From Mufflers to the Mütter: Essays on Everyday Spectacle

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From Mufflers to the Mütter: Essays on Everyday Spectacle

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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From Mufflers to the Mütter: Essays on Everyday Spectacle

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Abstract

This collection of essays interweaves the author’s personal experience and family history to explore the spectacle of poverty, classism and difference. In “Mufflering,” the processing of scrap metals for money becomes a lens for examining the relationship between the narrator, her stepfather and the “lower class” labors that bind them together and keep them separated. “Grandpa’s Porch” analyzes the concurrent feelings of alienation and familial bond that the narrator feels with her grandfather. “Beauty Queen Killer” studies the spectacle of intense feeling and unhealthy obsession that develops when the narrator, relegated to the lower classes of her middle school social hierarchy, attempts to locate a serial killer that briefly passes through her hometown. The spectacle of physical difference and the socioeconomic implications of freakery as observed in the medical “oddities” preserved in a medical museum are the themes of the fourth essay in this collection. This essay, “Mütter,” catalogues the exhibits at this museum in detail and explores the implications for the narrator of her fascination with these spectacle-based displays of difference. The final essay, “Everything to Fear” focuses on the narrator’s observations regarding her sister’s food phobias.
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Introduction

When I was eleven years old, my teacher did the customary “what do you want to be when you grow up” survey just before parent open house. While the other children answered “teacher” or “veterinarian,” I said that I wanted to be “a writer like Stephen King”; the frown on my teacher’s face made it obvious that such an aspiration was not acceptable. That week when the poster went up on our classroom bulletin board listing the students’ responses to this question, my name was not recorded. From this response, I learned to keep my home reading habits secret from everyone at school—I did not tell anyone that I had read several King novels by the fifth grade. Nor did I mention that my mother had read these books and then given them to me to read.

Even at this age, King’s writing impressed me primarily because of his focus on portraying the idiosyncrasies of his characters. As a kid growing up in a family isolated by being rural and poor, I enjoyed that many of his characters felt “real” to me—I knew people who, like Joe Camber in Cujo, were auto mechanics that abused their wives and children but who treated their customers better than family. These small spots of peculiarity coupled with some notes of familiarity made me want to get to know King’s characters as new friends. Indeed, the typical King protagonist (even the “bad” guy) had a well-developed background replete with very small, particular details (a momentary tenderness towards a child even as they verbally abuse that child, a love for poetry mixed with a desire to physically injure a friend) that made his
world interesting and altogether genuine; and whereas my teachers summed up King as the master of the mindless bloodbath, I viewed these moments of gore as superfluous.

I loved Stephen King’s people.

So, when I began to tentatively write short stories, I followed King’s model and penned tales replete with murder, haunted houses that wanted to kill and people with idiosyncrasies that I pulled from my daily life—absentee dads, secretive stepparents, moms obsessed with serial killers, sisters that ate Comet and smelled like cheese. As my mom primarily read true crime and horror novels, I did not know that some writers wrote essays and biographies filled with true details about their own lives.

However, when my maternal grandmother moved in with our family in my early teens, she brought along boxes of books by humor essayists such as Art Buchwald and Erma Bombeck. After one read through *The Grass is Greener Over the Septic Tank* by Bombeck, I was hooked. I did not have children or a husband or crazy pets like Bombeck but I had a strong desire to be funny. Being funny in middle school when you are poor and ugly can help you get past a lot of barriers and, for a while in eighth grade, I told stories about cleaning, menopause and desserts that I thought were hilarious. Try as I might, though, I could not write like Erma. In high school, I decided that I did not have the fodder for Bombecks’s brand of family stories because being country-trailer poor could not be made funny; the pain of being ashamed and constantly ridiculed by other students at school for external things about
my home life that I could not control was not chuckle-worthy no matter how you
dressed it up.

So, I returned to reading and writing horror stories and, although I
occasionally tried to write essays, I never felt my personal stories to be appropriate to
this genre. My attitude about essays changed forever in 1989 when, as a junior in high
school working at my town library, I stumbled across a book of essays that someone
had donated to the library book sale; reading *Trash* by Dorothy Allison changed my
writing life. In the introduction to the 2002 edition of Allison’s essay collection
entitled “Stubborn Girls and Mean Stories,” she noted that her family’s poverty made
her a better essayist “[w]e were the bad poor...We were not noble, not grateful, not
even hopeful. We knew ourselves despised...Everything I write comes out of that
very ordinary American history” (viii). Even without this introduction, in 1989
Allison’s collection allowed me to see that I could write about what I knew of the
world without apology and I took to this style with gusto. I learned from her how to
interweave humor and darkness into the portrayal of my family in such a way that
like Allison “[o]ne time, twice, once in a while again, I g[ot] it right [ ]” (Allison 7).
As well, Dorothy Allison freed me to include the harsh realities of my life in my
writing; details such as my family’s poverty, our junk-selling business, my dad’s
mental illness, and the dirtiness of my cousins’ house. Whereas these shameful facts
once felt taboo, I was now freed to write about them in halting essays. Still, I held
these writings close to my heart and never showed them to anyone in high school; I
was afraid that my readers would react by shunning, rather than embracing, my new
history.

In retrospect, the undergraduate school that I attended, William Smith College
in Geneva, New York, was not an environment suited to a young writer of Allison-
style essays that I was beginning to pen. Even as my teachers applauded Dorothy
Allison for her success in winning the National Book Award in 1992 with her
depiction of the impoverished Boatwright family in *Bastard Out of Carolina*, my own
stories of poverty failed to engender much interest from my fellow creative writing
workshop students or the faculty. Faced with the brutal workshop environment of the
campus “literary” society, I stopped writing essays about my family. In fact, like most
of my classmates, I now wrote fiction stories filled with the requisite bloodless
domestic dramas and existential considerations; it was easier to get good grades that
way and no one would know that I had been raised poor. ¹ I also no longer felt the
push to write the idiosyncrasies that I observed in my own daily life into my
characters; I too could mimic Joyce Carol Oates’s style or Richard Ford’s bland,
overwrought characters.

Ten years after my graduation, I no longer wrote much at all, and only read
works identified as “literary” by Barnes and Noble (where I worked selling books that
were on approved title lists). In the course of my readings I happened across an article

¹ William Smith College was a school that helped the poor to better themselves—although not by
having them attend the school (I always felt that I “snuck in” despite having been my class
valedictorian). Rather, the students held an endless cycle of clothing drives, tent cities, and charity
raffles that benefited the “unseen” poor. I saw the poor everywhere on campus—in the cleaning staff
and the food service people. And I felt closer to them than my classmates. I never told anyone that I
was related to some of the people from Geneva who benefited from the clothing drives and food pantry
collections.
by Rita Felski that examined the roots of her reluctance to write autobiographical essays that included references to her own lower-middle class roots. I was immediately taken with Felski’s argument that “culture is an empty but potent signifier” (36). In mulling over this idea I determined that I, like her, had been too long ashamed of this empty signifier; for me the signified aspects of “poor” were hungry people, dirty people, lesser people, which had, for all of my young life, included me. But Felski forced me to finally realize the emptiness of the word “poor” and some of my concerns about writing about this aspect of my life started to fade. After all, if a well-studied professor of feminism and culture had recognized that being labeled “poor” ultimately helped her academic life, why should I hide that I had been raised “poor”?

However, Felski also made a specious argument in her article that made my literary hackles and my identity as “poor” rise up in objection: she stated that “[b]affled if deferential before the mysteries of high culture the lower middle class is simultaneously barred by its ethos from participating in rowdier forms of popular pleasure” (36). As a member of the “lower middle class” I took issue with this argument: my people read popular literature such as Stephen King, Dean Koontz, Nora Roberts, Dan Brown, and Tom Clancy. We loved books that were decried as “popular” (and rowdy) by the literary intelligentsia and other cultural standard bearers; we participated in this (and many other) “rowdy” forms of pleasure. Indeed, I wanted to write to Felski and explain that it was this “lower middle class” that she denied “rowdy” pleasure that made schlocky horror novels, B horror movies,
carnivals and circuses into popular entertainment. Plus, I objected to her assertion that I was, in any way, “baffled” by the “mysteries of high culture”—indeed, even as a child who read Stephen King and Erma Bombeck, I could switch and read Tolstoy or other “high culture” standard-bearers without being “baffled” by them. Felski made a mistake here by not recognizing that people of the “lower” class might actually choose to enjoy the “rowdy” forms of popular culture (books, etc.) rather than constantly aspiring to join the “higher class.” From this moment on, I determined to no longer be ashamed of embracing popular culture—if I wanted to write like a “popular” author, I would do so and not be concerned with how others might perceive my genre.

As part of my Felski backlash, I began writing essays that focused on the “spectacles” that surrounded my experience of the “lower class” in America. In these essays, I incorporated a number of the ideas put forth by Jonathan Crary regarding spectacle and perception; Crary notes that “spectacle is also a set of techniques for the management of bodies, the management of attention” (105). In my essays, I worked hard to grab my reader’s attention using techniques that specifically drew my reader’s eye to those things that I found mesmerizing: the feel of junk piles in my father’s yard, the way that preserved bodies look, the rank smell of the circus. In penning these observations, I do not spend much time telling my readers the “why” of how my “characters” act. Rather, I am obsessed with drawing my reader’s attention to the “what” that the bodies of my characters do: they obsess, collect, “freak out,” get sick, cry, laugh, perseverate, crack jokes, and respond to others. I usually force
my readers to draw their own conclusions about why my characters might look or feel or act a certain way; I focus on using the right words to draw their attention to that look or action. When one of my workshop professors recently told me that I needed to overcome this need to focus on the shocking or the gruesome in my writing I countered that I cannot overcome this moment of the bang!. I do not need to consider why events happen in the world; rather, I describe what I see happen and let the reader savor the moment. In my essay “Mütter,” I do not explore why human bodies die—rather, I describe the bodies in the museum’s exhibits, how they are displayed, how they are set apart from other bodies and how the bodies made me feel as I observed them. Mütter

In describing the spectacle of my childhood, I have recently found that writing has become a slippery balancing act; there are many details about my history that I do not remember, have never known and cannot ask the remaining members of the family. I envy the Mary Karrs of the writing world who remember every detail of their childhood and can weave a cohesive book out of those stories. In reading The Liars’ Club, I often wanted to point out passages to Karr and ask, “How do you remember this so precisely?” For example, writing this book over thirty years after the events took place, Karr notes that her mother “pulled the rollers out of her hair in about three swipes of her hand and announced that she felt like a freed slave” (The Liar’s Club 194). The details of Karr’s autobiographical recall leads me to think that she either dictated her daily life into a diary during her childhood, that some member of her family did so and that she had access to these memoirs while writing her books
or that she took creative license with her history. I did not keep diaries as a child and have long since burned or lost any essays that I wrote while living with my parents, so I do not have Karr’s recall of every detail of every event in my life. In “Mufflering,” I recount broader themes and things associated with collecting junk with my dad; I also recall a few peak moments that stood out in my memory—these events took place over ten years of my childhood and I can only recall enough to write nine pages. In reconsidering my stance, I am not sure if I envy Karr or distrust her meticulous recall.

As for the second option of plumbing my family for details, my mother, always a guarded woman, has become more so as she has aged and will not discuss the details of my childhood anymore. Mom has begun the process of glossing over the rough patches of her life, transforming events like my stepfather’s infidelity into teachable moments orchestrated by God to test her. The introduction of God into her life has been recent and has become a vicious editor, taking truth and making parable. My Gramma, the only person who told stories about our family that felt authentic, passed away in 2002. Immediately after Gramma’s death, Mom burned Gramma’s daily diaries; now, my sisters and I spend a lot of time piecing together the ashes of Gramma’s stories into a patchwork that survives as our only family history. I also make do by writing essays detailing the smaller episodes we have recalled and outlining the larger themes of our childhood. I have resolved that I will not be writing my own book-length memoir going back any further than the age of thirteen. I simply
do not have that kind of memory for details and I refuse to supplant facts with haziness.

Moreover, I feel a moral responsibility to hold certain essays in my head until my parents have passed. These are paragraphs filled with the dark moments that have colored my history: abuse, neglect, incest, marital affairs and a lack of forgiveness. At the end of *The Glass Castle*, Jeanette Walls seems to forgive her father a lifetime of neglect, abuse and wasteful folly that rendered the family hungry and homeless: “But despite all the hell-raising and destruction and chaos he created in our lives, I could not imagine what my life would be like...without him in it [ ]” (279). I am a long way from this level of forgiveness and have vowed to restrain the anger I hold in me until my parents are gone. I do not think that I owe it to them to keep our darkest moments hidden from their friends and acquaintances; I simply cannot stand to let my parents know that the things that they have done, or not done, to me or my sisters still affects our lives.

The essays that follow are the result of some of these readings and experiences; they are filled with the people that I love and the few memories that I find hard to forget; they are packed with dark humor and blood and the spectacles that I find interesting in the world. In “Mufflering,” I consider a few isolated moments of my later childhood growing up as a “junkman’s daughter” in a world where carefree childhoods, beauty, wealth and health are not the norm. “Grampa’s Porch” looks at my parents’ history and moments that I felt kinship with my Grampa over our mutual hatred of my dad (theses stories were told to my sisters and I by our Gramma before
she passed). "Beauty Queen Killer" explores my teenage fascination with a serial killer that briefly visited my hometown. The essay "Mütter" is chock full of the spectacles that I observed in a visit to an unusual museum in Philadelphia. "Everything to Fear" examines my sister’s disordered eating and the sheer spectacle of eating with her in public. I have not been, nor will ever be, part of "higher class" culture. And, after years of feeling like I did not belong anywhere, writing these essays has helped me accept these experiences; I now know that the moments of my childhood that made me a writer obsessed with dark secrets (some that I will keep a bit longer), were also filled with a wealth of beauty and love and spectacle that I must share.
Works Cited


Mufflering

Two whole used mufflers can buy a loaf of bread. Seven old mufflers, a gallon of milk. Five mufflers cut into pieces translate into seven dollars and a day's worth of groceries. A ton of old mufflers cut into pieces can pay the electric bill for a month. Two tons can buy enough sectioned and split wood to heat a single wide trailer for a whole winter. Four tons can buy a used car.

****

I count my childhood in muffler days.

On Sundays, shivering inside a jacket stained rust brown inside and out, I would go mufflering with my dad. “Mufflering” became our kid word for collecting the metal things that other people no longer wanted (mufflers, old washers, broken refrigerators, seized up car engines) and selling them to a junkyard to buy the things that we needed (food, clothes, electricity and gas for the car).

Mostly, we collected used mufflers from dumpsters tucked behind the local Cole Muffler shop. The muffler shop manager, an old man whose skin and clothes were caked with dried rust, let Dad take whatever we could get out of the dumpster, filled with the castoff mufflers. “But only on Sundays when we’re not open,” he told Dad, glancing at my stained clothes and dirty face.

We drove to the shop in a 1968 Dodge pickup that had once been blue but had caught on fire years before and burned to a deep plum. Dad had replaced the burned seats with bench seats from a Ford station wagon. The seats were not bolted strongly
to the floor and each time the truck stopped, the whole seat lunged forward towards
the dash; my legs, not long enough to brace against the floor, crutched against the
dashboard. The inside of the truck smelled of cigarettes and rust.

****

A car or truck muffler is made up of a set of steel or aluminum tubes wrapped
in a rounded metal shell. Engine noise enters from a front pipe into one end of the
shell and exits the other end through the tailpipe. While in the muffler, loud engine
sound waves become quieter because vibrations in the tubes cancel out the sound
waves. Packing and filtering in the muffler also transforms engine exhaust into a less
noxious gas cloud. Before mufflers, car and truck engines ran so loudly and were so
fumy that enclosed cabins and car chat did not exist. The muffler changed everything.

In modern cars and trucks driven in snowy places, road salt, water and age
usually eat through a muffler in about five years. Sometimes a rusty muffler,
prompted by potholes and the rattling of the engine, falls off of a car, skittering across
the roadway in a shower of sparks. Other times, a car with a holey muffler becomes
too loud or spews noxious black gas from the tailpipe, but the muffler holds on to the
car tightly. Then the driver, afraid of a loud vehicle ticket or being gassed by the car’s
fumes, must take their cars to the muffler shop where techs wrench the old mufflers
off by force, like dentists pulling teeth. Once loosened, the rusted whole mufflers and
pipes are thrown into a large dumpster placed behind the building so the nice people
getting their new mufflers never see the discards.

****
On rainy days that dumpster, colored with rust from the years of seeping mufflers and being left open to the rain, cried rivers of red-brown and the rust color from the dumpster bled through gloves onto my dad’s hands, tinting them a light orange. He always made sure that my sisters and I wore gloves when we went mufflering but the color soaked to our hands too.

On dry days, the muffler rust flaked and floated through the air as Dad climbed in and out of the dumpster. Sometimes Dad coughed as he climbed and I could see the red dust moving in and out of his lungs. On brilliant days, the sun sparkled on the dust and Dad seemed to be inhaling the sunlight. After a dry day of mufflering, my snot was brown and scratched the inside of my nose.

****

I remember mufflering in flashes of memory so vivid that I can taste rust on my tongue. Rust tastes like blood.

****

Mufflers torched off of cars had an unpredictable sharpness where the muffler met the edges of the pipes. The metal edges of these mufflers shown new and fresh as a knife blade just waiting to cut through my gloves with scissor lines. A muffler cut thudded dully with hurt even after the bleeding stopped and some days I could barely hold anything with my precisely sliced fingers.

The mufflers wrenched off of cars without torching had patterned edges that gouged exposed skin into bleeding divots and left skin hunched in the furrow. There was no money for doctors or stitches or tetanus shots and my mom examined every
rusted mark in our skin, assessing the potential for lockjaw or infection. My mother had not completed high school but she had a *Reader’s Digest Family Health Guide* and a steady hope that hydrogen peroxide could stop any rusted infection. She tested for lockjaw by asking us to repeatedly open and close our mouths.

****

The scars of years of mufflering circled my dad’s hands and arms etched white against his deep Indian skin.

****

I was just eight when my mom had told me that she was remarrying and that my new dad was a real Indian. I had imagined my father’s skin would be the color of Indian Red in my Crayola crayon box and when I met him, I was disappointed. He was tanned, just like me, only his tan lasted all year long when mine always faded by mid-September.

I had also imagined that he would be Tonto quiet, only speaking in small choppy sentences. I got that one right. My dad was an eerily silent man who had no experience speaking to children. I begrudged my stepfather his quiet and tried to provoke him into conversations about steel prices and his life before he married my mother. I usually got a few words in response to my questions about junk prices and the logistics of our shared business. Like uneasy coworkers, we could talk about the business more easily than we could chat about ourselves.

I do not know if my mother knew she was marrying a junkman.
I never found out anything about Dad’s life before us from him and my mother would not fill in the missing gaps of information. I still have no idea what year he was born (“Too soon,” he said when I asked), where or when he graduated from school, his former wives’ names, or his children’s names (I think he had three or four). My dad had no past, I became convinced, and I made up stories about him and his expertise at riding horses and leading lost people through the woods. In my mind, he was no longer Larry the junkman but became The Chief; Larry was not a proper name for an Indian.

When they first married, Larry worked at a junkyard. He had a real job driving the crane that lifted cars into the car crusher. I heard him telling my mother in quiet whispers at night how he could make more money collecting his own junk. And Mom agreed. I knew that my old Dad (“my real Dad, I whispered to myself often) did not need to collect other people’s trash to buy food or new clothes. He was in the Army, currently stationed in Korea, and I knew that he would come back to live with us all again soon.

My real Dad never stopped along the road to take old metal from houses where kids from my school bus lived. I used to hate my real dad for leaving us behind to go to Korea but the mufflers made me love the cleanliness of our old lives with him.

With new dad, we lived in the country with no other children nearby. Our house, two single wide trailers nailed together, was surrounded by woods, swamp and ever growing piles of mufflers and metals waiting to be processed. My scabbed hands
and used clothes guaranteed that children of clean families would not brave the muffler piles to visit our home. When I was ten, my mother became friends with a family who fostered children and an endless cycle of used, skinny kids became our temporary friends. Over the next three years, I hung out with a deaf girl, a mute girl whose father had touched her in what my mother called “a bad place” and a seventeen year old girl who explained where that “bad place” was and what she had done with hers. These were not deep friendships and did not translate to school where even the deaf and mute girls avoided me in the hallways.

****

In the summer, mufflering days could be Saturday and Sunday since the Midas shop closed for the whole weekend. Dad and I would go to the shop on Saturday and load the mufflers.

I remember those summers every time that I hear the buzzing of flies.

Beginning in July, the muffler dumpster always buzzed with a million black flies, crawling over the inside surface of the bin and on the mufflers. My Dad said that the soda cans that the shop workers threw into the dumpster caused the flies to swarm and breed. I hated the way that the flies swelled up in buzzing masses as Dad stomped around inside the dumpster and threw out the mufflers. I hated how the dumpster magnified the buzzing until it filled my head and I could think of nothing else but killing as many flies as I could. During my tenth year, my dreams became nightmares filled with flies crawling on my skin, up my nose and into my mouth.
In the summer, prices for steel rose as the construction created higher demand. We could make enough with three hundred cut up mufflers to go to the drive in on Saturday night or to get McDonalds for dinner. For that reason, I loved summer mufflering despite the ever present flies; I could see that working and sweating in the buzzing resulted in something real—not firewood or electricity, but McDonald and popcorn and Walt Disney from the backseat of my parent’s ’76 Impala.

****

Most weekends, my Mom helped Dad cut the mufflers up.

Mufflering became her second job. During the week, Mom worked in an athletic clothing factory sewing jacket hems on baseball jackets and she brought home boxes of shiny baseball jackets for her kids to wear. Discards, the jackets were mistakes: mis-sized, misshapen, mis-colored. I did not know that my baseball jackets, which were almost always some shade of blue, were saved from the garbage; I loved that my Mom had sewn these jackets and I bragged about it at school.

In order to process the whole mufflers, Mom and Dad used an alligator shear to chop them into pieces. Shaped like an alligator’s mouth, the shears were ten feet long and clanged up and down, driven by an old car engine that spun a rubber belt. The edges of the shears shone with a polished brightness that contrasted dangerously with the rusty brown of the machine’s outsides. Those shiny silver teeth beckoned. “Come nearer,” they whispered as the shears clanged up and down.

My mom feared the shears more than tetanus when she calculated the potential danger of our business.
“Those shears can cut you in half,” she warned my sisters. I never had to be warned. As I scooted in and away from the shears, handing the mufflers to my Dad and Mom one at a time, I knew that I looked scared. I feared the metallic screaming of the shears and each time they would slam shut, I pictured myself turning and finding Dad caught up in those terrible jaws, trapped in the shiny teeth.

Once, the belt of the shears caught Dad’s right glove and circled his hand up and through the spinning wheel. The tips of his ring and middle fingers crushed into pulp and he bled deep red onto the rusty mufflers. Mom and Dad panicked and rushed to the emergency room before they could calculate the costs of stitches. After they were gone, I ran back to the alligator and searched through the mufflers, looking for blood on the razor edges, trying to get those pieces far from the shears.

I did not want the clanging jaws to taste blood.

****

One Sunday in the winter of my twelfth year, Dad and I went to the muffler shop with our empty trailer. That Sunday, unlike every other weekend since we had begun mufflering, the dumpster was empty. I sat down on the edge of the trailer and stared at Dad as he peeked behind the dumpster and into the dirty windows of the shop, cupping his hands to see if the mufflers were hidden inside.

Dad sat down next to me. He took off his gloves and rubbed his face.

“All empty,” he said.

My mind blanked and I stared at him silently. The mufflers had always been there when we needed them. How would we eat now without two mufflers equaling
one loaf of bread? I could not measure an electricity bill without calculating the payment in mufflers. My knees began to shake.

We climbed back into the cab of the truck. I felt older than I had that morning. I stared at the scabs on my hands and wondered if my dad would cry. I hoped not. We were not people who would cry together.

****

We switched to junk cars.

A large van was worth one ton of cut mufflers. A small car could bring in as much money as a ton of uncut mufflers.

We found out that cars took a lot more processing before becoming steel and the prices fluctuated more rapidly than the price of mufflers. Cars also took a lot more time to collect and the whole family worked Saturdays and Sundays all year. I learned how to use a tow winch on cars that would not start. We carried bee spray for the cars where yellow jackets had nested as the cars sat in fields, back yards, forests and city streets. Sometimes we found mice nests filled with pinky babies in the cars and I collected the nests and dumped them away from the car. The babies would squirm away from my hands, seeking their mother with tiny exclamation point legs jutting out and closed eyes twitching around. I never knew if the other mice found the babies once moved and it made me sad to think about them dying away from their mother mouse.

I missed the rust of the mufflers and the rusty rain weeping from the dumpster.
Grampa’s Porch

I envy people who recite stories of their parents meeting on a blind date or at a college mixer; these stories feel solid and clean, like stories that children should tell about their parents meeting and settling down to the serious business of having a family. My parents met near the furniture pile at the Yates County dump in rural New York. Not at all the stuff of romantic legend or steadily ever after—Disney princesses never meet their forever prince near a pile of abandoned tires while looking at cast-off furniture.

At this early 1970s dump, Yates residents paid five dollars a month for a permit allowing them the privilege of pulling their cars to the edge of a cliff on a back road near Benton and pitching their unwanted refuse over the edge. Bags of garbage, leftover foods, metals, couches, old washers, old fridges, toys, clothes and a mix of other castoffs all went over the cliff en masse. In this era before rolling garbage totes and garbage pickup, “dump runs” were a way to unload unwanted refuse and to pick up things that might be interesting; all of my grandparents’ furniture, their myriad number of televisions (some with picture, some with sound, few with both) and an astonishing collection of household items had been found at the bottom of the dump cliff.

My mother, not one to romanticize the harsh truths of the world, summarized her first encounter with my dad (and her future ex-husband) succinctly: “Walt definitely didn’t fall in love with me at first sight because he thought I was a long-haired dude.”
My mother, sixteen and dressed in a worn Carhart coverall, looking very much like the aforementioned “long-haired dude,” went to the dump that day because my Grampa needed someone to “help” with the car; the drive shaft on their ’61 Chevy had fallen out every time the car turned right for the last week. Grampa had handed Mom the coveralls before they got in the car and instructed her that when the joint fell out she had to shimmy under the car to slip it back into the universal drive. Mom was good at the shimmy under the car. Grampa, who by that point in the 1970s weighed well over five hundred pounds, could not shimmy under the car. He barely fit behind the wheel and often steered the car by moving his belly flap right or left.

On the way to the dump the day of the meeting, the universal had snapped out of alignment twice and my mother had slid under the car each time, mucking the front of the coveralls with brown axle grease and the back of them with asphalt streaks from the hot road tar.

My parents met at this unlikely Mall of America because Grampa needed to pick out a couch for my Gramma’s sun porch. Gramma and Grampa’s rented farmhouse had two long porches on either wing of the front of the house—one was occupied by Gramma, the aunts and uncles and grandkids and the other by Grampa and his dog, Captain. Very occasionally, the grandparents would visit each other’s porches and a sturdier couch was needed for Gramma’s porch. Grampa had to be very selective about the couch—sturdy frame, no food stains (Uncle Ed could never sit on a couch with stains) and no orange colored fabrics (Aunt Sally had a fury towards the color orange).
My dad, always a go-getter of an odd fashion, had been recently promoted to a job as the guy who sorted stuff at the Yates dump. Standing at the bottom of the cliff as people threw stuff over, Walter Smith sorted out this lemming pile into metals that could be sold for money, actual garbage like rotting food and baby diapers, and stuff that could be reused by others and that could be sold or traded for other stuff. This last group, composed of old couches, televisions with bad tubes, clothes and mostly rusty tools, drew people to this outdoor bazaar every day to pick through and take home the good stuff.

Grampa hated Walter Smith the minute that he met him at the bottom of the cliff. Grampa’s legendary temper warred with his need for a couch that day; my Gramma told me years later that Grampa thought my dad was smarmy and too self-absorbed and he wanted him away from his daughter. But he needed Walt to help him find and negotiate a price for a couch and, by the time the deal was made and the couch loaded onto the car’s roof, my mom and Walt had made a date. And I was born ten months later.

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As an adult, I like to imagine that my Grampa, whose temper could flare in a sudden moment that made his face burst into a red and sweaty twist of fury, was trying to protect my mom from all of the things that he sensed Walt would bring his daughter and the three daughters that she would beget with the dump sorter guy. For this reason, I love the memory of my Grampa fiercely and I like to think he would be
proud of me, despite my beginnings as the child of that "damn, no-account garbage picker."

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My father, having decided that his fortunes lay beyond the world of sorting trash, left my mother and me (I was six months old) one day to go pick up cigarettes at the store. When he had not returned three months later and had not called or written mom, she presumed that he had left us behind for good. Mom and I moved in with her parents and aunts and uncles in the farmhouse when the money that my dad left behind finally ran out. Dad came back six months later an inductee into the US Military.

When mom and dad married later that year (so we would get the “benefits” of being a military family), Grampa and Gramma were livid and banned us from their home. I am glad that I did not witness that scene or, if I did see them dismiss us, do not remember the hurt and the shame that we must have felt at being banished from our family.

Mom, never having lived away from her parents for any period of time, spent the next eight years moving to burrows in Germany, Colorado, and for a few glorious months, Florida, while dad fulfilled his military service in a series of long trips away from his family. But mom desperately missed her family, and when my dad decided to head off to Korea for his last six months of duty, finally called her parents and asked to come home. She had three daughters at that point and hated my dad as much as Grampa did.
“Your dad is an asshole,” she said when I asked about where my dad was moving to as we packed up our Chevy Nova hatchback with everything that didn’t belong to the military or dad. “He opens his mouth and nothing but shit comes out.” A few hours into the drive from Colorado to the Gramma and Grampa house in New York, I stopped asking if we were going home or what happened to dad or the rest of our toys.

As we crossed the states from Colorado to New York and my mom listed the things that my dad had done to her over the course of their relationship, I came to hate my dad too. He had left us behind again and again to chase mediocrity in the Army and had nothing to show for his labor. My mom said that she should have known that the dump was no place to meet a responsible husband and father for her children and, somewhere near Iowa, I agreed.

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When we first pulled up to my grandparents’ rented house on the huge hill near Benton, two cousins peeked out of the front doors and ran towards the car, screaming shrilly. My Gramma peeked her head out of the kitchen window and yelled for us to “Stay right there!” She came running out of the side door, scattering cats out of her way.

“My Grampa’s out on his porch,” Gramma whispered and pushed back her hair the minute she stopped hugging us. I did not remember her looking so old when we had seen them three Christmases ago and I shrank back as she reached out to hug
me again. “He can barely get off his chair anymore. It’s the sugar. He’s got it real bad.”

The cousins crowded around my sisters and me and ushered us out to the side porch. My cousin Ginny, six months older than I and still in first grade (I was in second), took my hand and led me to out behind a large tree that crowded the side of the house next to Grampa’s porch. She had skinny hands, scabbed up knees, a boy’s haircut and was wearing a boy’s Wrangler shirt. The last time we had seen each other, she had been a pretty girl in pink bows. Now she looked just like her older brother Larry.

Ginny cupped her hand around my ear as we peeked between the branches toward the porch and said, “Grampa’s mean and he smells bad. He stinks up the shitter all the time. Plus he hates kids. I think that he’s the meanest man in the whole world.”

I only really knew Grampa from my mother’s stories of him and I didn’t think he could be mean. My mom had told me the whole way from Colorado to New York that Grampa hated my dad, and by the time we pulled into New York, I loved Grampa and wanted him to protect me from my dad. Despite Ginny tugging at my arm to keep me hidden, I took a step out from behind the tree and slowly approached Grampa’s porch.

“Get your ass up here,” Grampa gestured at me.

I approached the porch slowly and found myself looking at my Grampa face on for the first time in at least three years. He was a large man with pinpoint blue eyes
hooded by a hunk of sweat-slicked black hair that jutted out over his forehead. He sat with his knees straddling the back of an ordinary vinyl kitchen chair. He wore no shirt and a pair of old workman’s pants cut off at the knees emerged from underneath his enormous belly. Beside him lay an old white German Shepherd dog with pinprick ears and a pink nose.

Grampa pointed at the dog and kicked out his foot to connect with one meaty dog haunch. The dog’s ear barely flapped.

“That there’s Cappy. Stands for Captain. I was a Captain in the Navy back during The Big War.”

Grampa sneezed and his belly moved in waves.

My Grampa looked at me for a few moments and then blew through his nose. A huge runner of snot blew from his nose and he cupped the snot in his hand. He waved his other hand at my mother and she suddenly appeared and grabbed my hand to lead me away. I wasn’t sure but I thought Grampa was falling asleep with the snot in his hand.

Cappy slept through our arrival.

“Grampa’s old and sick.” My mom explained as we walked back toward our car to get our stuff. “He didn’t mean to fall asleep. He sleeps in that chair out on his porch most of the time now. He must be lonely out there by himself. You should visit him every day.”

I wanted to visit Grampa. I wanted to know how and why he hated my dad and why he didn’t do more to stop my mom and dad from getting together in the first
place. If she had never met my dad, I knew my mom and my sisters and I would live with a rich dad who never smelled like sweat or left us for days at a time not knowing if he was alive or dead. (Most of those times Walt showed up smelling like beer and made mom sad and I knew that this other dad-who-might-have-been would not make her so sad.)

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I would never visit my Grampa on that porch or have those conversations about Walter.

Two months later, as school was beginning and I was slipping into a new life in my grandparents’ house (and mom was starting to date a new guy who sorted junk for a living but never drank and always made mom smile), my Grampa went to bed one night and died in his sleep. Gramma awoke to find him cold as their metal bed frame.

I stood in the doorway of Gramma and Grampa’s bedroom as Gramma screamed and pulled at her hair as the ambulance drivers debated how best to remove Grampa from his bed. I saw the thick inky blackness of his hair over the top of the sheet and blanket that the ambulance drivers pulled up over Grampa’s body. Grampa’s hand stuck out from beneath the blanket at an odd angle and I wished the ambulance men would fix his hand; my cousins stood beside me, all of us shocked into quiet.

The ambulance men settled on rolling him out of the bed; four men with their arms stretched and bulging rolled Grampa and his sheets off the bed and onto a
stretcher that sank under his weight. The tucked his arms next to him and covered his hair.

Gramma cried and wailed and the sound if it made me feel sad and alone. I wanted to hug her and tell her that it would be okay but I sensed that she could not be alright again.

The ambulance men took Grampa out the door of the house onto his porch and Cappy glanced up at the stretcher as it rolled past. I followed the men out and sat with my cousins on Grampa’s porch; we took turns petting his dog as the men loaded Grampa into the ambulance. When the ambulance turned around and drove Grampa down the hill towards Benton, the cousins and I sat silently on the porch and listened to the sirens fade.
Beauty Queen Killer

These are the facts of the case as I know them now:

April 10, 1984. Photographer Christopher Wilder kidnaps sixteen year old Dawnette Sue Wilt at gunpoint from a mall in Gary, Indiana. Wilder uses his previous kidnapping victim, Tina Marie Risisco, to help him lure Wilt to his car with promises of a modeling job. The FBI suspects that Wilder has been involved in the deaths of at least seven young, beautiful women from California to Florida, and warnings flash across national television. The “Beauty Queen Killer” should be considered dangerous. He has tortured his past victims, some as young as ten years old. He can also be considered charming and attractive. Pictures of Wilder’s face appear on television and newspapers everywhere.

Wilder then drives to Niagara Falls where he and Risisco take pictures in front of the Falls. The pair keeps Wilt tied up in their vehicle during the photo session. The three travel down the New York State Thruway to the Exit 45 motel near Rochester, New York.

April 12, 1984. Knowing that the police are trailing him, Wilder drives around the back roads of Upstate New York. He stabs Dawn Wilt twice in the back and once in the chest and leaves her by the side of a road in Barrington, a small town near Penn Yan. A local delivery man happens upon the girl on the side of the road. Wilt immediately identifies Wilder as her kidnapper. The local media goes crazy with warnings to young women. Christopher Wilder should be considered armed, charismatic and nearby.
Wilder flees to Eastview Mall in Victor, New York, where he lures Beth Dodge, a woman from Phelps, New York, out of her vehicle, a gold Trans Am. He then orders Dodge by gunpoint back into her car, drives her to a nearby gravel pit and shoots her. He drives the gold Trans Am out of the gravel pit. Risisco follows him in his car to Boston where he puts her on a plane back to California. Risisco immediately contacts police and tells them that Wilder is heading to Canada. APBs are issued to all of New York State.

April 13, 1984. In Colebrook, New Hampshire, two state police officers recognize Wilder and attempt to arrest him. During a struggle for his gun, Wilder is shot in the heart and dies instantly. Newspaper photographs of the dead man show his legs, clad in cowboy boots and jeans, dangling out of the Trans Am door. The rest of his body is obscured.

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These are the facts of the case as I knew them then:

April 12, 1984. I am twelve years old, in the second year of middle school in Phelps, New York and stuck in a two o’clock assembly. I sit on the aisle, close behind the teachers. From years of experience, I know that dark auditoriums can be dangerous places for the unpopular kids, filled with the electric hum of a dog pack on the trail of rabbits. The promise of blood fills the air and the pretty kids smell it in their hindbrains.

The principal tells us that we will wait inside the building for the school bus that afternoon. He tells us never get into a car with anyone we don’t know after the
bus drops us off. Parents will wait outside to take walkers home. He does not tell us
the reason for the assembly and I want to tell him that we had heard this one before.
That we are the milk carton kids. We know about Adam Walsh. Know never to take
candy from strangers.

The first spitball catches me by surprise. Three more hit my hair and hang. I
try to brush out the white chunks without touching them. They are heavy with spit
and cling to my fingers.

I look around out of the edges of my vision. I do not want to see that Tammy Penny
is wadding up another ball of paper and shoving it into her mouth. Tammy
thinks that her flipped blonde bangs, new boobs and high-topped pink Reeboks make
her too pretty to get in trouble with the teachers. Mostly, she is right. I slink down in
my seat.

The day of the assembly, I am wearing the new spring jacket my mom bought
at the Salvation Army. It is acid washed and has a Palmetto label exactly like Tammy Penny’s coat. Wearing my coat all day, even as I sweat under the thick denim, I think
that I can avoid being Tammy’s target. She will not yell “Piggy” at a girl wearing the
same coat as her.

Until that first spitball, I think I am right. I am not Piggy today. No one snorts
at me or wrinkles their noses. No one asks, “What smells?” and points at me. No one
says “Piggy smells” as we undress for gym or eat lunch or change classes. I am Polly,
not Piggy.
That *thwapping* of the spitball against my ear erases the threads of peace I am weaving together. I am Piggy and Tammy climbs back to untouchable. Becomes the beauty queen.

I stay in my seat at the end of the assembly. I think that I can outwait her and she will be forced to go to some eighth grade class. But bullies do not obey the ringing bell.

She waits for me in the hallway.

“Piggy.” Tammy snorts as she walks up behind me.

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As an adult, I hope that teachers in my middle school would have helped me if I had only one thing that needed doctoring. Bad hair. Bad clothes. Terrible smell. Dirty Coke bottle glasses. Bad parents. I would have been a quick three stitches and a band-aid. Made them feel good about fixing me up. But I hemorrhaged from too many places for new clothes or a shower before class or new glasses to stem the flow. Giving me an eye patch or a clean scoliosis test could not make me a healthy and whole kid. So they left me alone.

I hope that they were not part of the baying pack waiting for me to enter the woods each day.

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*April 12, 1984. 6:30 p.m.* “Authorities now believe that Christopher Wilder, the beauty queen killer, may be hiding in Upstate New York.” Tom Brokaw’s
graveled voice on the NBC evening news startles me and shivers trace around my arms and up my back.

“Wilder stabbed a sixteen year old girl and left her on the side of a dirt road near Penn Yan, a small farming village earlier today. He also may be responsible for the shooting death of a woman from nearby Phelps, New York. Authorities now believe that Wilder may be travelling with a young girl who he kidnapped from a mall in California. They may be in a gold Trans Am stolen from the woman found shot earlier today. Authorities warn that Wilder may be seeking young girls near malls or department stores. He may also be using his young teenage captive to lure other women.”

I see my mother lean forward from her chair as a correspondent traces Wilder’s path from Australia to California to Florida and back to California and then towards New York.

After the news broadcast ends, I see my mother step into the kitchen to look out of the window. She stares into solid blackness. We have no yard lights. We live in the country, in inky, solid black swamps where the night is not cut through with streetlight cones.

I go over to stand near her and stare outside. I wonder if her thoughts are with that gold Trans Am.

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I know that having two televisions, one with sound and the other with picture, stacked in our living room marks my family as not normal. I know that living in a
house made of two trailers nailed together makes me different. But the thing that deeply divides my sisters and me from the other children is our mother: Eleanor Virginia VanValkenburg Smith does not believe in keeping the truth from children. Any truths. At an early age, I learned the facts about death and burial, knew there was no Santa Claus or Easter Bunny and that terrible and random things often happened to people.

One of my earliest memories is my mother reading to me from Ann Rule’s *The Stranger Beside Me*. My sisters and I, nine, seven and one, listened with rapt attention as Bundy, in the voice of our mother, killed teenage girls and children all over the United States. We listened to him being caught, tried and escaping. We did not know that other children did not know the story of Ted Bundy as well as Winnie the Pooh. My mother leaves true crime books around the house, books about murder, serial murder, mass murder, unsolved murder and I begin to read them in fourth grade.

I learn to suspect everyone.

I also learn about the dark romance of the murderer; the sweet traps they lay out for women; the urge to be famous for something, anything, no matter how many people get hurt in the process.

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*April 12, 1984, 8:00 p.m.* My mother sits at the kitchen table reading a book about the Black Dahlia murder.
My mind wanders outside of our windows to the road we live on. It is a country lane but connects Penn Yan with the Thruway. I wonder where Christopher Wilder is at that moment. Is he sitting outside on the road near my house? Waiting outside in that gold Trans Am for some beautiful girl to leave her house so that he could grab her? Is he hiding outside of my school, only blocks away from where Beth Dodge, the dead Trans Am owner had lived, waiting to grab one of the girls? Would he take Tammy Penny?

I imagine that I could be the one to find him. Imagine that discovering this national celebrity near my house could be the thing that takes me out of this shack in the woods, where we have two stacked televisions, where my dad is the local junkman and my mother reads about killers but is afraid to go find them. Would that be my ticket out of spitballs and “Piggy”? I think that those girls would be scared tonight, the beautiful ones, would worry that Wilder could be lurking outside of their doors, on their roads.

I want to find him.

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April 13, 1984, 8:00 a.m. My plan is simple: I clean my glasses and put on my best clothes and my Palmetto jacket before leaving the house. I will take the bus to school; after all of the students go into the building I will head off to take up a position at the edge of the road in front of the strip mall (our only town mall). I hope that Christopher has stayed in town, looking for a young girl to replace the one he had left behind. I am not sure if I want to leave Phelps with him (I imagine that he will tell
me to call him Chris once we meet). I think that I might call the police and turn him in and get famous for awhile. No one will dare call me “Piggy” if I am on national television and interviewed by Tom Brokaw.

I have a picture of Christopher Wilder that I cut out from the front page of the *Finger Lakes Times* in my back pocket. On the school bus, I pull out the picture and trace the edge of his face. I wonder if his hair will be as soft as the paper under my fingers. In the black and white newspaper picture his eyes look hooded and I imagine them as a sharp blue that changes color in an instant.

Maybe I will not call the police and he will take me along with him on the next leg of his trip.

Three hours later, I am finally sitting outside the strip mall across the street from the school. When I arrived at school that morning, Christopher Wilder in my pocket, the teachers ushered us quickly from the bus into the school and I went along, like a fish caught in a rapid stream.

In the middle of gym, I slip back into the locker room, dress and blend into a lunch line with the sixth grades. No one yells at me and I sit at a table with another girl. She talks to me about her dog and her brother. No one throws spitballs. I realize that these kids do not know me, do not know me as Piggy or Polly or at all. This is the best lunch I have had in middle school and I am sad that I cannot follow this girl (whose name I don’t remember five minutes after lunch ends) back to sixth grade where I am unknown.
My bus driver, stopping for her lunch break at the Great Wall Chinese restaurant in the mall, does not notice me sitting on the ground by the mall. I take the picture out of my back pocket every few minutes, trace the bearded face with my fingers and then carefully fold it back into my pocket. It starts to rain and my glasses are speckled with the tiny drops and my Palmetto jacket begins to get heavy.

I know that serial killers are often found by the police by accident.

Ted Bundy was arrested after a police officer noticed that he had a headlight out on his VW Beetle. David Berkowitz, the “Son of Sam,” had received a parking ticket near the scene of one of his murders. I decide to walk around Main Street and find cars with parking tickets and look at the owners.

I find one car with a parking ticket. It is a small gold-colored car parked outside of the library. I wait for an hour until an elderly man emerges from the library and drives off. I realize that I am not quite sure what a Trans Am looks like and that I am hungry again and bored.

The rain gets heavier and I debate whether to go back to school or go inside one of the Main Street stores.

In 1984, the Phelps Library is housed in a small building that had once been a church. I am outside of the stone walls, tracing each stone, when the rain becomes a downpour and I can’t see anymore. I jump into the library as a thunderous boom shakes the sky and lightning zings across the clouds.

The stained glass windows in the library cast rainbow colors over the white walls and the tiny rooms form catacombs of fiction, non-fiction and children’s books.
I have never been to this library before and find the scents of must and paper and faint spice exotic and different from the peanut butter and jelly smell of the school library. I begin dribbling my fingers over the book jackets in the adult fiction section, waiting for the fog to clear from my glasses so that I can go outside again.

Once my glasses clear, I glance at my watch and startle. The bus will come in ten minutes to take me home.

I take the article out of my pocket. It is wet and the grays and whites of the print have bled together. I try to rub the paper over Wilder’s face and it slips off on my fingers, leaving behind a hole. I slide the wet paper back into my pocket.

I run to catch my bus.

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March 13, 1984, 6:30 p.m. Tom Brokaw announces: “New Hampshire State Troopers have shot and killed Christopher Wilder. The manhunt is over…”

Again, my mom leans towards the television. I feel a little bit like crying. Like someone I once loved a time ago has died in a distant place that I have never been and cannot go.

I go to my room and pull out the now dried picture from my desk. I smooth out the wrinkles. I study Christopher Wilder’s missing face. What color was his hair? His eyes?

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For the rest of junior high, I am just a girl with bad hair and a bad smell. A
girl still called “Piggy” by her classmates. I hate assemblies and get hit with spitballs
from Tammy Penny. My Palmetto jacket gets lost on a field trip and I get a new
plastic coat from Ames.

I start to write to Dawnette Wilt through the Penn Yan police. I want her to be
my pen pal.
Mütter

The skull of a one month old infant consists of six separate bones connected only by a thin layer of cartilage. If the child dies before those bones fuse fully at the age of eighteen months, the skull eventually disintegrates into a myriad of china thin slivers heaped in a pile. To archeologists and forensic anthropologists, such fragmented skulls become an odd little jigsaw puzzle waiting for someone to line up the pieces and fit the edges back together.

But what if the skull is that of a hydrocephalic infant or conjoined twins linked by a bony ridge at the side of their skulls? What if a fragmented skull has syphilitic holes burrowed throughout the bony plates separating them into a myriad of random jagged pieces?

Within a small brick building on a quiet street in downtown Philadelphia a unique museum specializes in such challenges. Since its opening in 1858, the Mütter Museum (pronounced “moo-ter”), part of the Medical College of Philadelphia, has amassed over 20,000 objects of medical curiosity including anatomical models made out of plaster, clay, stone, wood and plastic, medical photographs and illustrations, books, eccentric medical equipment and scientific memorabilia. But these immense collections are not what have transformed the Mütter from a staid medical observatory into Philadelphia’s most popular underground tourist destination. The lure of this museum for the average tourist lies in the Mütter’s darker purpose—the reconstruction and preservation of skeletons and other tissues from diseased human cadavers. Tourists come here to see the bodies.
Housed in display cases of dark walnut and polished glass suitable for a fine jewelry store, the Mütter exhibits thousands of preserved human parts twisted and ravaged by conditions long since vanished from our daily realm—the bulbously swelled skin of man plagued with smallpox, skulls replete with quarter-sized holes as a result of trepanation, the twisted spines of polio victims. Some of the residents of the Mütter were famous in life, including three presidents and one presidential assassin, circus stars and a few movie stars. Other are much more well known after their death—plague victims, mutated fetuses, mutated adults and one man who had the misfortune to be cleaved in two by a train. Some have remained whole throughout their career as medical specimens—entire bodies preserved in glass caskets with dim lighting illuminating their misshapenness. Some residents of the Mütter have been reduced to just a tumor-laden ear in a jar or a milky brown eye floating in a plastic cube—“Cataracts,” the plastic label reads.

I visited the Mütter with my partner, Jessica, who had reluctantly agreed to accompany me. Jessica was neither a science groupie (like me) nor possessed of a strong stomach. As we paid our $12.00 admission fee and slipped into the cool silence of the Museum, I immediately began to classify two kinds of Mütter visitors: those (like me) who looked into the cases filled with bones and jars of floating babies and eyes connected by thick optic nerves to a brain floating alongside and thought: “This may be the best vacation destination ever,” and those, (like Jessica) who
glanced into each display and quickly averted their eyes once they recognized the particular human part they were viewing.

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After an hour at the Mütter, Jessica eventually became overwhelmed and went to sit outside in the medical garden, leaving me to investigate the Museum’s darkly lit backrooms.

**The Mütter and Me, Part I**

My interest in medical oddities stems from an odd source—*Reader's Digest* magazine. My mother, a patriotic citizen, purchased this magazine yearly from the VFW in my hometown and as a result, countless freebie *Reader’s Digest* books poured into our home. While I had no interest in the *Reader’s Digest Sewing Guide*, I obsessed over titles like *Into the Unknown* and *Science Frontiers* (which in truth contained nothing of real science). In these volumes I found stories of famous Bigfoot sightings, Loch Ness, UFO abductions, rains of toads throughout history and, my favorite, medical anomalies. I would stare for hours at pictures of horned people, dwarves, giants, frogwomen and frogmen (with bars strategically placed over their frog nether regions) and the Elephant man.

Indeed, as a young child, I knew the story of Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins, better than that of Johnny Appleseed or George Washington.
My interest in medical anomalies would eventually lead me take a summer class in high school co-taught by Robert Bogdan. A professor of education at Syracuse University, Bogdan is regarded by many academics as the foremost expert on the history of the displaying of medical oddities—he is the guru of freak shows, the center of an odd mix of scientists and laypeople still interested in Cheng and Eng, Molly, the living doll, and the famous Tom Thumb. While in person he was not as interesting as his subject, Bogdan led me to another outlet for my interest—from him, I learned that the New York State Fair is the last in the U.S. to feature a sideshow with freaks. While these were not the “good” freaks like those of P.T. Barnum’s day (instead, a 3 ton pig and a 2 headed baby in a jar), I came to love the process of paying my fifty cents and slipping into the sideshow tent.

Within these tents at the Fair, I discovered the draw of viewing freaks first-hand—the excitement of being able to stare at deformity after years of deliberately averting one’s eyes. And I loved it. I have now paid fifty cents to see the same two-headed baby for over twenty years of State Fairs and never tire of that moment—ducking into the dimly lit tent, staring at the things we are taught not to stare at in real life. Visiting the Mütter represents the culmination of these moments—a unique hajj to the world’s largest sideshow.

**John Wilkes Booth’s Tumor**

Upon first entering the Mütter Museum, the attendants usher you into a brightly lit corridor past cabinets filled with “Presidential History.” I am instantly
reminded of Disneyworld’s brightly colored queue lines where Goofy cavorts or you are entertained by a movie while waiting for the main event. Here, the diversion consists of a jar containing a bit of yellowed tissue no bigger than a pencil eraser purported to be from a tumor removed from the thorax of John Wilkes Booth. How can they know this comes from Booth? I am an odd skeptic—I accept that Loch Ness may indeed house a subterranean creature of unknown etiology but need a DNA match to prove that this blob of tissue belongs to Booth. The Mütter offers no such proof of lineage and I move to the next display pairing faith and freakery.

More interesting than the dubious contents of this jar are its neighbor—a shriveled piece of brown cloth said to contain the blood of the dying Abraham Lincoln. Whether or not this claim is true, I stop a minute to consider the Museum staff’s intentions in placing these two exhibits next to each other. Indeed, the display contains little about Booth or Lincoln’s background and family ties, beyond their being tied together in a final act of revenge, death, bodily fluids and fire. I try to think about Lincoln without remembering how he died and find myself circling back to this brown stain on yellowed cloth. I find it impossible to think about President Lincoln without thinking about Booth and the Ford Theater.

I decide that it would be better to live namelessly than to die in a famous event like an assassination or the Black Plague or the myriad of other famous downfalls housed at the Mütter.

With that thought in mind, I finally enter the Museum.
Years ago, I spent a semester in college researching P.T. Barnum’s Museum. Built in New York City in the mid nineteenth-century, “Barnum’s Emporium” was regarded by many as the preeminent museum of its time—primarily because of his unique subject matter and presentation style. The Emporium specialized in displaying a diverse range of human oddities from the dwarf to the Aborigine (truthfully, these may have been Africans or African-Americans in loincloths but Barnum made them spectacular). Each display served to emphasize the resident’s status as “different” in dramatic fashion. Roped off in a square room where people of all ages could watch and stare, Barnum would perch a microcephalic person on a chair surrounded by nothing else. A light would sometimes be focused on the pinhead’s coned head (which was usually tufted with a small patch of long hair at the top to force the marks to “Pay attention to the head!”). Barnum’s barkers would yell out math problems at the pinhead, who would, on cue, drool and gibber for the assembled crowd. Flash and bang, Barnum’s Museum screamed.

In some ways, the Mütter presents its freaks on the other end of the spectrum—no noise whatsoever penetrates the confines of the museum space. In fact, no one speaks above a library whisper once we have entered the museum and even footfalls are muted by the thick carpets.

Yet, the Mütter’s dim lighting, punctuated by bright spotlights on odd features in each display and the progression from slight deformities (near the door) to the backroom filled with monstrous fetuses in jars, all serve to mimic Barnum’s
Emporium and evoke that same sense of the exotic and forbidden. Each specimen in the Mütter possesses a label designating the ethnic origin of the deceased and its location of discovery—very Barnum.

I approach the first display and am stopped in my tracks. The Hyrtal Skull Collection. One-hundred and forty human skulls lined up on glass shelves in a glassed case extending on to the museum’s ceiling. Over two-hundred and sixty eye holes stare out, lit from above.

A pirate skull from 1787. A young boy, French, smallpox, 1790. A mummified skull, year unknown. A hydrocephalic baby, year unknown, born to a French woman of ill-repute. Elderly women, young women, a youth killed by a hammer, smallpox, syphilis, tumors, aborted fetuses....

They stare out and me and I cannot stop staring back.

As I read the cards tucked beneath each skull, I want to know more of their deaths. Reading between the lines of the sixteen year old boy “Kicked in the head by
horse”. What kind of horse? How did he get kicked? Did he die immediately? Each of these skulls withholds a story of how it arrived at this place to look out from the walls of the Mütter.

I find out from the card at the side of the case that the skulls were part of the private collection of Dr. Hyrtal, an anatomist who spent much of his time collecting his prizes in Central and Eastern Europe during the end of the 18th century. Dr. Hyrtal donated his skulls to the Mütter after his death. I search the collection to find out whether Dr. Hyrtal himself became part of his collection but cannot find a skull labeled “Anatomist, France 1780.” I wonder whether these skulls were given freely by their relatives. Did Hyrtal pay the poor and indigent for their loved one’s head? Or, did the relatives of these people awake one day to find their loved one’s corpse headless without explanation?

I stare at them and they stare at me.

I love the rows and the neatly labeled display cards that show the care taken by someone even in the loneliest of deaths. The skulls of “Robber, 17, Executed” and “Elderly Woman, 82, Died of Consumption,” placed side-by-side with perfectly squared white label-cards feel equal in value to this collection. I like to think that Hyrtal loved all of his skulls; even the skulls of robbers and rapists and those unloved in life.

I wonder what Barnum’s pygmies and pinheads and bearded ladies thought as they sat on their stools and watched the marks pass. Were they happy to be stared at?
Were they looking back and mocking those who went by for their normalness, their sameness?

The line behind me becomes restless and I reluctantly move past the Hyrtal skulls. As I reach the next display, I am startled to find a human body so transformed that I can barely discern one part from the next. However, I find myself searching her skull for her eyes.

Soap Lady

When human tissue is exposed to brackish water after death, a rare chemical reaction called saponification can transform skin and fat into a lumpy clay mixture resembling common lye soap (adipocere). A result of the activity of anaerobic bacteria present in watery graves in warmer climates, this tissue mixture retains the shape of a human being due to the skeletal frame underneath but resembles nothing else human that I have ever seen.

The Mütter Museum houses the most well-preserved adipocerous corpse in modern collections. Nicknamed the “Soap Lady,” this body was discovered in the Old City of New Orleans—it is believed that the unnamed woman died of a Yellow Fever outbreak sometime in the nineteenth century. Now housed in a glass case at the Mütter, scientists have struggled to control the temperature and humidity to preserve her waxy remains. Her case, constantly monitored and regulated by a computer, serves as testament to her rareness.
There used to be a “Soap Man” who was exhumed from the same Louisiana graveyard as the Soap Woman. Soap Man was lost many years ago and is rumored to be held by a private collector somewhere in his home state. What an odd dinner conversation piece that must be—“Charles, is that a human body in your living room?” “Why yes, it is the Soap Man sitting there right next to my couch.” Perhaps, unlike the Soap Woman, he was unloved and untended and dried up and blew away on a strong windy day.

For some reason, the Soap Lady bothers many people more than the skulls or the babies in jars that populate the Mütter usually do. I think that it lies with her hair. It is gray and stringy and pokes out from her head as if she has been on a long nap and has a terrible case of bed head. Skulls and fetuses don’t have hair that they once tied up in ribbons or fussed over. They are somehow less pitiable than this long-dead woman with her unruly hair.

The Soap Lady doesn’t appear to me to have real-looking eye holes in her mass of puffy grayness. She has cartoon disk eyes. I can stare at her without her staring back. Safe.
Chang and Eng

A visit to the Mütter Museum would not be complete without seeing the casts of Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins. Born in Siam in 1811, the twins were connected for life by a thin band of tissue stretching across their torso and a shared circulatory system. Touring the world with P.T. Barnum, the twins gained enough financial freedom to leave the freak show circuit and buy neighboring farms in North Carolina. There they lived, married sisters and had twenty-two children before dying of old age. The twins even adopted the surname Bunker—a plain old American name for their families. After death, the twins’ bodies were autopsied at the Medical College of Philadelphia where their conjoining fleshy bands were finally separated and they became two bodies.

After the autopsy was performed, the doctors made an unusual choice—to preserve the death rigor of Cheng and Eng with a life-sized plaster cast of their bodies.

Housed now at the Mütter Museum, the cast occupies a beautifully lit case of oak and glass. Also in the case in a shallow pan filled with murky preservatives lies
the twins’ livers, entwined together even after death by a shared network of blood vessels and fatty tissue.

Before my visit to the Mütter, I read on the internet that the Museum staff has long debated whether or not to resign the cast of Chang and Eng and their other famous sideshow residents to the non-public part of the collection—to be viewed only by medical scientists and historians. Ethicists at the College of Philadelphia have argued that these displays hearken back too much to the Barnum freak shows and the era of exploiting abnormality for profit. After visiting the Museum, I argue that any scrubbing of the Mütter remains impossible. Indeed, whether we view a deformity under the bright lights of the medical theater or within the dark confines of a sideshow tent, the human desire remains the same—to pay money to look into the genetic maw and breathe a sigh of relief at our own normalcy. No matter which residents occupy the Mütter Museum’s display cases—Tom Thumb or an anonymous stable hand—the roots of this desire cannot be purified.

Babies in Jars

At the New York State Fair, for fifty cents, one can witness the wonder of a two-headed baby. The tiny dark yellow and brown tent where the baby resides has not changed since I was twelve years old and begged my parents to give me the admissions money so that I could follow the Barker’s voice into the tent. At the modern State Fair, the Barker at the baby tent is pre-recorded and the tiny fetus held
in that jar has become leathery and brown. Perhaps too many years in formaldehyde has pickled him. But for thousands of Fair goers every year, the tinny siren call to see a deformed baby remains strong.

In a college class, I learned about the process of teratogenesis—the unlucky lottery whereby a fetus becomes misshapen during formation. My class was filled with theoretical scientific abstraction: “________ results if the outer neural tube fails to shape correctly during week four of gestation?” “Hydrocephaly,” I would answer. I had memorized the textbook description of a hydrocephalic incident and could recite it verbatim.

Twenty years later, in the dimly lit back room of the Mütter Museum, I am confronted again by the astonishing range of things that can go wrong in forming the human body. Here, thousands of canning jars hold deformed human fetuses ranging from four weeks past conception to those ready to be born. Teratogenesis in such mass becomes stunning.

A slight twist of the neural tube in week two of development and you get two heads. Three heads. No ears. No brain (just flappy skin and a sunken cavity). Five arms. No arms. One eye. No eyes. Five eyes. A complete severance of the neural tube during week seven of development and the results are a bloody mass with no features at all.

Here too lay the skeletons of babies and children born with twisted backs and misshapen legs. One small child’s skull, missing pieces at the crown, possessed an oversized jaw with huge yellowed teeth. I can imagine the pure scientific joy of the
scientist who got to put the alligator baby’s jaw together! I wonder what happened to the missing pieces.

Standing in this room at the Mütter filled with jar after jar of babies whose mothers did drugs or smoked or had any number of invisible genetic flaws, I, for the first time, regret not having a child of my own. I see other visitors clutch their children more closely upon entering this room. Are they thinking “Thank god this happened to someone else’s baby and not my child”? Are they picturing their own child with no ears or three eyes?

I want to be like them.

But deep inside, I really want to show this room of jars to my imaginary child to fuel in them a passion for these places—for the freak shows and the sideshows. I regret having no children to share the “World’s Smallest Horse” with at the State Fair or to warn that the “Ripley’s Believe It or Not” tent is just a scam. I imagined myself looking down at my child and saying “A doll’s head glued to an alligator skull does not a good freak show make.” We would one day visit the Mütter Museum together and I would teach him/her to love the Hyrtal Skulls, the Soap Lady, Chang and Eng and these babies in jars.
The Mütter and Me, Part II

As I left the Mütter Museum through the Gift Shop (like any good tourist attraction, one must exit through the Shop), I pawed through the t-shirts and calendars and postcards for the perfect remembrance of the two hours that I had spent there. I finally selected two items—a magnet for my refrigerator emblazoned with a picture of the Hyrtal Skulls and the Museum’s motto ("Disturbingly Informative") and a “Box of Bones” puzzle.

Later that night, I put together the puzzle and was disappointed when a normal human skeleton appeared with the usual 206 parts all in the correct places. I wanted a puzzle with two skulls or an extra hand or missing limb. I wanted a Mütter puzzle of my own.
Everything to Fear

Some of my sister’s phobias can be defined with neat psychological labels.

April fears chemicals (chemophobia), eating in public (agoraphobia), airborne substances (aerophobia), riding in cars (amaxophobia), choking (pnigophobia), dentists (dentophobia), germs (mysophobia), medicines (pharmophobia) and being alone (monophobia).

I can handle these fears. In having definition, they become real. Not imaginary moments where April’s inability to control irrational thoughts rise up too far into her forebrain.

Other fears, I cannot label.

April has convinced herself that she has allergies to peanut butter, pickles and shellfish and will not bear to have them nearby. Her doctors have told her that she does not have food allergies. But her mind has become so convinced of her allergy that she experiences shortness of breath and vomiting if she eats a food that has been added to her list of allergens. This roster changes often and April texts me the names of foods that have been added. She never adds anything to clarify; the text read only: Clams. Garlic pickles.

This obsession I will not recognize. In our frequent phone calls, I remind April that, at thirty-five, she has eaten enough peanut butter to kill an entire grade school of allergic children. She does not respond directly to this fact and instead reminds me that there are so many varieties of shellfish or peanut oil that one can
never know if you will get a different kind, one that you have not been exposed to before, a new thing that can kill you.

I once tried to explain to April how allergies work—that you must be exposed to the allergen twice before you exhibit anaphylactic shock. “Your body must come into contact with that certain substance before it can rally its defenses to fight off that thing the next time. It is not the first bee sting that can kill an allergic person; it is the second one.”

My science did not help April the next time that she thought her throat was closing up after eating bread that she discovered was moldy. That time, she clawed her neck skin until it bled.

April tells our parents that I do not believe that she has food allergies and treat her like she is mentally disabled. I do not tell my family that I wish that April had something easy to describe like Down Syndrome or any of the other illnesses with commercials and telethons. Indeed, if someone tells me, “My sister has Down Syndrome,” I understand what they are saying and can picture the situation. When I tell people that “My once-independent adult sister dropped out of the world eight years ago and became an obsessive person. She lives in our parents’ spare bedroom (10 x 10 square feet) and fears everything,” I usually get blank stares or slightly puzzled looks and the discussion ends.

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When we were children, on Friday nights when the money was flowing, my sisters and I went to McDonald’s with our parents. We gladly ate Happy Meals
jammed into the back rear-facing seat of our station wagon, jostling each other for ketchup and stealing fries.

My sister and I do not eat at McDonalds anymore—her fears have eaten away my love of fast food.

Our last visit to McDonald’s together went as follows:

I put Equal in my iced tea and April said: “Did you know that Equal has a chemical in it that resembles formaldehyde? It can cause brain tumors and lupus. It’s banned in Britain. Before World War II, Equal was used as a chemical weapon by both sides.”

I ate a whole French fry without biting off the end: “Did you know that the chemicals from plastics linger on your hands after you touch them? Then when you touch your food, those chemicals get into you. You should never eat the part of the fry that you touch.”

“Do you know how they make Chicken McNuggets?” April asked. When I said no, she described the sifting and pressing process whereby rendered chicken scraps forcibly ripped from chicken bones are ground into meal and pressed into the shape of a McNugget.

I lost my appetite for fast food after the last time that April and I tried to eat at McDonald’s.

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In return for April’s phobias seeping out of her edges and worming into my brain, I have given myself license to seek out the root of her issues. I tell myself that
I am trying to help her—ferreting out the basis of fears. I want to be like Freud or Jung. Mostly I am nosy and a bit afraid that phobias are communicable. What if I wake up tomorrow and cannot eat clams or feel my heart beating a little louder when I eat a new food?

April did not always have the phobias.

I do not know if these moments of her childhood stand out because they were important to her life or if I have filtered our lives through her phobias, putting together the spider web that eventually wrapped April and has been squeezing out my visions of the real her.

Before the food phobias came the pica.

When she was five, April began eating in earnest anything that would potentially kill her—Comet, dishwashing liquid, Ivory soap. Anything filled with chemicals went immediately into her mouth.

One day, as my mother rushed into the house after working all day, she noticed April sticking her tongue out at me. Her blue tongue.

“April, what did you eat now?” Mom immediately said. She pulled my sister’s jaws apart and stared into her mouth.

“Comet.” I said. I directed my mother’s attention to the still wet green-foil can on the kitchen shelf. “I told her not to lick it.”

Sometimes I wonder if I really told April not to eat the Comet. Sometimes I think that our cousins and I might have egged April on to lick the can top. Maybe,
once she did that, we might have given her the spoon and promised her a reward if she ate a spoonful.

My mother paled as she read the side of the can and called our doctor's office. She immediately rushed April out of the door and to the doctor where my mother remembers Dr. Nicolai telling April all of the awful things that can happen when you eat chemicals.

Your stomach rots out. You can burn off your tongue. You can die.

April kept on eating. She nibbled at bars of Ivory soap the way some children eat crackers, holding them by the corners and gnawing away at the edges, her teeth leaving tiny parallel tracks in the fresh whiteness of the soap bar. I was in junior high before I realized that other people's sisters did not eat soap or drink Dawn dishwashing liquid.

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As April grew older, the pica lessened and she had ten years of usual eating habits as she got married and moved away. We ate together as a family at holidays and special occasions.

Everything changed after April separated from her husband. She stopped being social. Moved home. Stopped eating outside of her obsessions. Sometimes stopped eating at all.

Over the past two years, it has become increasingly difficult for our family to eat a meal together with April. April has now whittled her acceptable foods down to
only a few. She eats five meals a day, each consisting of exactly the same menu as the day before.

I envy the deliberateness of her ritual.

First, she takes a specific plate and fork from her cupboard (her dishes do not mix with my parent’s general dish population). Before she eats, April then washes her dishes with organic *Seventh Generation* dish soap (even if they are clean and just out of the cupboard). She dries them with a clean dishtowel each time. (Obsession makes a lot of laundry.)

Her daily menu:

Breakfast: White toast made from Wegmans bread. No butter.

Mid-morning snack: Repeat white toast as above.


Mid-afternoon snack: Wegmans Chocolate Chip Cookies.


Repeat every day.

April’s foods cannot touch the plastic laminate kitchen counters even when in the package. She says that the dioxins in plastics are endocrine disruptors that can cause liver damage, interfere with your body’s immune system and promote excessive hair growth.
Sometimes, when I eat with April, I deliberately fling my food down on the countertops. My bravado does not affect April’s habits and she continues to berate plastics.

I get exhausted whenever April and I spend time together. I try to plan visits around not eating, not talking about foods or fear. I do not know much about April outside of her obsessions—in many ways, the fears have become my sister, have blotted out the blood and flesh.

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Last month, our mother was hospitalized and I took April grocery shopping with me. I now know that grocery shopping for this April takes as much planning as the D day invasion.

Rule One: Do not mix cleaning products and foods in one basket. If April needs *Seventh Generation* cleaning products or health and beauty items, she must first purchase her foods, put them in her car and then go back into the store with a new cart or basket for the rest.

I have probed this phobia extensively and cannot get to the root of it. Did our mother take her to the doctor too often about eating soap? Did the graphic descriptions of rotting stomachs and death just enter her head one day and transform my Comet-eating sister into this person who cannot integrate food and non-food purchases in one cart?

April is reluctant to whittle away at the base of her phobias. I have asked her if she has deep secrets, things she cannot tell. I don’t ask her what these might be; I
just need to know if the answer is even knowable. She denies any hidden source of these rules that run her life.

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This is the story as I remember it:

I was ten and April was seven and we were visiting our Aunt Sally. Sally had just received a free house-trailer from the Catholic Charities after her old trailer was destroyed by burst pipes during a winter cold snap. (Sally had no furnace and she turned off her wood-stove often because she thought the chimney flue had backed up carbon monoxide into her trailer.) Sally’s new trailer had a gas furnace, white paint on all of the walls and just slightly off-white carpets. My bedroom at home was papered with leftover kitchen wallpaper; orange pumpkins, yellow squash and brown flowers interlaced. My house also had vivid green carpet coated in dog hair and chipped brown linoleum. Sally’s had white vinyl linoleum. I envied her floors. I imagined that having white floors would make your feet feel always clean. Like dipping them in new snow banks.

I did not know that Aunt Sally’s germaphobia and food obsessions made the white necessary. Sally could not feel clean in a non-white room and would not eat on non-white dishes. She had obsessively cleaned her old brown bathroom until the old flecked brown counters had bleached white and the linoleum had rubbed through in some spots. My parents did not tell me that the blinding whiteness of Aunt Sally’s trailer had been specifically provided by a sympathetic Catholic to help Sally push off the panic.
Twenty-eight years later, I can still picture Aunt Sally’s face swelling red on that moving day when she found me making Kool-Aid in her new white kitchen, stirring the sugar and purple powder together with a big metal spoon I had found in a drawer. Staring into the pitcher, neither April nor I heard Sally as she swooped up behind us, grabbed the spoon and pitched it across the room. My heart rose up and began to beat the back of my throat.

Aunt Sally’s face swelled red with fear or anger or a mixture of both. She rushed the pitcher to the sink, dumped the Kool-Aid and threw the pitcher into the garbage. Large drops of Kool-Aid now streamed across the white floor, sliding down into the grout cracks and running into tributaries that flowed towards the kitchen table near the wall.

I remember that Sally’s hands shook like an old woman as fell to the floor and scrubbed away the Kool-Aid until her sponge frayed and left behind little rolls of itself across the linoleum.

“Metal leaks,” Sally said after she had calmed down and her breathing became less labored. “Leaks into the water and then you drink it into your body. It can kill you quickly.”

My distress over this sudden rush of fear into an otherwise normal day spun into puzzlement and then I knew that I would never spend another day at Sally’s house. This woman was crazy, I remember thinking as my own heart finally slowed its shaking patter.

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Now, whenever I watch my sister take out her special fork or launch into a panic attack if she smells a strange chemical smell, I wonder if obsessions and phobia can be inherited.

Could my mom’s family pass down a gene for chemophobia the same way that other families pass down a recessive gene for blue eyes? I want to ask Aunt Sally if she eats the crust of bread or if she will shop for laundry soap at the same time as other foods. I want to call her up even though Sally has not spoken to my mother, or I, in more than twenty years.

I want there to be that link to DNA; a marker that I can comb my own genetic makeup for and know whether someday I too will start to fear clams or pickles or eating in public.

This unknown genetic factor is something that I fear, deep down in the dark of night, when I start to become a little panicked and ruminating over the vague stresses of that day. I do not want to become like April and obsess over things that I cannot label.