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## In the Hours between You and Me

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# In the Hours Between You and Me

by Amanda Mattern

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing

Linfield College

May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2011

Approved by *Signature redacted*

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# In the Hours Between You and Me

by Amanda Mattern

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## Introduction

When I began the giant feat of "Thesis" I didn't know where to begin. At first I had an idea for a novel but then I realized that there were three pieces in my repertoire that I loved and wanted to be published. So I began my thesis with two fiction pieces and one memoir. Who knew that in the end this book would become mostly memoirs and only one-fourth fiction? Even though it didn't turn out the way I'd envisioned it initially, In the Hours Between You and Me has become a work of art that I'm very proud of.

The memoir I started with was "Love Conquers All" and it is my most naked piece. By naked I mean it was written in a time where I could more be vulnerable and honest than ever before and included everything, good and bad. I think it could be my best piece. And though it may make some readers uneasy, it's an important memoir to me because of when, why, and how I wrote it. And to make everyone feel better, one of the pieces that follows "Love Conquers All" is about expectations in a relationship, a list that was born after the explosion of a terrible relationship. "The Relationship Agreement" was written as a serious list but meant to be read with humor.

The two fiction stories I wanted to include were "Hiding" and "Perfectly Buttered Toast." What I've noticed about my fiction writing is I love to start out with a vivid image in my mind and ruminate for a month or so over what might be happening. "Hiding" began with an image of a pink Hermès purse seemingly floating through a snowstorm in a rural area. Afterwards, I learned who was carrying the purse, the character, and discovered what kind of a person she was and that her name was Cara. After I had created a strong character, I took something from my own experience and handed it to Cara to see what she would do with it. The fact that she finds her husband high on cocaine while watching their son isn't a fabricated issue. It's similar to a problem I, myself, have experienced, but because Cara is so different from me, she handles it in a very unconventional way. Voilà, "Hiding!"

"Perfectly Buttered Toast" is probably my favorite piece. Mostly because I *love* doughnuts and I like to butter my toast a certain way. This piece began with the picture in my mind of a very stylish, pretty, but closed-off woman sitting in a doughnut shop and only eating toast. And no jam either. Evelyn is my favorite character, she's so odd and I love it. I decided to take some of my oddities and quirks and explode them into irrational proportions for Evelyn. Writing her character was so much fun that I hope she can come back in another piece sometime in the future.

From these pieces, everything started to flow into place. I remembered another piece called "Preggers" that I had really liked so I wanted to include that, too. But now I needed a section on family for "Preggers" to fit. That's where the

chapters started to emerge: a section on family, a section on relationships, and a fiction section.

But then I was on a roll, I remembered other pieces I had written and revised them heavily to become what they are now. And then I had more to say about everything. What used to be too hard to say now had to come out. Thus was born "The France Chronicles."

"The France Chronicles" began with "*Obligatoire*" because I really felt that story needed to be told. Having empathy for people is really important and I think more people should be aware of that and try to learn, especially that girl. Then "*Le Bus*" just popped out. There was no way I could write about France and *not* talk about the bus. Remembering how frustrated and scared I was made me realize that, at the time, I was definitely putting on a braver face than I felt. I wouldn't admit that I was really scared walking home in the dark because at the time I wasn't letting myself be fearful. But as I wrote it I discovered I was quite terrified of what could happen in the dark. Of course now, home safe, I can accept that I was fearful.

Oh, and . There was only one name in my thesis that I decided to change, and it was not ' . " I feel that one changes a name to protect whom they're speaking/writing of and I have no desire to protect

's name in the slightest. That being said, I didn't change the names of my sisters or any family members either not because I don't want to protect them, but because I don't say anything nasty about them. Honestly I think my family should be revered for being the most well-functioning and loving family I

know. So there's really no reason to change their names. There was one name I changed, marked with an asterisk. It has been changed because I have great respect for his family and they deserve discretion.

The title is something I have thought about a lot and I really like what it came down to. I chose In the Hours Between You and Me because it seemed like a great way to describe the separations in this book. In the first chapter, "The France Chronicles," it describes the actual hours and distances between my family and me and between the understanding of people: how divergent the expectations of one another's character can be. "Roses are Red, Violets are Blue, Relationships are a Bitch," is another one of my favorite titles and the book's title connects to this second chapter because it describes the differences in needs and wants in relationships. The third chapter is about family and how we connect with one another, with other families, and with societal expectations. And the final chapter emphasizes the intimacy of the "You and Me" in the title and exploring the discovery of lovers or the loss of them in fiction.

And now I need to thank a few people. Anna Keesey, my thesis advisor; thank you for all your wonderful advice and letting me roam wherever I wanted and sometimes needed in this book. My mother spent countless hours telling me what I might change to improve things, proofreading, and simply staying on the phone with me while I cried about not knowing if this was going to work out. She even stayed on the phone when I snapped at her in the hours of stressed and exhausted bitchiness. Thank you, Mom.

Thank you to my whole family for giving me lots of stuff to write about. Jessica and Lindsey, thank you for letting me write about you even though neither of you really had a choice. Thank you, Daddy, for supporting me the whole way and without whom I never would have learned French and, eventually, had all these great things to write about. Dad encouraged every feat I ever attempted and inspired me to learn languages, be adventurous and try new foods, and to love and have faith in myself. I have to thank my lovely niece and nephew, Brooklyn and Logan for having wonderful personalities and being lots of fun to write about. Lauren Ross, thank you for being there to hold me together when I was falling apart. And lastly, Kelsey Hatley, for simply praising my work in the last legs of this venture when I was convinced everything I'd written was crap. Thank you.

## Chapter One:

### The France Chronicles

## *Obligatoire*

I hated being in France. \_\_\_\_\_ called me a whore weekly, I didn't have enough money for food, the classes were hard, and I had to ride the bus-- one of my least favorite things. But that half an hour meant more to me than my entire four months abroad. I didn't know I had it in me, but that half an hour gave me character. And I learned a ton of really interesting things about France's history.

The walk from the bus stop to the *Université* \_\_\_\_\_ was a long one; at least six blocks and even longer when you're late, which I was. It was almost 7:00 and the buses stopped at 7:50 so I was planning on catching the last half an hour of the lecture, then booking it back to the bus.

As I sweated through my hoodie, I raced around the buildings on campus and charged through the double doors of the exchange student hall. No one was in the lobby. I opened the first doors to the auditorium and listened for sounds beyond the second set of giant solid wood doors. I heard nothing. I pulled on the heavy door and tried to sneak my way in. I turned to close it gently on the other side and turned to face the hundreds of seats full of foreign exchange students. I

expected to see Kelsy, my blonde *amie* from Kansas, and a sea of self-segregated Americans and Japanese/Chinese exchange students.

But no one was there. Every seat was empty. And at the front of the auditorium was the same man from the previous week's lecture. He sat in front of the empty chairs, behind his desk with his laptop and another computer and his book of notes. His head was in his hand and he looked up as I plunked down the huge steps. "*Bonsoir, monsieur,*" I said. I continued in French, "Am I too late? Did you already finish the lecture?" I asked him, knowing full well the answer.

"I never began," he replied quietly.

"Well, where is everyone?"

"No one came."

I remember the previous week when a girl from Notre Dame in Indiana interrupted him mid-lecture to ask if it was "obligatory" to attend these lectures. She spoke in her normal low, almost monotone yet complaining voice that made me cringe and even though her French was pretty damn good, "*Monsieur, est-ce que ce cours est obligatoire?*" I especially didn't like her now; she was unattractive, man-faced, and black-haired with a wrinkled nose that made her look like she was always dissatisfied with something.

So, sidebar for a minute, here. "Fuck" had become my most favorite word when I was in France, partly because I was having a terrible time and that word seemed to embody France, and partly because I had convinced myself that French people didn't know that word. They do. But it was my newly embraced and culminating word so it even made it into my internal monologue, which is

why, in my mind I said, "Are you fucking kidding me? Who asks that?" I mean, really, how did she get into Notre Dame with an attitude like that?

But anyway, she asked her offensive question and, stunned, all the professor could do was reply that it was certainly not required but it was for our own benefit and information because each of his lectures pertained to the trip we'd be taking that weekend, wherever the program was planning on driving us around France. I knew he was upset she asked.

But now I stood a few steps down from the doors and I looked at the man who had worked so hard to create a presentation for our benefit that he didn't need to do. He had his own job and he didn't need to do this for us. He certainly didn't need to do it for that bitch from Notre Dame.

He thought I was going to just turn and leave so he didn't bother mopping himself up or looking up at me expectantly. I could see his eyes were watery and not even his glasses or the distance between us could cover up how terrible he felt.

"Well," I walked down another step, "maybe you could give me your presentation. I know you probably have lots of other things to do, but... I'm here. I'd like to hear about the troglodytes." I looked at him, forcing my face to be innocent and non-judgmental, ignoring the fact that he felt downtrodden. I didn't coddle him or look pityingly at him. I looked him straight in the eye because that's what I thought he deserved.

"Really? Well, ok." I headed for a desk in the center of the room. "You could sit up here with me if you like," he said.

So I sat on the stage with him for half an hour, listening and taking diligent notes. I sat right next to him, looking up at the drop down projector screen and gave him all of my attention. I don't think I've been that interested or that determined to be that interested in something since I learned how to read. I learned all the different types of rocks that were in the area, what Troglodytes ate, how they built their homes, how to correctly pronounce "*troglydytiques*." I learned so much more than I would have if the room had had even one more student in it.

The Troglodytes built their homes into the limestone and sandstone and at one point France had even been underwater. Underneath all the famous French architecture, the earth had actual seashells in it and when I toured the caves that weekend I made sure to run my hand over the walls and feel the sand and search for shells. On the tour, I made sure to talk about all the cool and interesting things I had learned at the lecture, telling everyone to look closely at the rock and describing how the people lived. The next lecture had two other people in it so I guess it didn't help much but I'm sure the professor wanted more than just me. But regardless of what he wanted, that's what he deserved.

*Le Bus*

Public transportation makes me want to curl up into a ball and die. It started in eighth grade when my school bus route changed and we suddenly went from snobby upper-class students to sleazy lower-class students. These new people had drug addicts for parents, never had clean clothes, and seemed to seep in hatred for the people who didn't live in their apartment complex. So for the next five years I sat on the school bus every day with the thirty kids from Cedar Mill Apartments; I sat alone in the half-seat at the very back of the bus and listened to my CD's, trying to ignore the drugs being passed, the water bottles of alcohol. Buses are places where fear, hurt, and hatred are locked in together by one folding plate glass door.

In France I had to ride the bus to school everyday. Everyday I was up at the crack of shitness and drinking my weak tea and eating barely-toasted toast with Nutella. Learning how to read a bus schedule-now that was a life lesson that was probably important. Now I've learned it and I never want to think about it again.

I have two main issues with the buses in France. One, stop hitting on me, you creepy French and/or Moroccan men. Two, when you say you're going to show up at 7:16, you fucking show up at 7:16.

First there was the super awesome fact that I was pretty low on funds in France and I was trying to save my money for things like traveling and going out to fun places and really getting close France and French culture. This meant that I didn't really want to spend 40 Euros (read, \$65) on a cell phone. Oh, and wait, don't forget about the minutes... you'll want those. So seeing as most of my friends and I had a normal meeting place and time and I couldn't use a phone to call my family in the US anyway, I figured, who needs to spend all that money on something that I probably don't need?

Then the bus didn't come.

It was 12:30am on a Thursday night and I sat at the normal "*Le Cotra*" bus stop with a bunch of French people waiting for our bus home. The night bus comes once every hour and some change of minutes and it's a long, cold wait if you miss it. I sat there fifteen minutes early and after a while a girl came riding up on her bike, "Hey, the bus isn't coming here, they closed this stop down for the festival," she told us all in French. I immediately wrote her off as trying to fuck with me, you know those French kids. But then the crowd started walking away.

The farther they walked the more I believed her. So I rushed to follow the crowd and started walking to the next bus stop. I turned down the long main street, heading towards the "T" at the end of the road thinking that the bus might

stop there instead. But as I walked I saw the number 20 bus roll in front of me and pause and then keep on driving. I was at least four blocks away from it.

So there I was, dressed up cute and standing in the middle of the sidewalk, cursing at the damn French people who apparently don't know how to make a fucking sign saying "Oh, by the way, tonight the bus isn't going to come here." Nope, France is going to leave me stranded in the middle of a city that I've only been in for a few weeks without a cell phone and without an idea of when or where the next bus might come. And I can't walk home because a, I don't exactly know where it is and b, there are creepy people who cat call at you and I was already too freaked out to yell "*Vas te faire foutre*" twenty times while walking home alone.

"Fucking France. You're killin' me," I thought. Luckily the city had positioned some policemen to barricade a street (probably why my bus avoided that area in general) for the festival. I slunk up to them, totally embarrassed and cursing the hell out of everything French in my head, "*Bonsoir, messieurs. Um, j'ai raté le bus, évidemment et j'ai pas un mobile. Est-ce que c'est possible si vous pouvez appeler un taxi pour moi?*" Just call me a taxi, I wanted to say. I'm lost, scared and I need a CELL PHONE!!! But I held it together until I could get back to my host-house. Under my covers and somewhat safe, I skyped my parents.

"Fucking France. Fucking Buses!"

So then there was the plethora of drunk, high, smoking black men who always hit on me. I don't know what it is, but at 11 'o clock at night, apparently

the fact that I'm on the bus, and blonde, means I want to get laid. I had no idea, but all the black guys knew it for sure.

Momadou was the most forward of them all. He seemed nice enough but he spoke French with a heavy Moroccan accent so I could hardly understand him. What I derived was he worked the night shift somewhere and took the bus to the African quarter that was two stops past mine on the night bus. The first couple of times we encountered each other on the bus he worked hard to try to speak clearly and took my phone (at this point I'd bought one out of necessity and fear) and put his phone number in it. "We could have coffee sometime," he said with a big friendly smile.

So, yeah, at the beginning he was nice. But soon I learned which night bus he rode so I avoided the 11:44 bus and just waited the extra hour for the 12:53 bus in order to avoid him; I'd never called him for coffee.

It was inevitable, though, and one night he was there on the bus and this time gave no care or thought to the fact that I couldn't understand him. I was polite, maybe too polite. The bus was unusually packed that night and I stood hovering next to the folding doors so I could make a quick escape. When the bus jolted us, he held me up, touching me on my waist and hips, and continuing to chatter. He was irritated I never called. I told him I was really busy: I was writing my final *dossier*, ten pages in French on the subject of female circumcision. Then he rambled on and I heard something about walking me home and I asked to confirm if that's really what he said. "What? You want me to walk you home?" he said. Momadou was pretty excited at that thought.

"No. Uh, what were you saying?" And then we rolled to my stop. "Well, bye Momadou," I said.

He hugged me tight and said, "Call me for coffee if you have time, Amanda."

I jumped off the bus ledge and started off quickly around the corner, terrified that he'd decide to follow me. And not just Momadou, *anyone* on the bus was a threat in the unlit seven blocks back to my house. I kept one ear bud in and sang loudly to Bonnie Raitt, the other ear staying alert for any other sounds. Inside my hoodie my hand was wrapped tightly around the mace I'd bought for this very reason, a finger perched on the top, ready to shoot at any second.

When I finally reached my host-house I had to punch in the gate code and one of the big solid doors would open. Inside the house there were no lights on, so I would run my hand across the 100 year old walls and find the light switches. I locked the door in the light and flicked it off again, climbing up the winding, red-carpeted staircase on my hands and knees because I didn't know exactly where that tight curve was and I didn't want to knock a plant off the windowsill. At the top of the stairs and at the end of the hall was my room. I turned on a light, opened my computer and Skyped my dad. "Hi, dad."

"Hi, honey, how's it going?"

"Well, you know," I sighed, "it's France."

I don't know how to say this to you, so I'm just going to be very *Américaine*. That is to say: blunt.

You are the very worst part of France. I could handle the bus, I could handle running out of money, I could handle the distance from my family, but what I couldn't handle was you. Did you know that? But of course you did. *Mais bien sûr*. You knew what you were doing every inch of the way. And don't try to tell me that we had it so wonderful , don't try to weasel your way out of the truth because you know as well as I do that you're a bigoted, sexist, status-obsessed . It's true. Let me show you.

"It is forbidden for you to eat , nor are you allowed any space to cook, therefore you must either take your meals and pay the 120 Euros a month or you must take the bus into town and eat at a restaurant. And, imagine that you'll not wish to be out in the cold when winter comes, not to mention that will feed you much better for 10 Euros a dinner than a restaurant."

Do you remember those words? I remember that statement because as soon as I heard the word *interdit* (forbidden), your words seared into my brain.

For the record, fish sticks or an over-easy egg is not the equivalent of a 10 Euro dinner. At [redacted] I can get the most amazing *galette* filled with eggs, bleu cheese, mushrooms, tomatoes, a small side salad and a glass of white wine for 12 Euros. I know you're ripping me off. I just wanted to point that out to you. And also, don't try to then tell me that you are doing me a favor, that you are the best [redacted], because guess what, [redacted]? You aren't. Other people are given the opportunity to use [redacted] and to feed themselves and are allowed to go out at night without judgment. Which brings me to my next point.

I am a 20-year-old girl in France. Who would have thought that after my day of eleven hours of classes and my frantic run to the last bus and an awkward and sparse dinner that I might want to go out and oh, I dunno, see France? Did you think I wanted to come to France to study France in a classroom? Don't you think I can do that in the US? A classroom is a classroom, [redacted] but France is not Portland, OR.

[redacted] is the same age. You let [redacted] run around Paris and will come [redacted] occasionally for a day or two. You and I both know [redacted] is an entitled little shit who womanizes and sleeps around. You and I both know [redacted] drinks and smokes heavily and [redacted] goes out any night [redacted] wants to. And yet, the [redacted], the *Américaines* that you look down your nose at can't go out at night? We can't have a drink? That makes us whores? Can you tell me how many men I slept with? Did I have multiple partners on the weekends? Am I kinky? Please, tell me, because you apparently know everything about me and some of the

nights *are* a little alcohol-hazed. But I do remember that I kissed a total of zero people in France.

I have to say my favorite part was when you yelled at \_\_\_\_\_, that kind, beautiful \_\_\_\_\_ who, at \_\_\_\_\_, had left \_\_\_\_\_ stressful career to learn French and trying so hard at it; do you remember \_\_\_\_\_? You yelled at \_\_\_\_\_ for not putting \_\_\_\_\_ dish in the dishwasher. You had spent the previous three months \_\_\_\_\_ looking over us as we ate and monitoring the conversation. You \_\_\_\_\_ ate secretly somewhere else at another time and you enforced an unspoken rule that we were not to come into \_\_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_\_ always neatly cleared the table and left \_\_\_\_\_ plate, teacup, and spoon placed delicately on the counter. \_\_\_\_\_ always tried to please you, and instead of yelling at the other *Américaine* and me, you finally took it out on \_\_\_\_\_ : "OH, \_\_\_\_\_ ! Thank God Almighty that \_\_\_\_\_ ! What hideous, whorish things they are, \_\_\_\_\_ . I am not your \_\_\_\_\_ , \_\_\_\_\_ , you put your dish away! Ugh, \_\_\_\_\_ !"

I went that day to the director of the program and told him what you had said. I could take your under-handed, catty abuse, but \_\_\_\_\_ never did a thing to you. You knew \_\_\_\_\_ struggled at French and couldn't understand or defend \_\_\_\_\_ self and you *still* yelled \_\_\_\_\_ . \_\_\_\_\_ was so confused on the bus to school that day. "Why was \_\_\_\_\_ so angry?" \_\_\_\_\_ asked, "I don't understand." Shame on you.

And the last thing I wanted to say to you was about the lights. I know you unscrewed the outside lights so we would have to walk in the dark, I know you wanted to make me work to get back \_\_\_\_\_ every night when I went to

see friends, I know you wanted to debase me and make me crawl .  
 But it doesn't matter because you didn't stop me from seeing France, you self-righteous, privileged, . It was my experience, not yours, and I was going to experience every bit I could, even if that meant running into the every single night. You didn't win; you only succeeded in making me hate you.

Do you remember all of us that semester? Probably not, but we all remember you and how you let us down, because we all wanted a kind, but kindness just wasn't in your repertoire. I know you didn't learn anything; it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks. It didn't matter in the end, I still went home and you keep on taking money

. Good for you.

I won't tell you that I feel like I've lost. I won't back down from a challenge and you tried to challenge my independence every step of the way. You didn't succeed in controlling me but you did make my life hell for four and a half months. Do you feel guilty at all?

No, I suppose you don't.

Sincerely,

Amanda Mattern

P.S. Remember that nice old French couple, , whom the program -doing something right for once- paired me with? The ones who cooked a traditional French meal with me and took me shopping in the streets of

and drove me to the river where we walked together for hours? They saved me; they were wonderful people. Well, I just wanted to say, for the record: they thought you were bat-shit crazy, too.

## Chapter Two:

Roses are Red,  
Violets are Blue,  
Relationships are a Bitch

## Love Conquers All

It's for the best. That's what they all say and even what I say. It's for the best.

I stand naked in the shower and my mouth is wrenched open in an ugly silent scream. A scream that no one can hear but me and God.

I know now why I loved you.

Do you remember our first date? How it was Halloween and I was Poison Ivy? Do you remember that you brought me Ivy leaves from the creek to wear? Do you remember how romantic you were?

I remember waking up to breakfast in bed. I remember you kissing me as I orgasmed for the very first time. You were my sexual awakening and with that came love and trust and desire and everything I had missed out on. You were the one who taught me how to orgasm and let me teach myself to love. I remember how you held me as I cried out in ecstasy and loved me more for it. I remember you making me scream "Oh. My. GOD!" and I remember trying to stifle my blasphemous words with a pillow. As if God couldn't hear me anyway. I remember thanking him for the ability to have orgasms and for giving me you.

I love you because when I got sick a month into our relationship over Thanksgiving break, through my fever, the only thing I thought of was what to get you for Christmas. And what resulted was the 18 days of Christmas- days and days of presents, some pretty good ones, but some pretty corny ones, too. A pack of highlighters with the sticky notes built right into them- something I'd wanted for ages but thought you would like for studying your nutrition text, and a note saying "Seeing you is the highlight of my day!" A few "Cuties" tangerines because "I think you're just a cutie!" And even a book of coupons that I made for you—a full body massage that lasted for hours because it felt good for you but I loved exploring your body just as much. But even though I didn't actually love you then, I realize now that this is exactly why I love you. Even though that was totally crazy and creeperish of me, you stayed-- and you even loved me first!

You loved me for my craziness. I didn't know I was doing it, but I was way overboard and you just took it all in. And that's why I love you. You were the first person to let me love, unconditionally, someone other than a family member. I loved you so much, I did everything I could think of for you: letters, emails, cute presents, sex, cuddling, blow jobs, everything. You let me look at you through half-opened high-with-sex-chemicals eyes and kiss your collarbone and stomach, knees and fingers just because I could and because I wanted to. You let me do all of these things and you never said one word about me being too much for you, about being too much for you to handle. You took all my love and I loved that.

You got high, one specific time I recall, and stood there in your-- our kitchen staring at me. "I.... really, really like you," you said. And through the bloodshot haze in your eyes, I saw that you meant you loved me. It was the most beautiful look anyone has ever given me. Later, as I sighed the complete relaxation, sexual joy, and contentment no one knows but lovers, you said, "That's what a guy likes to hear, make that sound again, baby?" And I did.

Do you remember loving me like that? I remember. And sometimes I wonder if I'll wait for you. Will you love me again? Do you remember how we loved? Do you think we could be that way again? But it doesn't matter if we could or we might, what matters is we aren't. We aren't we anymore. And that's the end of that.

It's been approximately one day and two hours since you said it. We came back from shopping at Winco and you parked the car while I put away my groceries. You walked in, glanced around and then said those words, those words that *I* always say when we need to talk about serious things, but not you, never you.

You said, "We need to talk."

I climbed onto my bed and when you didn't take your familiar inside close-to-the-wall spot, I knew it was coming. I knew it was coming for a while but now I *knew*. I sat cross-legged with my back against the backboard and you faced outwards and said that we should take a step backwards, take a break from each other, we're fundamentally different.

We are.

Fundamentally different, that is. You believe that you can save the planet by not reproducing, so you want a vasectomy. You believe that Earth would be better off with very few humans and that it's your job to make it happen. I believe that God has a plan, for you, me, Earth, everything. I believe that everything has a purpose and that everything happens for a reason. I believe that God will take care of it and if he wants it like you say, then he'll make it happen. We are fundamentally different. We have different values, ethics, reasons to be, and I feel like I need to teach you them, because you lack them and because the few you do have sway in the wind like a seed that has no clue where it's going.

I have had this feeling for a while, the feeling that we were never destined to be together, that we don't work, that it's not right, but I ignore things so well. When you told me you wanted a vasectomy, though, I didn't know what to do. Don't I count? Don't I get a say in it? What if I want children? What if I want you to be the father of a child that will be the culmination of our love? What if I want to feel our baby's foot press against my uterus? Is it your choice to deny me that?

And that's when you decided that I was just not working out, that *we* were not working out. Fundamentally different in every way: it's true, unfortunately. I am a believer in Faith and holding on to something bigger and better than me. When I fail, when my family fails, when you fail, guess who's there to hold me like you won't anymore? God. God is always there, and

whether he exists or not, it doesn't matter to me. I have to believe that someone or something is there for me when nothing else is. And what do you believe in? Yourself? You can't do it all alone. You can't, and you should know you can't trust yourself. Because who's the one who overdosed almost to the point of death? I can assure you, honey, it wasn't me. Was God there then? Do you believe in him now? Who pulled you out of there? Oh yes, it was probably medicine. More drugs to save you. Or more drugs to push you further into what I don't know, understand, or care to talk about. Because there's no point in talking to you when you think you're the only one who knows best. It's called faith, have you tried it?

That is not the worst part. "I will always love you," isn't the worst part either. The worst part is, "I just don't love you romantically anymore, you deserve someone who can be here all the time and I just can't do that with the way my life is right now, I just have too much going on to be in a relationship." *Those* are the worst parts: A) not loving me anymore, B) blaming it on me being needy. Am I needy? Is it needy for your girlfriend to ask to be a priority in your life? Am I needy when I ask to be a part of decisions that affect us both? Am I needy asking you to put some faith in me? Or maybe it was when I asked you to put some faith in God, was that my neediness?

Or maybe I should take the offensive, here. Should I say: well you've graduated but you're still smoking pot, living your life like you're still in college, and partying without any consideration to invite me. Should I say I've always been the stable sideline of your partying, drinking, smoking, drug-taking college

lifestyle? I am the only one who holds you accountable. Does that scare you?

Does it?

Why don't you talk to your mom? Why aren't you closer with your family? Is it because you're always hiding from them? Because you're always doing SOMETHING wrong and you have to hide yourself from your mother.

How healthy of a lifestyle is that?

I know you still resent that they sent you away to rehab. Getting caught with pot in your senior year of high school was really dumb. It was, you know it. But why do you hate them for sending you to rehab? What were they supposed to do? Just let you go off with a felony and not go to college and watch their son live a horrible life? Well, there's no telling your life would be horrible but they're your parents, what did you want them to do? And then they shoved you in college and paid for it all, your car, tuition, food, everything. Your mom is so amazing! She's a hard-working gynecologist that supports your \$40,000 a year party. Why can't you appreciate her? I love her; I wish she was my mother-in-law.

I'm sorry that I don't like to party anymore. I'm sorry that I don't particularly care for getting high off of everything in sight. I'm sorry that I tried so hard to be what you wanted me to be AND what I wanted to be when they were clearly two separate things. I'm sorry I chose you over friends. I'm sorry I let you become my world. I'm sorry that I was dearly hoping we would be a forever-thing, that I could be your Stepford wife and that you would be my loving husband. I'm sorry I tried to convince myself it could work.

I think to myself that *you* don't say "we need to talk," *I* say that. And when I do, you say, "What, do you not love me anymore?" What sort of poetic justice would it have been for me to say *that* when you switched roles?

But no, I was too shocked that it was finally happening. I had tried all weekend to feel you out, why you weren't kissing me like you used to. Deep, lovely kisses that became amazing since I came back from France. No kisses.

Why no kisses... Kisses like that don't happen when you've already decided you don't love someone anymore. Kisses like that can't happen. When you didn't love me anymore, you gave up and crawled into a cave, sheltering yourself from my love that I was trying to throw inside to pull you back out. I can give and give and give, but it's worth nothing if you don't take and give something back.

So now I sit here, one day and three hours after we "talked," well, you talked and I sobbed silently trying to wrap some sort of section of brain or even a neuron around it. And when you finally left you patted my leg like I was a soccer player. Left me sitting there with black tears streaming down my face, eyes red like plums. And when you closed my door I couldn't keep it in anymore and the sobs started coming. The ones where you can't breathe and then suddenly realize you're out of oxygen but your lungs don't work right so the air comes in like gulps, insufficient gulps of terror.

You may have been selfish but you never took anything I wasn't willing to give. In fact the problem in our relationship is probably that you didn't reciprocate what I gave you. You didn't give any of it to me. That's what I was most angry about- that you didn't want to give me all your love automatically like I wanted to give you mine. You took and took until I couldn't give anymore and when I asked you to give, you couldn't.

My grandma was in the hospital when I got back from my semester abroad and I spent nights with her so my mom could sleep and go to work. I took care of her and my niece when I could and worked to keep you happy at the same time. But I was tired and wanted to be with everyone at the same time. I asked you to come see me; a 50-mile drive isn't that much, is it? But you were busy. You were too busy to come see me and I had no way to get to you. So for a month I asked you to take care of us, our relationship, while I worked with my family. And you let me down. You let me down because that made me too needy for you and now here I am on my bed and there's nothing I can do anymore because there's nothing left. I have nothing left to give you and it doesn't matter because you probably don't deserve it anyway. But that doesn't mean I don't still want to give you what I can. Even though it means nothing, I sit here and wonder what I can do to make you happy. It's not my job anymore I guess.

I climbed in the shower and hoped that my roommates wouldn't hear the sobs that tore at my throat, water mixing with tears, and then finally the scream. The scream where I tried to pray but my lips tore at the sides like in a scary movie where mouths become big gaping holes of nothingness and fear: the

scream that never makes a sound. It's the one where pain overrides every other feeling or sense. Pain becomes breathing and thinking and eating. Can't breathe, can't eat, and surely can't think of anything else.

What do I think about? I look at my room and I see you everywhere.

You're in the picture frame, of course, but you're also in the birth control on top of my purse that I took because you don't like condoms. You're in the candles I bought for us for a romantic evening but never got around to lighting, you're in the Canada hat from the Olympics trip we went on. You're in my bed and on my couch; you're in the perfume you bought me for Christmas. You are the box of secret slinky nightgown-y things I bought to impress you but you never really liked anyway. You are everywhere, but not here. You aren't touching me and you aren't kissing me and you never will again.

But it's all for the best. We wouldn't have survived and this was supposed to happen. Lucky for me you have more guts and just did it because I couldn't, and I never would have. I never would have because, dumb as you are, different as we are, neglectful as you are, I still loved you, love you. I loved being with you. I miss being with you.

But I don't miss how I loved you more. I don't miss how I would look at you with loving and adoring eyes and you would look away. I don't miss a lot of things. And those things, those things that I deserve, those things that I need, are the things that will pull me through this; because God has a plan. Because God knows what he's doing. Because I have faith that the tears will stop. I have faith

that he'll let me find something or someone to replace the hole you punched through me. Because when you feel like everything's lost, what and who do you turn to?

Faith conquers all.

## "Alone" Isn't Lonely, It's Safety

I want to drive without stopping and put the miles between me and all that reminds me of love. I want to curl up inside someone's arms and find refuge. I want to cry and scream and be angry. But I'm numb. I just want to get away.

You try to hold my hand. Don't.

I don't want to give myself to trust, to love and then have someone abuse it. I don't want to be taken advantage of again. I don't want to trust someone again, to lie down innocently beside someone and for him to climb on top of me. I want everyone to understand the word "no." I don't want anyone to touch me and pretend to love me. Because I fall for that shit and I just don't want to let it happen anymore. I want so bad to be with someone again, but I don't trust anyone. No matter how much I want to be cuddling right now, I can't do it.

You try to hold my hand. Don't.

I don't know if you'll listen to "no." I don't know if I can hold your hand and not fall for the lie. Because there are lies laying in between our hands. You want to promise a love. But it's a lie. You don't know that you'll love me or

where we'll go from here. I don't know if I can trust you. Why are you trying to hold my hand?

So don't touch me like that. Don't touch me at all. Don't ask to go out with me. Don't say, "let's hang out sometime." I don't want to be alone in a room with anyone; I just want to be by myself.

Just, please, at the very least, don't touch me.

## My Bottom Line

If you can't accept me at my worst

If you can't believe in God

If you make fun of my mother

If you have a criminal record

If you've assaulted someone

If you do drugs, pot included

If you aren't faithful

If you've lied to me

If you never make me laugh

If I'm giving more than I get

then you aren't the one for me

because this is my bottom line.

## The Relationship Agreement

In exchange for my love, I expect:

-Your bed to have a bed frame or a legitimate reason as to why not (i.e. back problems)

-Your bed to also include at least one comforter, duvet, or suitable blanket and no less than three pillows (one for you, two for me)

- You to be extremely clean. You must brush your teeth before bed and in the morning before we have a morning kiss. If you do not shower at least every other day, it will be a problem because you will inevitably give me a yeast infection: unacceptable.

-That personal hygiene be important to both of us, therefore if you expect me to stay over, have a towel for me. A hairbrush would be nice too.

-To be snuggled for no less than thirty minutes post-coitus, to include gentle tickling and light massaging.

-Your car to be in pristine working condition. The year, make, model, etc. mean nothing to me. However, you must be able to get me from point A

to point B while protected by a seatbelt. I will not take it lightly if you cannot go twenty miles without losing your carburetor.

-A quick jump to action when there is a bug that has invaded my apartment or personal bubble and needs to be dealt with.

-You to take an STD test within the week I ask you to (extra points for calling and making an appointment the next day). And absolutely no trying to lose the condom before your results have come back.

Chlamydia is unacceptable.

-Everyday, you to make me smile like I'm Julia Roberts.

-Absolutely no cheating. I will fulfill your every need, which means you don't need to look anywhere else. No kissing. No touching. No sexting. Nothing.

-You to believe in God. I want you to and I don't want to argue about it.

-Orgasms. I don't care how you do it, but make sure I get a happy ending, too, or no one will be happy.

-And of course, your love, too.

In return for all these things, along with my love, I will provide:

-You with your own two pillows for head-laying in the form of my large and beautiful breasts.

-An indulgent smile when you fuck up whilst trying to impress me (i.e. having champagne but not chilling it for us)

-Baked goods. Baked at our apartment or brought to wherever you live. I will also bake for your coworkers, provided they aren't all assholes.

-Private concerts in the car and sing along to "Single Ladies," complete with hand motions and booty-shaking.

-Massages when I'm feeling particularly loving, touchy-feely, or even just when you've had a bad day (I am quite good at these).

-A full two and a half year-span for us to decide if we are each other's "the one."

-Plenty of alone time before we even think about having children (plan on waiting until after I'm 30 and we've traveled the world)

-My affection, my devotion, and amazing blowjobs.

## Chapter Three:

### It All Comes Down to Family

## Preggers

I fled to a corner and cried. My sister was blue and she looked like death. She can't die, I thought, she can't. Lindsey and I would kill each other. Jessica is the glue. My glue can't die.

.....

Lindsey is my sweet, hyper-sensitive sister. She's only a half an hour younger than Jessica but she feels like that gives her every right to be the middle child. And that's how she plays it in the Mattern household. Lindsey keeps a detailed spreadsheet of how much my parents spend on each of us. Everything has to be fair. Everything has to be even. She's very sweet and a wonderful person, but she's sensitive as hell and a hypochondriac to boot. "How many sinus infections have you had this year, Lindsey?"

"Oh, well I just have one all the time you know. My sinuses are just a mess, did I tell you my back hurts? Yeah, yesterday I was helping Jessica put together the crib and I twisted and now my back hurts. And my arm, too."

I call her and it's an awkward few minutes of, "so... how are you?" until we finally both give up and she says, "Well, I can let you go..." I love her, but I'm

not the most patient person, and she's the most dramatic person I know. We aren't very good together.

Jessica is a great sister. She is intelligent and tough. She reminds me of my mother because she doesn't take crap but knows when to keep her mouth shut. Jessica is strong, literally and psychologically. She used to kick my ass and leave huge bruises on my arms. Now she offers tactical advice, how to address problems in my relationships, just like my mother. Though Jessica and Lindsey are twins, Jessica is most definitely first, always. But Jessica is not perfect. The husband she chose is a Republican and proud of it. And as my family is very silently democratic, Jeffrey is a lone wolf and speaks his inappropriate mind on anything and everything.

Jessica is also a prude, which makes it a little bit difficult to talk about anything sexual with her. I remember, after discovering the wonder of an orgasm myself, I asked her delicately if she was, you know "taken care of" in bed. Bright red, she said she was fine and changed the subject. I like to know that everyone is privy to awesome orgasms, especially my sisters. Jessica deserves some mind-blowing orgasms. I like my orgasms; they should have some too.

Her mind is uncannily closed: she has no way of knowing what going away to college is like, she doesn't know what it's like to sleep with someone who you aren't going to marry, she doesn't know what sushi tastes like. I have accepted it as my job to enlighten her to the ways of others and the world because it's easy to judge someone if they're your own sister, but it's hard to hold it against them. She can judge me all she wants but she still has to love

me—this is why we're so close; I judge her choice to marry Jeff and she judges my choice to fuck my boyfriend out of wedlock, but we still love each other.

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I wasn't around enough during Jessica's pregnancy. For some reason unknown I'd decided to stay in McMinnville for the summer that Jessica was due in July in Beaverton. Close enough to one another on the map but without a car, it's really like three states apart. I'd already missed out on the first seven months because of school but Jessica and I call each other a lot, so I still felt included in the happenings of Babyness.

Jessica was eight months pregnant when I went on a short vacation with my parents to Sunriver. On that vacation I got very sentimental and I wrote two letters. One was to my then-boyfriend, Richard\*, and one was to Jessica. I don't remember exactly what Jessica's said and I don't want to ask her for it back, but it went something like this...

Dear Jessica,

I am so happy for you that you will soon be the proud mother of a beautiful and perfect baby girl. I know that you will be the best mother and the best mommy that anyone could ask for and this baby is damn lucky.

I say mother and mommy because sometimes you have to be a mommy and sometimes you're going to have to be the mother, but you're going to do great both ways. Mommies have to hold the baby and let it cry and comfort and care and love and mothers make you make the hard decisions. Mothers won't tell you where to go to college and they'll let you make your own choices, good or

bad. Mommies cuddle. I know that you will know when to be the mommy and when to be the mother.

You are one of those people who always knows what's best and you will always make the right decision, for your baby and for you. You are going to be the best parent and I'm so proud of you. You are going through this pregnancy beautifully.

I know that I am the baby and you are soon going to be a mommy. But I want you to know that whatever help I can give you, I will always be there for you. Monetarily, I'm not much help, but I will always support you.

Love,

Manda

I gave this letter to Jessica and I heard through my mother that she was knocked out of the ballpark. "What did I do to deserve this?" she asked our Mom incredulously. Sometimes, you just have to let people know how much you think of them because, most times, people *don't* know. I was probably feeling very emotional and loving that week, or maybe I was sick because writing letters to my sisters is something I've never done before. But it was important to me for her to hear how special she is to me and I know she appreciates my writing so she'd love it all the more.

A few weeks later I saw Jessica again and she had me hold my hand to her stomach to feel the baby kick. I'd never felt the baby kick or even put my hand on her stomach—Jessica doesn't like to be touched. So I waited. I talked to

Jessica as we stood there awkwardly, holding up her shirt while I held my hand angled weirdly on her round tummy. And then she kicked. Suddenly I felt a foot press up toward me through fluid, muscle and tightly-pulled skin. Suddenly there was a foot. A tiny baby foot high-fived my palm and I could see in my mind Jessica's skin rise up around the foot, making a clear print, complete with toes. There was a baby inside my big sister. A baby, alive and, literally, kicking.

My family doesn't hug. We aren't a very huggy, touchy-feeling, kissy family. I am the most demanding of all of us, I like to have my back tickled gently. Sometimes I hover over my mom in the kitchen and she yells at me to get out of her way but I don't until she snuggles me for a few minutes.

My sisters and I definitely do not hug. We never touch each other unless we really feel the need and then, always, after a hug we feel awkward as fuck. Once in eighth grade, my sister dropped me off at school and I jumped out of the van and said, "okay, bye, love you." And Jessica just kind of sat there like a fish, garbling and opening and closing her mouth. I tried to take it back, "I mean, uhhhh, you're not Mom!" Because she should know that I thought for a second, it was mom dropping me off and of course I only said it because I thought she was our mother, "Sorry, okay, so, uh, bye. See you later." And I grabbed my backpack and ran. When we want to show affection or caring, we pat. A pat on the knee or shoulder is what we do. From anyone else it's belittling or a pitying pat, for us it's a "well, I love you, but don't let it go to your head"- sort of display of affection.

So touching my sister's tummy, feeling a foot touching my hand through my sister's skin: this was epic.

As I walked into Jessica's delivery room after maybe 20 hours of induced labor, I was nervous as hell. I had to meet our new family member but I needed to see Jessica and check her out first. I opened the door and my parents and Jessica's family-in-law rushed in with me as Lindsey screamed out, "You can't have her yet I just got her, it's STILL MY TURN!"

I saw Jessica and my world turned upside down. She was blue and shivering. Her sister-in-law went to check on her, Dad went to check on her. She was shivering with adrenaline, I thought, not cold, as the nurses piled blankets and blankets upon her. I don't remember where I was. Somewhere in the room, watching. I avoided crossing the room to see her because she was so blue and deathly-looking. I looked at the baby, I watched as she was handed from person to person. The nurses took her and smeared her eyes with Vaseline or something like it so she wouldn't get any infections. She was goopy and pink, but still pretty cute. After a while I finally sidled up to the left side of Jessica's bed. "Hi, Manda," she said. I asked how she was and she said "fine," like always. Then Carol, her mother-in-law, appeared on the right side of the bed and broke into tears of happiness. I burst into tears, too. "Carol!" I protested. I was pissed, my family doesn't hug and we sure as hell don't cry in front of each other.

I stood next to Jessica and pooled and didn't know what to do. I still couldn't hug her and I also didn't want her to panic when she saw my worried look. So I pulled my face together and just patted her on the shoulder like we do, which she probably couldn't feel anyway because there were so many blankets,

and slunk away to a corner and tried to stifle and stop my eye-flood. No one else seemed concerned she was going to die, so that probably meant she wasn't going to, right? I was angry with her, she chose to be induced and I was convinced that things should happen naturally, no matter how anxious she was to get that little leech out, I wanted it to happen the way it was supposed to. Then maybe she wouldn't be so tired. Maybe she wouldn't have spent almost 24 hours in labor. Maybe she wouldn't look like a giant bruise. Maybe you should just do what I tell you for once, Jessica. But it didn't matter now. She was supposedly "fine."

So I crept towards the baby, trying to catch my tears just as they spilled between my eyelids. She was beautiful and awake. She watched everyone. I held her, but couldn't even see her through my watery, swollen eyes; someone took her from me. We took pictures: I gathered myself together and smiled. I still wasn't convinced Jessica was going to make it.

But the next morning I opened the door to a new room, yellow and orangey, and Jessica was sitting up, pink-ish and flesh-colored and fine. She held the baby but more family and friends were coming soon, and Jessica is not to be seen without makeup, she likes to be primped and pressed. I shook up the makeup remover that I had brought for her, thinking she might have forgotten it, and dipped in a q-tip. Then, I began gently removing Jessica's eye-makeup, sweeping the q-tip under her eyes where her mascara had accumulated after hours of crying through the pain of childbirth.

Jessica is now a mommy. She has a beautiful baby girl, Brooklyn, but everyone just calls her Baby. I am now the auntie, or as Brooklyn likes to call me,

Mi. Baby and I get along very well and I think loving Baby is another way of loving Jessica, only Baby is the one I get to hug. Brooklyn loves Jessica and hugs her all the time; she even pats us. And Baby fits Jessica like love.

## 10500 NW Greenview Lane

My grandpa built our house on Greenview Lane maybe fifty years ago, with the help of my whole family: my mother, my aunt, my Gramma, An-aunt, Uncle Ralph, extended family of all sorts, really. There's a family joke that if there's ever a flood or natural disaster, there's no way in hell our house would break. Grampa wanted his family to be absolutely secure in every way possible-- reportedly using nails, glue, AND staples to make sure our house was as solid as a rock. On the other side of Skyline, just over the hill, is Portland and NW 23<sup>rd</sup> Street and when the house was built it was the only one around. No huge neighborhoods, no 3,000 square foot mansions a street over; it was just the house and the woods and the Elementary school up the street, so close that Mom and Auntie Barbie could walk themselves to school every day.

My house saw my Aunt Barbie and my Mom grow up—getting home late from parties or being drug home by Grampa at all hours of the night. My house has seen our pets come and go and holds their ashes in its lawn. My house has seen my mother's tenth and fiftieth birthdays. And, after months of hospice and straining split pea and ham soup for Grampa, my house has seen my Grampa die in its belly on a hot August morning. It took me another four years to figure out

that split pea and ham soup actually had chunks of peas and ham in it. I had always shared with Grampa.

My house has seen my sisters as toddlers, as feisty teenagers, as married women. My house has seen weddings and wedding photography. My house has seen me grow up and watches me still, wondering if I will be the one who buys it from my parents or if it will be one of the twins. Barbie gave up her rights to the house pretty easily, I wonder if my sisters will be that complacent to let me have the house or if we'll fight over it like the bathroom. I wonder whom the house wants to win. I know it chose my Mom because my Mom is that house. Sturdy and not going anywhere—nothing shakes her, she belongs here. Which one of us belongs there? No one would sell it outside the family. Other families just don't get it, would never understand it.

I love that my house has a front yard and a back yard. I love, love, love that we have a turnaround driveway- how does it work for other people when they have parties if there's nowhere for everyone to park? How would I function if I had to pull out backwards everyday into traffic instead of just driving around the circle? More evidence that this house and I are way too accustomed to one another for one of us to leave. I find it interesting how I never think about my room the way some people think of theirs as a sort of haven, I think of my whole house as the haven.

I love that I know every sound in my house. When I play hide and seek with my cousins, I love that as I hear a creak in the floorboards or the sound of a certain door opening I can say, "That closet is off-limits, that's where we keep the

nice stuff. Find another place to hide, munchkins." And I can tell who's going to come and kiss me goodnight by the sound of footsteps on the stairs- that's Dad because he's quick, that's Mom because she's strolling up the stairs.

Now there's a quiet slowness of the house as everyone ages, broken only by the occasional squawks and fast feet of Jessica's 22-month-old. There is only my Mom and Dad and Gramma who lives downstairs in the daylight basement, and sometimes me when I like to come back to my favorite environment. I cook for them and I watch TV on the couch while my Dad snores in the recliner and my Mom runs around paying bills and doing laundry. The couch that I lay on is new and leather—and uncomfortable as fuck. Such are the thrills of remodeling.

I remember when my parents decided to remodel the kitchen and then it became a "let's-remodel-the-house-and-upgrade-everything-else-while-we're-at-it" job. They didn't like the small window in the wall between the kitchen and the dining room, didn't like the trapped feeling of the kitchen walls, they needed to change it to fit their needs. Then they decided they didn't need a bathtub in the downstairs bath- a large shower would be fine. I was pissed. I don't like change and I especially don't like change in my house. Grampa had built this house and therefore it was already perfect, why couldn't anyone understand this?

My sisters were still in the house six years ago when the remodel happened and we fought bitterly over the color of our upstairs bathroom. Finally agreeing on "Devine Twilight," a fancy form of "purple," we fought again over the laminate—and decided on a gray and purple pattern that forever forced

us to stay with a purple painted bathroom, unless we wanted to clash with the laminate.

And the kitchen—the kitchen where I'd learned how to cook, where, at three years old, I painted the walls pink with penicillin when sick and stubborn, and where I'd climbed up on the counter in socks to get something and fallen, landing soundly on the counter edge and popping my cherry—this kitchen became something I did not like. It became heavy with browns-- my least favorite color. Brown cabinetry, fine, but brown granite against yellow walls is a brown overload. Brown. My new house was brown because now even the new couches were brown! And uncomfortable! A sectional but without any way to NOT slide of the couch—it's like trying to sit down without any friction—you just go flying.

But it was all for the better. Now our house is much more open, though still brown it doesn't bother me as much. I got a second oven so that made me happy. We have a very welcoming home now, it has yellow walls instead of the familiar white-ishness of decades of smoking a pack a day (thanks to the generation of the smokers), you can talk to your guests while you cook, the kitchen is now a two-or-more butt kitchen instead of a barely one-butt kitchen. So I forgave my parents for the change, but I won't tell them that. I will admit that they *improved* Grampa's house, but it was still just perfect the way it was. Only maybe it's a little more perfect now. Maybe.

In sixth grade I took an art class for six weeks. It was my first and only art class, probably because the teacher and I didn't get along very well. The

instructions were to draw your dream house and, not feeling über creative, I drew my own house. She gave me a "C" because it wasn't "creative" enough but it's actually true, that house *is* my dream house. I suppose it is missing the turrets I've always wanted and the Beauty and the Beast-style mile-high library in the west wing. But in all reality, my house with the blue shutters and the white paint is the house I want forever. It's like a soul mate. When you meet your soul mate, assuming they exist, you've already created what they're supposed to be like in your head but in reality they're not what you imagined, but everything you thought of and more. That is the dream house and I think my house is my soul mate-dream house.

I'll admit that I'm a pretty vain and materialistic person. I like going shopping, I like pretty things, but if I had nothing else in the world, I would want that house, small and unassuming, most of all.

We are togetherness, whether fighting and pissed off or completely happy, we're still together. At my house, you do not spend time in your room unless you are cleaning it or sleeping. You just don't. You spend all of your time in the great room, where everyone is. 10500 NW Greenview Lane represents togetherness and family life. Nearly all of our family functions are hosted at our house, not because it's the roomiest or because we have a giant-screen TV, I think it's just one of those houses that's comfy and everyone feels welcome at. My house is family, togetherness, comfort, homage to my Grampa, welcoming, where everything I need is, and a home.

## I'll Be Loving You Always

Lindsey is the short one. She has brown hair and beautiful, brown, almond-shaped eyes. Lindsey and I are sisters and we love each other, but we aren't really that close. I can't explain it; we just aren't. For some reason I feel like we never have anything to talk about and we don't really have anything in common. But it honestly baffles me because Jessica and I have no more in common but we talk at length all the time. What's the difference? Maybe Lindsey and I are always vying for Jessica's attention. Maybe she resents me for being the baby and getting things she didn't. Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

But I remember one time when Lindsey and I did have something in common. I'm the reader in the family; Jessica and Lindsey don't really like reading at all but I finally convinced Lindsey to read *Harry Potter*. Lindsey had finished college by then and was nannying. I've never seen her read but I did see her leave the house with a volume of *Harry Potter* every morning, so she must've read it during a naptime or something. I imagine her sitting in the corner of the tan couch at her job with a Pepsi and a baby monitor on the coffee table next to her. One hand would be holding the book open and the other arm would be perched on the back of the couch with her hand to her head flicking the ends of

her hair. For Lindsey, the flicking implies concentration so she was definitely into Harry's adventures. "Okay," I thought, "How can I keep her reading?" after she had gone through that series. Then I found *Twilight*. In the beginning, I thought it was a great series, so I read the books and then gave them all to Lindsey for her to begin and enjoy.

Lindsey is the sister who likes to please. She started reading the books because I asked her to. She would do anything for any of us; so even when I said I'd sing at her wedding, she let me choose what I would sing. "Whatever you think is best, Manda. Didn't you want to sing that song, I think it was 'Always' or something for Jessica's wedding? Since Jessica didn't want you to sing it, why don't you sing it for my wedding?"

"Always" was my favorite song; it sounded like it was from the twenties, jazzy and lyrical: "I'll be loving you, always, always/ with a love that's true, always." Not like the monotonous "One Hand One Heart" from *West Side Story*. I hated that song by the time I finally sang it at Jessica's wedding. Well, actually I hated it from the beginning and had even ranted about having to sing it to Lindsey. I don't like singing in front of people, but Jessica and Lindsey wanted me to feel included, so that was my job. And Lindsey really wanted me to sing, but she wanted to make me happy, too, so she let me choose whatever I wanted.

When Lindsey let me choose, I was pleased but since she'd left it up to me, I wanted to do something extra special for her so she'd feel like I was really doing it for her. Maybe a week or two later I was watching the Disney version of *Cinderella* and heard the song Cinderella and the Prince sing to each other while

dancing. It sounded just like something Lindsey would like. I immediately yelled at her to come downstairs to listen to it.

It was perfect because Lindsey and Jason are totally in love. Forever in my mind I'll think of them as the passionate, "true love" sort of couple. They first started seeing each other in senior year of high school. I sat on Lindsey's twin bed with the white frame and she told me about how they were going to go to the football game together and later, how he held her hand and then how he asked her to Homecoming. It's almost disgusting, but it's too perfect to be disgusting. Just like in *Cinderella*, when the Prince and Cinderella meet, it's perfect and they sing, "So This Is Love," which is exactly what I think about Lindsey and Jason: "So this is what makes life divine/ I'm all aglow/And now I know/ The key to all heaven is mine."

When Lindsey had finished *Twilight* and had loved it even more than *Harry Potter*, I began to hunt for books she might like. But it was also around that time that the message of the books sunk in and I realized it was all about being unable to live without a man.

"I finally finished *Twilight*, Manda! It was such a great book. I can't wait to read the next one," she said.

I gave her a belittling look and said, "Ugh, Lindsey, you know those books are terrible, right? They're all about needing a man to live and then having a baby, it's like Mormonism in series."

I don't think I realized it then, but I feel terrible about it now. My sister, who never liked reading, was reading and even conversing with me about books

and then I just shut her down. I told her it was stupid which probably even made her feel stupid. I regret those words. I regret telling Lindsey that it was a terrible book because she was trying hard to connect with me and I was just being high and mighty. And, let's just be honest, I was probably jealous, too.

Lindsey had actually lived the high-school sweetheart dream like the main character in *Twilight* and I hadn't. At that point I hadn't even had a boyfriend. I was probably jealous and purposefully bitchy. But whatever I was, I still regret breaking that bridge before it was even finished.

I can't explain why we don't call each other every day or even why we don't have much to talk about when we *do* finally call, but it doesn't matter, she's still my sister. Jessica and Lindsey may bond with each other even more because they both have babies now, but I'm the one who gets to be the cool auntie to both babies Logan and Brooklyn. I may not be able to connect with Lindsey, but it's hard not to connect with a chunky pile of smiles like Logan. And Jessica and Lindsey may text each other every twenty minutes and only call me once every few days, and Lindsey's hair-flicking may make me want to shave every hair off her head, but I still love her. Even when I have nothing to say, "I'll be loving her always."

## The Game Of LIFE

I am the yellow car. I have five holes and one pink body in the driver's seat. Jessica is the blue car, no holes, pink and blue bodies fill all six spots. Lindsey had miscellaneous holes but always one pink and one blue body in the front seat and at least one other body.

I don't play games. I don't like Risk and I don't like Monopoly. Games are not for me. I don't strategize and I don't take preemptive strikes against the opponent. I never liked playing LIFE, really; it was mostly to appease Jessica, the Planner. The Planner got to see her life laid before her eyes: nothing could make her happier. Lindsey, the hypersensitive, got exactly what she thought she needed to be happy, a husband, one or two kids, and a decent house. More would be fine, but those things at least.

And then there's me, the rebel, according to the family. Even at age seven, apparently everyone knew I was "different." I wouldn't bow to the karate instructor. I didn't pick up my toys: Jessica and Lindsey just did it for me. I wonder now if they always knew I'd be the rebel or just treated me as if I was one. The only one of us to learn to love and make love before she married, the only one to smoke a joint, the only one to travel abroad, that's me, the rebel. I

don't think I'm a rebel. I think those are normal things, but to them, to Jessica and Lindsey, I think they look at me as if I was an alien sometimes.

I was always the empty car. Sure, I would stop at the STOP sign and occasionally pick up a blue plastic lump and shove him into my passenger seat. But half the time that was only because my sisters wouldn't allow me to pick out my Victorian mansion without being first married. What if I didn't want to get married? But there are rules to this game. They must be followed.

But, even as "the rebel," I followed them. I followed them always and never even cheated once as I spun the wheel. I was always waiting for the end, the limbo when we all parked our cars in between Millionaire's Mansion and the Retirement Home and counted out our cash and LIFE tokens. I did whatever I could to always end up in Millionaire's Mansion.

And I never got children. I can't remember a single time that I landed on a square that said, "Congratulations! You just had a baby boy!" or "Congratulations! You've just adopted twins!" I didn't want to get married but I never got children. Why? How did this happen? Sometimes I would refuse to play, having noticed that I was always the one without any babies at the end. I would be persuaded by Jessica to play anyway and get disappointed again. And as her car filled up with baby after baby, she'd volunteer to give me one. No, I wanted my own, not one she had won for me.

Now I see my sisters. They followed the rules. They went to college like good girls. They got jobs and they got married. Now they're having babies, nearly halfway through the game, and I feel like I've hardly started.

We play the game right. None of us take risks in real life, for the things that really count. We buy the house and car insurances, we pay off our school loans as soon as we can, and we buy houses that are within our price ranges. We don't play Risk and we don't play Monopoly. We don't strategize against people. We try our hardest and we take care of our own. And I will admit that I take detours along the way but I think I'm still on the road to Millionaire's Mansion.

But sometimes I can't help but think that I'm playing the game wrong. Should I be more deceptive? Should I be more strategic? Should I hide what I'm thinking to get ahead of Mr. and Mrs. Jones?

Am I losing the game of life?

Chapter Four:  
Happily Ever Afters

## Hiding

Through the snowstorm you couldn't see a thing. The white was so thick, it looked like God was starting over, a blank canvas with no inspiration today. Then, quite suddenly, through the glass of the diner we all saw a bright pink blob. At first it was as if we were all hallucinating. No one was out in this weather in any case, the whole town was at the diner because no one felt like cooking for themselves tonight. But the pink blob slowly turned into a bag, hooked on the arm of a large, furry, hooded woman.

All eyes were glued to the figure as she slowly trudged through the thick Midwestern snow. The wind was pushing her towards the doors, encouraging her to hurry as the snow sliced through the air. She finally reached the door to Dina's Diner and shoved her large figure through the frame.

Everything about her screamed money. Every inch of her was covered in fur, a floor-length mink coat that impressed the diners to no end- the hunting was good in Amelia, Nebraska but when selling one fur meant feeding your family for a week, you didn't keep them for yourself, let alone an entire coat's worth. Her boots had some chunks of snow melting off of them, heels in this weather made what was left of the closed jaws drop in disbelief. And though they knew that pink bag was

expensive-looking, no one realized it was an Hermès—a Kelly, to be exact. Then there was the luggage she pulled behind her: one giant rolling bag and a smaller one on top, matching and marked D&G. This woman *was* money and she was fat so she had to eat well, too. Not the average, pear-shape all Nebraskan women come to accept, the extremely well-fed, round in every way, too lazy to go to the gym- fat. At least she looked that way until she took off her coat.

She stood there getting warm for a moment before lowering her hood. She had lovely dark red hair in a bun with bangs and a small upturned nose. Slowly, she unbuttoned giant pearl-like buttons on her coat and revealed a decent sized woman. And a baby strapped to her chest in a baby-Bjorn. And finally the diner moved.

People gave small gasps, suddenly loved her because she had a baby, closed their mouths only to open them again to chatter excitedly. The expensive, towering woman was immediately forgiven when they saw that baby.

The woman smiled at the diner and they melted. Then she walked over to the man behind the counter. "Hi," she said. "My name is Cara, I just moved here and I'd like to work for you. Do you need a waitress?"

While Edgar was kind of a hard ass, he was taken with her smile and of course, the baby helped her case. "Well, uh, you see, I'm not too sure I need the extra help, you know," he grunted.

But the clientele would have none of that ad came to her rescue, "Oh, come on, Edgar!"

"You could sit down once in a while, just do the cooking from now on instead of serve *and* cook!"

"Besides she needs a job!"

"And look at the baby!"

The baby was about one and passed out, swaddled comfortably. He had curly red hair like his Momma. Edgar looked at the baby. Edgar looked at Cara. Cara smiled sadly back at Edgar. Edgar sighed. "Thanks," Cara said softly. "I can start right now if you like. This is Sam, by the way." She nodded at the baby, then scooted around the long blue counter to grab the coffee pot and flitted around to every table refilling the coffee cups, Sam still strapped in.

"Hi, I'm Cara, I'll be your waitress from now on. What's your name?"

Cara was a character. She was funny and kind and really smart, smarter than the whole town, but she wasn't the best waitress. Oh, she was fine. She learned quickly and the town learned she'd never waited a day in her life. She didn't understand the difference between regular coffee and decaf because, "Honestly, why would you drink coffee without the caffeine? That's just silly." And when an order took longer than fifteen minutes to prepare, she'd smile threateningly at Edgar and say, "Edgar, darling, stop smoking and finish those burgers, people are waiting." And Edgar would grumble.

But they really liked her, she always took the time to stop and chat and tell them about her exciting East-Coast life. And she was always volunteering to help. When Missy Hungerford came in one day looking very disheveled and sad, Cara was the first to bring her a cup of coffee and sit down with her. Miss told her the farm she

owned had been in her family for at least a hundred years and now the state was going to take it because she hadn't ever paid her property taxes. "We owned the land before they even *collected* property taxes. Of *course* I never paid any!" And Cara, being an ex-lawyer, conveniently in the specialty of land and building laws, searched for days and finally found a way out for Missy. She took care of the fees and set up a plan with the IRS for Missy to pay a small amount of back taxes. After that, Cara became an important and useful person in Amelia and they all came to love her.

And Cara soon loved the town. She loved the people because they were all simple and kind. There was no crime because everyone was trusting and they trusted everyone. Cara rented the small apartment attached to the town hall that was usually used for emergencies. She paid RuthAnn Peterson, the 18 year old who always ordered an Oreo and chocolate milkshake, 30 dollars a day to take care of and play with Sam, plus free milkshakes whenever she wanted.

RuthAnn helped her unpack the day she moved into the small apartment. Cara threw the giant D&G bag onto the small bed, unzipped it, and flopped open the lid. RuthAnn gazed inside while holding Sam to see what seemed to be millions of onesies and overalls and small shoes, all for Sam. In one corner there were two pairs of jeans, a few shirts, some underwear and socks for Cara. She unpacked all these first, hanging them up, and was done in less than five minutes. The baby's things took the next couple of hours. From the small bag, Cara counted out 30 dollars for RuthAnn for the next day but before she could zip it up RuthAnn glanced inside and saw cash, tons of cash. She thought better than to ask about it, but wondered why on earth a woman like this would be traveling with so much cash.

On days when RuthAnn was busy, Cara would bring Sam with her to the diner. The townspeople would chase Sam around the metallic blue booths, let Sam play with their straws and bang their spoons on the stark white tables. Cara would watch carefully and lovingly from behind the counter, continuing with her duties as the townspeople bonded with Sam.

As Sam's naptime rolled around, Cara would slip him into the Babybjorn and whispered to him as she continued to wipe down counters. He gazed up at her and slowly his head tipped to the side and he began to snore. The townspeople encouraged her to put him on one of the booths so he could sleep there but she always responded, "Oh, no, he's fine here. I like having him close to me." And soon they stopped telling her to put him down. Sometimes Cara would sit at an empty table, close her eyes and listen. She found the sound of Sam's breathing comforting but when she was still, she could hear his heartbeat and she loved that.

When Sam woke up, it was usually that time of day when business was slowest. Edgar would come out of the kitchen and play with Sam, bouncing him on the booth seats and spinning with him on the 50's looking stools at the counter. It was times like that when Edgar and Cara spoke most.

The townspeople loved Cara greatly, but they did know a thing or two about people. And when a thirty-something woman with a baby and plenty of money moves to a town with no explanation other than, "I wanted to get out of the city," they know she really wanted to get out of something else. So when one day a tall,

dark, and handsome man with a strategic 5 o' clock shadow pushed his way into the diner, they weren't surprised at all. But they were thankful Cara wasn't there.

"Where is she?"

Edgar came out of the kitchen. "S'cuse me? Were you yelling something at me?"

"I said, 'where is she.' You know who I'm talking about, Cara, where is she?"

"Cara what?"

"Cara Cunningham! Red hair! One year old baby!"

"Uh, nope, don't have one. Sorry."

"Yeah, right. Well, I'll be back so you'd better let her know I'm coming."

And with that, he stormed back out. In the diner, a nasty taste was left in the mouths of the townspeople. Missy was sitting in the corner booth looking concerned. Edgar was satisfied because he was pretty damn sure he was supposed to lie. Besides, he didn't lie, he told himself, because his Cara wasn't a Cunningham. Cara always had her paychecks written out for Cara Boulder. Why should he correct this angry man?

By the time Cara came back from the one-year check up with Sam, the town was all huddled into a booth or two, with a plan to take out the man. When Cara walked in, Kelly bag and baby in tow, they all looked up and Edgar said, "A man came looking for you today, he called you Cara Cunningham, he's gonna come back." And then he went back into the kitchen.

"Don't worry though, we've already decided to hide you whenever he comes in. The town hall is at the front of town so when he drives through, RuthAnn said she

can call the diner and you can hide. It'll be a little hard for her to watch both Sam and the street but she said she can manage, and she already knows what he looks like," Missy said.

Cara sighed and sat down. "No, it's fine. When he shows up, he shows up. It'll be fine.... That was Gregg by the way, with two 'g's' because important people have unique names." She laughed at her terrible joke, took a couple of deep breaths and got up to get the coffee pot. Everyone was worried, but secretly they were a little excited to finally get to see the reason she left Massachusetts in the first place.

A few days later, when Cara was wiping down the counters, Gregg rolled up in his rented sports car. Cara didn't stop what she was doing. Gregg opened the door and narrowed his eyes at her. His tight jeans rubbed together and made an uncomfortable sound as he walked stiffly into the diner. "Where the fuck have you been, Cara?"

Cara threw her rag on the counter, "Where the fuck does it *look* like I've been, Gregg?"

He suddenly had a pleading, apologetic voice, "You didn't leave a note or anything, I didn't know where you went or where the baby was or anything, Cara. I was worried about you!"

"Well, I told you what was going to happen. And you didn't care. So why *would* I leave a note?"

"It was just one last time, I was just finishing what I had left, I swear it was just one last time. I didn't mean for you to find out."

"Oh, so it's okay as long as I don't find out? What the hell kind of reasoning is that? I shouldn't even have to tell you this. Gregg, you don't do cocaine when you're thirty and have a child. And you *certainly* don't do it when you're the one watching him," Cara said, her voice quiet but shaking with anger.

"Well that was an accident."

"Yes, I see, you accidentally got the bag out of the safe, accidentally cut it, accidentally rolled up a dollar bill, and accidentally sniffed it. Yes, I totally understand that."

"Well, it wasn't like that, baby. I swear I'll never do it again. You have to come back, Sam needs a father, you know, and I love you." Cara was deliberating that as he walked around the counter, like a tiger approaching its prey. He walked tentatively as he spoke softly to her. "Come home, baby."

"Don't 'Baby' me, Gregg, this isn't something you can weasel your way out of like you do with your family. I won't forget about this. And what Sam *doesn't* need is a father like you, who ignores him and gets high. You can't act like you're twenty anymore, you need to grow up, I thought you understood that."

"I *do* understand that. I do! Really, you two are my world, you're so important to me, that's why I've been searching for you! I know it was wrong and I promise I won't do it again."

"We aren't your world. You take care of your world and the only thing you were taking care of is yourself, you and what was left of the drugs. Cocaine shouldn't be in your world at all. I still can't believe you, you're standing here lying to me again, you said 'I promise I won't do it again' *last* time and then you did it again *and*

while our son was there. Sam and I don't need this, we don't need your family, we don't need you."

"Of course you need me, I'm his father. And my family wants him, too. He's part of the family now and they want him."

"Well they can't have him. Just because you're a Cunningham doesn't mean you get whatever you want. You can't have me anymore and your family can't pay me enough to get Sam, so that's it."

"Cara, they wouldn't dream of doing that! Not unless I asked them to, and I won't have to ask them if you just come home with me. We can talk this through and you'll trust me again and then everything will be fine."

Cara looked Gregg in the eye. He looked both pityingly and pleadingly at Cara, showing her his cards and threatening her with the possibility of losing Sam made the townspeople hate him even more, if it was possible. "I need to think about this. Go home. I'll call you when I want to."

"Okay, okay, just think about what I said. I'll be waiting at home, you should come soon." Gregg with two g's hugged her without her hugging back and left.

The townspeople were frozen with their jaws hanging open. Cara asked for the rest of the day off and went to go get Sam from RuthAnn.

The next day, there were four cards in the diner when Edgar opened. The first was to the town, the second was to Edgar, the third was to Missy, and the fourth was to RuthAnn. Cara apologized in each one saying how much she loved them all. She left a check for RuthAnn for school if she wanted. And her Kelly bag was sitting on Missy's usual table, waiting for her because Cara knew how much she liked it.

And she wrote this to Edgar:

Dear Edgar,

Thank you for everything, you don't know what you've meant to me. I love you very much. And don't worry, I'll see you in approximately three months. But keep it to yourself, I want to surprise everyone. We all know this won't work but I have to give it a try, for Sam. See you soon.

Love,

Cara Boulder

The townspeople were confused, they had all loved Cara so much and now she'd run off and left them with just memories, they knew she was gone, they could feel her leave. They felt betrayed and spent hours in the diner talking over Cara and Sam and what had happened just the day before. Finally as Edgar came around to refill the coffee cups, he heard them grumbling again over Cara abandoning them and he had enough.

Edgar sat down on the center stool and said, "Ok, look everyone, I have something to say about this. You can't blame Cara for leaving us. She has to take care of her family first."

"But her family's a cocaine addict!"

"Yes, but she's trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. Listen, Cara and I were talking a while ago, right after he came in that first time? Remember?" The townspeople nodded. "She said that he's got a lot of money and she's made a lot of money, too, because she's great at what she does, but his is backed by generations of family. And they're evil. She told me that when she first married him, he didn't like

his family at all, he'd been addicted to coke before that but he'd changed for her and he wanted to start a life together, without his family. But when they got married his family became really interested in Cara and their son's lives. She didn't tell me why, maybe she doesn't even know why but he started using again. And now, well, you all heard the threat, he'll use his family to get Sam if he has to."

There was a guilty silence hanging over the diner. Edgar didn't talk much, so he must've felt really strongly about this. They had no right to be angry with Cara, she was just doing the best she could.

"Well, maybe she'll come back."

"I hope so."

"You know, she deserves some nice people like us backing her up."

"She certainly looked so much better after she'd been here a while.

Remember what she looked like when she first walked in? So sad but so guarded? And now, she's been so happy! Her clothes aren't so stiff, she seems a lot more relaxed here than before. She needs us."

"She was so nice to us, and Sam, well, he's just the best baby a town could hope for."

Edgar sighed with relief and slid off the stool. "They were both the best this town could hope for and they deserve a town like us. I hope they come back."

### Come to Our Wedding. It's at a Mausoleum

Ysele stands on the balcony of the mausoleum alone in her strapless white gown. In front of her, marble squares with etched names stare down at her. She talks aloud to Ken, her best friend "buried" in the wall as she busies herself with a wedding floral arrangement made just for him. "I miss you so much, I wish you could be here to hold Charlotte and walk me down the aisle." Ysele has left Charlotte with her bridesmaids to spend some time alone with Ken before they all go off to the ceremony. She places his bouquet on the ground below his square, she fluffs out her skirt, sits down on the cold marble floor, and leans back on the wrought iron railing. She sniffles but tries to clean herself up as she sees Henry walk out of the hallway towards her. She says, "You know it's bad luck to see me before the wedding."

Henry doesn't answer. He just sits down gently next to Ysele and wraps his arm around her shoulders. She can feel in his touch his strength and love. It's more the affectionate yet careless drape of an arm over a lover or the protective hold of a father around his daughter. Ysele can feel it all: the protection, the desire, the care, the affection, in his firm yet almost nonchalant touch. She can feel it seeping through her dress. As Ysele gets wrapped up in

Henry's arms, she just can't hold the sniffles in anymore, lets her emotional dam fall, and melts into tears.

### Meet the Happy Couple!

Hi, everyone! We are the soon to be Henry and Ysele Beaufait, thanks for visiting our website! We'd also like to add that it isn't just us starting our lives together as a couple, we're becoming a family.

Henry says: Ysele is the most beautiful person I know. She's hilarious, quirky, full of life and hope and is ~~great in bed~~ a very free and curious person. We met when she came to my seminar on Astrology. I knew she was the one when she looked up at me with her huge blue eyes while her hand continued to take detailed notes in big, loopy letters. When I first met Ysele, I was stunned by her beautiful almost-black, wavy hair and blue eyes with lots of lashes. Her irises are the most detailed I've ever seen and look like they have clusters of constellations inside her.

Ysele is also the mother of a one-year-old, Charlotte, who I will be adopting soon after we marry. Charlotte is the perfect image of Ysele except her eyes are still deciding what color they want to be, though. Charlotte is curious and walking, she's learned how to open the baby

locks on all the cabinets, and she knows the exact cry that will set me running to her.

Ysele says: Henry is amazing, there's no other way for me to say it. He loved me even when I was pregnant with another man's baby! It's hard to believe how loving and giving he is, but that is just Henry. He's supportive and brilliant and I love him immensely. I love his thick, black-rimmed glasses and his salt-and-pepper hair. And I could stare into his eyes all day.

Henry often surprises Charlotte and I with breakfast in bed in the mornings. At night, I make him a glass of hot chocolate to enjoy with his book while I put Charlotte in her crib (not that she stays there for very long). I love every part of who we are as a family and we fit together so well, I couldn't think of anything better than what we have now.

### How We Met

Actually our story begins with another man. Ken, Ysele's best friend since kindergarten, had just passed away. Ken had a heart problem and he was out running one morning and must have collapsed. Ysele was four months into her pregnancy with him via artificial insemination. While Ysele was ecstatic to be pregnant with Charlotte and

had planned on raising her alone, she still hoped Ken would be there as her best friend and uncle to Charlotte. So, to say the least, Ysele was lost.

Finally, around her fifth month, Ysele decided that being lost and depressed was no environment to carry a baby around in, so she threw herself into everything she could. Which brought her to Henry. Ysele really likes to tell this story: "I was rushing to Henry's lecture and was running really late because my feet had swollen to the size of watermelons and my summer shoes were still hidden away because it was only just spring and then when I finally left with my flip flops on, it was raining and I was slipping out of them all over the place. I tried to be so quiet when I closed the door and turned to find a seat at the lecture but then my shoes were still wet and a giant *squeeeekpfttttt* happened and I was so embarrassed. And when I opened my eyes no one was there except Henry down in the front sulking, but chuckling a little, too, in front of his computer.

I asked him where everyone was and he just shrugged, expecting me to leave. 'I'm sorry I'm late, but can I hear your lecture still? My feet are so huge, I couldn't find any shoes that fit!' I said to

him. I knew he was ten years older than me, but when he looked up at me at that moment, I loved him right then. He was close to tears and his blue eyes were puffy and magnified in his dark, geeky-yet-adorable glasses and I couldn't help myself."

From then on Henry and Ysele were inseparable and now plan to live happily ever after.

On the balcony in front of Ken, Ysele and Henry sit quietly thinking. Henry thinks about how they'd met and really how important Ken is to both of them. "Ysele," Henry says after a few minutes of silence. "Ysele, I know this may not be the right time to ask, but do you think you would have rather been with Ken? If he was alive, would you want to marry him today?"

"No," says Ysele.

Henry feels small for asking her about how she felt about another man. "I'm not jealous or anything, sometimes I'm just nervous that if he were still alive you would have chosen him and not me."

"Henry," Ysele shifts to look at him, "I'll always love him, but I love you differently. I had Charlotte with him because I didn't think I'd meet you. I wanted to be someone's mother, but he didn't want to be anyone's father, and that was perfectly fine. But you... you're so different; you've been Charlotte's father and my best friend and my lover and everything. He's always going to be special to me, but you're perfect for me." Ysele hopes

she's said it right and that Henry really understands what she means. Henry's arms hold her tighter as she slides back into his grasp. "I still wish he was here, though, Henry. I wish he could have been Charlotte's silly uncle or something. It would have been nice to have him up next to me during the ceremony."

She feels guilty leaving Ken out of the ceremony; he deserves to see it. "Honey," Henry says. "What if, and I know this is a little weird, but what if we just moved the ceremony over here? I mean, we could make it work. The bridal party could stand on the balcony and everyone could be on the grass below.... We could make it work. And Ken would be right above us. It would be almost like you wanted." Henry wants to include Ken. Without Ken, he wouldn't even know Ysele. And if simply moving the ceremony would make her happy, there was no reason not to. Henry silently thanks Ken in his mind for bringing Ysele to him.

Répondez, S'il Vous Plaît!

Thank you for RSVP-ing on our website! Remember to check for chicken or beef on your RSVP and how many people will be in your party. We're so excited to share this wonderful day together! Also, please add to your RSVP if you will be attending just the ceremony at the Waterfront Park, the reception at the Heinrich Observatory, or both? (~~Don't forget the presents!~~)

## The Honeymoon

Henry and Ysele have not decided where to go yet. They want to go somewhere with little light pollution so they can stay up late and look at the cosmos, but babysitters are hard to find in the middle of nowhere. They will be taking Charlotte with them, of course, and may end of spending a couple of weeks in the pool somewhere tropical, teaching Charlotte how to swim and blow bubbles, and (after Charlotte is asleep) spending late nights together in the Jacuzzi with a bottle of wine ~~and maybe some warm massage oil~~. Thank you so much for visiting our website, we hope to see you soon!

Guests park along the winding driveway of the cemetery and walk along the pathways down to the grassy area below the mausoleum. Their faces have tightly placed smiles on them and they walk stiffly, whispering surreptitiously to each other and lacing their arms together to be as close as possible to one another.

The bridal party understands. But the guests are confused and don't know how to feel or act. Should they be sad or happy? They're at a mausoleum for a wedding. They continue on, shuffle awkwardly to their seats, and look up at the marble plaques of many people who'd passed on.

But then Ysele walks out of the hallway onto the balcony above everyone and she is radiant. It doesn't matter where the ceremony is as long as Henry, Ken, and Charlotte are all there. The guests forget where they are and watch while Henry and Ysele exchange vows. Ysele wraps her arms around Henry's neck and whispers to him, "Thank you for moving the ceremony and making Ken a part of it. You always know just what will make me happy."

"When you're happy, I'm happy."

If there is any doubt at all in Ysele's mind, at that moment it all disappears.

## Perfectly Buttered Toast

In the "Delectable Donuts" doughnut shop at 6 am, anyone could find me in my spot with my two slices of whole-wheat toast and butter. Jerry would be standing behind the display, arranging chocolate bars, bear claws, and lightly sprinkled cake doughnuts. Jerry was a good friend of mine, and it was Jerry who kept me coming back. I remember the first time I walked in and asked him for two slices of whole-wheat toast. He didn't smirk at me or make a joke, he just made my toast. And that was the beginning of our friendship. I liked to sit and watch the people come and go and Jerry liked to watch me watch the people. We liked to have our mornings in blissful, almost-silence.

Jerry was my best friend in this new town. I moved here two years ago to get away from old feelings and I haven't met a lot of people. But Jerry is my best friend because he understands me and I trust him. He even has the spare key to my apartment in case anything ever happens. My dad taught me that, my dad used to have my spare key back in the suburbs. Now Jerry has the key and I trust him with it, he's such a teddy bear I don't think he'd even use it for fear of upsetting me! That's how he is, such a thoughtful person, I'm so glad I met him.

I was sitting on the black stool, centered at the counter with the windows, debating between the extra 50 calories for the blackberry jam. Jerry makes the best homemade jam. I love blackberry jam, and it was in season, and it was Jerry's! But it was also an extra 50 calories that I didn't really need. I was already eating 300 calories worth of toast and butter. So I stared at my plate, thinking. The two thick slices of toasted bread were delicately positioned and the butter was evenly distributed between the two of them. I knew Jerry and I would be friends forever because of the way he butters my toast. He makes sure the toast is perfectly covered with butter, all the way to the edges, and he never uses more than the pat I ask for. I know this because I haven't gained a pound in a year, and my thighs would have noticed if Jerry snuck in extra.

Then there was that unassuming little plastic container, balanced on my white, ceramic plate, full of exactly one tablespoon of jam. No more. No less. How Jerry knew exactly what I wanted, I don't know. But he knew, and I liked not having to say anything in the hours after waking and before working other than, "Good morning, Jerry!"

As I contemplated the fat accumulation of the extra blackberry jam calories per day for the two weeks of blackberry season, I saw something out of the corner of the window. The dancing pie slice from "The Pie Haven" on 20<sup>th</sup> and Johns was hurrying up the street. I tried my hardest to look away but it was pie and from the looks of him, he was blackberry, and I just couldn't look away. My eyes glazed over but I tried to keep myself from slipping into a reverie in my mind by looking elsewhere.

I focused on the city streets, lined with garbage, empty Slurpee cups, apple cores, but then the apple cores only reminded me of apple pie and my mind slipped back to eight-year-old-me. Now I was sitting in the diner, across the blue, plastic, squeaky booth from my father. He was saying something about my mother but all I could do was shove myself full of apple pie. The à la mode kept dripping onto my black dress and my dad kept interrupting himself to wipe it off.

"Anyway, Baby, I was saying that now it's just me and you. You know? But we'll be all right. And I want you to know that. Evie? Evie? Are you listening?" He pushed my hand down, as I was poised to shove in another humongous bite, "I want you to know, Baby, that you can talk to me about anything. Anything you want, I'm here for you, really."

"Yeah, Daddy I get it: talk. Can I have another piece of pie?"

I don't remember much about those next years. I was pretty young. I do remember, though, that we had flowers in our house for a real long time. Whenever I woke up crying for my mother, Daddy would take me in his arms, and press me against his button-up shirt and hold me until I stopped crying. Then he'd take me out to get pie. It was about the pie. And, after a while, it was also about Daddy and me. That year before he died, it was like we knew he was leaving. We went to the diner next to his house nearly every day. But twenty pounds heavier and standing in black over his grave, well, I haven't had a single slice since he died two years ago.

Jerry singing in the back snapped me out of my reverie. He always started singing at 7:00, when it was about time to fry some more doughnuts. It was my cue that I should head to work, but sometimes I secretly stayed and listened to him sing.

Today he was singing "Good Morning" from "Singing in the Rain," and that's my favorite song. I sighed and sat a few more minutes, quietly munching my un-jammed, cold toast. I was thinking about Daddy. How we had always eaten pie together and how I missed him. It had been two years since I'd lost him and I haven't had piece of pie since. It just didn't seem right without Daddy. But that dancing Blackberry piece had me hooked. I kept thinking about how good it would taste and how lonely I was without my father. I missed him so much.

I got up, grabbed my plate and set it softly in the brown dish bucket. Leaving no trace that I had been there, I grabbed my workbag, walked on tiptoes so my heels didn't snap and held the bell as I slipped out the glass front door. I turned the opposite direction of work; I needed that pie.

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I've loved Evelyn since the minute she walked through my door. Actually, that isn't true. I loved her when I saw her on the other side of the door and then when she smiled at me and said good morning I fell in love with her all over again. I know she likes her morning hours to be quiet and peaceful and I know she counts her calories. I don't know how I know, she just emotes what she needs and I love doing it for her.

In the morning, I wait to put the doughnuts in the case until she comes in. I do it slowly so I can spend as much time as possible out in the lobby with her. Sometimes I unnecessarily rearrange them so I can stay with her longer. I can think of nothing that makes me happier than that one-hour time frame. From the moment she walks in to the moment I feel her leave, I float. Sometimes I watch her, the same

black skirt and jacket every day, perched on the stool. I love the way she dresses herself. Always high-heels and a pretty shirt but she hides it underneath the black. She's beautiful and I don't think she knows it, or maybe she doesn't even think about it. She doesn't sway her hips when she walks; she walks kind of like a little girl, in her own world.

She's the only thing I miss in my life. I made myself exactly what I wanted to be, business owner by 25, *successful* business owner by 30, and I love my doughnut shop. I love how my doughnuts are perfectly crispy on the outside and soft and chewy on the inside. But I need Evelyn now because she is my perfect doughnut. She's smart and a little crisp on the outside, a little distant, but I know she's got that soft inside, too.

About a year ago, when we she'd been coming in for a while, she and I had a deep conversation. We ended up talking for hours. I told her all about my business and how I'd worked so hard to make it what I wanted it to be. I told her how my family lived out in the country and how I see them often because we're a really close family. Evelyn is such a great listener but she shared with me too. She speaks softly but with self-assurance. She said that she was an only child and that her mom died when she was pretty young but she told me how she kept her mom's chest of treasures in her apartment and when she's sad she wears her mom's old clothes. Every night she said she opens the chest and breathes, remembering what her mom smelled like. She didn't talk about her dad, but that was okay because we talked about everything else. That's how I found out she was Catholic, too.

Since she was new to the area, I asked her if she wanted to go to evening Mass with me because Sunday mornings are big for doughnut shops and I can't go to morning Mass. We walk there every Sunday evening together and then I walk her back to her apartment where we say goodnight. Sometimes we even go back to the doughnut shop for coffee and to talk. Going to Mass with her is probably why I love her. She says, "Peace be with you" to everyone but she always gives me a huge hug and whispers it to me. I love that she has to sit in the seventh row from the front because that's where her family used to sit and she only likes prime numbers. And it has to be on the left side because she wants the left side to feel as loved as the right side and everyone always chooses the right side because most people are right-handed. Just thinking about her little quirks makes me smile. I love seeing her knees on the pad when we kneel to pray. I love that sometimes she's just a little off key during the Hymns but she loves them so much she doesn't care. And most of all I love that she lets me put my arm around her when it's cold in the pew.

But this morning she seemed a little strange. At some point, she went a little rigid on the stool, and became lost. I could feel her float off somewhere other than her usual happy morning daydreams. Maybe she had forgotten something for work. I hope that's it. But I had to start on my next batch of doughnuts so I went into the back. I wanted her to have a good morning, wanted to cheer her up, so I sang it to her. I hope that it worked. But I don't know if she even heard it, I never heard her leave.

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It's 6:45 on Thursday and tears are dripping into the 375 degree vat of oil. Jerry is crying. Jerry is crying because it's 6:45 and Evelyn hasn't come in since Friday last week and she didn't meet him for Mass on Sunday. He hasn't been singing either because he just hasn't felt like it and now he's mad at himself for crying into the oil because even the slightest addition of water will throw off the temperature and his doughnuts will be a soggy, oily mess and he can't even eat any to cheer himself up because he only likes the crispy ones.

Jerry wonders if Evelyn is sick or even dead. Or, even worse, he offended her somehow the other day and now she's found a new doughnut shop. He should have told her before, he tells himself, he should have told her that he loved her but now there's nothing he can do because now she hates him and he has chased away his perfect doughnut and he will never love another woman ever again. Jerry knows he's being melodramatic but he's just so passionate about Evelyn he can't help himself.

But maybe all isn't lost. As Jerry scoops out his many doughnut balls and lays them out to cool and drain he remembers the spare key. Of course! That spare key that Evelyn left him almost a year ago in case she locked herself out or something, he could go check on her! But was that creepy? What if he went over there and everything was fine, she wasn't dead, etc. and she actually *did* hate him and he had just made it worse?

By this time Jerry had stopped crying and was now staring at the spare key in the drawer designated specifically for Evelyn's key. And then he realized how to do it. He would wait, if he could, until closing time at one and then he'd make her some toast, just the way she liked it and get her some soup just in case she was sick. Then

he'd find her apartment and bring it to her, on the pretense that she was sick, because even if she wasn't, he may still be forgiven for offending her if he brought her a care package. He hoped she liked soup.

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At one, exactly, Jerry locked the front door to "Delectable Donuts" and departed, soup and toast in hand (back-up jam in his pocket). He saw "The Pie Haven" on his way and wondered why Evelyn didn't get her toast there, thanking God that she didn't. But then, as he stood in front of the double doors to her apartment building, he wondered if she *was* getting her toast from them now. He paced outside the doors for a few minutes before reassuring himself that, even if she was, he was still her friend. And friends bring each other soup and toast.

He marched through the doors, took the elevator to the fourteenth floor and stopped in front of 1408. Then he knocked gently.

Evelyn came tromping up the hall. She opened the door in her father's too-big, button-down shirt and her mother's workout short-shorts. She was holding a half-eaten apple pie and Jerry could see the tear tracks down her cheeks. Her apartment was covered in pie pans in to-go boxes from "The Pie Haven" and Jerry could see the dancing pie in her glazed-over chocolate-brown eyes.

And then they cleared as she focused on Jerry. And Jerry just stood there, loving her, as he held out to her: perfectly buttered toast and soup.