when a homeschooling breaks away from their family purposefully. In this last essay I argue that this is not necessarily a condition of homeschooling, but rather the human experience. I write, "I am so desperate to complete the homeschooling narrative; to escape from the people that made me. To yell from a balcony that I am free now, that homeschooling was a jail, but it's not possible as much as it's not true. I hate the word escape because there's no way to escape without implying that homeschooling stifled me, when in most ways it did not" (63).

Here, I argue against the idea that homeschoolers inherently have to escape from their home and family, that escaping is not an essential part of being a homeschooler, but rather it is an essential part of growing up. I argue that I want to leave not because I was homeschooled, but because, like every human, I have to find my own identity. The current expectation is for homeschoolers to have to escape or survive homeschooling, that homeschooling is always quintessentially cultish and suffocating, and I argue my wanting to leave is not attributed to homeschooling but rather what I want for myself as an individual.

Through the process of writing this project, I also discovered a lot about my writing process, especially in regard to handling length. When I first began, I had only written one or two nonfiction essays, and I had struggled with length requirements, just barely hitting six or seven pages. I initially expected it would be challenging to write the goal of 10-15 pages for each essay, however, the opposite was true. Due to the nature of the project spanning most of my life, I had difficulty condensing and some early essay drafts scaled nearly 20 pages. I especially had to work on my ability to write and revise more concisely, to choose quality over quantity in determining which scenes or experiences were most important to deliver meaning.

As someone who primarily writes fiction, throughout this writing project I learned the importance of research and how to focus on using facts and personal history in order to create full scenes and derive meaning. There were moments where I felt that an experience I had had didn't quite fit what I wanted to say, and I felt compelled to lean on my fiction instincts and find a better alternative to reality. However, because nonfiction is about reality, I wanted to maintain as much truth as I was able to and I learned to not only do research, primarily asking people around me specific details or searching online for names of things I'd forgotten, as well as craft elements. Rather than embellishing the truth or trying to reimagine scenes in ways that would fit

what I wanted, I learned to use more compelling language, switch out scenes, or explore internal dialogue in order to create meaning out of scenes and experiences that outwardly might have lacked precisely what I wanted them to be.

When I initially began this project, I had hoped to argue against the negative representations of homeschoolers. As I researched more and began writing, I found myself almost aligning to the stereotypes that I often have hated: that homeschooling was challenging and difficult at times, that I didn't have many friends or was unsocialized. However, instead of distancing my writing from it and trying to prove that I wasn't like that, as I often felt obligated to do before, in this collection I attempt to show these experiences in a more honest light. I hope these essays will add a more nuanced voice to the homeschool community and literature—to show that these experiences aren't necessarily all negative, but a consequence of an early movement that can be adjusted or refined. At the end of this project, going forward I hope to seek venues for publication individually for each essay, and potentially use these essays as a writing sample for future MFA applications. I believe that this project was effective in doing what I had set out to do early this year, to discuss homeschooling at more than a surface polarized level, which is often the case for much of popularized homeschooling-based literature and perceptions.

Shelved: An Essay Alphabetically Arranged

Almond, David. *The Fire Eaters*.

This is a smart book for a smart kid. Mama said, only smart kids understand this book. I stared at its bright red cover, admiring a last name that reminded me of the almond bread she bought at Christmas time. It was braided bread, sticky marzipan. I read the book too fast and I pretended that I understood it even though I did not. I didn't know much about England, or the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When I told her that I liked it and it was very interesting, she beamed under the yellow lights of the half-finished basement. She whispered, "I knew you were a smart kid."

Bauer, Marion Dane. *Runt*.

Call me Runt. A runt is the smallest in the pack who gets pushed out so that the others can thrive. I was in the back seat of the car, reading *Runt* for the second time, the cold afternoon light bouncing off the car windshield and glinting over the soft brown pages.

Papa said over his shoulder without turning around, "You're a runt, too." His forced and buckled laughter bounced against the gray plastic siding of the car.

Conner, Leslie. *Waiting For Normal*.

I was always grasping at normal because being homeschooled never felt normal. My favorite moments of normal were going into grocery stores on the weekends or after school at the time when it made sense for children to be out. The cashier wouldn't peer over the rim of her thin, halfmoon glasses and ask, "Is it a school holiday?" even when she knew it wasn't.

Instead I would just bounce along dragging my small fingers across the row of brightly colored cereal boxes like every other normal kid.

Dowell, Frances O’Roark. *The Secret Language of Girls*.

I hoped this book would be a manual—a step by step instruction, like *Spanish For Dummies*. While I spent afternoons skimming that yellow textbook, tripping over the reorganization of *red car* to *carro rojo*, I carefully plodded through my new manual. I found myself rereading its worn pages to make sure I hadn’t missed any of the important parts. I knew that there was something I was missing, maybe a code word or a secret handshake everyone else had learned by intuition but I hadn’t.

The first team I ever joined was a swim team, and I wanted to know the secret thoughtfulness behind the girls’ careless giggles, easy conversations, and calmness. I thought maybe it had been there all along, in that book, and I’d just gotten it a little later than everyone else.

But there wasn’t any grammar or tenses, or vocabulary lists like I’d hope for, words that would make me fit. By the end, I still didn’t know what the secret language was, and the girls end up fighting and lonely.

Dowell, Frances O’Roark. *The Kind of Friends We Used to Be: a Sequel*.

This one didn’t help me much either.

Fox, Paula. *The Slave Dancer*.

“‘Flying fish,’ said Purvis. ‘There’s peculiar creatures in these waters.’”

That is true. Most times when I swam I got stuck in the slow lane with all the kids that were much younger than me even though I wasn't that slow. I swam in the right lane against the wall every week, knuckles skinning bruised concrete. Each time younger kids moved up before I did even though I knew I had better race times than they did, I checked every week.

My coach would always say when I asked for help, "You're just having a bad day," even when I wasn't. "You must be coming down with something," even though I never got sick. She never pushed me like the other kids, unless she was pushing me out.

Sometimes from the elevation of a blue styrofoam kickboard, I'd pass by the kids in the regular lanes and try to splash water at them when they weren't looking. Sometimes I'd pass the girls in the other lanes, and they would giggle and then not tell me what was so funny, no matter how many times I asked and swore I wouldn't get offended. The muscle tightening feeling came from more than just the 30 laps of freestyle kicking. I wished I would have figured out what the Secret Language was.

Gantos, Jack. *Dead End in Norvelt*.

I read on the back porch in the sun while my younger sister Karina tried to make up for all the school she hadn't done that year. She shook the rickety white plastic table with her foot, biting down on the end of her fat yellow Ticonderoga pencil and squishing through the metal casing.

"I can help," I said, watching her white face flush with frustration. The pinkness hid her sprinkle of freckles, tears filling up her eyes. She always cried when doing school work, and I could feel the explosion bubbling in the tremble of her bottom lip. I wanted to stop it, to keep her at a soft boil long enough to finish her subject.

“Leave Boo alone,” Mama said from inside the screen door. “You always make it worse.”

I shoved my plastic chair back further into the sun, the hot white of the pages burning my eyes. I bit my tongue against a retaliation that would only make Boo cry harder. She never did catch up, years spilling into one another as September came around. The soft squidge of falling behind.

Hannigan, Katherine. *True (...Sort of)*.

Lying is a survival tool, a genetic trait passed down from generations of people who wanted to get themselves out of awkward situations. For my grandmother, that was a marriage and five children she didn't want. For Mama, it was things she shouldn't have done, like spray painting an underpass or stealing skateboards.

My lying was different. When Papa came home from work and made us tell him what school we had done that day, I lied about Newton and gravity. When I was with the girls at the swim team, I'd lie about little details like who I'd been with and what I'd done.

“My friend and I went to see that new movie,” I'd say, when I really meant my sister and me.

Irving, Washington. *The Complete Tales*.

My house felt a lot like sleepy hollow. Everything was in a slothy haze, bodies turning to mulch under layers of blankets, piled on top to keep warm for the winter. Time didn't seem to pass right especially because we were never counting: five days or five months could have passed, sometimes I couldn't tell. Mama's calendar was always on the wrong month anyway.

The day to day routine was always the same: wake up late, do school work, play video games, go to sleep. On Thursdays we had piano lessons, but even those off-day adventures usually yielded their own routine: teasing my teacher's fat cats, eating breakfast at Anderson's Farm, playing video games all night. Although there was comfort in the routine, when it lasted a hundred years, I felt like something wasn't quite right. Everything outside of my window changed, the cars, the houses, the trees, the street. All the while I never moved.

Jackson, Shirley. *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*.

We have always lived in this house. The gray house on the hill. Hopscotch Hill School we called it, pastel chalks dusting off our knees in the hot summers. One summer, my sisters and I spent hours before a rainfall making roads in chalk all over the large flat driveway, squiggly half roads dotted with places I would never go to.

"This is my house," I said, drawing a misshapen rectangle in green chalk, fingernails digging into the loose gravel. Stamping over to the other side of the sizzling pavement underneath the pine tree, I drew a halfmoon in purple. "And this is my friend's."

"But you haven't got any friends," my younger sister said, glancing up from her own rendition of a store front in pastel pink.

"It's for when I do," I said, scuffing the lines into an inerascable smudgy blob with the front of my bendy flipflop.

Korman, Gordon. *Schooled*

I met Mabel at summer camp one year. She became my friend by default, and I didn't really like her all that much but she was a little hard to shake. I had made friends with a smart,

bubbly girl named Tessa, but Tessa liked Mabel more than me, so we all ate lunch in the cafeteria together even though Mabel was boring.

While Tessa easily skipped past the idea that I was homeschooled, Mabel couldn't quite jump that hurdle. At the end of the camp, when Tessa drifted off into a private school schedule, Mabel kept emailing me. I figured I was supposed to have friends so I might as well just keep replying.

Mabel used to talk to me for hours on Skype. She would set up a time, and I would spend an hour getting ready: brushing my hair, smearing on dark blue eyeshadow and red lipstick I bought at Stop and Shop for a Halloween costume. I would get dressed, even though I wasn't going to be leaving the house and sit, spinning in my creaky desk chair. And wait for her to call.

Most times she would, and she would talk about everything that happened at her middle school. She told all of her friends about me like: "My homeschool friend does this," "My homeschool friend doesn't know how to do this," "My homeschool friend has never seen this." It was always "My homeschool friend."

One of the last times we talked, she kept saying, "I'll ask my principal if you can come to my school. Just for a day. Like, you can shadow me, and my friends can meet you. He'd love to meet a homeschooler."

I kept saying, sure, that sounds fun. And I tried to convince myself that, so that I could be a good friend. I was never her real friend, though. I was always just her homeschooled friend.

LeGuin, Ursula K. *Very Far Away from Anywhere Else*.

On the side of the pool we sat in groups, our discount collapsible lawn chairs facing inward circles by age groups. The 12-15 age group sat tucked in their circle, and I glanced at my

older sister eating wet cheerios out of a Tupperware beside her best friend Hailey, who wore her signature style of fluffy boots, a swim suit, a winter hat, and acne. I was on the outskirts of the 8-11 age group, my chair faced inward behind someone else's already inward facing chair. I got there first but their chairs somehow still navigated their way around me. I listened to my designated group of girls talk, but I didn't try to butt in. I gnawed on the organic, whole wheat, no frosting Poptart my mom thought was healthy.

When they got up to go to their race, I lightly pushed their chairs a little further apart with my foot, feeling the cold yellow metal graze my flip-flopped toes. I dragged my own chair forward, maybe just one or two scooches and looked around to make sure no one saw that stealthy attempt at fitting.

When I got back from my race, my chair was pushed back and sideways like someone tripped over it and didn't bother to reset it. My blue towel that had my name emblazoned on it was missing, but I was sure I'd find it draped over someone soon.

I spent the rest of the long weekend waiting for another moment to push my chair up into a space where it won't get pushed back out.

Mass, Wendy. *A Mango-Shaped Space*.

There was never much to distinguish myself from anyone else. At home, my sisters and my personality blended together because we all watched the same things, wore the same clothes, experienced the same things, and my parents always mixed up our names anyway—we were interchangeable.

When I was at swim, I was always just the homeschooler, and it wasn't really an admirable weird trait. I had always wanted something cool like synesthesia, so when my own

mango-shaped space floated into my field of vision, I thought I had finally got something that would make me interesting. A stuck piece of orange color blocking out my left field of vision, it took me weeks and doctors' visits to realize the floating blob was a symptom of a migraine.

I tested it out and found this mango-shaped space didn't correlate to anything, not smell or sound or memory, but just floated there without changing. Even if a migraine wasn't as interesting as synesthesia, being able to say I had a UFO of color was still pretty cool. I saw it as a party trick, not a symptom of perpetual stress.

Northrop, Michael. *Trapped*.

I never got snow days. On winter days I woke up and watched through the gloom of my bedroom window the oak tree slowly fill up with crusty crumpling snow. I waited to see if the bright red lights of my digital clock would flicker dim for a power outage. Even if it didn't, I would wait long enough in the soft cocoon of my comforters until I was sure that I could convince Mama I could have a snow day.

"You don't need a snow day if you don't have to go anywhere," she said, a dented clear Calvert ruler in hand.

"But it's snowing," I said, stirring brown sugar oatmeal under the gloom of the kitchen.

"After school, you can go out," she said, in a way that was only slightly affirming, like if I did just half of it and begged hard enough she would let me creep out into the pale afternoon.

I sat at the kitchenette table in front of the two giant un-curtained glass doors, watching the snow fall heavily over the porch and across the stoic woods. The table was fake wood, pressed and stained into unnatural yellow gloss, and I drew dark green marker over it and wiped

it away quickly before it could dry. I stared at the same page of copy maker homework, wondering if I'd ever make it out.

Orwell, George. *1984*.

The August I was seventeen, I made a new friend. He was homeschooled most of his life, dragged from the mountains of California to the cool suburbs of Massachusetts by his professor parents. He went to the same dual enrollment classes as me even though we hadn't realized it until afterwards. He was the first homeschooler I'd ever met that was my type of homeschooler—a little pretentious and flighty, but not too much where tie dye was a staple pattern. He had a type of freedom I was craving; he sauntered into Boston whenever he felt like it, snuck into state parks late at night, and had friends.

“Did you forget?” he said once when I forgot. “We're the same person.”

The first time we went into Boston on the T, I gave him my copy of *1984* and he gave me a copy of *The Man in the High Castle*. I returned it in a week, but I never got mine back.

Quick, Matthew. *Every Exquisite Thing*.

The November was cold, sallow, and empty. I came home most nights and laid in my bed, staring up at the ceiling, trying to piece together the shapes I had found when I was a kid, all the years I spent not moving in Sleepy Hollow. He had ignored me in sterile way, the kind of way that the girls at the pool used to, where I felt dirty and wrong for trying. I had held hopes higher than I usually did, mostly because I always blamed the fizzle of friendships on the inability to connect rooted in homeschooling and upbringing. But he was a homeschooler, so I didn't know who or what to blame.

Mama kept saying “But what did you do?” over and over because she had liked him more than me, so in the end I decided it must have been me that was the problem all along.

Rosoff, Meg. *How I Live Now*.

As a conversation for a group project slowly died down, a classmate asked me what high school I went to. I smiled and blinked, a hesitation, before on misplaced instinct I said, “Coyle Cassidy.” A private school not too far away, I hoped that he wouldn’t know someone who taught or went there. I had guessed right when he shrugged and said he went to the public high school, so no wonder he hadn’t met me before. The lie is a comfortable one I will adapt.

Spinelli, Jerry. *Stargirl*.

I wanted to be Stargirl, and I almost went as far as asking people to call me that. I wanted to draw a subtle connection, as if to say: *look, I’m one of the good weird homeschoolers*.

She was the perfect kind of homeschooled because she went to real school and people liked her. She was unabashed and perfectly quirky and even if she couldn’t quite get the secret language right, nobody minded. It became my favorite book, but I think I liked these books out of obligation, because in the end the books were bad and the only thing they accomplished was saying the word “homeschooled.” But I wanted to like them, because at least they were trying.

Tolan, Stephanie. *Surviving the Applewhites*.

I told my neighbor about getting into college, standing in the dead zone between our two yards. The yellowing, crisp grass once held buzzing roses of Sharon Papa planted before their

house was built, inherited from his mom. One day my neighbor ripped them from the ground and drilled stakes in their place, so we were sure where never to cross.

“You’re going to go into culture shock,” my neighbor said. I imagine him thinking, how will you possibly survive?

My older sister’s early education major advisor told her, cramped into a small office, “You can’t be an actress if you’ve never seen a play.” And I imagine her thinking, you won’t ever survive.

Zusak, Markus. *I am the Messenger*.

“What was it like being homeschooled?”

“Oh it was pretty cool.”

But the thing is I don’t know. It’s impossible for me to separate the homeschool from the homeschooler, to know what was education and what was childhood. Most of those things blend together. It’s impossible for me to say it was all good or all bad, because like any other experience, it was a soft mix of both—years spent happy, comfortable, and calm easily became suffocating, itching, angry.

Most times I feel like a messenger, stepping between these two places and observing what has happened in the other, but not really being allowed to experience it myself. Instead, I’m sent to try to tell the world what it’s like to be homeschooled, and to never understand what it’s like not to be. I don’t have a permanent fit in either of these places, my only purpose is to try to understand what it’s like to be an other.

You're Always on the Phone

It was a Wednesday the first day I went to school and didn't cry. The only day I went to school and didn't cry I was wearing a blue dress—A-line, with yarn dolls playing hopscotch and jump rope sewn into it. It was the only day Ms. Helena didn't make me sit in front of the fish tank. She even let my older sister Anna come down from the second floor and play dolls with me during lunch.

After school, I finally got to play in the sandbox while Anna swung on the swings, her soft brown ringlets spreading out from her lightly freckled face. I pushed my fingers deep into the warm sand, hoping that one day I would be good enough to earn the privilege of the swing set underneath the cool oak trees.

Ms. Helena wouldn't let anyone leave the fish tank until they stopped crying, and I had been the longest participant of them all. I ran to Mama when she got there and in stuttering spirits I explained I didn't cry even a little. I said that I liked school now and I didn't have to sit in front of the fish tank anymore. Ms. Helena stood tall and leant back, heavy arms crossed, a sly grin saying *thank god I finally broke that one*.

Thursday, I cried the entire day—heaving sobs so big and so long I couldn't catch my breath. I only repeated two things over and over and over, “I want Anna,” or “I want Mama” until they forced my sister to come down from her upstairs hiding place. She never got angry, but she always seemed a little short like she hated playing grown up to her whiney little sister.

The glow of the fish tank illuminated her face while I heaved that I didn't know where she was when she wasn't there. When Anna went up the split-level staircase I thought she disappeared from existence entirely.

I stared at the fish tank, watching the goldfish swim around before my blurry eyes. Ms. Helena asked why I couldn't be good like I was yesterday, and I told her I didn't know why and that I was trying. Her disappointment weighed heavily, and I wished Mama had let me wear the blue dress again.

By Monday, I was homeschooled. My three-week stint in Preschool Montessori ending gleefully while Mama swore to my skeptical father and grandmother that I would go back in September when I was more mature. I accepted this easily, heading back to the comforts of Sesame Street and strawberry milk, leaving behind the institutional disappointment and disapproving faces of the little yellow school house.

A few months later, Anna left school as well. Anna had loved Helena's Montessori up until I got to stay home in my pajamas all day, Mama desperately searching dial-up lines for homeschooling information. Anna's enthusiasm had dulled over the months following my dramatic departure until she stopped eating out of nervousness, shivering in the mornings.

Anna's exit was softer than mine: Mama tasked her with only one thing, that she could stay home if she could tell her how Helena taught Anna how to read. Anna spied all the techniques that she learned from Helena—sand trays with movable letters, *Bob Books*, phonics, jelly bean reward systems. Anna walked Mama through Wal-Mart, pointing out each item on the shelves. Using Ms. Helena's techniques, Mama taught me to read; I don't remember learning, but I know from stories that I learned quickly and easily.

Mama did hours of research lit by the bright monitor of our computer named Bessy and I would watch her. She went through every blog and review, primitive Amazons and eBays, not assigning herself to a particular method, instead taking bits and pieces from each until she

thought she had enough to start. Papa sat back after work and on weekends, never offering more than a check book, a critique, or an expectation of failure.

For the first year of homeschooling, Anna worked diligently through her huge orange spiral workbook from Calvert Academy, a private school in Maryland that offered homeschooling curriculum. For my version of kindergarten, I worked less enthusiastically through the practice version of her workbook. It was beige, half the size, and without instructions at the top so that when Mama was busy, I had to wait for help or to plow through myself.

For the most part, I'd leave a huge clumsy star and go to the next page anyway, hoping to find something easier. Most times it wasn't, so I would turn back a few pages and erase what I'd already done and do it again, so Mama could see I was at least doing something.

The landline was always ringing, and Mama would leave us to go answer it. She would talk to her mom on the gray phone for hours while doing the dishes, her silhouette bent awkwardly to the right to hold the phone and wash plates at the same time. Anna would keep her head down and continue, short legs kicking, while I stared up at the pledge of allegiance plaque against the right wall, trying to make out the meaning of big words like "allegiance" and "republic."

For much of my early education, I followed in Anna's footsteps. My parents, who by law still had to pay school taxes, couldn't afford to buy six sets of curriculum each year. While Papa worked overtime to pay taxes for the local public school we were destined to never attend, Mama scrounged around to try to find the best and cheapest alternative modes of education. The summer before first grade, Mama spent the entire summer erasing Anna's old workbook. I don't think I'll ever get the smell of erasers out of my nose, the shape of her bent over the edge of wide

kitchen sink, erasing until her fingers could no longer hold the eraser without scratching against the page.

She gave up when the eraser turned perfectly round, the size of a dime, and she hadn't even gotten halfway through the book. She decided it'd be easier to just buy a worksheet at Big Lots. She gave me the erased pages and told me not to cheat off Anna's answers that were pressed into the thick pages. Still, I spent most of that year tracing the indentations with my fingers, the feeling of soft sticky rubber against my skin.

My sisters and I spent most of our time outside in our backyard forest, digging around in the soft pulpy wooden trunks of fallen trees and playing *Little House on the Prairie*. We made mud cakes from swamp water and cool dry dirt dug out from underneath the porch. Mama settled down in the kitchen facing the chill screen door, watching our electric colored snow coats wander between the outline of the woods, dipping in between pine trees and trash left over from when our woods were an illegal dumping ground. Sometimes she would research homeschooling material, but most times she would read books.

My mom, Tina, loved books, all kinds of books and she read all the time while we played. She was making up for lost time, I think, since she didn't read a single book until she was in her last years of high school; she used to tell us with pride how she did an entire project on *Johnny Tremain* by just reading the back cover. She did awful in school herself, so bad that her report card used to make her mother cry and wail when she saw it.

Tina didn't actually fall in love with education and reading until her artsy older half-brother sent her the full *The Chronicles of Narnia* collection in the mail. A half-brother, half-

estranged from all the way across the country, quietly decided to send her copies of his favorite books through the mail, and then call her on weekends to make sure she had read them. She has read one of everything, always gravitating more towards books about young girls, like *Emma and Me*, *Bastard out of Carolina*, or *Lolita*.

His little spark of interest kept her going, and when he left for home after her wedding, he said they were kindred spirits. Since then she's gobbled books, buying and buying but when he stopped calling, she stopped reading, like without him checking up on her she doesn't have anything to keep her going.

Even so she knew how important books were to herself that she made reading her number one agenda item: every day was filled with books. We read in our beds, in the car, on the driveway, on the porch. Every time we visited my grandmother, she would give each of us a twenty and we would walk to the nearest bookstore and buy a book. With the change, we would walk down the strip and buy chocolate or candy cigarettes that tasted like chalk.

Mama pieced our education together one review at a time. Most Augusts were marked by the sound of the mail truck idling or the doorbell ringing. We loved the feeling of ripping open flat-pack packages, some of them exploding speckled blue fluff all over the tortoise shell kitchen counter.

I flipped through the pages of our new textbooks, shiny muted gloss with loud, saturated pictures of Mount Rushmore. The front cover of my American history book was tomato red and the bottom right corner was picked into layers of cardboard pulp. I got dust under my fingernails picking at the fraying corners, lying flat out on the carpet of our half-finished basement. I read with a notebook next to me because Mama told me to take notes, even though I don't know how.

“Whatever you think is important,” she said, standing over me holding a paper coffee cup, her head blocking out the hot overhead light.

But I didn’t know what was important, so I wrote it all down. My handwriting was big, and messy, and shaky, so it took me too long and I spent more time trying to transcribe everything from the book than actually reading it.

“It has to be in your own words,” she said when I showed her.

I didn’t know what my own words were, so instead I just reordered the sentences and dropped some of the words she knew I didn’t know. I hated the textbook because of its weight and its oldness and all the other names inside, all the other people who had touched it before, owning and understanding the information I never would.

When I complained about the book, she pointed to the front that said “McGraw Hill” and told me that it was a real school book, that it was what real kids learn in real school, and if I went to real school I would have to read it anyway.

Not long after, I found discrepancies in the history and spelling errors. I grabbed Mama to show her, finding satisfaction in the fact that I found something wrong with it. She sat beside me on the carpet, flipping through the pages.

“It said that on the reviews, but the rest of its fine. Just skip the parts that are wrong,” she said, flipping through to see if there were more glaring errors. I squeezed my eyes and glared at the reflective pages under the lights, having hoped that this would have gotten me out of reading that sticky hardcover book.

Mama always wanted us to be self-taught homeschoolers, and she never really taught us anything besides how to read. We were expected to sit quietly by ourselves, desks facing inwards at walls decorated with maps or posters of cats stolen from our piano teacher’s waiting room. We

were supposed to read the brief message at the beginning of the page and teach it to ourselves. She told us this often, particularly when we reached a problem that we didn't understand, and she couldn't seem to explain either.

“You're self-taught,” she said. “You'll have to figure it out.”

She must have read somewhere about how self-taught homeschoolers were smarter, more driven, confident. She never really asked us if that was what we wanted—it was a lofty goal, like she thought it would make us geniuses. She didn't want to help us struggle, to watch something click into place. She wanted school to be instant. Being self-taught meant understanding the information the minute we came across it, without ever having to go through the slow process of learning.

I stared at the first line of my worksheet, kindly addressed to “teacher/parent/guardian.” It didn't explain very much about what I was supposed to do because it was a supplementary source, an extra worksheet for a kid that just didn't quite get it. But I had never learned it in the first place, so it made little sense to me. Mama always told us to come get her if we had a question, but I learned quickly that she would only wave me off telling me she'd come down to help later, and I should just move on to the next part. She didn't think I needed help and that I was just wasting time.

Most times, I sat next to Anna in the musty basement. Anna worked slowly, the sound of her pencil scratching hardly ceasing until she huffed hard and leaned back against her chair. I would start strong but then drift, looking up to think about an answer and not returning to the page for a few minutes.

Anna would notice, kicking her foot against the metal of my card-table desk, threatening to tell Mama. I would return angrily to my sheet, pressing down so hard the tip of my pencil would snap. I'd flip the page in defiance, refusing to get it wrong in favor of not doing it at all.

She didn't often come down to help, but she would correct our homework by chunks. At first every Friday, but soon, every month or so, slowly slipping into never at all. At least not until we had to make copies of our homework to give to our superintendent. I dreaded those days more than anything, and when she'd ask for my blue three-ring folder with the googly eye cat on the front that I got at Kmart, I would hand it over with a gnawing feeling.

"You're my worst student," Mama said, making me sit beside her at the kitchen table, flipping through each page that was incomplete. For months, she thought I was doing school, but I had been staring into space. Each page she pulled out had a first attempt hastily erased, a giant pencil star on the top and a note: "Help! You were on the phone with Bop!" followed by a hundred sad faces. The notes got more pathetic towards the end: "You're always on the PHONE!" in huge heavy scrawl, leering off and around the side of the page, which made her laugh at first and then turn angry, flicking a pencil skittering across the lopsided kitchen table.

She said it was embarrassing and that she didn't get why I wouldn't just try, that I should have pride in myself and my work. I explained I did try but was deterred by the stinging promise of tears to say that I just didn't get it; I didn't have the instinct for learning like I was supposed to. I wasn't going to be self-taught like Lincoln. She gave me the stack of all the worksheets that hadn't made sense in their own context, now out of order and months late.

She said, "You can do them all now." Snappily, mistaking my quivering lack of eye contact for defiance.

"How?" I asked, leaning over to flick through the sharp edges.

“They have instructions at the top,” she said. “You’ll have to figure it out.” She got up from the table and turned her back on me, opening the creme colored dishwasher with a soft squeak.

I sat behind her at the short breakfast table and scraped away the yellow paint from my pencil with my short thumbnail until the sun set behind the looming bare branches of our forest. She pattered loudly behind me, slamming silverware so I would know she was mad.

When Papa came home, he went in and out of the backdoor leaving the screen door half open, the chill night breeze blowing in with the smell of grilled Kielbasa. He leaned over my shoulder, a glance of his black work shirt touching my head, but he said nothing.

Mama always made the mistake of complaining to Papa, even though she didn’t want him involved in our schooling at all. It was a punishment that she always tried but ended up hating the consequences of because it usually hit her the hardest.

“I’m telling your father when he gets home,” she said when we’d beg for just ten more minutes on our favorite games. Hoping she’d inevitably forget, we’d quietly continue playing, leaning over our outstretched books, three-ring binders digging into our chests.

Anna would teach us how to bother Mama into getting us out of school, trailing behind her and talking, asking questions, saying she needed help with her math while Mama tripped over a huge ball of laundry. The socks fell from her bundle and Karina and I scurried to pick them up, to call out her error and count how many mistakes she had made.

She'd finally huff, yell at us to go away, and we'd gleefully scamper to the soft confines of the basement and computer games. Then she'd tell Papa when he got home from work that we were refusing to do our school, which wasn't exactly the case all the time.

Papa always called a family meeting. I knew it was about school when he used our full names.

"Annalise, Mialise, Karina," he called up the staircase, the hall light snapping on. His voice was exasperated but almost excited by the sudden need for involvement in our lives when he deferred responsibility for otherwise.

"What?"

"Just come down here," he said, his heavy footsteps thumping back around the small upright piano towards the kitchen.

We went down, trailing one by one, sitting on the kitchen barstools. My feet swung against the table, knocking against the pressed wood and I trailed my fingers against the rough ply underside of the table. I hated when he did this, it was like a performance that hardly anything ever came out of.

His long look of staged disappointment glazed over us one by one, his thin pinky-brown lips pressed together, leaning against the table on his fists. The bright overhead lights glowed against his wide forehead, creating a halo that hurt to look at. He took a deep breath in, his broad chest sucking in at the stomach, pushing into his ribcage. He calculated the kindest but most authoritative way to go about getting us to do school, his eyes wandering into the top right corner, so I knew he was thinking hard.

The speech was always the same, sometimes with consequences, sometimes without. He'd say things like, "Your mother says," "I hear that," and "You'll have to go to school if." His

threats never seemed to work though because we weren't really opposed to going to real school, at least I wasn't. But I listened with my head hanging anyway, my back tensing with embarrassment and the fear of getting in trouble. Karina would always cry even if she wasn't the one getting yelled at and he'd lean all the way against the table to try to get her to stop.

He'd impose sanctions on us, blocking out internet access until he got home at six, making up a random number of hours required of school to earn our keep: four, and at least an hour of math. Even when we did a full day of school, we'd still finish by one in the afternoon, and then we'd lay around, staring up at the ceiling, counting how long it would be until the garage door groaned open.

Mama just kept saying, "This is your fault. If you had done your school, you wouldn't be in trouble," while she flipped through an eBay page of discount jeans. Part of me didn't think she was right—it wasn't all my fault, she was the one that didn't make us do school. But I didn't retaliate; I wasn't like Anna, I couldn't just yell back without feeling.

Eventually Mama decided to try online school. Time4Learning was the closest I ever got to real school because it had a grading system and report cards that would show up on the "teacher/parent" page. It was all automated, with cartoon episodes for English, grammar, math, and pages of blaring html for history lessons. After going through each unit, it would have a quiz or an exam, something I had never done before besides an off-brand state test she'd found online.

It didn't take Anna and me long to find a fatal flaw: the system would let us take the test as many times as we wanted, replacing the old grade with a new one. Most times, I would skip

through the unit assignments and go straight to take the test as many times as I could until I got above an 80 percent, because I guessed that was a good grade.

“It’s showing on your report card,” Mama said as I stood behind her, hands awkwardly folded behind my back. She pointed out all of the attempts listed and the grades I’d gotten each time. I hadn’t realized it would show on her side because it didn’t on mine.

“The superintendent has to see these,” she said, flicking her hand at the blue screen. “I can’t just show her these. She’ll think you’re an idiot.”

I pushed my toes into the speckled carpet, digging at the layers with my big toe. I felt my face flush red, so fast that the skin under my eyes wiggled. Maybe I was an idiot; I’d never done anything else to prove that I wasn’t. I returned to my laptop and opened unit one, beginning at the start not knowing what else I could do. I was self-taught, after all. I was supposed to be good at these things.

At the end of the year, having cheated my way through the majority of my subjects, Mama decided I would do fourth grade over. She spent the entire summer saying it wasn’t a punishment, that I had started school early anyway so it would technically be the right grade. But as Anna stuck her tongue out at me and moved onto sixth grade, all I could think about was how Papa called us monkeys when the TV wasn’t working, and we kept hitting the *on* bottom again and again like it would magically fix itself. Monkey’s repeat things, he said, they don’t know how to adapt. Don’t be a monkey.

Fourth grade didn’t feel like the right grade. It felt like repeating something without adapting it. Like a monkey.

A few summers in a row, Karina and I went to a camp called College Academy, a private program where they had professors and college students teach college-like classes. We went, terrified sacrificial lambs, bruised knees shaking underneath the clock tower in the chill mornings. The panic waned when we thrived, weeks full of easy friendships, academic successes, and sunburns. After camp when Mama saw how much we liked a school-like atmosphere, she decided to enroll us in co-op classes.

Mama had never wanted to enroll us into co-op classes. She didn't see how they were anything different than real school considering that they were mostly taught by teachers or parents with degrees in subjects like math and biology. We'd gone to something similar right after she withdrew us from Montessori, Marsha's homeschool group. But after Marsha told my mom she didn't plan to teach her daughter to read until high school, Mama never returned. Mama's entire homeschooling curriculum relied on reading, and she couldn't imagine life without it.

We went to Ms. Lorraine's writing class. It was down a long country road full of large old farmhouses set way back from the street, painted deep blues and reds, leaning fences and Shetland ponies lining the road. It was in an Audubon place, the lobby small and wooded, taxidermy animals pinned to the walls. In one corner, there was a turtle tank that I spent most of my time staring into while other homeschoolers came and went behind me. Ms. Lorraine would come from the side room and usher me in, a sly smile creeping across her thin lips like she knew something about me that I didn't.

Ms. Lorraine was thin and boney and wore turtle necks like my mom. But she was gruff, thick turquoise eyeshadow and the smell of menthol Newport 100s drifting, her words came out

in puffs of smoke. I always felt dizzy sitting in the room with her too long, relieved when she would lean back and push open the old, sticky window.

Karina quit after not too long—she never liked challenges. But I did, and I liked the classes, Ms. Lorraine, and the prospect being friends with the other homeschoolers, so I joined the group English class. It was once a week at three in the afternoon, and Mama would drop me off while she sat in her green minivan. She passed her time in the parking lot spying on all the other homeschool moms' sitting in their minivans spying on her.

The first time I went to the group class, I sat at other end of the short conference style table, mismatched chairs squished up against each other. Ms. Lorraine talked while we waited for everyone else and I fiddled with a clicky pencil that I'd stolen from Anna, because she still was the only one who got the nice school supplies.

I always heard them before I saw them—a short bunch of 11-16 year old's, they stumbled in over each other, voices scraping against the ceiling of the squat room, slamming against the mismatched chairs. I watched their shoulders bump as they sat, drew myself in tighter, braiding my legs over each other until I was pretzeled.

The hour was physically exhausting because there wasn't a point of focus. Everyone talked at the same time, over each other, yelling, tagging, I couldn't keep up. I bounced my attention between them, visually tracing their mouths to figure out what they were saying. I clung to random phrases, laughing without context when someone glanced at me. I said nothing unless Ms. Lorraine turned directly to me, squished uncomfortably between the only other girl, dressed all in red plaid who yelled over me to a boy with a bright blue *Adventure Time* shirt.

I was the first to escape the stuffy room when Ms. Lorraine yelled it was over, the clock way past the end of the class time. They congealed in a right corner, backs turned, uninviting.

The door was left pushed open and I stood by the turtles while Mama went into the room to pay Ms. Lorraine.

I turned from the turtle tank to watch the group, to try to figure them out. I half-hoped one would beckon me over with a wave, but they did not.

The girl faced away from her, her red plaid shirt slouching. She said, “What about the new girl? She seems kind of stupid.”

I turned around quickly to stare at the turtles. One was stuck under the other, and its legs waved, like it was swimming in the air.

“Well, she is blond,” a boy said, stuttering laughter sliding down the white chipping paint of the walls.

I watched the turtles struggle under the heat lamp, looking more baked than comfortable. I wanted to tap on the glass, to hold one. But the sign said not to, so I didn’t.

I stayed a little longer at Ms. Lorraine’s, a few months at best. But after a while, the feeling of my stomach gnawing on itself lost its appeal and I stopped going. I returned to the comforting isolation of the home homeschool and didn’t leave again until I graduated.

Mama could never figure out what type of homeschooling she wanted to do and so we flip-flopped, never getting a complete education anywhere. Our schooling was a game of telephone, started with confidence and then dribbling down until it didn’t resemble what it was supposed to. It wasn’t her fault; she didn’t do it on purpose. It was just that everyone around her was expecting, almost hoping, for her to fail, so much that she took advice from all the surrounding sides and never got to do what she had originally wanted to. She wanted to please

everyone just a little, letting her original plans and ambitions fall wayside to others uninformed suggestions. Everyone expected us to be stupid, wacky homeschoolers, everyone but her.

My extended family used to test us. We did spelling bees for my maternal grandmother, reading books out loud to her in stuffy Cape Cod hotels instead of playing on the beach. We recited the Pledge of Allegiance to our paternal grandfather, science facts to our dad, quick thinking history facts to our superintendent. Christmas dinners were never filled with what my cousins had learned at school, a shrug and an “I don’t know” was enough for them. But for us, a deep breath and a performance of knowledge was required every time we saw family, legs shaking under the dinner table because we knew if we didn’t, Mama would get in trouble.

The lack of structured education, the constant flopping between the unschooling my mom had truly wanted to do and the random demands for classical, real school from my dad whenever he felt the sudden need to take charge created a dichotomy our heads couldn’t keep up with. No one believed in my mom, nobody though she was smart enough to do it, so we always had to prove that she could.

I did teach myself, but not the way my mom thinks about it. I struggled through primary education, pursuing what interested me when her back was turned. She takes credit for the successes, the good grades in college, but removes herself from my early education, saying I should have tried harder, that I was careless and lazy and naïve, and I didn’t put any work in. My accomplishments now are her final proof that she did it, though, so I say nothing. I know that if I deny her the right to claim credit for all the work that I’ve done, and all the struggling on my own, I will leave her with nothing. So when she says she’s surprised how well I turned out, how she doesn’t know where it came from, I sit back and nod, and thank her.

At the Edge of Spooky Hollow

Even though I was homeschooled, we never really did much traditional school, not really. My mom had never wanted to do traditional school anyways, but my dad's skepticism and occasional insistence that she wasn't smart enough to actually teach us anything required her to adapt the classical school-house type of teaching in some form. His own traditional values weren't easily swayed, and so she did her best to at least compensate on a surface level. Still, my mom liked to find ways around doing traditional school, and she liked to shop the most.

My mom, Tina, is a border-line hoarder and she likes to shop in bunches: she binges items, buying and buying until she has no more room and then purging, selling until there is no evidence she ever bought anything. My childhood was scattered with hope chests, authentic Amish woven quilts, Hollister jeans, books, dolls, baskets, buying at least eighty of them, and then selling them all, her craving fulfilled.

On Christmas mornings, I used to wake up with twelve discounted American Girl Dolls that had an expiration date: we knew to play with them quickly because she was going to flip them for twice what she bought them for in November. I spent most of my childhood in dusty corners at Kmart, reorganizing the record collections at the Salvation Army, or standing with my head sideways in the dark corner of the local book store, peering at cracked spines trying to help her find her next favorite book.

My sisters and I got accustomed to this freedom, but it didn't take long for my dad to catch on. His original homeschooling skepticism crept over us like an itchy woolen blanket. As the internet became more accessible, his career as an accountant kept him working from home, suddenly aware of the lack of "home" in our homeschooling. I remember the change, instead of his heavy feet running up and down the staircase every time he forgot his wallet or keys, the

mornings were marked by his loud voice opening his ringing cellphone, “Hello, Joe Carney.” A dedicated man, he’s spent 35 years playing the same golf course every Sunday, golfing during tornado warnings and thunder storms like maybe he’s hoping to get struck. He’s got his best golf score, 76, memorized while he still can’t remember any of our birthdates. When we quiz him, his eyes flicking up to the corner like he hopes they’ll roll back into his head.

Papa played principal, attempting to enforce traditional school by taking away my Mama’s credit card and blocking out the internet so she couldn’t shop anymore. Still, we found alternative methods, like playing in the backyard for hours or “doing” school in our bedrooms or talking at the kitchen table.

Papa is tall but in the painful kind of way, like his years playing basketball, smoking, and eating copious amounts of junk food are finally catching up. His height hides his soft balding; dark brown duck fluff shoots out from behind his ears. His big square face holds dry, blue eyes and a grin so wide it’s like his first day on Earth every time you see him.

Mama’s face is incredibly long, a head like a pin, curling hair with a few stray blond pieces that still haven’t given up on her yet. She’s too short to be the model she always thought she was destined to be, but prides herself on her slight weight so much I’ve never seen her eat all three meals. Her eyes show remnants of her parents—blue eyes littered with soft yellow flex turned them mostly green. Her crooked nose dips off to the side into a clef lip neatly sewn shut weeks after being born too early to avoid a blizzard.

Mama always spoke to us like we were adults since we were kids. She holed herself up in our gray house on the hill for homeschooling, and she didn’t have a job or maintain old friendships. This act was not out of dedication to our homeschooling but rather, she didn’t really want any. We were always good enough friends for her.

Tina didn't have a career, and by the time she had my older sister, she was happy to leave her job at the bank where all her coworkers made her cry. She'd gone to secretarial school in Boston, after modeling school, where she learned all things typing. She worked a lot of jobs, bouncing between banks, grocery stores, and secretary positions and by the age of 23, she defied her mother's desperate pleas to just work and buy cute clothes, becoming the first out of seven to go to college. I imagine her spending all of her weekly paycheck at her college bookstore, Tiny Tina suddenly transformed to Kristine Solgard, rolling up in her gray Chevy nova on the first day of classes with a school backpack, pencil, notebook, sweatshirt, sweatpants, hair tie, hat, and anything she could buy to feel like she belonged there.

She graduated five years later with a degree in fine arts, crying at her December graduation. By the time she started applying to do graphic design, she decided to just get married. She always says she ran out of time, but I think she just got tired of trying. Like she'd burnt herself out with all those five years of defying everyone's expectations.

I liked to listen to Mama tell stories, and Mama always said she was going to write a book about her life. She started it way back in college and she has the first chapter written in an old blue bound journal, tucked away in her memory box underneath piles and piles of clothes she's never worn and paintings she'll never return to because her paint and her confidence is all dried up.

She read chapter one to me, but I like to skip to the bad poetry in the middle where she keeps her greatest angsty masterpieces, or to the journal entries from her three-week trip to France where she had to stay with all of Joe's weird relatives. In France, the dinners lasted for hours and Joe gave up translating because most of the humor doesn't translate right anyway.

I imagine her sitting there, a few years into vegetarianism, staring at the full roasted pig that she'd just met that morning—allergic to wine and terrified of the carbs in bread, she never ate much. Despite the two semesters of French in preparation, she only memorized one phrase, “je n'aime pas le chien” or “I don't like your dog” because France is full of dogs, and she didn't like any of them.

The language of her stories are in everything we do. Every time something funny happens, our responses usually goes: “That's a chapter” or “that has to be the title.” The book that will never be written but everyone has different chapters prepared just in case it does.

Mama says desperately, “You have to write my book.”

I say I want to, but I'm not sure how.

My grandmother was a liar. She never told a true story, and if anyone ever asked her a real question about her long confusing life, she'd just say, “Mind your own goddamn business.” Most of the details of her life don't add up no matter how hard we try to cross reference, and it's like we never even knew her.

Mama made up for all the stories her mom didn't tell her by telling us everything she ever thought, or saw, or felt. When I was a kid I had bunk beds in my bedroom. Huge chunky wooden ones, the color of straw. I always slept on top bunk, Mama and Karina underneath, Anna in a twin bed on the other side of the room. Mama always wanted us to sleep together.

“It's more natural,” she said. “That's how people used to sleep, all in one room on a straw mattress.” I tried to imagine that, a big family all tucked up against each other, prickled by straw and the cold.

We always read books at night. First out loud, big cardboard books that later melted into soft paper backs, yellowed newspaper print. After a while, she would flick the lights off and we'd go to sleep, every once and a while yelling for Karina to stop whispering. This night was different, though, because she was telling stories.

Her voice carried softly as I watched the shadows of the room move around from the yellowy shadow of the nightlight. She had told us some stories before, but in the sporadic type of way when something reminded her of it. Her voice moved quietly because Karina had fallen asleep, and every time she finished one, Anna and I whispered, "One more, one more."

She started in California, how her parents had run a hotel in Lake Arrowhead where famous people used to stay. She had maids from Mexico who would make her burritos for lunch and spoke to her only in Spanish. Her and her older sister Diane had turtles, and when they came back from vacation once, they found their turtles missing. "Mmmh," she imitates the maid's response, "Turtle soup."

The stories spill into one another as the night grows softer: her dad dies, Rainbow Drive, throwing scissors at the boy who broke her new jewelry box. She watches a kid drown in a pool, rides her bike around and around the neighborhood after dinner, and throws water balloons at people over the balcony of her apartment.

When she finally stops and tells us she doesn't have anymore, I spend the rest of the night thinking that I can't wait until I grow up and have as many good stories as she does. I imagine her always in motion: a whirl of blond hair, streamers on her bike, scabs on her knees, and a scowl like she's ready for a fight.

Her stories infuse a certain wildness in me. One, for her tight leash, I can't fully achieve but I imitate in the easiest ways, dreaming up an imaginary curtain I drape over my reality. I

never understood her contradiction—her pride in her own wild upbringing, and her complete reluctance to let me even five feet away from her at all. Perhaps she thought her stories would give me enough freedom without the consequences of actually being free.

I rode my bike up and down the main road, only to our second neighbor's mailbox so she could still see me, and then back again. Over and over and over again while she sat on the driveway reading a book or cleaning out her car. I pretended she wasn't there, and imagined the low ranches were tall apartment buildings in a warm, smoggy city. That the towering cedar trees were soft swaying palms.

I wanted a taste of that freedom she bragged about. She didn't know she was bragging, even when she said, "I can't believe people now. I used to roam the streets of Los Angeles by myself and nobody knew where I was or even cared."

I always seemed to stump her when I said, "But you won't let me go out by myself either." Not even to the corner store up the street to get a bag of 99 cent gummy worms, or to bike ride around the rich cul-de-sacs with the big hill.

"Maybe Anna or Re, but you're blond," she said, "They like the blond ones."

So I sat in my bedroom and when I heard the shrill noises of children, I jumped up and stared out the cross-hatches of my window. A gaggle of eighth-graders from the apartments down the street yelled and stumbled by in bright blue and pink t-shirts with glittery labels. I wanted them to look up at my window, catch a glimpse, wave. But they never did and walked until they were out of sight, hidden behind the trees that loomed over the part of the street we named Spooky Hollow.

My sisters and I always played in our backyard, hidden away from the roar of the main street. Our backyard was only half ours, the other half technically belonging to the state. But they

never checked so we claimed it as ours, soft grass dipping into the bristles of wooded undergrowth, poison ivy, and burs. We lived on an area called Dead Swamp, a contradiction I felt because what else could a swamp be but dead. We loved the swamp, even though Mama yelled at us to keep away from it when we came back soaked in bog water.

We played most days in the woods, avoiding school work by instead creating independent lives in the forest. Dead Swamp, before our house was built, had been an illegal dumping ground, and even before that a farm so there was lots of things to live in. Rusted chicken wire, concrete blocks, tires, bed frames, and fallen trees—we found and nailed decaying boards into live trees so they could swing like doors, sap dripping down our fleece coats. Karina always had to stay in the back room, pretending to sleep on the pile of wet, musty leaves.

I was lucky because I was the middle child so by default, I got to be Laura from *Little House on the Prairie*. Anna tried to make an argument that because I was blond, I would have to be Mary. But Mary was boring, and Laura was all fun, so I claimed that birth order was more decisive than hair color. Karina played Carrie, who in all the DVDs we had watched so far was still a baby, and so she was able to quietly assume the role of watching and listening, which she pretty much did all the time anyway.

When we grew bored of our TV show games, we moved to our own. We spent years never playing ourselves—we always wanted to be someone else. I remember the ritualistic aspects, how we transformed the forest with our feet, gloved hands, and the sheers we had dug out from the basement when Papa wasn't home because he got mad when we cut back land that wasn't ours. Mama told us that on the other side, if we walked far enough, was McDonald's and we dreamed of finding it but never walked far to get there, blocked by the promise of coyotes. I remember being almost able to see the transformation, when we stepped from the real world into

the imaginary, the poison ivy vines creeping away into blackness and ice and atmosphere that we had imagined.

Our favorite tree was a short cherry blossom which roots held dead pets, and when it snowed, its thick branches weighed to the ground making a snow cave we'd fall asleep under when we got tired of sledding. One year it snapped in a snow storm and in the dry of spring without a burning permit, Papa lit a fire and reduced it to dust.

Mama didn't like us to do sports, especially not ones with teams. She hated things like soccer and baseball and lacrosse because they all meant having to collaborate with people. She is a die-hard individualist, stone set on the value of never dragging anyone but yourself down.

As kids, we liked to swim. We learned how to swim early, fear of the deep end springing into our shivering ribcages only when she started yelling that we were going to drown. The summer I was nine Anna and I tried out and joined our first real team, the Bluefish Swim Club. I shouldn't have made the team as I was barely able to keep myself from drowning, boney arms flailing, post-asthmatic lungs seizing. But during the tryouts, when the coach told me to get out of the pool, I knew that getting out would mean not getting in so I refused. "I know how to do it," I repeated in urgency. My sad attempt at the butterfly made her laugh, so I joined the team.

Anna and I started first, later Karina who would dip in and out at her leisure. Mama didn't mind the team aspect of swimming because it still focused all on the individual: we had a team name, but our own performance was all that really counted for anything. I mostly was there to compete with Anna, but also my first real grasp at people my age.

Anna and Karina easily made friends while I got sidelined to the parent's corner. I had always been closest to Anna at home, but she was quick to adhere to the ideology that younger sisters are vermin and pretended I wasn't related to her whenever we got near the scent of chlorine. Most times, I missed her, so I sat with Karina instead. But Karina was never quite as easy to talk to.

My first sort-of friend was a girl named Abby. She was gawky, and tall, and had a huge birthmark on her forehead and I thought it looked like someone had pressed her forehead into a grill, but I didn't say that. She was a bad swimmer like me, and she was awkward like me, so we spent a lot of time eating dry Cheerios and talking about Harry Potter. The first time and only time I went over to her house she wanted to watch Harry Potter again, which didn't make much sense to me because we'd already seen it. I had never been to another person's house before so I figured that must be what people do. We sat on her bedroom floor while her mom made us hot dogs and her smelly old golden retriever sat on my lap. It made heaving noises and then went suddenly quiet, and I thought he might be dead.

I itched, and didn't know how to sit, hoping that the movie would bore her and we could go do something else. By the time the hot dogs were done, we ate them at the kitchen table, and I mostly talked to her mom while Abby tried to feed her dog when her mom wasn't looking.

Afterwards, Abby got bored and we went outside and poked around in the snow surrounding their lake house. I kept asking her questions, but she gave one-word answers and didn't ask me the questions back, so I gave up and awkwardly laughed when she did something stupid like go down the frozen slide or trip over a loose branch.

One summer I took a break from the team, mostly because I got in trouble for yelling back at my coach and my parents didn't want to pay for it anymore. But I went back in the fall

when I turned twelve, and because I had missed a few months I was slower than before. Abby had somehow gotten really good and assimilated into the cool group, the ones with stage moms and race times good enough for future Olympic qualifications. She tried to talk to me sometimes, but I think it was because her mom told her to.

I wasn't very good at swimming, but I was good at the games. I always won the out of water versions of sharks and minnows because no one ever wanted to get caught touching me. I wasn't as good as at one in the pool where under the cover of bubbles even the coolest kids weren't afraid to tag me it.

When Papa would drive to the wrong pool to pick us up and we'd have to wait another half hour for him to find the right pool, I would sit and talk to their parents while all the kids I swam with twirled and screamed, playing tag in the lobby of the college pool. Part of me liked it, because I felt mature, but the other part of me wished I was sliding around in my green off-brand crocs, trying to get tagged it.

I could never really talk to anyone on my swim team, mostly because I felt like my jaw was rusted shut, like I would not be able to open it. When I was spoken to, I would open my mouth fearing they could hear the squeak. I wished I could convince myself to talk like I did at home—at home I was loud, and talked over everyone, told stories that held some attention. I wasn't scared of talking to the girls at swim, I just didn't know their rules yet, I still wasn't sure what the Secret Language was. So I kept my mouth shut, and listened. Everyone thought I was shy but I was trying to figure it out. I didn't say anything for a few years, but even when I finally tried, and I thought I had gotten the rules down I didn't. I'd waited too long, and by then everyone had an opinion of me I couldn't quite shake no matter how hard I tried.

The computer was my favorite thing from the start. A plastic and metal tendril stretching out tentatively across the world, promising something I've never had before, free and open access to people.

When we bought laptops with all the birthday money from my grandpa, Mama insisted that we would never use them outside of school hours. Anna and I picked them out at Best Buy ourselves, the only two clunky Toshiba's left on the bottom shelf. They had white keys destined to be plucked off by fidgeting fingernails. Papa, a self-proclaimed computer guy, spent three days setting them up in-between working and golfing, and we'd creep into his bedroom to steal a glance at their promise.

After enough begging, he finally gave them to us. "They don't have any virus protection on them, so don't click on anything weird," he said.

We swore we would never use them outside of school hours, trudging behind him down the carpeted basement staircase. As soon as he placed them on our rickety card table desks, we had already figured out how to log onto our favorite websites before Mama could try to remember the url for the homeschooling website we had bought them for.

Mama said from behind us, "See, this is what I didn't want to happen."

It didn't take me long to end up on a game about horses. It was the perfect kind of website because it was set up like the Facebook my parents wouldn't let me have but disguised perfectly under the innocence of horse racing and breeding. Mama didn't understand how I could spend ten hours a day on a horse website.

"Breeding horses takes time," I argued as she leaned over my shoulder, one tab open on a stagnant screen of a horse and three others on open forums.

I didn't actually like horses, so I mostly neglected my growing herd to the point of starvation, satisfied with friending everyone on the website and patrolling forums upon forums about everything and anything besides horses.

Our computers were all in the half-finished basement, blinking screens facing outwards. Mama never really came to see what we were doing, content with her own laptop upstairs, browsing through hours of eBay pages for the next obsession to flip. My sisters and I were all in a row, so it was unavoidable when I found a new website that they wouldn't join as well. Anna always focused on game play rather than socializing while Karina carefully followed my digital footprints everywhere I went.

The online friendship felt almost like an off brand of the freedom I'd been searching for since Mama told me stories about what it felt like to live. I lived in my head, imagining up images of the people I talked to, but there was still something not quite right. I'd look up and see the squiggly lines of the mesh paneling in the basement, but I could get sucked into the world of excited conversation where I didn't feel like I had to rush to keep someone's attention. While I had some near-friends at swim, they never tried to engage with me past the necessary.

I had never realized that friendships were possible where I wasn't an inconvenience or a wonderment, where everything I said or did didn't felt like an embarrassment. My online friends were the only friends willing to listen to my stories.

Online, I pulled together a ragtag group of people—California homeschoolers, the teenager who hated school and spent the whole time on her phone under the desk, the one high school graduate, the girl from England, my younger sister, and me. We all played writing games in each other's forums for a year or so, creating and interacting with bad storylines we made up, or stole from the internet. Eventually interest petered out, the teenager found a better group, the

English girl was too busy with GCSEs. Even the homeschoolers were gone, they had moved back to Hong Kong so they were never online at the same time as me anymore. In the end, it ended up the same as I had started: just my sisters and me.

I tried to find a new group, but it wasn't that easy. Sometimes people would message me, but I didn't answer and if I did, I just got bored. I didn't think they were good enough to talk to, or maybe trying the first time was so hard, I didn't want to try again.

I had had friends that I considered real ones, even though nobody else did. I had to watch my words when I talked about the people I knew online, because if I said, "My friend," Mama would jump in and quickly say, "You don't have any friends."

I adjusted to the awkward phrasing to avoid the tension like, "The person I know from online." I got really frustrated when she didn't want to call my online friends real, because I think even if we had been friends offline, she would have wanted me to call them something like "acquaintances." It was a feeling I couldn't shake, like maybe she was right. That they weren't real friends at all and I still had nothing to show for trying.

I want to write my mom's book, but I don't know how. We talk about it sometimes in passing because I think we both know the reality of it is limited: she used to say she had to wait for some people to die first, but those people are dying, and she doesn't act anymore ready. I can't imagine it being written from her perspective because I only know her stories through mine, as if they'd lose all their value if they weren't told by a narrator like me.

"That's interesting," she says. "But I think it should be through mine."

I wonder if this is a testament to selfishness, or perhaps she doesn't realize the impact all of her words had. Her own stories seem like fables to me, so deeply ingrained in far off lands and mystery that when I actually meet one of her characters, I'm caught off guard by their physicality as if I'm meeting a celebrity.

The problem is I don't know how to tell her story without also telling mine, like she's the cause and I'm the effect, because that's all I really know. I can't imagine her stories without my interpretation, without a sense of skepticism, analysis, wonderment. I don't know how to tell her story, which she cuts off at 29, without also telling the homeschooling. I'm the product of the stories she doesn't see important to include.

When I tell her I don't think I can write her story, I mean that I think she should write it herself. She looks up at me, eyes round and puddling, bottom lip jutting out. She thinks I mean she's not worthy.

Hermit Crabs Must Never Feel Quite at Home

My mom and I don't fight about much, but we do fight about homeschooling. It's the only thing we really disagree about on a personal level where she gets all hot and frustrated—limbs flinging voice rising while I sit there attempting nonchalance, regretting what I have said.

I can critique her personality, her politics, her appearance, but I can't critique how she schooled me. One of the first essays I wrote in college was about homeschooling and she begged to read it, mistaking my apprehension for flattery. She read it in the dentist's office waiting room 45 minutes away and I imagine her face reddening, the sound of a whirring drill spilling through the glass doors. She typed up an email on her cellphone sending it over the bad wi-fi to account for all the things I was wrong about homeschooling, like I hadn't been the one living it at all.

I've always wanted to pick the homeschooling apart, analyze everything she ever did. But most times I can't because I haven't found anyone who understands even a little; I feel like I'm the one who's wrong by wanting to say that any part of it didn't work like it was supposed to. My two sisters don't feel the same way I do, at least not as strongly. They tilt their heads a little, agree lightly and then continue with gentle counter arguments. I can't ever criticize homeschooling with those who didn't experience it either unless I want to condemn the entire system. I am always a spokesperson for the entire methodology even when I don't want to be.

“You should be grateful,” Mum says. “I made you, you're mine.”

Somehow the homeschooling is ownership, a shackle around my ankle when education at best should be a type of freedom. Most people are indebted to a faceless mass of strangers who were paid to teach them for twelve years but were never possessive of their work. I can never part from the person who made me—leaving is ungrateful and so I know that I cannot leave without also spitting in her face.

Mum always wanted to protect me from the world, from public school, from the public, at least that's what she says.

“You don't understand the pressure of high school. Do you even understand how awful it was when you didn't have the right clothes? Or a boyfriend? Or your hair didn't curl right?” She stares at me, her eyes bugging out. But I think that this is a façade erected to maintain the homeschooling tradition like she's trying to say: *there is something wrong with the world and only I can protect you from it.*

I think she made herself believe that the world was awful in order to justify why she never could bear to go out in it, or why nobody was ever very kind to her. But I wonder if she doesn't think there were any holes in the bubble she tried to create around us. When she wasn't looking, we poked air holes with blunt pushpins, gulping at glimpses of what we couldn't have, and we didn't drown like she kept telling us we would.

But I am expected to say no, no I don't understand. Thank you, I'm glad I didn't have to deal with any of that pressure.

“You'll never understand the pressure of needing to fit in,” she says, “and I'm jealous of you.”

I smile bleakly and nod, agree listlessly. I don't know how to explain to her that by wishing to remove us from the pressure, she tripled it. How could I explain to her that the thing she should have wanted to protect me from had been in the house all along?

The first time I leave, I'm nineteen and my mom is crying in the airport. I'd never been anywhere alone before. I never got invited to sleepovers or birthday parties. Instead of hugging

her, I laugh and make her stand in front of a sign that reads “Trauma Kit” while I take a picture, hoping it will diffuse the tension because I’m not sure if I can parallel her sadness. I’m having trouble squeezing my grin into mock sorrow. She’d been blocking my trip to study abroad at Oxford University for months, refusing to talk to me about it even though it was only three weeks in July. Her reaction sedated my excitement. I want her to be happy for me, but she’s not so I have to hope I’ve made the right choice alone.

She doesn’t let me say goodbye, her rosacea-red cheeks blooming a deeper brown, a signal of more tears to come. She pushes me to the security line, bubbling eyes cast down, mumbling that I’m only making it worse by standing there.

I try to make her laugh by running through the waiting lines of the TSA, arms spread out like an airplane, dipping back and forth between empty rows, no one around to crowd it. When I turn around to see if it worked, she’s not looking, her face pressed deep into the golf shirt of my dad. He shakes his head at me and waves a large hand, a goofy open mouth grin on his face. I turn back towards TSA, resuming a not-homeschooled composure, locked legs and trying to stand straight with the weight of my carryon backpack threatening to tip me over.

When I get back from England three weeks later, she’s sullen. “Papa always said the middle child leaves first, and I didn’t believe him,” she says, her thin lower lip pouting out. “You promised you wouldn’t leave me, you can’t leave me with them.”

I pull at the fringe of my shorts. “Anna and Karina didn’t kill each other while I was gone though. I think you’ll survive.”

My parents used to listen to cassette tapes on car rides when I was a kid. The cassettes were by some psychologist who believed in the importance of birth orders. On one of the rare days they went out without us, she came home and stood under the stovetop light, dishing out

our destinies. She said the middle child is a negotiator, perfect for jobs like president or ambassador because with all the practice of bridging siblings together what more work could bridging different nations be. The psychologist said the middle child usually leave first out of all the other kids, but she didn't believe it—she refused to. I was always her favorite, something she tells everyone especially my sisters like it will kick them into competition.

I'd always talked about leaving but I'd never really done it before, now this short trip away from home had begun to prove her wrong.

“Besides, you like Karina better anyways, you won't even notice I'm gone,” I continue.

“But you're the glue that holds the family together,” she says. “You can't leave me. I made you.”

It's a weight I carry with me always. The expectation of moderating, silencing, connecting. If my family were each a telegraph line, I'm the operator. I don't take my own calls, I'm only expected to choose who to connect to the other.

The homeschooling had always been a way to just keep us at home—I grow uncomfortable when people ask the question, “why were you homeschooled?” because I don't have a good enough answer. I used to change it all the time—the same as when people ask me where my name is from, because there really isn't a good reason except my mom felt like it. I wish I could fulfil the expectation, to say I come from people who thought *Harry Potter* would make me a Satanist, or that I was training to become an international spelling bee champion. The truth is the only real explanation I can come up with is that my mom wanted to have friends, so

instead of finding them, she made them. It wasn't that she didn't have any friends—she always had friends—she just must've imagined she could do better.

My sisters don't want to leave, not quite like I do. I've wanted to leave my whole life, like an itch I can't get to and I'm not sure why, except I've always got this feeling like I'm missing out on something. People get stuck here, in Massachusetts, and I don't want to get stuck.

But they don't ever want to leave. Karina claims that she'll get the house we've lived in our entire lives when my parents die, while Anna envisions grand things like Thanksgiving with future husbands and children, even though I consistently say I'm never getting married and I don't like children. She wants to have a traditional Griswold Family Christmas, while I hope I never have to celebrate Christmas again after I move out.

When I say I plan to leave Massachusetts and never come back, Anna calls me a traitor. She scoffs and looks away from me, answering to another person in the room like I'm not even worth talking to if I can't be realistic.

“Yeah, she's definitely going to marry a guy and have like, seven kids,” Anna says, predicting a future she deems I'm destined to have.

Mum agrees, looking at me with sympathy. “I didn't want kids either,” she says. Her lips curl into her crooked nose, a Lucille Ball worthy cringe. “I thought they were gross. I still think they're gross. But it's just what you do.”

“She's gonna have a bunch of kids, and live here forever, and be a secretary,” Anna continues in a slightly lighter voice, her controlled anger wafting around the dusty photo frames and my great-grandmother's refurbished couch, swaths of fluff hanging from where the cats have dug in. “Just like her mother.”

Mum winces faux-dramatically, cooing a soft “ooh.”

“Yeah sure,” I say, mostly to get off the subject. No matter of convincing without action will change their minds. For now, the twenty-year-old expectations of secretary turned depressed housewife looks fulfillable. I haven’t really done much to combat this expectation anyway. I know Anna wants nothing more for me to stay—this is the only way she knows how to say it.

For Anna and Karina, the close quarters were a warm fuzzy hug, a weighted comforter during a long winter, a type of security. The repetition, the tradition, the weeks spent always doing everything just the same was perfect for Anna and her obsessions with control, order, and schedules. It was perfect for Karina, a self-proclaimed sloth, not wanting anything to challenge or change her, she’s been playing the same video game over and over since she was nine.

While I shouted for us to do Hanukkah instead of Christmas, since we didn’t believe in anything anyways, they dutifully turned on the ‘90s stereo to Christmas music and started sorting the branches of the decrepit plastic tree. A break from tradition is a break from family, and so when Anna calls me a traitor, I know she is right.

I feel like a traitor most days when I leave the house and do things Mum would have condemned me for before. Things like using public restrooms, opening doors with my hands instead of my elbows, or talking to people. Even though she doesn’t have to know, I feel her constant nagging voice telling me to not eat out of salad bars or reminding me to flip off the school bus when I drive by, to stop loitering and to come home. As much as I want to break from the homeschooling, I don’t think I ever will be able to without breaking from her.

I was raised on a steady diet of contradiction, constantly digesting when she thought the rest of society was valid, and when it wasn’t. Whether she meant to or not, Mum acted like she believed she was better than everyone else—smarter, well-read, driven, and she didn’t want us to assimilate to the perceived idiocy of society. She attacked them subtly everywhere we went,

mostly in our sudden and short-lived expressed desires to become them—the kids at the ice-skating rink were prissy, the kids at the swim team were gawky ugly jocks, the homeschoolers were weird homeschoolers, college was made for idiots. When we carefully became a part of these places, we were the good homeschoolers, the good swimmers, or the smart college students, while everyone else kept their preassigned label. It didn't feel right, like she thought we were bad by association and just was too nice to tell us.

Everything that wasn't her was wrong, it was us against them—the relatives she hated, the movies she didn't like, the streets she didn't want to drive on, the people she never liked to talk to. Every constant expression was the only peer influence I had soaked into my pores until I wasn't sure where she ended and I started.

I never really figured it out. Now when I hear myself telling someone I don't like cartoons, I wonder if it's because I don't or because Mum hated them so much that I just adopted it, just figured that's who I was going to be because she was really the only person that I knew, so how was I supposed to know any different. I could never really shake the feeling of being an outsider. I became an extension of her, a little tendril of manipulated interest sent out after sixteen years of cultivation.

When I do contradict her, like when I find myself out among them and speaking, I feel the betrayal eating at my stomach lining like it's trying to get out. I'm constantly conflicted between wanting so desperately just to be like them when I still can't shake the weight of everything she ever said to me. I still see it through her eyes and I can't figure out who I'm supposed to be if I'm not her.

I told her once that I felt like an anthropologist most days. As if I'm immersing myself in a new culture but never actually becoming a part of it, distancing myself just enough so that I'm

still an observer, able to understand the quirks, the flaws, the oddities of it. She said that I was being ridiculous, that she never did that. She never made me like that, at least not on purpose.

I was never very good with people, a thing I like to blame on homeschooling but know that it's probably just the result of an abrasive personality I'm not willing to shake but try to overcompensate for with copious amounts of eye contact and poorly timed laughter. I learned this not too long after I tried to make friends with a graduated homeschooler who by default I thought should've been compatible, but even he didn't stick—I couldn't really blame his departure on the idea he thought I was a weird homeschooler, so I had to revel in the fact that I must just be plain weird. Not the good kind either, just regular, old fashioned weird.

After friendship didn't work out all too well, I figured I might as well try dating and see if that stuck. One of my ex-boyfriends was the first person I'd ever met that hadn't really cared that I was homeschooled, which was weird because at least two of my other dates had only wanted to date me because I had been homeschooled. While his lack of interest should have made me feel less like a trophy, it made me uncomfortable, anticipation like a brick in my ribcage hoping he'd finally react like I was used to so I could expel the weight. I talked about it all the time, more than I ever had with anyone else like I was trying to drive a reaction out of him.

The first time I told him, he just shrugged and said something like, "My mom wanted to do that." I balked at his lack of interest; my one sentence hook for attention and conversation hadn't worked on him, and I didn't really know what to do. I had anticipated that hurdle, eager to jump it and make a curiosity of myself, but it never came.

The car curved gently around the bend and I glanced at the Big Blue Bug along the highway, an advertisement for an extermination business that marks the strip between Rhode Island and home. I admired the darkening blue sky behind it, and only half listening to my then-boyfriend tell me for what I imagined to be the thirteenth time how his graduating class was only thirty-two people deep. The pride of his achievement, of being one of a few, puddled thick on the steering wheel and all I could think about was my mom and how similar his thinking was to hers, that being unique was all numbers and something that mattered.

Since I always like to pick at scabs, I said, “Well mine was only three. Or technically one.”

I watched him nod thoughtfully out of the corner of my eye. I turned to focus more on the highway, foot phantom breaking every time he nearly slid into another car. I did it quietly to avoid his gentle condescending “relax chica” every time my seatbelt locked.

“I would have been good homeschooled,” he said after a moment of silence.

I turned to look at him sharply. I snorted and said, “What?”

“Like, I wish I had been homeschooled,” he repeated. “I think I really have the personality for it. I hated the pressure of high school, and I’m jealous of you.”

My back tensed and I scrunched up my nose. “I mean, it wasn’t all like that,” I said, stuttering over words, and I felt defensiveness spilling in when my voice dropped a little. “I think that’s a weird thing to say.”

He ignored or didn’t notice my annoyance and continued to say he would have been smarter, more driven, more dedicated to what he would want to do. How he wished he had been homeschooled because then he could have done anything he wanted. He accounted for my lack of friendship in his own fantasy, remarking how he would have been better without friends, that

he didn't need people, even though he has a huge group of friends and still complained about being lonely when I didn't text him back.

"It would have been so good," he said, hitting the steering wheel to emphasize it again. I didn't answer while he continued, instead watching the bridges we passed under.

I don't know how to explain to him what homeschooling really was like. It wasn't field trips to the Boston Museum of Science (and even when we went, Mum yelled at us not to touch anything) or hours of self-indulgence into hobbies and interests, trips to the library. How do I explain the years spent staring at the ceiling, the cold sunshine dragging itself through the window, not bothering to move because there was nothing to do anyway. How I decorated all my walls with photos so at least I would have something to look at. The internet was turned off, the piano was too loud, the TV didn't work, and I'd read all my books. How do I explain the boredom, to live without sound or action because the only people I had were the wall and my parents and sometimes, they acted the same. How could I explain the itchiness that went far beyond the surface, manifesting in organs I couldn't scratched even when I tried to dig deep.

So I didn't. He never asked me anyway, so I let him talk and talk about how good I must have had it until he tired himself out. And then I agreed. Yes. You would have loved it. I'm sorry.

Ever since I was a kid, I always wanted friends. It was an obsession from the start, an absurd one I tried to measure at every turn. I tried to quantify it, to nail it down to mathematics because the actual innerworkings of it didn't make much sense; everyone in my family just liked me because they had to, but what made outside people want to know me?

Instead of talking, I counted every text I got from someone, every eye flick, every confused smile or head tilt and I compared them, trying to measure how people's reactions to me were different to others around me. While my sisters drifted ahead of me in measurable friends lists and birthday gifts, I lagged behind still trying to count the amount of times I had made somebody laugh.

When I was a kid, I complained to my parents that I wanted friends. They said that I'd have friends when I was in college. It seemed like a long way away, but I accepted that excuse because there really wasn't much else to do. When I neared the end of college and had less friends than what I had started with, my parents laughed at my inability to socialize.

"You're such a loser," Mum says, in language to imply she's joking but I know she's not because she talks about it all the time. How she's got more friends than me, how she just can't understand why I don't have any. Her only surviving blond pieces curl tightly in awkward ringlets around her long face, and she's jumping in skinny jeans, a date night with her old high school group of friends on a Friday night, the only time worthy of dressing up. "You're wasting your twenties. You wouldn't believe what I'd done by the time I was twenty."

I want to tell her that I understand the life that she had, that I thought I would have that life as well. But they all still feel so foreign, like I don't fit so it's easier not to pretend to. I can't demand a place in a world that I'm still not sure I belong to.

Despite her nagging, Mum doesn't even like when I have friends, or really when I have to leave the house at all. She can't do anything to stop me, she doesn't impose any rules, but she always tells me not to leave. She says how much it hurts her for me to not be home, that she can't lie to me: she has to be honest. There became a point where it was easier not to leave home

than to have to fend her off; when I'm out I can feel her sadness eating at my nailbeds like a reminder to go home.

She kept us home because she wanted friends, and by her own design I can now be nothing but her friend, and no one else's no matter what I actually want. Sometimes I don't tell her my work schedule, instead opting to just leave the house in uniform and wait for her to frantically text me, asking when I'll be home because she misses me. If I tell her I'm working a nine hour shift beforehand, she becomes so upset she yells that I need to quit my job, because I hate it anyway. I think she knows the more I work, the more likely I am to leave more permanently than just down the street.

Mum especially doesn't like when I have friends or have to go out on friend-like activities, even if it's just dinner with classmates or people I work with. She contradicts herself, both telling me she is glad that I'm finally interacting with other people, while also whining while I try to get ready to go out. She follows me out to the garage, holding her thinning robe together while I tie up my old sneakers. "Remember your poor old mum, all alone, by herself," she says as I squeeze out past her car towards mine parked in the driveway. I tell her I never think of her when she's not there, like she ceases to exist if I don't see her, but most times I see her in everything, cold hands clenching around my wrist in a gesture supposedly of love.

When I got my first job at sixteen, I found the world exciting, like touching things I wasn't supposed to was a form of rebellion. I liked driving, not responding to texts, working, talking. I was the annoying cashier that nobody wanted to bag for, the one who asked too many questions in between customers and only worked nightshifts so I could work with the other teenagers. It was like I was making up for lost time, swallowing everyone whole.

Despite my sudden confidence, there was still a barrier, half the time a physical one. At my first job, I eagerly accepted the service desk position without thinking that it looked out over the row of cashiers. I became a turtle in a tank, staring out at everyone interacting while nobody came to see me unless they had a problem. I think I burned myself out; I reverted to my old self, the shivering kid in the pool, staring at everyone as they swam away from me, stuck to only listening, and counting, and watching.

Leaving now, I'm exhausted because every time I feel like I'm stabbing her, the way she winces when I come down stairs holding my car keys. I stopped trying to make friends and to go out with people when their personalities didn't make up for the breaking leaving puts her through.

I don't want to be ungrateful.

I grew up thinking I would be able to shake the homeschooling, like I was some butterfly that, at age eighteen, would magically shed itself from its origins, never having to look back. Maybe I always knew it was false hope, even when I used to count down the days like *1642 more days until I'm 18*.

It took me longer to realize that I wasn't ever going to be able to shake it because the homeschooling wasn't just education, it's my family, all of them and by design they're all I have. I learned everything through her filter, and whether that's a good or a bad thing, I'm not sure. Perhaps everyone has similar filters, just a lot more spread out across than mine, so they are influenced by not just two people, but dozens.

I am so desperate to complete the homeschooling narrative; to escape from the people that made me. To yell from a balcony that I am free now, that homeschooling was a jail, but it's

not possible as much as it's not true. I hate the word escape because there's no way to escape without implying that homeschooling stifled me, when in most ways it did not.

But I think I am still hoping to escape like other homeschoolers do. I wish I wasn't. I wish I could be content with the life I had been given, easy like my sisters, hoping for nothing more than a job and a house down the street. I wish I could cry when I think of leaving, that my home felt like a warm bath not like a box soft from rain so it's turning to pulp and I no longer fit, limbs jabbing out at the corners and the lid is caving in on my head.

I wish I didn't have to hurt her, like I could live up to her expectations, but something inside me trembles when I think about returning to the hermitage of my home every summer. My mom was passed self-induced isolation from the mothers before her, and she then passed it to me. Her mom isolated her by loving her too much, telling her not to leave home unless she had to. My mom lived at home until she was thirty, choosing only to leave when she got married, the last of all my grandmother's seven children, the one she cherished the most. By homeschooling my mom tried to recreate the love and comforts of her own home, a forever girlhood, mother and two sisters became mother and three daughters—she always said she never wanted a boy. What should have been soft was bruising, crushing us in every time we tried to peek out over the lid, never thinking that we might need a little more room to live than she did. But I can't ask her not to love me that much. It is one thing from homeschooling I can never shake, even if I want to.

When I think about leaving, I imagine going back to where it started. To ditch the dark, cold winters of Massachusetts, the winters of dryness that makes my nose bleed and my eyes burn and the months spent hiding under layers and layers of comforters that never seem to warm me. I have to go to the place that my mom says is as hot as an oven but in the dry kind of way, not like here where it's sluggish and full of bugs and gruff people, bent like trees in the snow. I

want to trade for the hot concrete of California, the heat and the palm trees and the stucco and the earthquakes and the fault lines. The women in my family have a habit of running to California when they can't take it anymore, like it's just far enough out of reach where no one can find them even if they're looking.

I imagine saying nothing. To leave in the middle of the afternoon in August in my bright yellow beetle, the approaching autumn sun glinting off the windshield. I don't take anything, the hatchback empty except for maybe a box of books I haven't read yet. I'm not sentimental enough to have anything to hold onto.

I don't imagine her there because I don't know what I would say to her if she was, but I'm not sure if she would say goodbye to me anyway. But what I know for sure is that I have to go back to where it started, at least, back to California where the freedom came from.