

Crank

Ellen Hopkins



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my family, and all families whose lives have been touched by the monster.

With special thanks to Lin Oliver and Steve Mooser and their wonderful SCBWI, which guided my way.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

While this work is fiction, it is loosely based on a very true story--my daughter's. The monster did touch her life, and the lives of her family. My family. It is hard to watch someone you love fall so deeply under the spell of a substance that turns him or her into a stranger. Someone you don't even want to know.

Nothing in this story is impossible. Much of it happened to us, or to families like ours. Many of the characters are composites of real people. If they ring true, they should. The "baby" at the end of the book is now seven years old, and my husband and I have adopted him. He is thriving now, but it took a lot of extra love.

If this story speaks to you, I have accomplished what I set out to do. Crank is, indeed, a monster--one that is tough to leave behind once you invite it into your life. Think twice. Then think again.

Flirtin' with the Monster

Life was good before I

met the monster.

After, life was great.

At

least for a little while.

Introduction

So you want to know all about me. Who

I am.

What chance meeting of brush and canvas painted the face you see? What made
me despise the girl in the mirror

enough to transform her, turn her into a stranger, only not.

So you want to hear the whole story. Why I swerved off the high road, hard left
to nowhere, recklessly indifferent to those

coughing my dust, picked up speed

3

no limits, no top end, just a high velocity rush to madness.

4

Alone

everything changes.

Some might call it distorted reality, but it's exactly the place I need to be:

no mom,

Marie, ever more distant, in her midlife quest for fame

no stepfather,

Scott, stern and heavy-handed with unattainable expectations

no big sister,

Leigh, caught up in a tempest of uncertain sexuality

no little brother,

Jake, spoiled and shameless in his thievery of my niche.

Alone,

there is only the person inside.

I've grown to like her better than the stuck-up husk of me. She's 5

not quite silent, shouts obscenities just because they roll so well off the tongue

not quite straight-A, but talented in oh-so-many enviable ways

not quite sanitary, farts with gusto, picks her nose, spits like a guy

not quite sane, sometimes, to tell you the truth, even I

wonder about her.

Alone,

there is no perfect daughter, no gifted high-school junior, no Kristina Georgia Snow.

There is only Bree.

6

On

Bree

I suppose

she's always been there, vague as a soft copper pulse of moonlight through blossoming seacoast fog.

I wonder

when I first noticed

her, slipping in and out of my pores, hide-and-seek spider in fieldstone, red-bellied

phantom.

I summon

Bree when dreams

no longer satisfy, when

gentle clouds of monotony

smother thunder, when Kristina

cries.

7

I remember the night I first

let her go, opened the smeared glass, one thin pane, cellophane between rules and sin, freed.

8

More on

Bree

Spare me

those Psych '01 labels,

I'm no more schizo than most.

Bree is no imaginary playmate, no overactive pituitary, no alter ego, moving in.

Hers is the face I wear, treading the riptide, fathomless oceans where good girls drown.

Besides, even good girls have secrets, ones even their best friends must guess.

9

Who do

they turn to on lonely

moon-shadowed sidewalks?

I'd love to hear them confess:

Who do they become when

night descends, a cool puff of smoke, and vampires come out to party?

10

My

Mom Will Tell You

it started with a court-ordered visit.

The judge had a God complex.

I guess for once she's right.

Was it just last summer?

He started an avalanche.

My mom enjoys discussing her daughter's downhill slide.

It swallowed her whole.

I still wore pleated skirts, lipgloss.

Crooked bangs defined my style.

Could I have saved her?

My mom often outlines her first
marriage, its bitter amen. Interested?

I
was too young, clueless.

I hadn't seen Dad in eight years.
No calls. No cards. No presents.

He was a self-serving bastard.

My mom, warrior goddess, threw down the gauntlet when he phoned.

He played the prodigal trump card.

I begged. Pouted. Plotted. Cajoled.

I was six again, adoring Daddy.

What the hell gave him that right?

11

My mom gave a detailed run-down of his varied bad habits.

Contrite was not his style.

I promised. Swore. Crossed my heart.

Recited the D.A.R.E. pledge verbatim.

How could she love him
so much?

My mom relented, kissed me
good-bye, sad her perfume.

Things would never be the
same.

I think it was the last time she kissed me.

But I was on my way to Daddy.

12

A

board United 1425

The flight attendant escorted me to a seat beside a moth-munched toupee.

Yellowed dentures clacked cheerfully, suggested I make myself comfy.

Three hours is a mighty long

time.

Three hours is a long time, astraddle a 747's wing, banshee engines screaming, earachy babies fussing, elderly seatmate complaining.

Can't stand flying.

Makes me nauseous.

I get nauseous when vid screens

play movies I've seen three times, seat belt signs deny pee breaks and first class smells like real food.

Pretzels?

For this ticket price?

13

For the price, I'd expect Albert to tone down the gripe machine. I closed my eyes, tried to shut him out, but second run movies can't equal conversation.

My wife died last year.

Been alone since.

I've been alone since my mom met Scott.

He sucked the nectar from her heart like a famished butterfly. No nurture, no nourishment left for Kristina.

A vacation is a poor substitute
for love.

14

T

wo

Hours into the Flight

Albert snored, soft as a hummingbird's
hover. His moody
smile suggested he'd
found his Genevieve, just beyond time
just beyond space
just beyond this continuum.

I watched his face, gentled by dreams, until sun winks off the polished fuselage
hypnotized me, not quite asleep
not quite conscious

not quite in this dimension.

I coasted along a byway, memory, glimpses of truth speed bumps within childish

belief,

15

almost ultimate

almost reliable

almost total insanity

Daddy waited in the dead-end

circle, reaching

out for me.

I couldn't

find his embrace

find his answers

find his excuse for tears.

Faster. Faster.

He'd waited too

many years for me to come looking.

Hadn't he? I

needed to see

needed to know

needed a lot more.

Hot Landing

Hot runway.

Hot brakes.

Hot desert sand outside the window, wind-sculpted crystalline slivers, reflecting
a new

summer's sun.

Good-bye, young lady.

Good-bye, Albert.

Good-bye, toupee.

Good-bye, dentures.

Good-bye, in-flight

glimpses of a soul, aching, and dreams, fractured, injuries only death could cure.

Have a nice vacation.

You too.

17

You relax.

You pretend to have fun.

You share a toast with me:

here's to seasonal

madness, part-time

relatives and substitutes for love.

18

T

he Prince of Albuquerque

June is pleasant in Reno, kind of breezy and all.

I boarded the plane in clingy jeans and a long-sleeved T. Black.

It's a whole lot hotter in Albuquerque.

I wobbled up the skywalk, balancing heavy twin carry-ons.

Fingers of sweat grabbed

my hair and pressed it against my face.

No one seemed to notice.

I scanned the crowd at the gate.

Too tall. Not tall enough.

Too old. Way too old.

There, with the sable hair, much like my own.

How was it possible?

19

I thought he was much better

looking, the impression of a seven-year-old whose daddy was the Prince of Albuquerque.

I melted, sleet on New Mexico asphalt.

20

M

mutual Assessment

Daddy watched the gate, listing a bit as he hummed a bedtime tune, withdrawn from who knows

which memory bank.

"Daddy?"

Roses are red, my love.

He overlooked me like sky above a patch of dirt, and I realized he, too, searched for a face suspended in yesterday.

"It's me."

Violets are

blu-oo-oo.

Peculiar eyes, blue-speckled

green like extravagant eggs, met my own pale aquamarine.

Assessing. Doubt gnawing.

"Hey."

Sugar is... Kristina?

21

He hugged me, too tightly. Nasty

odors gulped. Marlboros. Jack

Daniels. Straightforward B.O.

Not like Scott's ever-clean smell.

I can't believe how

much you've grown!

"It's been eight

years, Dad."

From daddy to dad in thirty seconds. We were strangers, after all.

22

I

Got in a Car with a Stranger

A '92 Geo, pink under primer, not quite a princely coach. Dad and I attempted small talk.

How's your sister?

"Gay."

Sequestered on a California

campus. When she outed,

I cringed. Mom cried.

You called her queer.

How's your mother?

"Older."

Prettier, gift-wrapped in 40ish self-esteem, a wannabe writer and workout fanatic, sweating ice.

How's what's-his-name?

"Indifferent."

23

Either that or flat in my

face, yet oddly always

there exactly when I

need him. Unlike you.

And

how are you?

"Okay."

Near-sighted. Hormonal.

Three zits monthly.

Often confused.

Lusting for love.

"You?"

Same.

24

S

Small Talk Shrank to Minuscule

Hot? Not! Wait till August!

The carriage burped. Screeched.

Hiccapped. I tightened my seat-belt, like that could save me.

Straight A's, huh? Got your brains
from your old man.

I was starting to doubt it.

No air-con, windows down, oil flavored the air.

Conversation took an ugly turn.

Never been laid? Tell the
truth

little girl.

Like it was his business. He
reached for his Marlboros, took

one, offered the pack. My lip
curled. He lit up anyway.

Quit once. Your mother bitched

me out of the habit.

I watched him inhale, blow

smoke signals. Exhale. Beyond the ochre haze, city turned to suburbs. Not pretty
suburbs.

25

She was the bitch queen. I started

again soon as I moved out.

The Geo limped into a weather-chewed parking lot. I escaped the front
seat. Aired out in blistering heat.

Here we are. Home sweet home.

What's mine is yours.

I'd made an awful mistake.

Daddy wasn't the Prince of

Albuquerque. He was the King of Cliché.

26

You

Call This a Castle?

Cracked cement ramparts, a less than mighty bastion, swamp cooler overflow,
drool down the battlement.

Behind the stockade walls, faceless generals barked orders to their private
troops, drilled their little soldiers.

Welcome to my castle.

You call this a castle?

Heat throbbing off the parking lot convinced me to chance crumbling stairs.

And there, step four, flight two,

I bumped into my White Knight.

Okay, maybe more like gray.

I'll compromise with silver.

27

Not My Type

No shirt

hot bod.

His, that is.

So why did

I

break out in a sweat?

No shoes

barefoot, bare chest, with a bare, baby face to make the angels sing.

Nothing but ragged

cut-offs, hugging a tawny six pack, and a smile.

28

No pin up pretty boy

could touch, a smile that

zapped every cell.

He was definitely

not my type.

29

At

Least I Had Something

to think about besides my dad's

less than palatial

apartment.

If he qualified

As royalty in this true

blue collar

kingdom,

I had zero desire to see how the working class lived.

30

D

ad Had to Go to Work

Work?

You've heard of work.

You couldn't take

one day off?

You don't know my boss.

Does he know about me?

She knows you're here.

Your daughter
comes to visit...

She doesn't know.

Know what?

That you're my daughter.

Who am I, then?

A long-lost relative.

31

H

e Worked in a Bowling Alley

Under the table,
so I don't screw
up my disability.

Unsticking stuck
balls, fitting stinky
shoes, collecting
cash from the crop
du jour of the great unwashed.

No one there's

gonna tell. They

got their own secrets,

No worries about bubblegum, athlete's

foot, or the current

flu, passed bill to bill, ball to ball, shoe to shoe.

Like who's making

out in the back room,

who's striking out.

32

Geo unlocked in a parking lot

where the color of your jacket might

mean your life, wrong

night, wrong time.

It's not the best

neighborhood, but

hey, come along.

33

I

Opted Out

Long trip, long day, no thanks,

I'll stay.

Okay.

34

Not

Quite Silent

The empty boxes

Dad imagined

rooms.

Glurp... glurp... glurp

Hot drops into deep kitchen
stainless.

Plunk..... plunk

Cool drips on chipped bathroom
porcelain.

Chh-ka-chh

Sleepy branches
scratching bedroom
glass.

35

You crazy sonofabitch!

Neighbors through thin plaster
walls.

36

T
he Screaming

flashed me back to a time
when Mom and Dad were still together
if you could call
miles apart together.

Leigh and I would huddle close under the blankets, whispering, as if the
whispers of two little girls could blot out the barrage of hateful words beyond
our bedroom's thin plaster walls.

Dad's vicious slurred epithets came through too loud and too clear.

37

But it is Mom's low, level threats I best remember.

You
do not deserve these children and

when

I'm through with you in court

you'll

be lucky to get visitation.

She was right.

And I still had not forgiven her.

Maybe he wasn't perfect.

But he was still my dad.

38

Of Course, When I Was Little

I didn't understand the terminology of words like infidelity.

Nor the implications of my father's sundry addictions.

I only knew my wicked

mother took us far away, kept us far apart.

Time passed, with little

word from Dad.

But, having experienced

Mom's growing

frustration at a stalled career and family life's daily limitations

I put the blame squarely on her. As for Dad, I could have forgiven

39

him pretty much anything, even his silence.

As long as I could forever

stay his little princess.

40

Okay, Over the

Last Few Years

I may have gained a little perspective.

Mom struggled to raise two kids on her own, at least until Scott blundered into her life.

Jake was a late addition, one the workout queen accepted and loved despite killer stretch marks and sure-to-sag-even-more boobs.

As for Dad, well, truth be told, his love of drugs surpassed his love of family.

And when we were small, he just

happened to install cable TV, giving him every opportunity 41

to experience the wild side of bored, stay-at-home housewives, eager for entertainment.

So it was, perhaps, ironic

that I discovered...

42

D

ad Hadn't Paid His Cable Bill

Three fuzzy channels

hissed and spit a rerun of

Friends,

extra-inning baseball, and soap opera, en español.

I should have gone

straight to bed, counted cracks in the ceiling.

Instead, I went outside.

Cigarette smoke, toxic curls in the stairwell at my feet, soft voices rising,
pheromone fog.

He was still there, my silver knight, flirting with some fallen Guinivere in short
shorts and a cropped T.

43

I kept to the shadows, observing the game I hadn't dared play, absorbing the
rules with adhesive eyes.

44

T

he Rules

Uncomplicated, this

child's game.

He says,

Please?

She says, "Can't."

He,

Why not?

She, "I'm not that kind of a girl."

Then she spends twenty
minutes disproving the theory, until

Mother calls,

Hija!

She answers, "Mama?"

Mother,

Come inside now.

She, "Be right there."

It's a lie. He pulls her into his lap, silencing meager protests with full-lipped kisses.

He insists,

Now.

She resists, "Later."

He,

Promise?

She, "Cross my heart."

46

S

he Went Inside

I wasn't sure if I felt more

disappointed or relieved.

Guinivere really had him.

So I shouldn't want him. Should I?

I didn't really want his perfect
pout, reaching hungrily for my own timid lips.

I didn't have a clue how to kiss.

Didn't really want his hands, investigating the hills and valleys of my landscape.

I'd never been touched by a boy.

Didn't want his face, burrowing into my hair, finding my neck. Tasting.

I'd never even said hello to such a complete stranger.

Didn't want his smoke, making me gag, making me want to taste something so
gross.

47

It was all so confusing, I mean,

I didn't want a boyfriend, no summer fling to make me want to stay in this alien
place.

Anyway, I'd be speechless if he asked.

48

I

Must Have Moaned

Hey

.

He popped above the stairs suddenly, a wild-eyed Jack-in-the-box, anticipating the pay-off crank.

Oh, it's you.

Like he knew me, knew I had no life, suspected I'd come spying, set up the game just for me.

I waited for you.

I coughed a hello, stamping sweaty

palm prints into not-so

wrinkle-free jeans.

Could he read minds?

49

I know what you're thinking.

Smile. Nod. Say
something witty before he finds
out what an incredible
geek you are.

That you're too good for me.

He topped the staircase, slinked closer, golden eyes narrowing, reached
out and touched the flush of my cheek.

But you're wrong.

50

The
Wind Blew Up

My mind raced.

My heart joined in.

I shook my head, mute as snowfall.

What, then? Why do you look

At me that way?

What could I say?

That some stranger inside me couldn't
keep her eyes off him?

I know you can talk. I heard

you before.

I felt her stir, like a breeze blowing up off the evening sea. My wind had
awakened.

You know, you're kind of cute,
in a stuck-up sort of way.

She pumped through my veins in hot, red
bursts. Blood pressure
rose in my face, blush.

51

You here for the summer? What's

your name?

Her tongue curled
easily behind my teeth, and her words melted between my lips.
"My friends call me Bree."

52

Bree?

Who Was She?

And where did that name
come from? I'd probably
heard it once in my life!

Pretty name, Bree.

Okay, good call.

Confidence flooded our
brain like hormones.

Our turn. Who was he?

My friends call me Buddy.

Hardly a handle for a white knight.

Bree asked for the name on his birth certificate.

Mom called me Adam.

Better. We liked it. So

why didn't he use it?

(Forgetting completely about the Kristina thing.)

Hard name to live up to.

Not really. It isn't hard to fall from grace. Revisit Genesis. Maybe I'll go with you. Might be fun.

53

You're a
strange girl.

I had to agree. What was up with this person, Bree? And was she a permanent fixture?

But I'd like to get to know you.

54

I
Wanted to Know Him, Too

Wanted to know

what Guinivere knew.

Bree might have pulled him
closer, tempted his kiss that very
moment, given hers in return.

But with a sudden slam, reality
kicked into gear. Downstairs,
Guinivere called his name.

He answered,

Up here.

I looked in his eyes, caught a hint of warped humor, jumped up to go inside.

He asked,

How long are you staying?

Not long enough, I wanted to say. But I told him, "Three weeks."

55

He said,

Not

much time.

Footsteps on the stairs.

Bree vanished, leaving

panic in her wake.

He finished,

But maybe enough.

56

T

he Return of Guinivere

She took in the scene, face cinder-block hard, eyes blinking like mad, black turn signals.

"Who is she?"

As if he had something to explain. He didn't, did he? Yet his voice was right beside my ear,

Bree.

I swear I saw her claws
spring out. I froze, prey.
She told me her name was
Lince. Then translated,
"Lynx."
She had claimed her territory.
I decided to let the wildcats
play, uninterrupted. His warm
hand whispered against mine.

See
you soon.

57

His promise fell, soft as a premonition, followed by the bobcat's predatory
growl,

"Me too."

58

T

hat'll Teach Me

to spy to moan to covet

my neighbor's boyfriend.

I ran inside, tried

to breathe to laugh to silence

the drumming inside my head.

Went into the kitchen

to get a drink to get away to get a glimpse of the biggest cockroach I'd ever seen.

59

T

oss-and-Turn Night

Bone-oven hot outside, swamp-cooler cool three feet up the hallway,
temperature in Dad's claustrophobic guest

room: lukewarm.

The bed was a monstrous box

spring. Thin, mildewed foam, two sprays of Lysol, and one thrift-store sheet
were all

that lay between

Bedzilla and me.

Tried my right side. Kept

seeing the kitchen

cockroach, the one I

tried to pretend was only a Mormon cricket, Los Alamos-grown.

60

Tried my left side. Flashed on my bedroom at home.

Pin clean, pretty in mauve, a ballet of pink butterflies on the walls, pillow-top
mattress to die for.

Flopped onto my back. Found the keyhole behind my eyes, squeezed through,
into sleep.

Not slumber, but sleep just this

side of waking, where dreams

fuse with reality.

61

T

hrough the Keyhole

I found myself in a meadow, brilliant green beneath a soft wash of sunshine.

I moved at a near sprint, drawn toward a symphony, primitive passion.

Lovemaking.

Wildcats mating, snarls at the joining, satisfied roars signaling completion.

I slowed, shifted upwind, crept very near, somehow unafraid.

Fascinated.

62

Some movement gave me

away. Exquisite feline eyes

found me in the grass,

golden eyes, flecked green.

He purred and she looked up.

I gasped at her face.

My face.

63

So

Much for Sleep

Jump-started awake,

I sat up in bed, found the eyes of the lynx at the glass, snarls in the hallway.

Sweat-drenched, shivering, I threw back the sheet, went to the window, three flights above a deserted alley.

Found no eyes but dream eyes.

One demon conquered,

I slipped on flip-flops, mediocre protection against monster cockroaches, wandered toward the kitchen.

Found no snarls but Dad's snores.

64

I

Hid Out for Three Days

Spent them sleeping in, like Dad.

I

work late. No shame in that.

Afternoons we ate fast
food and talked.

Sure I want more. Some day.

He was pushing 45. Time was running out.

A house of my own. A good woman.

Surely he'd dated one or two since Mom?

Slept with a few.

Don't do movies...

There's more to dating than movies.

Don't do dinner, unless
they cook.

Come on, Dad. What about love?

Love is overrated. Besid

es...

I couldn't believe his confession:

No one can measure up

to your mom.

65

I

Even Spent Time at the Bowling Alley

Okay, I'd bowled before, averaged a solid 98, with one or two games around 130.

But did you know some

people spend half their lives

hanging out in bowling alleys?

The same people arrived, around the same time every night. It took me three days to realize

they came for more than just a few games of good, clean fun.

Some came to flirt, obnoxious in their efforts to make their spouses jealous, or disregard them altogether, desperate to recapture escaped dreams and wasted years of youth.

66

Some came substance shopping, disappearing into back rooms and bathrooms, returning red-eyed and crusty-nosed, coughing and sniffing, too mellow or very, very wound up.

In school I was never confronted with drugs, surely never sought them out. But I wasn't exactly

clueless. As I watched, one

thing became obvious. Where the party went, my dad followed.

67

H

e Hadn't Changed After All

But he wasn't such a bad guy, really. Not ambitious, true.

In fact, you might call

him lazy, at least when the drug of the day was green.

Been smokin' pot since I was 1

3,

couldn't quit if I tried. Besides,

why try? It keeps me happy,

mellow. Makes me eat

too much, but

oh, well.

The white

stuff was a different

story. He'd stay up all

night, eating zip, bowling and snorting line after line.

Rent money, right up the nose.

68

We used to

do coke, till "Just

Say No" put the stuff

out of reach. Now it's crank.

Meth.

The monster. It's a bitch

on the body but damn do you fly.

69

You Fly

Until You Crash

Two

days, two

nights,

no

sleep,

no

food, come

down off the monster,

you

crash

real

hard.

70

Dad Crashed

Slept twelve hours, got up for a drink and a pee, slept six more.

Good thing it was his day off.

But was it always his day off? Or did he sometimes go to work, mind folded down around exhaustion?

Did he sometimes

blow off work completely, call in sick, notating on his calendar the Illness of the Day?

71

No bowling, no small talk, just plain, empty time, I walked down to the corner store for

Pepsi and

Cosmopolitan.

Guess who was buying

cigarettes, copper skin

glistening bittersweet

summer sweat. One

look, I was Play-Doh.

He

Knew It, Too

He turned, flashed a drop-dead-in-your-tracks gorgeous grin.

Hey, Bree.

His voice dripped

honey and cream, irresistible poison.

You been avoiding me?

I plead not guilty, argued spending time with my dad.

All-night bowling?

He knew too much. I

fumbled for change, came up short.

No worries. My treat.

He paid for my Pepsi, asked if he could
walk me back.

I'll be good. Honest.

73

Hip brushing hip, his hand slipped around my waist.

You on your own today?

Heartbeat bombs
went off in my head.
Spectacular.

Can we talk awhile?

74

H

is Mom Was at Work

We went to his apartment, a nice
quiet place to talk awhile.

Mind if I light up?

What could I say? It was his apartment.

His lungs.

Bad habit, I know.

I watched hands, hard and etched like granite, light a match with finesse.

Do you have any bad habits?

I could have made up something.

Instead I shook my head.

Want any?

I wanted him. Bad enough. I reached for the cigarette in his hand.

You don't smoke, do you?

75

I took a small puff. Struggled like hell not to cough.

Or throw up.

Careful. You'll get sick.

So I did the sensible thing. Took

another drag. Felt better.

Come here, Bree.

He pulled me close, locked my eyes, tilted his face just a fraction.

Then I really felt queasy.

76

He

Wanted to Kiss Me

I felt it with every nerve, every fiber, every molecule of my being.

I wanted him to kiss me, with every nerve, every fiber, every molecule of my being.

But I was scared to kiss him.

Every nerve, every fiber, every molecule screamed!

He leaned forward, parted those

perfect lips.

77

At that exact moment,

every

single

thing

about

my

life

changed.

Forever.

78

F

irst Kiss

They say you'll remember
your first kiss forever. I will.

It was Fourth of July.

It was Christmas.

Fireworks. Snowflakes.

Sunstroke and frostbite.

It was all that I could ask for and completely unexpected.

I expected demands.

He gifted me with tenderness.

I expected ego.

He let me experiment.

I expected disrespect.

He called me beautiful.

I expected him to expect perfection.

He taught me all I needed to know.

79

The

Week Flew

By

Monday

Ducked Lince and made out at the park.

Learned a thing or three.

Tuesday

Took in a movie.

Sat in the back row.

Really made out.

Wednesday

Had a Slurpee fight.

Kissed the sticky stuff off each other's faces.

Thursday

Back to his apartment.

Things got heavy.

Heart-stomping heavy.

80

Friday

Bummed a ride and went

skinny-dipping up

Red Rock Canyon.

Saturday

Talked with Dad, wishing I was doing

something else with Adam.

Sneaked out after dinner for a smoke and a taste of tongue.

Sunday

Met Adam at the bowling alley.

81

S

Somehow the Place Looked Different

What had changed?

It was still a run-down bowling
alley in a bad part of town.

I had changed.

Somehow I didn't care about other people's obsessions.

I was obsessed.

Somehow I didn't care about public make-out sessions.

I plotted make-out sessions.

Somehow I didn't care about women, stealing other women's boyfriends.

Had I stolen someone's boyfriend?

82

Somehow I didn't care about back-room parties.

It was my turn. I'd been invited.

83

C

Choices, Choices

Life is full of

Choices.

We don't

always

make

good ones.

It seems to

Kristina

you gotta

be

crazy to open your

windows, invite the demons in.

Bree

throws rocks at the feeble

glass, laughs.

84

You

Have to Remember

It had been a tempestuous week, snared by emotions rubbing me so raw

I hurt at night, alone in the dark.

I finagled my way on this trip to fall back in love with my dad.

Instead I fell for a boy from the wrong side of the tracks, worse, the wrong part of the country! I had come, wanting to want to go home. Now the dark side of Albuquerque looked pretty damn good.

85

So when he asked about getting high, I didn't think, I agreed. We smoked some good California green.

Took three tries to put me in the place he said I should be.

Sleepy. Not "high" at all, but real low. And real slow. Not my idea of a party, except the munchies part.

I wanted to meet the monster.

Why go down if you can go up?

86

We

Met at the Bowling Alley

I introduced Adam to my dad. He and Buddy already knew each other.

Small building, you know.

Their networking surprised me.

Not exactly sure why.

Some good green bud around.

Dad seemed to accept that

I knew about such things.

Don't worry. She's safe with me.

Someone called for bowling shoes.

Adam and I eased down to the far lane.

Okay, little girl. Ready to party?

I was ready to take a big bite of freedom before my time was up.

You gotta be sure.

Mom expected me home in ten
days. Of course, I was sure.

Let's hit the back room.

We ducked behind a stack of crates, sat on the floor.

You really never tried this?

Like magic, a mirror and razor blade appeared.

87

You're gonna love it. You'll see

.

I watched him pour powder, yellowish white.

It will take you to heaven.

Used the blade to chop the chunks

fine, draw two crooked lines.

Make you want to fly all night.

He held the mirror to my face, handed me a sawed-off straw,

Make you want to make love to me.

88

J

ust Before the Drop

You know how you

stand and stand and stand in line for the most gigantic incredible roller

coaster

you've ever dared attempt.

Anticipation swelling, minute by minute by minute, you choose to wait even

longer, to ride in the front
car and finally it's your turn.

They buckle you in, lock the safety bar with a jolting clunk!

Hook engaged, the chain jerks
you forward. You start to climb

crank-crank-crank

89

Cresting the top, time
moves into overtime as you wait for that scant hesitation, just before you
drop
knowing you can't turn back.

You know how you feel at that instant? Well, that's exactly how it feels when
you
shake hands with the monster.

90

No

Time Like That First Time

Fire!

Your nose ignites, flameless kerosene

(and, some say, Drano)

laced with ephedrine

you want to cry

powdered demons bite through cartilage and sinuses, take dead aim at your
brain, jump inside want to scream

troops of tapping feet

fall into rhythm, marking time, right between your eyes get the urge to dance

louder, louder, ultra

gray-matter power, shock waves of energy mushroom inside your head

91

you want to let go

detonate, annihilate barriers, bring down the walls, unleashing floodwaters,
freeing long-captive dreams to ride the current

through

arteries and capillaries, pulsing, rushing, raging torrents pounding against your
heart

sweeping you away.

92

B

ut That's Not Exactly Cool

So you sit and smile, pretending like it's not even fazing you, not touching you at all.

So he looks you in the eye, trying to measure you, find a hint of reaction.

And he says,

Tell me how you

feel.

So you can't stand it one more second, and you close your eyes, daring him to kiss you.

93

So he does, and it's

electric, high voltage, stun-gun strength desire jolting sinew and bone.

And he asks,

How 'bout another
line?

94

If
a Little's Good

More must be great, right?

Well, sometimes.

That time!

It didn't burn as bad, nasal self-defense, I guess.

And it launched me to a place, very near the gates of heaven.

Adam took my hand, led me the rest of the way. No, not quite all the way.

95

A1

though Maybe

it's a matter of semantics.

How does Webster define

"all the way"?

Does it mean, start to finish, an act of defilement, pure physicality,

no choice but yes, no

stopping now, no holds barred,

everything off, nothing

left to chance, all the way in?

96

B

ecause It Wasn't That

It was gentle persuasion.

I can't get enough of you.

Sweetest coercion.

My beautiful angel.

Magnet to metal.

I've got to have all of you.

It was hands, exploring
taboo places.

Oh, God! You're perfect!

Lips and tongue, not
far behind.

Let me eat you up.

Skin to skin, belly to shoulder.

Sweet as puddin'.

It was body rush after body rush, intensity building.

Touch me there.

97

Hot flush, raging

blush, quick-start

ignition.

See how much I need you?

Ice flash, instant

crash, voices outside the door.

No! Don't stop now!

98

I

Didn't Want to

Stop Either

but one of those voices

belonged to my dad.

They were here just a while ago.

We scrambled to cover skin, passion, and stash.

I didn't see them leave.

Trepidation, just this side of anticipation, tingled.

They must be around somewhere.

The monster stomped up and down my spine.

Kristina? Buddy? You here?

Adam looked at me and whispered, "Who's Kristina?"

99

F

or Some Crazy Reason

I thought that was the funniest thing

I'd ever heard.

Creepy, insane

laughter bubbled up from my gut like lava, erupting suddenly in gigantic

heaving

gulps.

We were busted.

I was busted.

100

And I

didn't

give

a

damn.

101

Not

Until the Door Opened

Guess who was there with my dad.

Wha' the fuck you up to, Buddy?

Lince pounced through the door, claws extended, golden eyes growing black.

You two been messin' around?

Hair askew, buttons

undone, I thought it was pretty obvious. But Adam dared say no.

Well, what, then?

Damn, if she didn't
want to believe him.

I almost felt sorry for her. The monster shook me smarter.

Okay then. Fix me a line.

102

Like
an Idiot

I took one too.

Things went from weird to worse.

I mean, there I was, snorting crank with my dad, my boyfriend, and his other
girlfriend.

Something majorly
wrong with that picture.

103

T

he Monster Loves to Talk

He jumps into your head and opens your mouth making it spout your

deepest

darkest

deceptions.

Making you say

all the things

you'd rather

not say, at least not in mixed company.

104

D

ad Said

I
shouldn't be tootin'. My boss

almost caught me last time.

Think I could convince her to
try a line?

I'd love to get her in bed.

Adam said,

Don't blame you there, man.

She's a babe, for someone

my mom's age. I'd do her too.

Think she'd go for a threesome?

Lince said,

Whoa, baby. Keep it in
your pants, at least

till I take it out of them.

Anyway, three's a crowd.

I decided

Three is a throng.

Four's more.

105

I got up, headed for the door, hoping

Adam would try to stop me.

But lust is stronger than love. And

monster lust is unconquerable.

106

I Was Pissed

Anger seeped from my pores, vinegar sweat, as I stomped out the door, into the night, down the dark sidewalk.

I was hot.

Heart

jackhammering in my chest, pumping fever, toenails to follicles, blistering veins and brain cells.

I was high.

107

I ran through the alley, inconsolable, turned down the sidewalk, invincible, five minutes later,

I was scared.

108

N

ight Had Hung

a sultry, black curtain, sequined gold.

It would have been quite beautiful in another part of town.

But here, cars

cruised slowly, checking out the tightly knit groups crowding sidewalks and doorways.

Here, color was everything, skin color, hair color, the color of your jacket.

Fair-skinned, golden-haired,

109

I stood out like a moped at a Harley rally.

110

I Th

ought I Knew the Way Home

but it all looked different, covered in night, and the buzzing in my brain put this sparkling in my eyes.

It wasn't like psychedelic, more like my eyes were speeding too, and didn't know just where to focus except on points

of

light

in

the

dark.

111

Whatever,

I was completely

disoriented.

And as I tried to figure out

which way to go, these three guys in Raiders jackets semicircled me.

Hey, baby,

can we help you wit' som'thin'?

112

I Tr

ied to Be Cool

Tried to sound tough, asked if they could spare a smoke.

Sure, baby.

Anything you want.

Took a cigarette, bummed a light, and with a soft "thanks"
tried to amble away.

Hey. Where ya going?

You ain't in a hurry, are
ya?

They weren't big, not football
players, but I was outnumbered and felt it.

Yeah, what kind of
thanks is that?

The circle tightened, moving me back, away from the safety of the street.

Damn, you are
a fine little piece.

113

Think. Think! But my brain
moved too fast to process well.
My eyes gave it away.

Yo. I think this bitch
been crankin'.

That was license enough. Bodies
bumped, pushed me into a doorway, blocked escape.

Ever done a three-fer?

You gonna love it, baby.

114

H

ands

covered my mouth, rough, held my arms, strong, ripped my clothes, vicious.

Fear danced up my spine, jolted

my brain, dripped onto the ground.

No!

I

screamed into dirty

flesh.

Not

this way!

115

Buttons burst, zippers

opened,

I closed my

eyes, braced for pain.

116

And Then I Heard

a familiar voice

Hey dudes.

Whatcha doin'?

Adam took
command.

You not bothering

that little girl?

The trio
pulled back, straightened up.

'Cause that just

isn't right.

Glared.

Stared.

Half issued a challenge.

Nah, man. No need

to fight. Besides...

117

Adam pointed to a black and white, two blocks away and closing.

You know what they do

to rapists in prison?

118

Three Raiders Jackets

faded into the night, dissolving like silver and black nightmares.

Adam folded me gently into his arms, kissed my sobs, stilled my quaking.

Don't cry, Bree. It's okay now.

The patrol car drew
even, slowed to a crawl, window
rolled down, inquiring.

Remember, you're buzzed. Stay cool.

Glad he was there, scared he was there, I dug deep for a smile, waved the cop
away.

Come on. Let's go home.

119

I Held Tight

to his shirt

all the way home, clung fast like a paranoid kitten.

Dad wasn't there, no doubt bowling off his own buzz, so I asked Adam in.

We stayed up all

night, smoking, talking, I struggle to remember exactly what
about.

Boys

Chicks

School

Detention

Art

Sports

Reno

Albuquerque

Mom

Mom

Dad

Long-gone Dad

120

Stepdads

Boyfriends

Gay sister

O.D.'d

brother

Buddy

Bree

Adam

Kristina

Love

Love

121

Dawn Broke

A rose-colored rain over distant hills.

We kissed for about the thousandth time,

No promises, no demands,

Just solid rebuilding of shattered trust.

Then I said it.

He said it too.

I
love you.

And everything
that went before
meant nothing.

122

A
bout That Time

Dad stumbled in, looking like the monster had boogied on off.

You still up?

Up, and flying high.

Was I supposed to go to sleep?

Better get some sleep.

I walked Adam to the door, promised to see him later.

You two didn't do anything

I wouldn't do. Did you?

No way, Daddy dearest.

And where were you

when I needed you?

'Cause a girl could get

into real trouble.

123

Clueless

Dad went to bed.

I laid on the couch, closed my eyes, let the night slip into replay.

Exhilarating, rocketing into my

mind, reaching

unimagined

highs.

Depressing, knowing when

I left, Adam would

stay. Would he downplay

spectacular

times together, forget the best, remember the lows?

124

As if I had

never entered his life, never existed, would he toss

all promise of tomorrow, tumble headlong into old routines?

As if he had never

told me he loved me?

125

I

Was Supposed to Sleep?

Thoughts bulleted in my brain, ricocheting, creative side to practical side, lustful half to hateful half.

Sleep? Yeah, right.

I got up, located cleanser and sponge, scrubbed the bathroom, washed the dishes, waxed the kitchen floor.

Wrote a four-page

letter to my sister, told her I was in love.

With a boy.

I think I asked for her forgiveness.

126

Wrote a poem, an epic, tinged with dark humor, decided to give it to my mom because this was all her fault.

Somehow.

Went to the bathroom, considered my growling stomach, but the thought of food made me want to heave.

Settled for a beer. That went down fine, so I had another.

And another.

127

After the Fourth

No more writing paper, nothing left to clean, I turned on the TV, thanked God for the

Jerry Springer marathon, six great hours, filled with pitiful people, whose lives were way worse than my own.

Hard to believe the world is such a screwed-up place.

128

I needed food, sleep, but the monster denied every bit of it.

Playing wasted couch

potato was all that I

could ask for.

And more.

Fading speed buzz, escalating alcohol, it was all I could do to stay upright.

So I didn't.

129

U

sed Up

Burned out, adrift on a sea of uncertain synapses, a place where your eyes
refuse to focus and your brain
refuses to function.

Somewhere between the transvestite who slept with his (her?)
mother's boyfriend and the perky
blond
(transvestite?)
evening
weathergirl.

130

Everything

shut

down, cerebral

ghost

town.

I

fell

into

sleep.

Deep, dream-free

sleep.

131

W

oke to Pounding

on the door, insistent vibration, building noise.

Bree? You there?

Late-day sun

filtered through cracks in the blinds.

It's me. Open up.

Late-day? How

long had

I slept? Only

hours?

I need to talk to you.

Twenty hours, as it turned
out. I tried to open my eyes.

Please, Bree?

132

Adam's tone
forced me into the moment.
"Hang on."

Something happened.

My mouth tasted like dead speed, dying beer, and foreboding.

There was an accident.

133

C

oming

Jumped up, dashed for mouthwash, forgetting the uncertainty of legs, unused for twenty hours, but spurred to confront the fear in his voice, and something more, something too like guilt.

Oh God, who was in the mirror? Not Bree, not Kristina, but some evil

incarnation glaring

back at me, a horrid

red-eyed crone, materialized

134

as if from darkest

dementia, nightmares to come, hibernating inside of me.

135

I

Filled the Sink

with cold water, dunked my whole head

under, counted to ten, came up, repeated the process.

Came up again and she had retreated, still close, I suspected, but far enough to let me

go to the door.

136

H

is Demon Showed in His Eyes

He stumbled in, tumbled against me, clutching like a scared little boy, in need of his mama's grace.

She's hurt real bad.

Who?

Lince.

What?

Fell (or jumped) off the balcony.

When?

Yesterday.

Where?

Right outside.

I didn't

dare ask

why.

Instead,

I let him

cry.

137

He

Told Me Why Anyway

She c

ame home from the bowling alley, went looking for me.

Found me.

Here, with you.

Heard us inside, talking, laughing.

Looked in the window, watched us kissing, watched my hands, running all up an'
down you.

When your dad came home,

she

waited for me to come outside.

Said she wanted to talk.

But she wanted more than that.

She wanted to erase you from my heart.

Never could, Bree.

Never could.

And that's what

I told her.

138

The monster rose up hard then, hard in her eyes, She looked like an animal,
crazy mad, diseased.

Spit in every word, she swore

she'd get back at you, at me.

Next thing I knew, she was on the sidewalk below, still, except for the blood
running red from her head.

They say it was an accident, she tripped, or leaned over too far.

Crankin', they said, and she was.

Oh, yes, she was.

139

That's what I wanna believe.

Maybe someday I can.

But

right now I think something different.

I never saw it coming.

Never thought she would.

I would have stopped her.

Could I have stopped her?

140

My

Brain Somersaulted

My heart picked up speed, my stomach threatened to 86 guilt, drowning in bile.

Oh, God. I'm sorry.

Hold me.

I wrapped him tight, hair dripping cool around the stiffness of his shoulders.

Not your fault.

Whose, then?

The answer, hanging over my head like a stubborn black cloud, seemed obvious.

Mine.

Don't say that.

141

I pictured Guinivere, golden-eyed wildcat, crumpled against the sad, cracked cement.

Whose then?

Plenty

of blame to go around.

Too much truth in that.

And I never heard a thing, dead to the world for twenty hours.

142

We

Sat on the Floor

Tangled up in each other, a knot of emotions
desperate for release.

And the more we kissed, the more we talked, the more confused we became.

He loved me. He loved her.

He loved her first.

He loved me now.

I loved him. I hated her.

I hated him for loving her.

I loved him for loving her still.

He wanted me. He needed me.

He needed more to go to her, let her know he loved her still.

I wanted him. I needed him.

I wanted him to forget her, needed
more to let him tell her he loved her.

143

When he asked me to go
along, some masochistic
piece of me agreed.

F

fifteen Blocks on Foot and a Bus Ride Later

We walked through big revolving doors, into the Land of Antiseptic.

My empty stomach rocked at the alcohol/bleach perfume, yet somewhere in that revolting scent a lovely memory floated, ghostlike.

The receptionist told us Lince was in ICI and asked if we were relatives.

I'd seen enough soap operas to know to nod an affirmative answer.

Adam played along.

I'm her brother and this is...

I held my breath

...

my

fiancé.

145

The lady didn't even blink behind her thick

gray lenses. She directed us to the elevators. We got off on the 7th floor. A nurse said we'd missed visiting hours, but since we were relatives she'd let us poke in through the door.

Intensive care is not a private place, big windows allowed unobstructed hallway-to-room views.

It was a sea of white.

Uniforms. Sheets. Curtains.

Floors and walls.

Why did that feel comforting?

146

L

ince Floated

in that white water world,

Guinivere upon the River Styx, tubes intruding wrists and nose, liquid-filled lifelines.

Adam let go of my hand and

I stopped in mute agreement.

This was his show.

I found the waiting room.

A dozen needs attacked me there.

I needed

food, fluid, soap, shampoo.

I needed

Adam, his heart, his promises his tomorrows.

147

I needed to go home

'cause somewhere

deep down

I needed

my mommy.

And all that made me really

really need

a line.

148

E

vening, When We Left

The breeze, too hot to cool the blooming

flower of summer

night,

seemed to ignite star

candles in a sky, darkened as much by mood as time.

We found the bus stop in silence, though I knew he had something to say.

149

Walked home beneath the celestial

cathedral. No kiss at my door, only his good-bye.

Not enough, but how could

I beg for more? Did he mean forever, or just for now?

150

D

ad Asked Where I'd Been

How's she doin'?

I opened my mouth to tell him, realized

I didn't know. Adam

had given nothing away.

Heard it was touch-and-go for a while.

Still looked touch-and-go to me, machines pumping existence into her through plastic tubes.

Too damn bad. Pretty girl.

Not so pretty now, Dad, head to toe black-and-blue, and shattered framework, facing uncertain healing.

Hard to believe we just partied together.

He really didn't get it, turned back to his TV. I went to the refrigerator, held my breath, looked inside.

Sorry, not much in there.

151

Moldy cheese, outdated

milk, peanut butter, and soggy celery. I found an apple, soft, but edible. Almost sweet.

We could go out

to dinner.

My brain claimed I was crazy to even consider such a thing. But my insistent stomach won the day.

McD's okay?

152

One

Hour

Tons of tasteless, useless, meaningless

food and conversation later, two rounded, roiling bellies pushed

back through the front door.

Not that Dad didn't ask plenty of questions, worthy of answers, but how could I tell the man who turned his back on "daddy" status how my life had changed?

How could I explain

gut-wrenching insights to someone so lacking

vision?

How could I admit my

part in the current melodrama to a psyche devoid of guilt?

153

How could I share the way my heart was breaking

when my confessor

didn't believe

in love?

154

I

nstead We Returned to Small Talk

which is probably all we'll ever manage, all we'll ever get to, if we get to anything at all.

We couldn't have spent more than two hours, total, within three weeks, tied up in trying to talk to each other.

Inter-family communication

must be an acquired skill.

He never even asked

if I'd gotten high before my little

Albuquerque adventure.

Never asked if I enjoyed

spending time with the monster.

He only wanted to know if Buddy and I had done the dirty, perhaps right there between his own disgusting sheets.

His question reeked of voyeurism.

155

And he accepted my negative answer with a smile that meant he didn't believe a word.

I wondered if Mom
would have.

156

D
ad Went Out

Left me

to

fret

to

stress

to

cry

to

choke

on

emotion

and

great

green

nose

clogging

gobs

157

in

sincere

need of a good

blow

instead,

I let

the

snot

drip.

158

I

Was

Mid-Drip

when Adam knocked on the door.

I half considered pretending

I wasn't there.

Hurting.

Bursting.

Over him.

Over this whole sorry

pile of crap

I'd dug myself into.

But I wanted to see him

more than anything.

Needed to know

I hadn't imagined the whole head over heels

thing. I had to go home in a couple of days. I

wanted to go

still in love.

I found a paper towel, let go a mighty blow and went to let him in, even though I knew I must have looked

very much like my

dead and buried grandma.

160

Okay,

I Looked Awful

To anyone else, he probably looked worse.

To me, he resembled an angel.

A poor, sad, beautiful angel.

His hurt swallowed mine, like space swallows time, and the two intertwine.

We tangled together

I'm sorry.

Me too.

I'm just so confused.

Ditto.

I do know I love you.

Ditto

squared.

161

So

of Course I Did a Really Stupid Thing

He pulled a bindle from his pocket, tapped the sparkly powder inside.

Cooked up fresh yesterday.

Mother Kristina said no.

The monster stormed Bree's door.

That's my girl. Let's forget
the bullshit and
fly.

We soared through the night, well beyond daylight.

Funny thing about the monster.

The worse he treats you,
the more you love him.

I knew already that had to be true.

Blood geysered in my veins.

Thoughts stampeded across my
brain. Together, ecstasy.

You are the most incredible girl.

I never believed someone like you

would fall for someone like me.

But are you Kristina? Or Bree?

162

At the moment, all Bree.

"Kristina is who they made me.

Bree is who I choose to be. How

'bout you? Adam or Buddy?"

With you, I am Adam.

And you are my beautiful

Eve. Let's run away,
find our garden, live there

together, happy. Naked.

163

A
dam

took me in his arms

kisses melting

hurt, forgotten ice

Unhurried hands lifted

my shirt

Pump. Pump. Pump

Passion rose up in my heart and a bit farther south

The monster-fueled

inferno built

thigh to belly button

Adam's mouth moved

lower, inch by trembling inch

I was ready to do it oh, so ready.

right that very instant.

164

B

ut First I Had to Pee

Passing the mirror,

I chanced a glance at Bree, crank embers glowing behind dilated black windows.

She didn't look half bad, certainly not dead and buried.

In fact, she looked quite animated.

I dropped my jeans. And guess what
discovered, already staining my panties?

That pesky monthly visitor who shows, unbidden, on your step, a true-blue party
killer.

Only this time, encouraged by the monster, it blew across the threshold, smashed
down my door.

I staunched the flow, changed
my clothes, and went to tell Adam.

165

Flustered, flushed, he swore he didn't care, pouted and pleaded and cajoled.

But I was not about to lose my virginity in a fountain of menstrual fluid.

How many times

have I regretted that decision?

166

B

ut That Day

there was still enough
Kristina left to feel
humiliation,
still a smattering of old-fashioned morals, somewhere
inside; still a healthy dose of survival instinct, buried beneath
a childhood, fractured by hormones, smashed by the monster's
fist and pressed into memory by two-faced
bravado.

167

So

I Said

"No way."

Why not?

"You know

why not."

But you know you want to.

"I do.

But I

can't."

Not right, Bree. Look what you've done to me.

And I

thought,

What did

I do?

You made me need you.

He brought the crank.

Made me have to have you.

He let
things get
out of hand.

Not later. Not next time. Now.

168

And then he took

my hand,

Put it right there.

showed me
how to make
things right.

Yes, just like that.

For him.

But what about me?

Girl

s Get Screwed

Not that kind of screwed, what I mean is, they're always on the short end of things.

The way things work, how
guys feel great, but make girls feel
cheap for doing
exactly what
they beg
for.

The way they get to play
you, all the while
claiming they
love you and making you
believe it's
true.

170

The way it's okay to gift their heart one day, a backhand the next, to move on to the apricot when the peach

blushes and bruises.

These things make me believe

God's a man after all.

171

I

Considered That

As I considered my suitcase, sitting empty and closed on the floor.

Empty and closed like Dad, not quite

hopeless, but not ready to be filled.

Empty and closed like Mom, writing a novel to create the excitement lacking in her own little life.

Empty and closed like my sister, genetically

locked in a maelstrom of meaningless apologies.

Empty and closed like Lince, hovering in some

frozen netherworld neither sun nor rain could thaw.

Much too much to think about, I unzipped
my American Tourister and started to pack.

172

O

ne

Day and Counting

Mom called on her cell.

You ready to come home?

Don't forget to get to the airport

at least an hour early.

Kristina? We've really missed yo

u

around here.

Translation:

You are coming home, aren't you?

Your father's a dunce, so remind him.

You are coming home, aren't you?

Dad called from work.

I

took the dayshift so we could

spend

tonight together.

Want to go out to dinner?

Did you say good-bye to Buddy?

Translation:

We really should spend one evening together.

The fridge is empty again.

He's not over there boinking you, is he?

173

Adam called from the hospital.

Lince is off the respirator,

but still in a coma.

Can I see you this afternoon?

I've got a surprise for you.

Translation:

Looks like she'll survive, with or without a brain.

Are you still on your period?

I'm on my way to pick up a bindle.

174

To

Speed or Not to Speed?

I told Adam to come on over,

I wasn't going

anywhere

then proceeded to fret, as I did

anytime

he and Lince popped up together in a single thought, anyway

I had only this day to make

him remember me, however

I could.

I knew it wasn't a great idea, flying home, mostly high on the monster or crashing fast, the last tiny remnants of speed and I

fighting to feel good, despite what the buzz

had become--

175

low, that is, so low it was hard to remember the best of it. So of course I chose to go for it. Adam, Bree, and the monster were inextricable friends.

176

A Couple

of Toots

Skeletal lines, jaundice yellow, evil little breezes up the nose.

One

inhale, awesome, mean, tiny

hammer blows to the brain, and I

didn't care who knew that

I was high,

(well, okay, I preferred clueless cops)

not Dad, who would be home

soon. He'd want one or two

himself. Not the people next door, who I'm pretty sure kept an ear to the wall,

waiting to see if I would fly, or attempt, like our wingless lynx, to defy all instinct and natural law, ball up courage, count to three and crest the edge in one mighty leap. Or maybe she did just fall.

I wonder, as I wonder if

177

I,

locked in a cage of dreamless sleep, a place where only the monster can drop you so hard, heard the cry of a fallen

broken

bird.

178

B

ut Right Then

all I could think of, in that speeded, heated moment, was my own pain, stabbing through the pleasure.

I asked Adam to hold me, kiss me longer, harder.

Oh, God, I love you.

Begged him to help me
remember the taste of love.

How will I live without you?

Pleaded with him not to live without me. Write. Call.

I will. I promise.

And I promised I would
come back to him.

I want to give you something.

I can't believe I let him, me, la gallina extrema.

So you'll never forget me.

(The extreme chicken.)

Closed my eyes.

I'll always be a part of you.

179

Gritted my teeth, locked into the love of the needle.

Right there, on your thigh.

And accepted Adam's tattoo, the tiny heart a very big

Stashed under your skin.

symbol, forever bonding us, his ink in my flesh.

180

It

Throbbled

the Next Day

All the way home red and raw, like my eyes, drained of tears, denied sleep's healing, staring at the glare of midday sun in vibrant blue sky at 20,000 feet.

Red and raw like my belly, not even

MacDonald's to soothe its empty

demand ('cause Dad, of course, cranked it up when he got home--so much for dinner out).

Red and raw like my heart, pried from Adam's, the two beating, no longer together, but a thousand

miles between them when

only yesterday they

thumped in unison.

181

Red and raw like my brain, unable

To shut down, thoughts crashing like electrons orbiting a nucleus of dueling emotions. Wanting to stay high. Knowing I should want to come down and stay

that way.

182

I

Still Wasn't Down When We Landed

High-rise casinos, each with a "got

rich" story or two and thousands of sad little secrets, gigantic glittering towers of glass and ungodly neon

intruding upon the beauty of the July

dusk, yet waving a welcome home, midst a bayou of cement, asphalt shingles, tinted panes, fake wood siding, and lingering in the distance, an ocean of sage-embroidered playa, vast as time itself, those very seconds, hours, eons locked within the fringe of great crustal blocks most call mountains.

Kristina had seen it all before.

Kristina was home.

Bree saw it all through new eyes.

Bree was a stranger.

183

T

ightedened Airport Security

No one greeted me on the far side of the jetway, no relatives, no friends, only slot machines.

Tugging those two

carry-ons, upper thigh

itching like crazy beneath a tight pair of jeans.

I wandered toward the escalators, a 50-foot-long

mural of blue Lake Tahoe

flanking me on my left.

8-foot-tall showgirls in purple boas (and not

much else) smiling at me from the right.

Kristina drawn left,

Bree to the right, the monster started to retreat just in time.

184

I

Saw Them

before they saw me-- the whole fam-damilly turned out to greet me:

Jake, sweaty and animated, auburn hair (And where did that come from, Mother?)

ruffled, freckled face (Thank God I missed that recessive gene!) handsome with summer color.

Leigh, on summer break, too "Brittney-ish" (So much of Mom's platinum beauty!) to really be gay, (What a waste--like a butch would care!) legs to die for, unshaved in short shorts.

Scott, face losing

stress as he (Hard day, or another argument?)

put work behind him, (Mom could have done worse--and had!) tall, lean, and great

looking for 40.

185

Mom, somehow prettier with laugh lines, (Would I be able to say the same?) visible from here, (Would I ever even be that beautiful?) and a smile that could light a starless night.

Right at that minute, she saw me. (And, just for an instant, her smile was all mine!)

186

T

hen She Caught Sight

of something

not quite right, something

not quite familiar.

She hesitated, unsure

that I was me.

Her smile

dissolved, ghostlike.

But then she waved, and my family

flooded me.

187

H

omecomings Are Strange

You come home, and everyone talks at once and everyone asks questions, but no one waits for the answers.

Instead they talk about themselves, what they've been up to, what they're going to do next, as if you're a photo on the wall.

And then they talk to one another, forgetting you've just flown in, forgetting you're in the backseat, forgetting they've already said it all.

188

And you want to shout, can't you see

I'm here?

can't you see I'm

brand new?

Can't you see me at all?

189

My

Mom Says "I Love You" with Food

So we went out to dinner. Not McDonald's, either.

We went to a buffet. A mega casino-style buffet:

Salads--Oriental chicken; wilted spinach; ambrosia; three-bean; crab (at least that's what they call it); potato (three kinds); pasta (five kinds); carrot & raisin (nasty); and, of course, green.

Entrees--pizza, lasagna, mushroom ravioli; fried chicken, roasted chicken, chicken piccata; mahi, halibut, and deep-fried cod; mashed, baked, scalloped

potatoes; vegetables; and on the carving board, roast beef, roast turkey, and roast loin of pork.

Desserts--apple, cherry, and lemon meringue pies; angel, carrot, and triple-chocolate cakes; pastries, cookies, rum balls, and truffles; cobblers and bread pudding; soft-serve ice cream, with all the fixings; and for sweet-tooths on a diet, strawberries (forget the diet, top with whipped cream!).

So Mom gets two plates (low carbs), strawberries (no whipped cream).

Leigh gets three, eats half of each, skips dessert.

Scott eats most of three, with a brownie and ice cream for dessert.

Jake finishes four, down to the gravy; tops that off with three desserts.

190

As for me, still battling the monster for brain and stomach space, I picked at a single plate.

191

H

ome Sweet Home

Our pretty

little place on a hilltop acre, native

sandstone and imported

compost, Mom's handcrafted

oasis in a northern Nevada high

altitude valley, not really a valley, but more a depression in the eastern Sierra foothills, where mountain streams fed snowmelt to a shallow, silver lake, and everything managed to stay green, despite high desert heat and wild winter winds,

looked like it welcomed me looked like it threatened me looked just the same to me looked completely different and I was happy to be home and I was undeniably sad and I never wanted to leave and I wanted to turn and run wanted to call my old friends wanted to call my newest friend wanted to confide everything wanted to keep it all to myself needed to boast about the best needed to confess the worst needed to hold up needed to break down had to remember had to forget had to find Kristina. had to hide Bree.

192

D

espite All Trepidation

Despite the monster, fluttering in and out of my head like some demented moth, drawn to whatever light might be left there, despite Bree, demanding I find a way to get high, as if I had a clue where to get crank back here in Kristina Land,

despite Leigh, helping me lug one suitcase, her hand annoyingly pinching mine with every tug, every pull, despite Jake, dropping the other suitcase down an entire flight of stairs, spilling shampoo, lotion, and tampons,

193

despite Scott, smelling depressingly clean, while my own speed-induced body odor reeked ever stronger,

despite my mom, insisting I looked fabulous, having dropped four or five pounds, all the while wondering if anorexia had arisen....

194

REGARDLESS

My spotless

mauve room with pretty pink

butterflies on one windowed wall and a big old bed worthy of dreams invited me into the familiar

offered to rest my weary body and soothe my sorrowful heart.

195

I

Slithered Down the Hall

into the haven of the bathroom, shed

my clothes, showered, scrubbed my

skin until I thought it might blister, studied my thigh, found likely signs of infection.

Bree shrugged,

Kristina

silently screamed at the angry

green pocket of pus beneath the purple welt--

Adam's forever

symbol of love.

196

T

he Door Opened

I did scream then.

But it was only Leigh.

Hey, it's only me.

Kinda jumpy, aren't you?

"Did you need something?

I'm naked you know."

I've seen you naked before.

'Course I've never seen that before.

She pointed to the tattoo.

What could I do but ask her opinion?

In my opinion, you've got one nasty

infection. Did you sterilize the needle?

Thinking back, I wasn't so sure.

But I said, "Of course he did."

He

did, huh? Your hard-bodied,

dark-haired dream boy

did this?

So then I had to tell her everything.

Except I left out about the monster.

Well, I hope that's the only infection

he gave you, in love or no.

So then I got my back up. Played

defense to her quarterback sneak.

197

No need to get your back up.

I was just kidding, and of course

girls can carry STDs too.

So then Bree felt much better, while
Kristina felt really bad.

I
know you're sorry. No worries.

Let's chalk it up to jet lag.

B

rain Lag

described it better, synapses quieting, gray

matter shutting down, except the pain center part, Leigh's elementary nursing--alcohol, hydrogen peroxide, and a dab of Neosporin--had only managed to make the aching mess hurt even more, although she probably killed off a germ or two.

At least, lost in the center of my bed, I didn't have to wear jeans or jammies or even panties.

Naked, in that cool tangle of cotton

sheets, I felt myself slip far, far away, deep beneath an indigo ocean. Down, down into a silent, lightless land, and there, in the darkness I found my Adam.

199

Funny thing, your brain, how it always functions on one level or another. How, even stuck in some sort of subconscious limbo, it works your lungs, your muscle twitches, your heart; in fact, in symphony with your heart, allowing it to feel love. Pain. Jealousy. Guilt. I wonder if it's the same for people, lost in comas. Is there really such a thing as brain death?

200

S

ilence

shook me awake.

I groped into consciousness
room dark, blinds closed, shadows
undulating in air-conditioned
waves.

Midday,

I thought, house
emptied of people, of pets, of life,

Nobody home.

Just me for company, no one
demanding

201

conversation or explanations.
I was alone, and I liked it that
way.

On
the Nightstand

I found a prescription bottle and three notes.

The first was from Leigh:

Had some antibiotics I forgot to finish. You won't get a whole treatment, but they haven't expired. Not the way you're supposed to do it, but couldn't hurt!

The second was from Mom:

Your father called to make sure you made it home okay. You are okay, aren't you? I told him everything was fine. It is

fine, isn't it?

The third was from Jake:

Some guy named Adam called. At least I think his name was Adam. He also said

Buddy? First he asked for Bree, then changed it to Kristina. Who's Bree?

Good question.

203

I

Went Straight for the Phone

dialed Adam's number, forgetting the area code was different.

Got some

creep's cell

phone by mistake, and asked for the man of my dreams.

Don't think I know him, but if

you talk real dirty,

I can fake it.

Bree giggled. Kristina wanted to puke, thanked him anyway, tried again.

Head dizzy, hands shaky, 505 area code

inserted correctly, I got his mom.

Buddy's at the hospital. Lince

opened her eyes today.

I'll tell him you called.

204

Kristina felt relief. Bree felt rage and a burning desire for a couple of lines. I thought about the one time I actually sat down and talked to Adam's mom.

Tough thing for two boys

when their daddy

turns his back on 'em.

Turned his back, packed a bag and hit the highway. Left his family, broke, in a lousy two-bedroom walk-up.

Never said "bye," let alone "sorry."

Sorry speed freak. Least I got
to wear my face minus bruises
and swollen eyes.

205

Finally without tears, until her oldest son died, shootin'

speedballs--

just enough

meth to stay wide awake for the heroin wild ride over the brink.

Michael took after his dad.

Never too much, never enough
of goin' right out of his head.

What did that make Adam?

Watching his dad choose the monster, seeing his brother lie down for the demon,
how could he want to party too?

Buddy's all I've got left. I
pray
to the good Lord he makes

better decisions.

206

And, knowing all these things, perhaps more intimately than I ought to, what did
that make me?

I thought about praying too.

207

C

hanged

my

mind.

No

doubt

the

good

If You do still care, Lord, please keep me safe.

had

weightier

things

to

worry

about

than

the

half—

hearted

apology

of

a

crashing

crankster.

208

The

Phone, Still in My Hand, Rang

I jumped, like a bee had just

given me a nasty hello.

I returned the favor

with a totally foul, "Yessss?"

(Then thought, jeez, what if it's Adam?)

Hey, Kristina. It's Sarah.

How are you? How was your

trip? Tell me all about it!

How was your dad? Sweet?

Did you meet any cute boys?

Sarah--my best friend since

4th grade. Crazy smart, pretty in an Irish sort of way, with embarrassing freckles and wicked red hair she was forever trying to tame.

209

Was it hot down there?

It's been miserable here!

Did your dad have a pool?

Did you get a tan?

What did you do for fun?

What could I tell her?

How much did I dare?

That is, if she ever gave

me a chance to talk.

How much did she really want to know?

Did you do any shopping?

I

already got school clothes.

What did you do for the 4

th

of July? We went

up to Virginia City.

What day was today? The 10th!

Dad never said a word about fireworks.

210

The 4th of July had slipped on past, with me held fast in the grip of the monster.

We're going camping.

Want to come? My mom

said it's okay. I hate to spend
a whole week, alone
with my parents and little sis
ter.

I told her I'd ask and call later.

My brain needed a rest--not to mention my left ear.

Kristina could listen to Sarah talk for hours.

Bree was ready to scream.

211

At

Least I Had the House to Myself

I downed an ampicillin, splashed peroxide on my
wounded
thigh, which actually
looked a little better, the heart

more pink than violet, the pain more a soft

pulsing

reminding me with a steady beat of an emptiness so complete I had no clue how to fill it, loneliness so heavy I had no idea how to lift it, need so intense I had only one way to relieve it: a bitter drink

212

of its very source-- the deep well of the monster.

213

I

Considered

the Reno crank scene, or what I knew of it.

Legit entertainment--

music, magic, comedy clubs.

Legit and semilegit--

gaming, sports betting, light night carousing.

Legal, semi-immoral--

adult revues (aka "titty shows")

gay clubs, strip clubs, swap clubs, beyond-the-city-limits prostitution.

Such activities,

24-7, practically invited the monster's

participation.

Remote desert

dwellings, travel

trailers and

214

sad, little

shacks, went up in flames regularly, victims of ether-fed fire.

Oh, yes, there was crank in Reno, waiting for me, calling out to Bree.

All that was left was

To find it.

215

S

uddenly, However

all those days with little or no sustenance hit me in one awful instant.

Lucky me! Mom's kitchen was a whole lot better stocked than Dad's.

(Not to mention a whole lot cleaner--

no mega-cockroaches allowed!)

Summer fruit.

Garden veggies.

Leftover roast beef.

Homemade bread.

Hand-churned ice cream.

I'd almost forgotten how great a cook

Mom was, at least when she wasn't

too busy writing or going through one of her "I'm not your damn servant!" phases.

Double lucky me.

It seemed she was going through one of her

Suzy Homemaker stages.

216

Fresh salsa.

Homemade chips.

Leftover chili.

Cherry pie.

felt like I'd died and gone to God's grocery stop in the sky!

217

My

Luck Ran Out

'Cause after I

finished pigging out, I

really wanted a cigarette.

Nicotine's a strange addiction. I

didn't even realize I was hooked until I

couldn't have one. No

one at my house

smoked, at least not so you'd notice. Not

my mom. Smoking

causes wrinkles. Not

Scott, who had a family history of emphysema. Not

218

Leigh, who said
they made
your hair smell like an ash
tray (only true
if you don't
smoke). Surely not
Jake, the ministud athlete. Nope.

I
was most definitely
out of luck.

For the moment
anyway.

219

It
Got Worse

because just about then, my mom came home.

Good. You're up. You looked dead
to the world, so we let you sleep.

Leigh shadowed her through the door.

"Feeling better? We went shopping.

I needed a new swimsuit in the worst way."

Mom put an armful of bags on the counter, ignoring my crumbs.

I

got you one too. Your old one
is pretty ratty.

Leigh reached into a Macy's bag, extracted it for approval.

"Cute, huh? She wanted to get you a tank, I

insisted on a bikini. You

do

still like pink?"

Mom looked at the hot pink
crochet, as if for the first time, shook her head and clucked,
Better try it on. Can't sh
ow too much

skin at Scott's company
picnic.

Leigh glanced down at my T-shirt hem, barely covering our sisterly secret.

"Nope, wouldn't do. Wouldn't
do at all."

221

All

Thoughts of Bad Habits

vanished within a deluge of normalcy.

Scott's company picnic was an annual

family affair, fifty computer specialists, plus kids, wives, significant others, et al, eating, drinking, and being otherwise merry on the water slides, wave and wading pools at a decidedly fun place called Wild Waters.

Beyond all things wet, there were go-carts,

minigolf, an "invest your entire allowance

here" arcade, and amusement-park-style rides.

The day began early, ended late, and we always

had a blast. So why didn't it sound inviting? I was home. Everything was the same, everything exactly as it should be. Everything, that is, except

me.

222

I

Went to Try On the Swi

msuit

Few things are quite as humbling as cinching yourself up in a completely revealing

bikini and standing in front of a full-length

reflection, rotating like a bird on a spit, trying to admire the naked truth staring back at you:

body slim but not

fine-tuned

boyish hips, just

barely qualifying as curves, uncertain breasts, cup size stalled

somewhere between

A (plus) and B (minus), womanhood

223

desperately trying to escape, succeeding

once a month, like it or not, ready or not.

(At least that wasn't

currently a problem!)

224

T

he Tattoo, However, Was

It did look better, but it still didn't look good-- a bright pink, semi-heart-shaped

thing, blue ink hiding somewhere beneath my skin, not an easy thing to hide in an itsy bitsy bikini.

Band-aids were problematic. A little

one wouldn't cover it, but one of those big

square dudes would draw everyone's attention, guaranteed. Besides, have you ever seen a Band-aid, floating in a swimming pool? Would you want to be responsible for such a disgusting thing?

And even if one did manage to stay on midst gushing gallons of chlorinated water, what would all that wet

wildness do to the just forming

scab and retreating infection?

225

Still, I couldn't beg off.

Wild Waters Day was important to Scott's "leg up the management ladder."

It was Mom's day to strut her stuff in her own itsy bitsy bikini.

And it was always a summer hit for us kids.

If I said I didn't want to go,

Mom would check for a fever for certain.

Even if she didn't find one, it would open the door for questions I really was in no mood to answer.

Questions I knew I'd have to answer soon.

226

As

I Pondered

my problem, the telephone rang.

Jake happily informed me--not to mention everyone else--it was Adam/Buddy on the far end of the line.

"Hello?"

Hey,

Gorgeous. I miss you.

Melted butter.

"Oh, Adam. Me too."

I can't stay on long. Phone

bills, you know.

Hot butter burned.

"Okay."

Just want you to know

I love you.

Burned good.

"Me too. Always."

Lince is coming home

tomorrow. She'll be okay.

Burned bad.

"I'm glad."

Bree? I've been thinking.

We're a long way apart...

Sizzled.

"I know."

So I think we should give

each other permission

to see other people.

Spattered.

227

"You want

my permission?"

You have mine. Just think

of me from time to time.

Wetted.

"I don't need your
permission, Buddy.
And you obviously
don't need mine."

Well, okay then. Better go.

Keep in touch.

I really do love you.

Scarred.

228

H

is Idea of Love

sure didn't mesh with mine.

"I love you, let's see other people.'

Interesting

sentence structure.

"Lince's coming home.

Let's see other people."

Unusual

paragraph construction.

My face flushed

tears poked my eyes, scar tissue twisted my heart, wrapped itself around arteries,
closed tight around my jugular.

I coughed pain.

I never went to Albuquerque

expecting to find love.

thought it had found me there, followed me home.

229

I never came home, expecting to lose

love in the space of one brief

telephone call.

Is it always so short-lived?

230

Mom Knocked on My Door

I found that strange.

She never knocked.

May I come in?

Never asked for permission to come in. Permission.

That word again.

We haven't had a chance to talk

since you got home.

Then she looked at my face, all puffy and pissed, read everything she needed to there.

Looks like we've got a lot to talk about.

But maybe this isn't the best time?

I wanted to talk. Needed to.

But how could I possibly talk to her? She was my mom.

I

know I'm your mom and not always

easy to talk to. But I'm here for you.

I was ready for a lecture.

Why did she have to choose

that moment to try "nice"?

231

I

want to hear all about your trip. Let

me know when you're ready.

Big girls don't cry, especially
not in front of their mommies.

But a cloudburst threatened.

I

hope you're hungry. I'm making

your favorite

--

lasagna and garlic bread.

I was hungry (somehow).

I was tired (still). I was hurting (inside and out).

And more than ever, I wanted to walk with the monster.

232

Over

Lasagna and Garlic Bread

I talked about airplanes.

I talked about lonely seatmates, third-run movies, and pretzels (for this price!) in place of meals.

I talked about Albuquerque, bowling alley

etiquette, Los Alamos-grown cockroaches, and walk-ups in decidedly bad neighborhoods (omitting the part about my own little nighttime foray).

With some prodding, I talked about Dad, his job, and (lack of) girlfriends; I talked about his philosophy, somehow sadly yet to ripen into something resembling maturity.

With a lot more prodding,

I talked about Adam aka Buddy

(omitting everything of use to anyone

interested in blackmail).

233

Considering his recent treachery, it was easy enough not to gush about his hot bod, wildcat eyes, incredibly perfect lips, and intuitive hands.

And, mostly because everyone knew it anyway, I talked about how, despite his undying love, he had given us both permission to date other people.

234

Lei

gh

Knew

there was a whole lot
more to the story, of course.

But I'd never
told her secrets, and trusted
completely she would
never betray
mine.

Still, just in case, I
never dared
mention
sex, interrupted by periods;

Lince, interrupted by drugs;

235

or my own

infatuation with the monster's

spectacular

rock and roll.

No, these

secrets

belonged strictly in my own

private closet.

236

Later

Leigh climbed into my bed, moved very close to me, her proximity strangely unsettling.

Want to talk? I do.

I miss how we used to talk.

I recalled a time, not so long ago, when snuggling with my big sister was comforting.

Tell me more about Adam. Is he really your very first boyfriend?

So why did it bother me now, when I so needed the consolation of touch?

I'll tell you about Heather. She's

not my first, but she tops the list.

Heather? Lesbians had names like Bobbi or Jo, didn't they?

"Heather" belonged to a model or cheerleader.

237

She's a cheerleader. Well, a song

leader, and pretty much perfect.

Leigh was almost perfect herself.

If she were taller,

she

could be a model. Picture-perfect

lesbians. I had to laugh.

What are you laughing about?

Didn't

know cheerleaders were my type?

Didn't know cheerleaders could
be

that type. Which got me thinking.

What else might those peppy
cheerleaders do?

238

I

Tucked That Away

And tried to focus on my sister

going on and on about being in love with a girl: their meeting, touching
accidentally, connecting

immediately, interwoven

hand in hand, heart-to-heart.

And even though I loved my sister

had accepted her eccentricities

I found it hard

239

to listen to detailed

descriptions, abstract

ambitions, relevant

observations, hers and mine.

240

W

Wild Waters Day Dawned

hot, crystal blue--perfect for watery fun.

I donned my new bikini, disguised the tattoo beneath a hot pink gauze cover-up,
and on some lunatic whim

called Sarah to come along.

While

waiting in line, we ran into Trent, another longtime friend, who on his 16th
birthday made the huge mistake of climbing out of the closet and waving a big
hello.

Of course, I was good with it. We were best buds, no matter what, and, of course, there was the Leigh factor. But others in our school were not quite so open-minded.

Since he outed, Trent

had been teased, humiliated, beaten, even

semitortured by some pickup

truck cowboys who didn't have a clue about the real meaning of masculinity.

241

So there I was at Wild Waters, trying to look extremely cool at the coolest place in town, with chatty Sarah Baker and Trent

"the gay guy"

Rosselli.

Turned into an interesting day.

242

Mom and Scott

wandered over to the group

picnic area to join the company

brownosers and nibble.

Leigh and Jake went off together, racing to see who could reach the top of Black Widow first.

Trent hit the wave pool.

Sarah hit the bathroom--she always

showered before entering the pool.

I opted for an inner-tube float along the Lazy River, mostly because of this very cute lifeguard, perched overhead.

And there was Bree, smiling seductively, and I swear that poster boy lifeguard smiled right back.

243

And in that righteous moment, complete

clarity. Bree was not an invention, not a stranger.

Bree was the essence of me.

244

W

hether That's Good or Bad

I can't say. I just know it's true.

Bree opens doors

Kristina wouldn't dare

knock on,

like that cute lifeguard's--

not to mention Adam's, even if that one had recently slammed in her face.

But Bree insists on having

things all her way.

So when Trent and Sarah

came trucking up, bickering and tittering and doing all those little cutesy friend-type things,

Kristina never minded.

Bree wanted to tell them to shut the hell up, go

away. Let her play.

245

For a while, without the monster

whispering sweet and terrible

nothings,

Kristina was still in charge.

But Bree was watching.

246

R

ather Than Face

total embarrassment, I

told Trent and Sarah I'd

meet them at Black Widow.

They looked at me, looked at what I was looking at, hard-bodied and tan on his tall tower.

Trent gave me a thumbs-up.

Sarah broke out in giggles.

Then they graciously provided space.

I invited Bree to take over while

Kristina took cover. She bent forward from the waist, shook her dripping hair,

straightened, flipped it backward, and without a single thought to the puffy pink heart on her thigh

247

(let alone its artist), she marched right over to that lifeguard tower, looked up and, without drooling at all, asked,

"Do you get a lunch break?"

248

Before Bree

that would never have happened.

Whatever she'd done to me, for me, and basically in spite of me, she'd given me a whole new sense of self.

I never knew

I could play the vamp, do it so well, flirt with total aplomb, and not only that, but look good doing it.

Before Bree I never

knew such sheer, depraved

forwardness could

be so much fun.

So I went with it, jumped right into the role of shameless flirt.

Girls responded

249

with pointed whispers, haughty laughter and, as

I myself have often done, with evil eyes.

Bree, of course, couldn't

care less. In fact she thrived on any and all attention.

Guys responded to that with solid

once-overs, come-on smiles, and in Brendan the lifeguard's case, with phone numbers.

250

As

If That Weren't Enough

I sprinted off in search of my friends and (literally) bumped into Chase Wagner, Reno High's storied bad boy.

Kristina would have offered a quick

apology and scurried away.

It's not like Chase was in the running for Mr. America.

He looked like a linebacker, one who didn't play much in the sun--the freckles on his cranberry skin almost pulsed pain.

But Bree found his bedroom

eyes--glacier blue--and brooding

demeanor quite the turn on.

"Hey, Chase," she cooed.

He scoped me out like an old
tomcat, ogling a brand-new canary.

Do I know you?

251

Kristina knew enough about
him
to think she ought to flee.

Chase Wagner could be
hazardous to a person's health.

You look familiar, but not, so
maybe

I'm thinking of someone else.

What's your name?

Just like that, she had him.

If she wanted him. Her game was no less dangerous than his. "Call me Bree."

252

Right Then, Three People

shouted, "Kristina!"

Time to beat a face-saving retreat, so

I smiled and told Chase I'd catch him later.

I looked around and saw Mom, waving to come and eat,

Leigh, minus Jake, gesturing to come share a towel,

Sarah, at the top of Black Widow, watching Trent's wet ride down.

"Not hungry yet," I shouted to Mom.

To Leigh, "Be there in a few."

Then I joined my oldest, bestest

friends in the world, tried to think of something to talk about besides lifeguards,
bad boys,

253

and this person named Bree, growing stronger inside me, convincing me to be
someone I never dreamed I'd want to be.

I know you should be able to share such news with best friends, but I felt pretty
sure they'd never relate and maybe refuse to forgive

me for trading in the tried-and-true for a test drive of the dark side.

254

S

till, When Brendan Came By

I left my friends with my sister, took a walk to the back of the park, the eyes in
back of my head noting envious stares.

Brendan noticed, too.

You related to those people?

"Pretty much." I bummed a cigarette, inhaled like it was the healthiest thing a person could do.

The pretty one looks like you,
but the others don't.

My turn for a jealous jolt. But I had a secret
weapon. "The pretty one is my lesbian
sister. The others are my cousins."

Lesbian! Really? I never met

one before. How about you?

I laughed. "Of course I've met one, if my
sister is one. Oh, you mean do I lean that
direction? No way. I prefer male hardware."

I

like what you've got, too, li'l

sister. At least, what I can se

e.

Male hardware? Must have read it in

Cosmo.

Whatever. Brendan touched my hair, made a move like he just might kiss me....

255

Damn. There's my boss. Back

to work. Call me, okay?

I wondered if I could. I'd always waited for boys to call me. Which is why I never talked to any except Trent. And Adam.

By the way, beautiful, what's

your name? In case you call.

Twice in one day! I almost told him the truth but realized the fantasy was better and rested completely in Bree's hands.

256

I

Went Home

tired, tanned, and stuffed on barbecue,

Scott insisted

high on life, nicotine, and purloined booze,

Chase invited

elated, pumped

up, full of Bree's

magical ego,

Brendan inflated

chastised, brought

back down a notch or two,
Leigh instigated
then all the way, chest-deep into shit when
Mom finally noticed the tattoo, my
meaningless, forever
symbol of love. Still,
Bree swore

257

whatever

punishment
lay ahead, only one thing
could have
improved
that phat, fabulous day:
a big bite of the monster.

258

Grounded UFN

Until further notice. No

excursions, no calls.

How unfair could you get?

Couldn't she just decide how mad to be, then mold the consequences to fit?

I'm so disappointed in you!

What else was new? She was only good with "all I could be" when it involved a straight-A report card.

Don't you realize this could

scar you forever?

Well, duh, Mom. It already had, though not in the way you imagined.

Couldn't you have asked about that?

Why can't you be more
like your sister?

Did she mean look more like her? Be
PhD bound? Or maybe she wanted me
gay? Lesbians and pregnancy rarely mix.

How can I trust you to make

good decisions?

259

Oh, great. Here it came. No driver's
training, no driver's license. Their
way of keeping me cooped up forever.

Driver's training is on hold.

And to keep you from feeling

cooped up, you can pull weeds.

Fine. I was almost 17, would never
drive, and now I'd spend my summer
yanking goats' heads.

260

T

he

Pr

oblem with Being Grounded

is it gives you a whole lot of unavoidable time to think.

Not even pulling weeds can
take away your ability to plot
all the varied and wonderful
things you might do to get even, or at least to make up just a smidgen for time
lost to TV and yard work and house cleaning.

Time better spent

camping with old friends

(even slightly annoying ones), partying with great-looking new friends, and
expending a few brain cells with the monster.

get even,

261

S

he Cut Me Loose

Two weeks before

Back-to-School, gave me her credit

card and a ride to the mall, her way of apologizing without saying she was sorry
for trashing my summer.

Jake wanted to come

along, but I told him

I'd crawl into bed and stay there rather than haul my little brother around the mall. He went fishing with Scott instead.

Didn't matter much.

Summer had dissolved.

New clothes and a few

new tunes just might

improve my "sour

outlook," as she so lovingly termed it.

I usually despise trying on clothes but, finally

free, I meant to make it an all-day affair, shop

every store, including

Victoria's Secret. Guess who I ran into there?

262

The Reno High Varsity

Cheerleaders, all buying

new undies and bras to shape those tight tanks and sweaters (football weather in Reno is an exceptionally mixed bag).

I waved to Trent's sister,

Robyn, then pretended to browse, watching them

yak a hundred words a minute, and I knew my

suspicious were accurate.

Those goody-goody girls, flipping perfect cartwheels and pert little ponytails, most definitely accelerated their metabolisms. The only question was: how?

263

I

Pondered That

while I picked out

my own underwear.

As I handed the saleslady

Mom's credit card, someone

tapped my shoulder.

Hey, Bree. Can I see

your panties?

Chase! I tried to think of a witty comeback, managing mostly to look like a stuttering fool.

"Uh-oh, uh--old or new?"

Either, or. Better yet, both.

What's up? Where you been?

Like he'd been looking for me since Wild Waters.

Like I'd been avoiding him.

You haven't been avoiding me,

have you?

264

Why would I? What he might lack in looks, he more than made up for in fringe benefits.

I explained about the tattoo.

You really wanna piss her off,

try a piercing. Want to see mine?

I couldn't find studs in his ears, lips, or tongue. Which pretty much left one place.

"Didn't it hurt?"

Like a mother. But it

feels

awesome now.

He guided my hand

just south of his zipper.

Kristina recoiled.

Bree--well,

Bree was Bree, to Chase's great pleasure.

Hee hee. So want to take

a little ride? Got my truck outside.

265

I started to protest.

I had some serious
shopping ahead.

And Bree or no Bree,

I wasn't about to do

Chase Wagner.

No strings. I just want to

get

to know you better.

Where had I heard a similar tale?

I was about to give him a definite no when he sweetened the offer.

I've got a little toot, if

you're

so inclined.

266

D

id It Show?

I mean I'd

thought about the monster

dreamed about the monster

lusted for the monster

regretted

knowing the monster but I hadn't

touched the monster

in over a month.

Hadn't even seen it.

Thought I might be over it.

Was it still alive in me?

Could it still have such a solid hold on me?

267

We

Drove Down by the River

parked beneath towering cottonwoods.

Strange, how intensely desire

builds when the monster waits at the far end of a drive.

On the way I learned, for a bad boy

Chase was incredibly smart. Webster

would envy his vocabulary, he was up on current events, could quote Keats:

Give me women, wine, and snuff

Until I cry out hold, enough!

You may do so sans objection

Till the day of resurrection; for

Bless my beard they aye shall be

My beloved Trinity.

No mirrors, no blades, Chase reached

deep inside a pocket, withdrew an amber bottle with a tiny spoon attached to the lid. He set it on his knee.

Hey, you're shaking. You're not

scared, are you? We don't have
to do this, do anything at all. We

can just sit and talk if you want.

268

"I'm not afraid, Chase." Not of him.

Not with him. In fact, I felt quite safe.

It was monster desire that made me
tremble. Chase noticed.

Take it easy with this stuff, Bree.

It brings even good people to their
knees. Don't get me wrong. I
like it, too. Just keep cool.

269

One

Spoon

I was cool.

Two, I was too

cool. Three, sub-Arctic. Four, my mouth hit
monster mode.

Chase could barely

keep up. We talked

about:

Good girls

Bad boys

Smothering moms

Indifferent moms

Disappointing fathers

Obnoxious fathers

Stepfathers--one

Stepfathers--three

Annoying little brothers

Brothers with very big footsteps

Summer trips

Boring summers at home

Junior years

Senior years

Early graduation

College boards

Cheerleaders

Football players

Artists

Poets

Tattoos

Piercings

Ex-boyfriends

Ex-girlfriends

Dreams

Doubts

270

Punishments

Loneliness

Old friends

New friends

Gay friends

Lost friends

Desire

Addiction

The monster

More monster

Kristina

Bree

271

I

Had to Explain

about Bree/me; by then, he had
already asked to kiss
me, and I let him because I really
wanted him to, and it wasn't my
first kiss
nothing like that one, in fact, maybe it wasn't
even my
best kiss but it was pretty
fine, and the fact
that he had asked
will forever make
that kiss

272

stand out in my

mind, touch my

heart, make me

remember a kiss so tender it made me cry.

He held me then, smoothed my hair and I asked him to kiss me again and he did,
over and over, until I thought we might

melt together, fused by kisses.

273

In

That Quite Hot Moment

a park ranger cruised by, took a good, long look.

Maybe we'd better go

.

"I should get back anyway.

My mom will wonder if I don't
spend enough of her money."

Ha, ha. I can always
help.

As we drove away, he pulled me
close, rested his hand on my knee, shifted between my legs.

Can I see you again?

"Any time, Chase." Any time.

How weird was that? A few months
back I would have said no way.

Soon?

As soon as I could break away from
Mom's watchful eye. Chase sure
wasn't her type. Was he really mine?

I

like you, Kristina.

"I like you, too." I did. He was nothing like I had imagined.

He was bright, intuitive.

Or do I like Bree?

274

Even if he did ask hard questions.

Jetting on the monster in spectacular
fashion, I didn't know how to answer.

Doesn't matter. What's in a name?

That which we call a rose by any

other word would smell as sweet.

Chase Wagner and Bill Shakespeare.

Talk about your strange bedfellows.

I was in line for that ménage à trois.

275

Chase

Wanted to Walk Around the Mall

with me, but I knew I wouldn't get much

shopping done if I went on a kissing

spree. A word of advice:

Never shop on crank.

Your brain moves beyond the speed of light as you wander through a familiar store. First, you can't find Juniors.

Once you finally do, you need the restroom first, then you get all turned around again.

Then, you can barely take it all in. Sizes. Styles.

Colors. Trends.

Everything looks great on those goofy mannequins, so it's got to look better on you, right? You grab an armful, stumble to a

dressing room, try on all those darling clothes and nothing you like fits. So you leave silk and velour and suede behind, settle for two identical pairs of jeans.

276

Then you hustle off to the next store and repeat the process, only this time you leave with a couple of tees exactly like a couple you bought last year.

And when you realize that, you laugh your

butt off, but really don't want to hassle with returns or exchanges so you decide to accessorize instead.

277

A

Second Word of Advice

If shopping for clothes on crank is dumb, trolling for jewelry, belts, and shoes is something just this side of insane.

Suspenders?

Don't think so.

Nikes. Vans. Doc Martins.

One of each?

Maybe next time.

Scrunchies. Barrettes. Berets.

Ebb the sable flow?

Uh-uh.

I was stressing over earrings when
another hand touched
my shoulder.

I thought you were going to call.

Brendan.

278

T

wo

Guys in One Day?

Almost too much to consider, although Bree found the prospect quite intriguing.

So then I had to explain GUFN again.

"Today is the first day she cut me loose."

Sounds

like a reason to party.

That

was funny. But it was time to catch my ride home. Since Brendan was my mom's type--tall, handsome, and gainfully employed--I let him walk me out. Mom was parked right in front.

Is she a

lways so punctual?

I laughed like he was the wittiest

man alive, and promised to call, wondering what was up. With me.

Had I lost one boyfriend, to gain

two? And how could I possibly

want

these two,
opposite squares on the chessboard?

279

Damn, your
mom is fine.

That
wasn't funny at all. I had to live with my mom, obey her rules, accept her
punishments. But I would

never
accept her as competition.

Not as fine as you, of course.

Okay. Better.

280

Mom Wanted to Hear All About Brendan

I told her what I knew, hoping I didn't talk too much. Or too fast.

He's really cute.

Oh, great. Mutual attraction.

I almost opened my mouth, thought better of it.

Did he ask you out?

In a manner of speaking,

I supposed. Out. In. I

doubted he was picky.

Do we need to have the talk?

At that, I really had to stifle Bree. Let me tell you, it wasn't easy.

He did seem like a nice boy.

Seeming and being are two different things. You seem nice, too, Mommy dearest.

Anyway, did you find some nice clothes?

281

I showed her what I

bought, and she grinned a killer smile.

At least you're consistent.

I had to laugh, speeding along with the monster.

Consistent? Not!

282

I

nconsistent Me

could barely look at dinner.

I told Mom I ate at the mall.

What?

What, what?

What exactly did you eat?

Quick, Kristina, think.

"Stir-fry. You know, fast food Chinese."

Did you eat all your veggies?

OMG! Here I was, busting

my brain on first-class speed, and all she cared about was if I'd consumed my greens?

'Cause you can't stay smart

eating only junk food.

Stay smart? First I had to get smart, and it wasn't about to happen holding hands with the monster.

Besides, vegetables give a girl

a healthy glow.

283

Damn. Wasn't I glowing?

Then again, even if I was, it could hardly qualify as healthy. Still, Mom didn't insist I share the dinner table.

It's only leftovers, anyway.

By the way, a letter came

for you today.

284

D

ear Kristina,

Hope everything's okay. Hope you're okay.

Things are okay here.

My mom got a new job and she's dating her boss.

He already thinks he's my stepdad or something.

Says I'd better think about what I want to do with my life.

Besides party, that is.

I hate him already. You know?

Lince is home and I guess she's better.

She has to go to PT

--physical therapy--

every day.

She's learning to walk and talk, just like a baby.

It's weird, really weird.

I try to spend time with her, but it's hard. You know?

I'm sorry about that phone call.

I didn't mean to upset you.

I was at the end of a three-day binge.

Too long without food and sleep.

Your brain starts to play tricks. You know?

285

I do love you, Kristina.

You were a summer gift, one I'll always tre

asure.

You were a dream I never wanted to wake
up from.

You opened my eyes to things I'll never rea
lly see.

You're the best thing that will ever happen
to me.

Be safe. Be smart. Stay you.

Adam

286

Why

Was Everyone

suddenly worried about my IQ?

I sank into my

down

pillow-top, reread every word

twenty times, right down to his signature.

Adam had a poet's soul.

I put the letter down and considered crying, wondering how loving him could bring me so far down, wondering how to stop loving him, wondering

if the monster would soon

let me come down.

287

I Did Cry

Then

Climb-and-dive on the crank coaster,

I unlocked my heart, let the hurt out.

And then, like he was listening at the keyhole, Chase called.

(He even asked for Kristina.)

Hey, sweetheart. Just

checkin'

U

p on ya. You okay?

Let's see. Speedin'. Wantin' tobacco.

Cryin' over a guy I thought I was over.

Probably going to start my period--just in time to encourage a few new zits right before school started. "Fine."

Really? You don't sound fine.

Can I make you feel better?

I told you he was intuitive. Even
if he wasn't the type I could
bring home to Mother. Yes,
I liked Chase Wagner.

I'd sing to you but I'm pretty

sure that wouldn't
help.

288

I jumped into his well of ever-present

cheerfulness, gulped deeply, laughed out loud. We talked until Scott needed to
use the phone.

You probably won't sleep

much tonight. Think of me

once or twice?

At least. I hung up, feeling much less
alone. Pulled out my journal and started to write. Wrote all night.
The monster and I had a lot to say.

289

C

hase Was Right

I didn't sleep much that
night and not for the next
day or three afterward, either.

Sarah invited me

over,

I told her I felt under the weather, both to escape inevitable questions

demanding uneasy
answers and to consider my
options.

290

possibility number

one,
Chase, likely; two,
Brendan, maybe; three, someone altogether new.
Who knew?

291

I

Had to Pick Up

my student I.D. card so I bummed a ride from Chase, told Mom I was going with Sarah.

It was the first time in a long time I'd out and out lied and it bothered me. For about five minutes.

I walked down to the 7-Eleven to wait for Chase, anticipation rumbling in my

empty gullet.

The sight of his red Toyota pickup brought a smile to my lips--and more, inside.

We shared a seat, we shared a smoke, we shared a kiss or several.

At school, Chase waited with me in some long

lines. Yearbook. Class schedule. Student body card.

I even smiled for the camera. I had to, with Chase checking out my student body, grinning like a toad.

Back in the truck, more kisses and a cigarette of my own (pilfered from his pack, pilfered from his mom).

292

He dropped me off around the corner from my house, gave me a stick of gum and a big, wet good-bye kiss.

It might have been the perfect day except just as I closed the door, Scott happened to drive by.

I learned a valuable lesson about lie construction and Mom gave me plenty of time to consider how to do it better.

293

G

UFN Again

I

sat on my bed, absentmindedly

tracing the lopsided

heart-shaped scar, didn't

read, didn't write. All I did was think about my personal evolution. Where did I

belong with my relative innocence

gone? Where did I fit?

I felt like I had fallen in

to

a critical state of limbo.

With my old friends mired in status quo, how could I explain my

summer enlightenment? My new

crowd--if three guys and Guinivere

qualified--was not what my

294

mom

(or I) expected. I wondered if I should

confess that her sweet, intelligent

little Kristina did not exist

anymore.

295

L

Leigh Headed Back to School

Mom drove her to the airport.

I waited until they hustled off, late, then asked to stay home, claiming, "Cramps."

Mom gave me a look, but I could prove the cramps were real. Leigh gave me a big, tense hug, made me promise to behave myself.

The minute the car turned the corner,

I was on the telephone, completely

misbehaving.

"Come over, Chase."

Now?

"Right now."

Where's your mom?

"Just hurry."

Need arose like an angry red dawn.

I paced until the dogs warned a stranger had just arrived.

How much time

do we have?

"Not enough."

What do you

want?

"Everything."

Will I get you in
trouble?

296

"Probably."

I didn't care. I needed to feel
good. We snorted, we smoked.

I asked for,

"More."

Don't think you

should.

"Please!"

Take it easy,

Kristina.

"Can't."

Your mom will be

home soon.

"I know.

That's why

I can't."

297

C

hase Left Me with Goodies

He didn't want to, told me

No way. but Bree, mistress of persuasion, knew a trick or two to get her way.

Kristina swore to keep her in check and she tried, but no way to slow the electric impulse flow, our brain began to plot. How to get away from the confines of GUFN?

Sweet-talk Mom?

Little chance of that working, a crazy

idea soon hatched to sneak away for one spectacular last summer fling.

Insanity, that's what it was, school

starting in only two days.

298

I

Watched the Window

as I picked up the phone and dialed.

Bree cooed a throaty hello.

Hey. I'd just about given up on you

.

I could not admit to GUFN. Not
again. I concocted
some lame excuse.

No problem. Want to get together?

I did. Chase or no Chase, I wanted to see what Brendan was made of.
Bricks, mortar, flesh, bones.

I'll pick you up. Where and when?

Let's see. Wait for everyone to hit the hay, extra half hour, scale down the wall...

That's pretty late.

Very late. But I'd definitely be
awake. I coughed up the fact
I was sneaking out.

Okay by me. Just don't get caught.

No duh. I didn't plan on getting caught. Still, what could they do if I did? Ground me forever?

What sort of party would you like?

299

Damn, direct. Not even sure

if he indulged, I said I'd bring the toot if he'd bring the beer.

Sounds like a deal I can

live with.

Mom's SUV turned up the driveway. Deal sealed,

I said good-bye.

See you tonight, luscious.

Luscious? Plain old white

bread me? I liked it. At least

I thought I did then.

300

I

Hid Out in My Room Until Dinner

made sure to gag down every scrap of spinach, so both my mom and my mouth would keep quiet.

I still had a valid cramp excuse so I packed it in early. Uh-huh. Sat in the dark, lit as the starry sky.

Listened to the sounds of my normality: familiar footsteps in the hall; whispers; laughter; baying at the moonlight.

And it occurred to me for one uneasy moment
that every move I had made lately might have
started a landslide.

What if I couldn't go back? What if I died in the crash?

Almost immediately, the monster soothed
me, confused me with a deeper question.

What if the ride was worth it?

301

I mean, who wants to trudge through life, doing everything just right? Taking no

chances means

wasting your dreams.

How can I explain the pure chilling rush of waiting to do something so basically not right?

No fear. No guilt.

How can I explain purposely setting foot on a path so blatantly treacherous? Was the fun in the fall?

302

I

Hoped Not

As I softly opened my second-floor window, peered down at the cement walk below, took a deep breath.

Fingers clutching the upper sill, toes stretching for the first-floor trim, I managed to touch down

safely. It may have been the safest moment of the night, in fact. Gulped into darkness,

I let my eyes adjust, felt the breeze lift

goosebumps, listened for signs of household disturbance.

No motion. No sudden snitch of a light switch.

No sound but distant coyote song, I silenced

my conscience, quieted my screaming nerves and slipped away unnoticed, for the moment.

No streetlights, no headlights, the world

seemed to sleep beneath my feet as I ran,

a mustang over moonlit playa; a cheetah in high gear. No fear, no brakes, consumed

303

by some irrational itch to cruise along shadowy thoroughfares, traveled by demons.

304

Brendan Was Waiting

in a battered mud-colored Bronco.

Climb in. You look great.

Winded. Hair plastered by my

escape sprint. He was a liar.

A smooth, gorgeous liar.

Wanna go up to Chamberlain Flat?

Secluded five miles up a rutted
dirt track, the played-out mine was a notorious party spot.

Supposed to be a party up there.

Anything could happen at a party up there. Good things. Bad things.

Truly evil things.

Ever hear about Evan Malone?

Evan Malone, urban legend--eighteen and in league with Satan, skinning goats
up at Chamberlain Flat.

My brother went out with his sister.

So he was more than just a parental

fabrication meant to scare kids
away from abandoned mine shafts?

He was real, okay. Kyle met him.

305

Met him and what? Dressed up like
Halloween, prayed to the devil, and sacrificed hooped animals?

Shared a bong. Said he was creepy.

Major understatement, if the dude was really for real! If pot made you buddy up
with Satan, you could keep it!

But don't worry. Evan's
long gone.

I reached for a whiff of courage.

Far fuckin'
out! Beer's in back.

306

We

Bumped up the Road

Doing 40 or so spilling some
foam of summer-warmed brew
and busting our guts, laughing.

I watched Brendan's muscular hands
try to shift, missing gears, try to steer around potholes,
not quite evading most of them.

I studied his face, mentally tracing
bone structure a model would kill for, high cheekbones perfect white teeth
all sheathed in Mediterranean—
flavored skin, iced mocha,
begging to be sipped, so I did.

I swear, every guy you kiss is

so different. Each has a unique
essence, each a significant style.

307

Brendan was eau de lavender, vanilla,
Heineken, Crest and top-notch speed.

His style was

"No is not an acceptable

answer."

He was Bree, with a penis.

308

S

aturday Night

postmidnight, 30-some hours till

back to the books, the party had

hit high

gear. Pot smoke hung, a skunky

green curtain, but I didn't want to fall low so I indulged in another big snort before inhaling a couple of tiny tokes, mostly to satisfy the incredible urge to pollute my lungs. I topped that off with a Marlboro, landing on just about the perfect plane, just about the place I wanted to be. Not too speedy, not even close to straight falling into the yo-yo rhythm of crank, pot, beer, tobacco, the sensational motion and emotion, up and down, Brendan hanging tight, though I suspected he might desert me, take off on a flirting binge. And, oh, god,

309

the jealous stares of girls I had envied

not long before, girls suddenly, strangely on fire to know me, though they had never once in the past returned my smile. And now, instead of Kristina, they got to know Bree.

310

Brendan Stoked the Fire

Let's take a walk.

I was game to play the game. We wandered
off, found a soft sitting
spot in a patch of crispy brown wild wheat.

Come here, Bree.

As he pulled me onto his lap, I wondered if
I should confess my double identity.
Instead, I let him kiss me. Hard. Hot.

Oh, man. I'm hot.

He shed his shirt and the moon revealed
perfect, tanned muscles. He started to unbutton mine, silencing my protest.

Shhh. Don't say

no.

"I can't. I mean, I never..." Crank-enhanced
goosebumps lifted as he moved his hands gently across my skin. "Stop."

You know you wa

nt to.

"I do, Brendan, I really do. But I can't.

It's the wrong time of the month."

I'd decked him. He slapped back.

Then, why

did you call?

311

I let Bree answer. "Not to get laid, incredible as you are. Is that all you think I'm about? What if I told you I'm a virgin?"

I'd call you

a liar.

Bree wanted to joust, but Kristina thought about a long walk home and put Bree back into her box. I looked him in the eye. "No lie."

312

P

aydirt!

The "v" thing. Is it every guy's dream to take something so tenuous and make it totally, solidly his? But Brendan softened immediately, offered to forgive me if only I

promised to let him be first. I wasn't sure

what I needed forgiveness for but I said

okay, then proceeded to thank

him as only Bree--and the monster--could.

313

H

air Mussed

clothes cockeyed, makeup smeared,

I would have looked
fairly suspicious if I
had walked through the door that night.

But I didn't have to and never once
pondered getting
caught as I stood

tiptoe on the first-floor window trim, stretching to catch the ledge and crawl
back inside my window.

House dark, no sound but Jake's snoring through the wall, I laid in bed, watching
a ghost dance on the ceiling, nose sucking

314

up sweat, tobacco, and eau de Brendan, wondering what Adam was up to until
the sun poked through the curtains, less than an hour later.

315

High

For two days, too much crank, no sleep, liquid diet. The first
day of school was a nightmare.

Good thing I wasn't a freshman.

I'd have gotten lost, somewhere between gym and the chem lab.

(Almost did, in fact.) I collected

handouts; tried to follow list upon

list of curricular expectations; tried, failing miserably, to conquer

new locker combinations; avoided

eye contact with teachers, staff, and

most definitely school police; ducked Sarah and Trent so I didn't

have to listen to their chitchat; spent lunch far from anything close

316

to food, even though I trembled from near starvation. All the while

feeling like my head would burst from thinking so damn much when

all my brain wanted to do was close down and fall deep into REM

sleep. I considered climbing under the bleachers, letting it do just that before I did something really dumb like passing out, but just about then the final bell rang.

317

D

ay One

blessedly behind me,

I rode the belching bus

home

wondering how I would

possibly make it to school the next day. Craved down time when I had to gear up, sustenance though I might throw it up, silence when I knew my family

would be waiting to share

news of the day. The very

monotony

I had lately disdained

cried out to me:

I am

essential

without me you will

wither, like this

summer

folding up into fall;
freeze hard, water in

318

winter

awaiting the first breath
of
spring; uproot, grass in
a
wind

blown into tornado;

parch, like earth denied

rain.

319

M

om's Car Wasn't in the Driveway

I thanked my, for once, lucky stars, went

inside, ignoring

Jake completely.

Scoped out the fridge, grabbed a handful of red grapes so sweet

you could never

even fantasize them.

Downed them like candy, went back for more, chased them with fudge

swirl Haagan-Dazs.

No homework, I
went into my
room, fell straight into bed and the sleep of the dead.

320

Mom must have

thought me dead, when she found
me hours later, tried desperately to shake me from the devil's deep slumber
embrace, shouted for
Jake to bring icewater, threw it in my face

321

Which

Roused Me

riled me, made me
want to scream.

Instead

I made a major--in

retrospect, not the best--

decision.

I creaked to sitting, thought

twice, but when she insisted

I drag my

rubbery

bones to the dinner table,

322

I looked her in the eye and for the first time in my life, told my mother,

"Fuck you."

323

M

ajor Mistake

Her eyes popped wide, her jaw

dropped like concrete. She reached

out and shook me.

What did you say?

Even caught up in confusion,
I knew better than to repeat myself.
I shook my head.

Tell me again.

Okay, she was testing me.
I flunked completely.
"I said, fuck you."

That's what I thought you said.

Mom's turn for firsts.
She slapped me so hard my teeth
rattled and snot flew.

Don't ever say that to me again.

I dissolved into exhausted
tears, wondering why I'd done it.

Mom broke down too.

Kristina, what's going on with
you?

324

I couldn't tell her the truth.

What kind of lie might do? I started with a genuine, "I'm sorry."

Oh, God, I'm sorry
too.

She sat down beside me on the bed, put her arms around me, hugged tight.

You're not in trouble,
are you?

Trouble? All sorts of trouble, oh, yes. But not the kind she was worried about.
"No, Mom."

These new friends... are they... okay?

Why couldn't she just say
what she meant, ask if they'd led
me down the path to hell.

You've got so much
promise....

Then again, if she did, would I
own up? Confess that I had taken the lead on this perilous journey?

Please don't throw it all away.

325

My mind churned love. Mom loved
me. Adam loved me. I suspected
Chase might love me,

I love you, Kristina Georgia.

(I was pretty sure Brendan
only loved the big "v.")

Who loved me more?

Who loved me most?

Now, please come down to
dinner.

326

I

Did

I sat at the table, brain blank, head
spinning, something
that sounded

suspiciously liquidy

whooshing between my ears, trying not to look like the space cadet I felt like, struggling to form coherent

sentences around megabites of chicken and corn bread, waiting for the ax to clobber me. But Mom never

said a word about the reason

327

for the red marks across my cheek, and not

only didn't punish

me, but let me off

GUFN.

Forgiveness

granted, I made some

decisions: appreciate

family, focus on school and hunt for Kristina.

328

I

Mostly Managed That

for the next week.

Hit a reasonable

educational stride, settled into the rhythm of classrooms, quizzes, study halls, homework.

Hung out with

Sarah and Trent, swapped summer

vacation stories

(majorly editing mine), tried out for honor choir and actually made it, despite a voice gone raspy from excess and mushrooming allergies.

Did my best to absorb the energy of family, meals, Sunday church, and a Labor Day camp out.

And I managed all that, barely thinking

329

about the monster or wondering what

Chase or Brendan or Adam

might be up to.

Until in one fateful day

Adam wrote, Brendan called, and Chase showed up to drive me home after school.

330

B

ackpack Bulging

I climbed into Chase's truck, slid close. "Where ya been?"

We moved to Sparks. I had to transfer.

Solid explanation. Still,

"Why didn't you call?"

I

did. You were grounded. Remember?

That excuse was shakier.

"Not for the last two weeks."

I

wanted to give you some space.

Pregnant pause, giving
himself some space.

Kristina,

I know I'm not exactly your type.

I looked him in the eye.

"I don't think I have a 'type.'"

I

thought it might be the lifeguard type.

Reno wasn't the "biggest
little city." It was a small-town gossip mill.

Not that w

e have an exclusive thing, I know.

My cheeks burned. "No, we
don't. But I really like you."

I
needed to
hear that. I like you, too. A lot.

331

"I went out with Brendan because I was flattered."

I dared to confess, "I never
had a boyfriend until last summer."

That's hard to believe, Kristina.

Taking that totally wrong,

I huffed, "Why?

Because I'm such a slut?"

No. Because you're so beautiful.

Tell me about last summer.

By the time I finished, I still
loved Adam. But I was falling for Chase.

332

So

Why

was I so hot to return the phone message, waiting for me to come home?

Brendan:

Give me a call. I want
to see you again. This time

I'll bring the refreshments.

"Refreshments?"

I'd perched on my

pedestal for a whole week.

How fast could I make it down?

333

As

I Considered My Answer

I noticed Adam's letter, sitting on the counter.

Dear Kristina,

How's school? I hope I can make it through this year. It's really tough, what with worrying about Mom, Ralph (can you believe she'd like a guy named Ralph?), and Lince. She's talking better now, and can get herself to the bathroom. I guess that's good.

I saw your dad the other day. It was kind of strange because he never even mentioned you. Of course, he was with a new woman. (Not bad, considering she's with your dad. Ha, ha.) Maybe he doesn't want her to think he's old enough

to have a daughter your age.

Are you going out with anyone special? Half of me hopes so. The other half wants you to always be mine. There's a pretty cute girl at school, Giselle, giving me the eye. She looks a little like you, in fact. I think I might ask her out.

334

Maybe you didn't want to hear that. But you're my very best friend, the only one in the whole world I could tell that to. I want to hear everything about you, too. Kind of weird, huh?

So do you have a boyfriend? Is he a jock or what? (Wink, wink.) How safe are these letters, anyway? Does your mom read them? I wonder if Giselle parties. Doesn't everyone? Okay, maybe not.

Write soon. Love, Adam

335

Giselle?

He liked some girl named Giselle?

Did she speak French (or just give it)?

Maybe

I didn't want to hear that?

Why did I read his letter anyway?

And what was up with Dad?

Why hadn't he called?

Was he a Daddy Judas?

Had he sold me out?

Should I call Brendan?

Set myself up?

Would I truly let him be first?

Was I ready to lose the big v?

Should I call Chase instead?

Ask him to score for me?

Would he do it if I asked?

Walk a slender wire for me?

336

Did I want to risk honor-roll status?

Chance further alienating my mom?

Had I lost my mind completely?

Did I really want to get high?

337

You

Bet I Did

The monster

shouted,

Where have you been, my

sweet Bree? Hurry back to me.

My blood pressure bloomed, my head
pounded.

Need rose up, pumping violently through my veins. All I could think of, as I
reached for the phone on my

nightstand, were fat ivory lines, waiting to whisk me to a netherworld, far
beyond my door.

Chase was "busy" Friday night. So I
did a really intelligent thing.

Called Brendan for a date and asked

him to make a buy. "Can you get me an eight ball?" I figured an eighth of an
ounce would last awhile. It cost me

338

\$250, which I was saving to buy my

first car. But hey, I probably

wouldn't have my license

for

years. Illicit fun settled upon, I put on my most innocent face and went to gift my
family with half-hearted company.

339

I

Could Hardly Wait for Friday

Though the voice of my virginity nagged, the lure of the monster was stronger.

Besides, I could always say "no."

Couldn't I?

Pretending to be the perfect gentleman,

Brendan arrived at my door, introduced himself politely.

We told my mom and Scott we were going to dinner and a drive-in double feature.

But food and movies were the last

things on our minds.

Not that we necessarily had the same

things on our minds. As we drove up the mountain, his hand crept up my leg.

I let it do exactly that as I watched for a safe spot to pull over. We drove back off the highway, deep into a grove of fresh-scented evergreens.

Carried a blanket back into the trees.

340

He pulled out a bindle, which looked a bit short, and a six-pack of beer. For the next twenty minutes, we snorted and drank, climbing to a very tall buzz.

We talked and joked and giggled.

And it all seemed just like it should.

Until it didn't anymore.

341

It

Started with a Kiss

Crank-revved, pistons firing full bore, passion firecracked in tiny bursts from thigh to belly button.

Oh, baby.

I want you so bad!

"B-b-bad to the bone?" We laughed, but it wasn't a joke. Not for long.

My shirt tore open. "Wait."

I've waited for weeks.

Put up and shut up.

Kisses segued to bites. Bruises.

Pain rippled through my body.

"Brendan, please stop."

No. You promised,

You damn little tease.

Off came my shorts. Down went his zipper. I realized I was in serious trouble.
"I'll scream."

Go ahead. No one can hear

but skunks and coyotes.

Still, as I opened my mouth, his hand slapped down over it. Those sublime muscles hardened.

342

Just relax.

You'll love it.

My brand-new Victoria's Secrets
shredded, and I felt the worst of
Brendan pause, savoring my terror.

They all love it.

Had he done it a different way, I
might have responded with excitement.
Instead, I froze as he pushed inside.

There it is.

Oh, God. There it

goes.

It went, all right, with an audible
tear. Pain mushroomed into agony and all I could do was go stiff.

You weren't lying,
you bitch!

I laid there, sobbing, as he worked and sweated over me. Stoked by the monster,
it took him a long time to finish.

Give me a line,

I'll give you an encore.

343

He pulled away, sticky and bloody.

Throbbing inside and out, I didn't move, didn't dare look him in the eye.

What the hell

is the matter, Bree?

I stared up at the clouds, gathering into gloom, shrouding the moon.

"My name is Kristina."

344

B

ut It Was Bree

who got me on my feet

helped me to the car

put me on the seat

kept me semiupright on the long ride home

Bree, who staunched the blood

straightened up my clothes

unsmearred the makeup

brushed my hair smooth

willed strength against the aching

claiming body and soul

Bree, who understood

that, wasted on crank, there was nothing I could do but plot future revenge.

345

Not

a Blink of Remorse

Brendan didn't say a word

most of the way home. He

drove slowly, just under the limit. I watched him, out of the corner of my eye.

He didn't look so perfect

anymore. His nose had a bump and his eyebrows

almost joined. And, of course,

I knew what he was made of.

Finally, he found a few words-- his thank you for the gift he had stolen, the one I should have given and never could again. I will remember them forever:

If I'd have known

you'd just lay there,

I wouldn't have bothered.

346

Have You Ever

had so much to say

that your mouth closed up tight, struggling to harness the nuclear force
coalescing within your words?

Have you ever

had so many thoughts

churning inside that you didn't

dare let them escape, in case they blew you wide open?

Have you ever been so angry that you

couldn't look in the mirror for fear of finding the face of evil glaring back at you?

I stared at Brendan, trying to find some words--

any words--to express the terror of those minutes, the horror of his violation, the humiliation at his benediction.

347

But my mouth closed up tight around the nuclear force building inside, thought after thought churning, the evil in my core threatening to eviscerate me.

Would you think it a mercy killing?

348

Br

endan Pulled Up

at the foot of my driveway, didn't so much as glance my way until I opened the door and creaked to the curb.

Then he turned and tossed the dwindled bindle at my feet.

You owe me \$250.

Would you believe

I paid up?

349

I

Stumbled up the Driveway

wanting desperately to shed the lingering traces of eau de Brendan.

Even messed up, I realized

I couldn't very well go inside and straight into the shower.

Someone might wonder.

So I aimed for the hot tub, threw back the cover, almost gagged on eau de chlorine.

But I didn't care.

Steamy water bubbled around me, over me, jetted inside me.

The monster laughed out loud.

Cleansed, chlorinated to the point of chemical

peel, sore muscles relieved,

350

I felt almost human again.

Tiptoe to my room, up a darkened hall, past closed doors,

I wondered if I'd ever feel completely human again.

351

Exhausted

but too buzzed to sleep,

I pulled out some stationary:

Dearest Adam,

Always great to hear from you. You're a regular well of information. Why isn't any of it ever good?

If you happen to see my dad again, tell him not to bother keeping in touch. He's a shit and I hope his new girlfriend gives him herpes. Or worse.

How's it going with Giselle? (Were her parents on something when they named her?) I'm sure she gets high if you're attracted to her. Have you two done the dirty yet?

352

As for me, I've got two boyfriends. One is too busy to keep me out of trouble. The other just raped in I think it was rape, anyway. Can you define the word for me? Oops. I think I'm sounding bitter.

Better close now. I need to cry. (Maybe you didn't want to hear that.)

Love you, too,

K... Bree

353

It

Was Mean

So mean, it made me feel
better but not quite good
enough

I could only think of one
way to make things all
better

okay, so maybe it wasn't
truly the best way to climb
above

my mounting state of depression but it definitely did the trick in fact, I had to
laugh, it was so simple. I just

had to open the bindle

calling

me on behalf of the monster

354

Clo

se to Empty

We had tooted a lot, but not an eight ball.

I began to suspect

Brendan had pilfered a bit.

Brendan a thief?

Almost unbelievable!

Conservation was the key to seeing me through until morning when I could give Chase a call.

Conservation, in fact, might be the solution.

The solution to staying high and still maintaining my way through class work, homework, and family dinners.

I knew I couldn't

manage it straight.

355

Couldn't manage not to sink into a swamp of self-pity, quicksand for a fractured psyche.

Kristina crumbled.

I called for Bree.

B

rain Waves

ping-ponging inside my skull, no hope of sleep or easy egress to a plane where
memory

could not intrude, I bent my

head, submitting to shame.

Why had I gone? What

had I done? Who would

want me now? How could I

deny the state of my being or my

part in its disintegration? No

way to elude the bitter bite of blame

I tried to lay the night's

events on anyone but myself.

Couldn't. I had tried to play

Brendan, and he had turned the tables. He was a grand master player. I was new
to the game.

357

The
Game Replayed

over and over all night long, like a cable TV horror flick.

I laid in bed, memorizing
every scene, every line, every plot twist.

Finally sunshine
trickled through the blinds.

Dust danced in its beams.

The house filled with the everyday.

Footsteps.

Voices.

Coffee. Perfume.

Nothing new.

Nothing unusual.

Nothing, except me.

whiffed a line of willpower.

358

Got up, got dressed in ratty clothes.

Hair unbrushed, ditto teeth,

I went into the kitchen, poured

hot black brew and lied about my date.

359

A

nswer Before They Ask

Great strategy. Mom didn't even snarl

when I said I was too tired to go to Jake's soccer game.

Once I saw her tailpipe, I called Chase.

Thirty minutes later, he chugged up the driveway. One look, he knew.

What's the matter, Kristina?

"Too much fun last night. Come inside."

My mom might have accepted the lie.

Chase knew better.

You're buzzed. But there's more.

So much for deceit, for accepting blame.

So much for never telling a soul.

I broke down like rotting rafters.

Tell me what happened.

I told him everything, start to finish, in minute detail. He gathered me up, glued me back together.

That bastard. I'll kill him.

360

I shook my head, tossing tears and thin streams of snot. "It was all my fault."

Chase grabbed my shoulders.

No! Brendan knew what he
was doing.

He pulled me so close it hurt, laid his head against my heaving chest.
Then hard-ass Chase Wagner cried.

Oh, God, I'm sorry, Kristina.

I should have been there for
you.

361

Stunned

I kissed his forehead, licked away his tears.

He looked up and his eyes told min

I love you, Kristina.

Eyes couldn't lie.

Could they?

With sudden clarity,

I knew,

"I love you, too."

Don't say it

unless you mean it.

Did I mean it?

Brendan was no more than a nightmare.

But, Giselle or no Giselle, what about Adam?

You could snap

my heart in two.

362

I thought of the letter in my room, the one
that had poured from me
only hours before.

If I mailed it...

It's bending me.

I shifted and the throb in my thighs
reminded me of the "new" me.

"But what about..."

Come on.

I'm not exactly chaste.

Chaste Chase?

A monster-fed

giggle tried to slip out.

I relegated it to a tooth-baring grin.

You're so beautiful

when you smile.

363

He kissed me then, so sweetly, I truly
felt beautiful, despite the ugliness
that would always remain.

No one can take you
from you, Kristina.

Tears slipped from my eyes.
Chase absorbed
every one, sponging up regret.

I promise never,
never to hurt you.

I wanted him to prove it.

Needed him to prove it.

"Make love to me."

I could feel he wanted to.

I want to.

You know I do.

But not today.

364

R

elief, Disappointment

A flash flood of love and a surge of need so deep it went way beyond the monster.

"Please, Chase? I have to know what it's like when two people really want to."

And you will. I will take you to heights you can't imagine.

But not until you've healed.

I didn't understand. Go ahead. Call me dense. "It's only a few bruises, Chase."

I meant not until you're free from dreams of yesterday.

When we make love, the only

people there should be you and me.

He was right. Adam lingered on my nightstand. Brendan would haunt me, a shadow, for days.

When you've vanquished your ghosts,

I'll be here. Besides, sweetheart,
anticipation is half the fun.

365

I could only hope the other half
might one day be as wonderful.

With Chase, it seemed possible.

Meanwhile, I'd better go before

your parents get back. Want to
go outside for a smoke?

Soft drifts of nicotine filled my
lungs, soothing one hunger.
Chase held me close.

Funny thing, Kristina. Before you
,

I believed love was making love.

Waiting only makes me

love you more.

P

Powerful Words

Strong

enough to latch on to me, bear the weight and lift me, induce buoyancy, float me in a brilliant, blue sky above the reach of personal demons.

So peaceful, in the canopy, beyond distress and self-incrimination. I wanted to stay there forever.

Impossible of course. Chase drove away and almost immediately, fantasy dissolved, like sugar stirred into saltwater, as the real world

clamped down around me, slammed me back down to Earth.

367

I

Tried to Beat Mom Inside

but she was right on my heels as I went through the door.

Who is that boy who just left?

Busted. I had to tell her something, so I said, "A friend."

What kind of friend?

"My best friend," I wanted to say.

"My only friend." I just stared.

I asked you a question.

Okay. I'd tell her what she didn't
want to hear. "Chase is my boyfriend."

Boyfriend? He's hardly your type.

Anger bubbled. I gritted my teeth.

"I don't have a type, Mother."

Well, at least someone good-looking.

Like Chase wasn't, she meant.

And, "You mean like Brendan."

Exactly. What happened to Brendan?

I was prepared. "We didn't really hit it off." Understated, huh?

But he was so nice, so polite.

368

I tried to bite my tongue. Didn't work.

"He wasn't so nice, Mom."

What do you mean?

"He was..." I paused, "all over me."

She looked at me without sympathy.

Why didn't you tell
me before?

I took dead aim. "I didn't think
you'd care. Apparently, I was right."

369

Leveled

Have you ever actually felt one up on your mom? What an exhilarating feeling.

She stuttered, coughed, couldn't say a word because somewhere inside she knew she was wrong.

So I pushed even harder. "You always told
me not to judge a book by its cover.

Practice what you preach, Mom."

Two clichés don't exactly make for deep
conversation, but I didn't expect
that (or want it) anyway.

I started for my inner sanctum. Paused.

"I mean look at you and me. On the surface, we both seem so normal!"

Her face contorted, emphasizing every wrinkle.

"Take a peek inside our family album.

Like what's in there?"

370

Do you think that was mean? I guess, but it felt so great, it made me grin.

Sort of sick, or what?

371

Light-Headed

Giddy from my absolute bluster

(not to mention lack of food and a big dose of nicotine), I skipped up the hall,
singing

a Queen

song about paying

dues and doing time, no

crime committed. Oh, that

Freddie Mercury. What a waste!

That guy was really something--a rebel and worse.

In a day when it was supposed to be okay to experiment that way. No condoms, just good gay fun. We

know better now.

372

As I thought about that, I had to wonder: What will we know better about tomorrow?

Who cares? Hindsight is useless.

Even looking back now, things seem a bit muddled.

373

N

orthern Nevada Autumns

are filled with weeds.

Toxic, high-allergen garden killers.

Tumbleweed.

Rabbitbrush.

Russian white top.

Guess how I spent that Sunday.

Wound up on Claritin

enhanced crank, it wasn't so bad.

Yank. Think.

Tug. Consider.

I would put Adam's letter in the mail.

Water. Soak in.

Watch Mom and Scott

drive away.

Bribe Jake to help.

I would never tell another soul about Brendan.

Direct Jake to dump the wheelbarrow.

Yank. Think.

Tug. Consider.

374

I would make love with Chase very soon.

Start to come down.

Disappear for a toot.

Notice my stash was two

snorts away from gone.

I would make a cash withdrawal the next day.

Help Jake finish up.

Send him to 7-Eleven for Cokes and chips.

I would call Chase while he was gone.

375

No

Answer

No sweat.

Okay, maybe a little sweat.

If I couldn't

get crank from Chase

who could

I get it from?

I thought.

And thought.

And finally, one person

came to mind.

I got on my bike, pedaled over to

Trent's, hoping

Robyn was home and in the mood

376

to share some

information. Vital

information

to a person

desperate for a new connection.

377

T

iming Is Everything

Mine was impeccable that day.

Robyn answered the door, quite noticeably strung.

Oh, hi. Trent's not home.

He went into town with Mom.

"Cool. I wanted to see you.

Can I come in?"

I eased through the door.

I don't know... um.

..

the house is a mess.

..

It was neat as a pin.

But it did smell like crank.

I suspected Trent wouldn't

be home anytime soon.

What's up, Kristina?

Can't it wait till tomorrow?

"Relax. I'm not a narc." I

reached into my pocket for the semimutilated bindle. Robyn's pupils went all the way black.

I

thought you'd lost some weight.

It's better than the Atkins di

et, huh?

378

"It's a helluva lot more fun!"

We laughed and I offered to share the last of my stash. "Have a mirror?"

Don't tell me you're still snorting.

Have you ever tried smoking it?

She was the first to even suggest it.

Robyn the Reno High cheerleader
proceeded to show me a whole new
way to get down with the monster.

379

We

Went into Her Room

Locked the door. Sat on the bed.

Robyn produced a V of crusty foil, tapped in the last crumbs of powder.

This little bit will go right to your

brain and won't clog your sinuses.

Won't stay there, draining, little by little. Oh, no. You blow straight through the roof in one giant puff of smoke.

I

t's an awesome rush. And you won't

stay awake for days.

She handed me the stub of a Slurpee

straw and showed me how to hold it just above one end of the V.

When it starts to smoke, suck fast

.

Hold it in as long as you can.

Robyn held a match just below the yellow powder. It browned, bubbled, smoked. A waft traveled up the V.

Here it comes. Don't let it get a
way.

Oh, God, that smells good!

It tasted nasty. But it took me higher than ever before. The monster pirouetted in
my brain.

380

My turn. Don't hold the match too

close to the foil. Crank can burn.

In seconds, Robyn was flying. Instant
bonding. She didn't even blink when
I asked if she could score.

You've

got the money, I can get the crank.

For a small finder's fee, of course.

I expected no less. We planned to meet up the next day. I went home, feeling better than I had in a long, long time.

381

S

he Forgot to Mention

a couple of rather important things:

Like how, if you exercised

(riding my bike, for instance), your lungs fought to hold air.

I huffed and puffed

all the way home.

Like how, when you came down

(I had to eventually), your head screamed with pain and your body broke out in panicky sweat.

Like how your little brother's teasing

(irritating at the best of times), would set you way off, make you jump off the deep end.

382

Like how parental concern

(inquiring minds wanted to know), might suffocate you, might confuse you, might make you yell,

"Just leave me the fuck alone!"

383

T

his Time

it was Scott who asked for the heart-to-heart. It was a rather one-sided conversation.

May I come in, Kristina?

Can we talk?

He hated confrontation. I
could play the game two ways.
In-your-face. Or contrite.

What's going on? Your mom and I
are worried about you.

I chose contrition. And feigned
ignorance. "What do you mean?"
He came right to the point.

It's like you've become a whole
different person lately.

Not all of me. Just the Bree part.
Not all the time.

Just with the monster.

Did something happen
at your dad's?

Like he wanted to hear about Dad.

Like he really wanted to know he and Mom were 100% right on.

384

Don't take this wrong, okay?

You aren't doing drugs, are you?

What was I supposed to do--
admit it? I shook my head in hearty denial.

I
know adolescence is a time
for experimentation...

Oh, yes, he knew. And my mom did
too. Dad told me all about how they

used to get high together.

but I hope you'll think twice before
you do. You've got a lot to lose.

I bit my lip, filled my eyes with innocence, let it encourage tears.

"I know, Scott. I promise to think twice."

385

He

Talked at Me Awhile Longer

I smiled, nodded, apologized for my foul temper and angry words, protested
when it seemed I ought to and somehow managed to avoid GUFN.

When he left, I patted myself on the back for a game well played, snatched open
the door and tiptoed down the hall to eavesdrop on the kitchen conversation.

Mom and Scott believed
they'd bitten the bullet.
Little did they know
I hadn't yet fired off the full
round.

386

T

he Next Few Days

went by in a smoky, crank-scented haze.

Robyn came through, big time. Her eight ball

looked closer to the real

deal, so I was generous with her finder's fee.

We got to be good friends.

I would toot a line before school, hook up with Robyn at lunch, hop into her car
for a taste of tinfoil and tobacco chaser.

stumble into classes

talkative and glassy-eyed.

And just to make things
interesting, I took up part-time residence on The Avenue.

387

Other schools have them too.

You know, designated

smoking areas for kids who aren't supposed to smoke.

My new friends and I were far enough gone not to care that teachers cruised by us Avenue bums, researching potential troublemakers.

Hedging my bets, I did insist on one thing: out there on The Avenue, everyone called me Bree.

388

I

Gave Up the Bus

in favor of rides with Robyn, with a detour or two along the way to indulge in some Homework Helper.

(Like it really helped!)

A couple of afternoons she had cheerleading practice.

(How could she do back flips and cartwheels without killing herself?)

Those days, Chase came by to take me home and stop by the park for a good long make-out session.

I invited him to share my stash.

He took a snort or two, but declined the tinfoil routine.

389

I let him get away with it the first time.

On his second refusal,

I asked why not.

He shrugged.

I've set boundaries.

390

I Meant

to analyze

Chase's limits

that very weekend, to learn

just how far

I could stretch

him at the edges, to judge

how wide

I might warp his self-imposed

morality.

Don't ask me

why I felt the incredible need to test

this person that

meant so very

much to me, to fathom his most

personal thoughts, coolly dissect his psyche.

391

I only know it was on the table for that Saturday until fate intervened.

392

O

kay, the Air Races Intervened

September is Air Race month in Northern Nevada--four fabulous days of warbirds, jets, and homebuilt aircraft, racing wingtip to wingtip, balls out, around pylons.

It's a must-see event, and we'd made it a family event every single year since Jake was a tiny baby, snoozing soundly in his stroller, despite ear-splitting military flybys.

We always went on weekends and I always begged for more, so it would have looked pretty damn suspicious to say I didn't

want to go. Besides, I did want to go. I just wanted to go high.

393

So when Mom reminded us at dinner that we'd have to get up early and dress in layers, I cleared my throat as if to protest.

Instead I asked if I could invite

My friend Robyn to come along.

Again, I'd made the perfect

preemptory strike. Mom was so happy I would participate without incident that she not only gave her blessing, but let me ride in Robyn's car.

394

Robyn Was Game

Scott's company had box seats and plenty of tickets. Robyn got comp tix, with a can't-beat view.

But that was only for starters.

You bet I'll go. Those flyboys
are soooooo cute!

You can guess what we did on the drive north of town. We arrived, diamond-eyed, behind dark sunglasses.

Aviator glasses. Ha! Hope those

pilots aren't as wired as I am.

I hoped so, too. We sauntered down the flight line in tight jeans and tiny tank tops, turning

more than a few heads.

You'd think they'd never seen girls

before. Maybe they think we're lezes.

You thought I was a vamp!

I couldn't come close to

Robyn. Even Bree had to work hard to keep up.

395

Wanna give 'em a show?

Have you ever kissed a girl?

The only girls I'd ever kissed were relatives, and only lip-to-cheek.

Lip locking another female? Never!

And in public? No way!

Come on. It's just for fun. Promise

not to slip you the tongue.

OMG. If I hadn't been so wound, I would have died on the spot.

Instead, I jumped right into

Robyn's shameless game.

396

Wolf

Whistles

made me pull away, completely red-faced, but LMAO.

(You do know what that means, right?)

Okay, my a-double-s was still

attached, but I couldn't

quit laughing.

(In retrospect, it wasn't

that
funny.)

At the time, it seemed like the funniest thing
I'd ever done.

(What's the funniest thing you've ever done?)

Don't get me wrong.

I'm completely hetero, and that experience proved it to me.

397

(I decided that later, when I had much too much time on my hands to think about such things.)

But seeing the look on people's faces--some
horrified, some fascinated--
made my day.

(How would you look, seeing two
pretty teenaged girls making out, right there on the tarmac?)

398

We

Found Our Box

took seats behind Mom, Scott,

Jake, and a couple of guys Scott

worked with. Robyn nudged me as Mom leaned over, showing off cleavage to the cute young blond.

He took a good, long look, then

whispered something no doubt funny and off-color into Mom's ear. She giggled and flirted and carried on like Scott wasn't even there.

Worse yet, Scott pretended not to notice. Or maybe, tied up in conversation about the latest microchip technology stocks, he in fact didn't notice. He turned the tables nicely when his boss and Mrs. Boss (in a very short skirt) joined the lineup. My parents

set an extremely poor example for us impressionable (ha ha) kids.

399

Good thing Jake wasn't sitting behind them. Clueless, he ooh

ed at every aerial maneuver. Robyn and I observed the whole show

(including the terrestrial maneuvers in our box) with pure enjoyment. It's always great to watch the world's

best pilots fly, and better yet to see

adults behave like juvenile delinquents.

400

Th

ree Races

and two stunt performances

later, Robyn and I excused

ourselves for a trip to the outhouse. We hustled off to the car to "powder our noses," then hurried to pee before we were missed.

As we headed back to our seats, a familiar form came striding in our direction. Brendan.

Attached, as if sewn on, was a girl, not more than 14, with a fashion doll body and child actress face.

Her shorts, cut high on the thigh and low on the hips, revealed a stud in her navel. I thought about turning around or ducking into the swirling crowd but without warning, Bree took over. "Hey, Brendan!

401

Great to see you again," she gushed.

"Raped any schoolgirls lately?"

He maintained his frosty cool as he leveled his eyes.

Can't rape the willing.

"That's what I've heard." I turned to his sidekick.

"How about you? Are you willing?"

Still locked to Brendan, she quite obviously

deflated, and her face paled beneath an overdose of cover-up and cheap blush.

"Well, have fun you two. Don't do anything

I wouldn't do." I started away, calling over my shoulder, "Watch your back, Barbie doll."

402

Robyn Wanted the Whole Story

I told her, then she shared her own sordid tale:

I

started crankin' to keep up with schoolwork

around gymnastics, cheerleading, student

council, and other extracurricular crap.

You'd be surprised how many brownnosers

get high, and with so much around, I thought it would always be easy to score. Sometimes it goes dry.

During one particular drought spell, I was hurtin'
for certain, and went looking for a new source.

Found him in a casino arcade, cruising for fresh meat.

He flashed a bindle and I followed him out to his car.

I still can't believe I was stupid enough to get inside.

He drove east of town, all the way out in the desert past Mustang.

After a couple of snorts, he was all hands, all over me.

When I told him to stop, he said, "It's a long walk back, even if you don't get lost. Anyway, we both know what kind of a girl you are."

403

That stung, but not much. All I could do was ask for more

crank so maybe I could halfway enjoy it. I didn't. He was dirty.

Smelly, like he hadn't showered in days.

And after he started, he got mean.

He did things to me

--

terrible things, I've still got the
scars--

things no sane person would ever do. Of course, he wasn't exactly sane.

Afterward, neither was I.

404

N

ow, You Might Think

an experience like that

would serve as a stern

warning, make a person

do a quick about-face and sprint in the other direction.

Didn't happen like that for Robyn.

Didn't happen like that for me.

405

Before I Met the Monster

Life had a certain

rhythm.

An easy

downhill

flow.

Seconds, minutes, hours, days, a segue of perpetual motion.

Everything in its proper
place, at its proper
time.

Morning alarms, kitchen clatter, bus gears, school bells, teacher talk.

Locker clang, hallway

laughter, slamming

doors.

After-school

queries,

406

homework, music,

TV.

Contentment

thrived in repetition, routine, familiarity.

407

B

ut

Now

Nothing

felt

right

nothing

seemed

proper

but

getting

out, getting

away, getting

crazy, getting

high.

408

P

roblem Number One: School

Getting up in the morning, was it only moments after finally falling into a state of semisleep?

Finding clean clothes

(I was supposed to put my dirties in the laundry room, but who could remember?)

Sucking down coffee, nibbling a half cup of honey-sweetened corn flakes for a slight rush of caffeine and carbs.

Catching a ride with Robyn or one of my Avenue buds, coaxing myself mostly awake with a whiff of white.

Twenty minutes on the Avenue before the bell rang, tempering my morning buzz with nicotine.

Stumbling into homeroom, most likely tardy, hoping Mrs. Twedt wouldn't notice and reward me with detention.

409

Making some classes, cutting others, deciding which would be which by which was which the day before.

And somehow I managed to convince myself life with the monster was not routine.

410

P

Problem Number Two: Relationships

Old friendships, tucked away like treasures, relegated to tokens of yesterday.

New friendships, faulty ground to cultivate and build a future upon.

Old boyfriends, a very short list, abbreviated further by definition and distance.

New boyfriends, one definite but distracted, and no shortage of Avenue wannabes.

Siblings, one too close and curious, the other much too far away to serve as confidant.

Parents, ever-present shade, dimming

my sparkle, kryptonite to quell my bid for superpower.

411

Teachers, counselors, preachers, scaffolding, crumbled by the weight of my monster.

412

P

Problem Number Three: Connections

How to get high and stay that way?

(Coming down was a bitch and a half.)

Finding crank

wasn't really difficult.

Most of my new crowd knew

someone who dealt

(or knew someone who knew someone who did).

Getting what you paid for proved more problematic, unless you went straight to the source.

Even then, things were iffy.

(Stoners aren't the most reliable people.

Even they would have to agree.)

Fronting years of hoarded

allowances and birthday gifts

sometimes resulted

413

in disappointing returns.

And my bank account was dwindling fast.

414

Problem Number Four:

Feeling Good

The biggest problem of all.

You know how riding real fast in a car or a spectacular takeoff in a jet gives you an awesome rush of adrenaline?

You know how spotting an eagle

cruising low over the treetops, it watching a baby finally master the try-try-again of walking makes you glow all over?

You know how singing a beautiful song with dead-on pitch, or getting every test

answer right, including the extra credit brainteaser, makes you feel like you could take on the world?

415

You know how waking up to perfect skies, enough sunshine to warm you, not enough to bake you, watching a silent fall of quarter-sized snowflakes

gives you delicious shivers of pleasure?

Somewhere on my stroll with the monster,

I'd lost these things.

416

F

eeling Good

became a matter of scale.

One to ten,

"ten" being one step shy of shredding the time-space continuum,

"one" being ten steps shy of dropping flat in my tracks.

Every increment

required meth or more meth.

I didn't have to go all the way up, but up, I did need to go.

After a while, even high,

I could almost

make believe food

didn't taste like cardboard,

417

almost float down into REM sleep,

almost function the next day,

almost look forward to my

almost 17th birthday.

418

I

Would Celebrate Several Ways

One with my family. My mid-October

birthday always meant a

trip to San Francisco to play tourist on Fisherman's Wharf, scarf

too

much seafood, shop Ghiradelli Square, and visit my grandma--to see just how

far she had slipped away toward the underworld of dementia.

We

went down the weekend before and it was just as I imagined. I knew things

had

taken a turn for the worse when Grandma

stood up in church and yelled, "I have

to go to the bathroom!" Flying relatively high on the monster, I laughed like a lunatic all the way

home.

Which made Mom mad and made me wonder:

Does insanity swim in our gene pool?

419

In

One of Her Better Moments

Grandma drew me aside, put one finger to creviced lips and whispered,

Kristina, dear, I've got something

here I want you to have.

One tentative hand stretched toward mine. Grandma's eyes sparkled, glass under rain.

My grandmother gave this to me
on my own 17
th birthday.

It was a beautiful gold locket--24
karat, with an inlay of diamonds.
But the real treasure was inside.

That's my wedding picture, there.

And my grandmother's, there.

Both women wore ivory lace, simplicity made lovely with a spray of yellow roses--and my locket.

I

ask only one thing. Please pass
it on to your own granddaughter?

420

"Of course, Grandma. Thank you!"

It felt like wealth around my neck-- a wealth of love.

421

C

celebration Two

My birthday fell on Friday night.

After dinner Mom broke out the cake and presents--cool velour jeans from Leigh, matching sweater from Jake, diamond studs from Mom and Scott.

Hope you like them.

"

I love them. Thanks, Mom."

What wasn't to like? I went to look in the mirror. The stones magnified the pale bathroom light, like my growing guilt. Mom came in behind me.

I wanted you to have

something special.

I watched her in the mirror.

She reached out, as if to touch me, withdrew instead. Maybe if she had followed through, everything that

came after wouldn't have.

I

feel like I've lost

you, Kristina. I guess

it had to happen

sometime. It's as much

my fault as yours.

422

It was a stunning confession.

And probably not completely accurate.

Yes, she had distanced herself through work and stretching her affection. But the monster was a mightier intruder.

Please be careful.

I'm worried that

you've made some

bad choices. Don't

let them go from

bad to worse.

423

H

alf

of Me

wanted to whine.

Wanted to rage.

Wanted to get right up into her face and shout,

"What about

your

bad choices, Mom?

Have you ever once stopped to consider

how they not only created me, but helped mold me into the not-so-fine, not-so-upstanding, old-beyond-her-years, not-exactly-a-lady standing in front of you?"

The other half

told me to shut up, told me to smile, told me to find a hint of contrition and agree, 424

"You're right, Mom, some of my choices

haven't been the best lately.

I promise to try harder to do the right

things, and make you proud of me."

Considering I had made plans with Chase for celebration number three, plans that might very well test just how bad my choices had become, guess which half won.

425

L

et's Just Say I Got to Go

Chase picked me up for my Big Day.

He actually knocked, went

mano a

m

ano with Mom and Scott.

Evening. So nice to finally meet

you. Kristina has told me so

many good things about you.

Oh, that boy was a player! Scott

shook his hand, invited him inside and Mom thawed her frozen glare.

Don't worry about a thing. The

concert may run late, but we'll be

back before we turn into pumpkins!

We didn't have a concert in mind, of course. Chase's mom was out of town.
He had a special party planned.

I

got the E. It's critical--

pure MDMA,

the rea

I deal. But you don't have to try

it if you don't want to.

Speed, with a hint of psychedelia?

Going primeval, no fear, no pain?

"I want to do everything with you."

426

Cool. 'Cause I want you to go

all the way to heaven.

And I want to take you there.

We got to his house hours before the others would arrive. (Parents gone?

Stoner grapevine buzzes overtime.)

Let's drop the

E right now.

I want you to peak while it's

just you and me.

I had no idea what to expect.

It took an hour to come on and discover a new universe.

427

E

cstasy Is Hard to Describe

It's like falling

softly into a pool of crystal

mountain

water

floating on your

back

circular

beneath

vibrant

sky

deciphering

codes in the clouds

spinning

dizzy

fast.

It isn't at all like going

clear

out of your

head

lunatic

mad

throwing

yourself in front of a runaway

train

insane

hallucinating

black

widows and black

helicopters behind you

crazy.

428

It's a lot more like jumping

into

your own

brain, ferreting

what's

inside

accepting

past

failures

freeing

self

destructive

demons

forgiving

yourself and those

you love and even

those you

despise.

429

C

hase Was Right There

riveted to my side as I laughed, as I cried.

Finally, he kissed me, and it was just as fine as any kiss could ever be.

Tender.

Blossoming.

Passionate.

Intense.

Only on E, it was more.

It was like opening

myself up as wide as

I could go, inviting him inside.

He crawled right in, filled me with love so close to perfect, I asked him to pick me up, carry me off into his bed.

He did.

430

Chase Wagner, the most beautiful man in the whole wide world (despite what the rest of the world

could see),

showed me exactly how

making love should be.

431

I

Was Aglow

at the first knock.

Soon the house filled with friends, with acquaintances, with complete strangers.

I wanted to get to know

each and every one.

I wanted them all to know

everything about me:

my intellect, my beauty, my righteousness.

Maybe you have to have been there (or to a rave) to relate.

I had accessed my innermost

recesses. I needed to explore, to expand, to excavate.

The most incredible place I'd

ever been was right inside of me.

If I left, I might never find it again, and so I refused 432

to sink down, to close the door, to rebuild the wall.

When someone offered a second dose of birthday E, I said, "Absolutely."

And when someone broke

out the crank, I was ready to snort up, to smoke up, to shoot up.

I should have been scared to death.

But ecstasy dissolves all fear.

433

Unforgettable

Birthdays

aren't easy to come by.

Do you remember

Your 4th? Your 12th?

To my 90th birthday,

I will never forget my 17th.

If you do remember

them, why?

It was a day of firsts: giving

myself willingly to ecstasy.

To a man. A needle.

Presents? Surprises?

Firsts?

It didn't hurt, not at all.

The sting was rather
pleasant, like excising an ingrown toenail.

Or did pain define
those memorable days?

Now take the rush of snorting, multiply by
100, you get smoking.

To find mainlining, you
approach infinity.

434

Have you ever once in your life
reached out to touch infinity?

435

E

levation

Oh, but a whole lot more. They say people who die from ecstasy die from

overheating.

Adding speed to the mix accelerates the process because it makes you want to dance until the sun comes up.

The music made me dance. It entered my brain, firing spark plugs and pistons. It revved me to my feet.

The crank was jet fuel, pumping through my veins, propulsion.

I shifted into overdrive, motor heating steadily.

I danced with guys, I danced with girls, hotter, closer, melting together like candles in a south-facing window.

Our dance was primitive, beautiful, waves at high tide.

Our dance was sensual, sexual, and yet somehow innocent.

Spent calories orbited, raising temperatures. Some drank alcohol.

The wise drank water. It tasted as good as champagne.

And then somehow the subject of my birthday came up.

Word spread and the mood elevated beyond celebratory.

436

Gifted with kisses. Tender. Probing. Inviting. Feminine. Masculine.

One emptying into the next, eddies in the swollen river.

I kept my eyes closed, absorbing sensation until it screamed for release. So the part that came next seemed very right.

437

I

Don't Know

whose blade it was, whose idea it was.

I don't remember

saying yes.

I know I didn't

say no.

The knife was sharp.

One nick at my wrist.

It didn't even hurt.

It didn't seem wrong.

Rust in my mouth.

Rich red salt.

I drank it down, asked for more.

438

Offered my own to those who would partake.

Fever. Fire. I was on fire.

Time hesitated.

Solid earth gave way.

Strong arms caught me, carried me into the cool of outside.

A familiar mouth found mine.

I looked into Chase's eyes, found emotions in turmoil.

Fear. Need. Concern. Lust.

And then he said the words

we were both afraid to hear.

I

love you, Kristina.

439

I

Was Cinderella

and Chase was my unlikely Prince Charming.

(Hey, I'd graduated from knights to princes, even if they were unlikely.)

Suddenly I was very sure.

"I love you, too, Chase."

For real?

I reached up and kissed him and it was very, very real, despite the quite surreal juxtaposition of colors in the night sky.

You take my breath away.

"Make love to me. Please? I don't care who sees." He might have.

But just then his watch beeped "two."

No way. Come on, let's go!

Well beyond the witching hour,
Chase hustled most of his guests
out the door. (A few were tied up in the bedrooms.)

I
didn't want to piss off your parents.

We wouldn't make it home until almost three. But the E insisted I remain hopeful.

"They're always in bed by ten..."

Doesn't look

like they're asleep.

Every light was on, upstairs and down, and I caught my mom's face at the window. We had turned back into pumpkins after all.

441

If

You Guessed

I was GUFN, two points for you.

Can you believe Chase was brave enough to walk me to the door?

Mom pounced.

"Do you realize it's three A.M.?"

Chase tried to apologize, said we'd lost track of time, talking.

"I'm
sure
that was all you were doing."

Mom lectured him on responsibility and gave him the old,

"We were worried to death!"

(She looked just fine to me.) What could

Chase do but nod?

"Well, Kristina won't be going

anywhere for a while."

I tried to talk my way

out of her anger zone.

No good.

442

"What were you thinking, Kristina?"

Scott flashed a half

apologetic look as

Mom carried on.

"Don't you know the cops keep a lookout for kids like you?"

I wasn't a kid. And

I'd never so much as seen a cop drive by.

Not yet, anyway.

443

Exiled

to my private mauve island where pretty

pink butterflies fluttered on my wall in a lovely E-enhanced butterfly dance, I tried to be angry, but the ecstasy

wouldn't let me. In fact, it made

me take a peek at things from my

mom's POV. I

mean, we did

stay out until the cock woke up to stoke his crow. Not only that, but we did the very things she worried about us doing, and more.

Introspection

would be easy as a dual-edged

sword. If you

acquaint your

self with your

self, you don't

always like the person you find
inside. I could deal with that. The
bigger problem was discovering Bree
didn't really give a damn about liking me.

444

I

Spent the Next Day

helping Mom can tomatoes.

It was an annual event and I

had always hated the tedious

chore. But the last tiny tendrils of ecstasy, infiltrating me, somehow made it
enjoyable. I didn't even mind

my mom's company. In fact, my mood

seemed to rub off on her. She didn't once

bitch, though she enthusiastically quizzed

me about the previous evening's activities.

This very big part of me wanted to confess, to ask forgiveness, request help. Oh,
I knew my bad habits had escalated, and if Kristina had had her way that day,

well, who knows?

But over the last few weeks, Bree had grown stronger and her argument--that Mom might

put her away, far removed from friends, Chase, and all personal choice--was feasible. So I refused to waver from the concert and long

conversation excuse. And when she asked about drugs, I summoned every ounce of righteous indignation I could muster and denied touching a thing except a

toke or 445

two of weed. I knew she wouldn't be

too upset about that. And by the time all the jar lids popped down on row upon row of salsa, sauce, and ketchup, I was still grounded. But at least

Mom wasn't as mad anymore.

446

Bur

ned Out

Burning

up, coming down,

I popped three

aspirin against the
throbbing in my skull, and attempted a nap.

I laid in bed,

sweating

out toxins, the last of the E and crank,

aching from the inside out. Could I ever

shift into reverse?

Falling from euphoria,

I face-planted into depression. Hard,

447

somersaulting through your own

manure. Harder yet to get back up without

tripping and falling all over again. I felt out of control, a meteorite

tumbling through space, tugged by gravity toward certain doom.

448

J

erked Awake

well after dark, yanked into consciousness by Mom and Scott, yelling in the hall.

"Are you blind, Marie? You don't sleep like that unless you're crashing."

She's running a fever, Scott.

And just what makes you an expert?

"Come on. We both know the scene.

You just refuse to believe it."

We had a long talk today. She swears
the only thing she has tried is pot.

"Like your sweet, little Kristina is above lying to you?"

But what do we do? Search her
room? Have her tested?

"We pull the reins tighter. No dates.

Straight home after school."

For how long? We can't keep her
locked up here forever.

"At least until report cards come home.
If her grades are okay, she's free."

449

What about tonight? Should I try
to wake her up for dinner again?

"Let her sleep, If she's really sick, she needs the rest. Especially after last night."

Okay. Just, please, try to keep
an open mind. And, Scott?

Thank you for caring.

450

R

Report Cards?

If grades were the criteria,

I would be in deep frigging dung.

Two weeks till "d" (for dung) day, no way could I make up for how I'd screwed up this quarter.

And if they were going to start

searching my room, I had some

serious stashing to do.

But I didn't dare move, not for a while. I stared off into the dark, thinking about Chase.

No dates? Home straight after school? How could I live without seeing Chase?

Alone in my bed, I could taste

him, embrace him, feel his skin, warm against my own.

There, as the house fell silent,

I could hear him tell me,

I

love you, Kristina.

Live without him? They couldn't

make me.

Wouldn't

make me.

I would go to him that night.

451

I grabbed my "hideables."

Out the window. Down the wall like a spider, on night prowl.

No way to call him to come and get me. How would I ever get myself into Reno?

One way came to mind.

I swallowed my fear and stuck out my thumb.

452

A

nyone Could Have Come Along

A rapist.

A serial killer.

Brendan.

Lucky me.

I drew a cop.

The black and white

approached slowly, crept past.

Brake lights flashed.

Thank God I

thought to reach into my pocket and toss the contents into the weeds as he pulled to the shoulder, red and blue revolving.

I wasn't high, but I felt buzzed.

453

I wasn't holding, but I broke out in fear sweat.

Goosebumps popped out like disturbed wasps.

How much would he notice?

How much more would he guess?

(And how much did guesses count?)

454

He

Got Out of His Car

Evening, young lady.

His flashlight found my face, concentrating on my eyes.

Kind of late to be out alone.

My mouth felt paralyzed.

All I could do was nod.

Going somewhere important?

I drew a deep breath. Exhaled

slowly. "Just to a friend's."

Do you realize it's after curfew?

I wanted to say something
smart. What I said was, "It is?"

Do your parents know you're out?

Parents? Couldn't involve them!

"Th... they're out of town."

I

see. Then I can't take you home.

Yes! He couldn't take me home.

Relief segued into apprehension.

Looks like I'll have to take you in.

In? Where was "in"?

He couldn't mean jail?

Tsk. Wittenberg isn't a good place.

455

Juvenile hall? I was dead!

Mom would kill me.

...

for a nice girl like you.

He escorted me to his car, put me into the backseat.

What's your name, anyway?

If I told him my real name, they might call home anyway. "Uh..."

Tough question?

It never crossed my mind I
couldn't get out without it.

You have to answer it sooner or later.

"Bree," I said. "Bree... Wagner."

456

I

Wasn't

Scared--Yet

They asked me lots of questions.

I made up every answer, the most important one being,

"My parents can't be reached.

May I call my brother?"

They handed me the phone.

I could only hope he was home.

Brrrng... brrrng... brrrng...

"Chase? It's Bree--your sister?"

Listen, I got picked up for curfew..."

I had roused him up out of deep crash hell. It took a few minutes for him to

come to.

"Since our mom and dad are out of town, they brought me to Wittenberg..."

Somehow he got my drift. He

told me to chill, he'd see what he could do.

No more questions. No tests. Not even the rush of a strip search.

They marched me down to a holding cell, gave me four solid hours to wonder what came next.

457

No word from my family. Not

Kristina's. Surely not Bree's.

They took my clothes, gave me

baggy gray sweats, assigned me a bed in the dormitory.

I joined the general population.

I wonder where that term came from.

They were not general at all.

Roomie #1, Lucinda, was a gangbanger, involved in a drive-by.

Roomie #2, Felice, was in for wrecking a Caddie, carjacked at knifepoint.

Roomie #3, Rose, had beaten up her mother--with the butt of her gun.

Of course, she had a good excuse.

All of us had one thing in common: a total infatuation with the monster.

Tell you the truth, that scared me a little. But not that much.

Tough

Girls

I spent much of Sunday listening to them talk.

Trash talk.

Honest talk.

Tagging

Expression

Street fighting

Courage

Color

Family

Hunger

Need

Speed

Crashing

Connections

Scoring

Trafficking

Shooting up

Popping a cap

Remorse

Doing time

I let Bree do my trash talking.

Kristina stuck with honesty.

Somehow, Lucinda and I found an odd rapport.

And by the time Chase called my parents to let me know where they could find me

(can you believe it takes a

real

parent to get you out of juvie?)

459

and they released me bright and early, Monday morning,

I was a tougher girl with a new connection.

460

C

ause and Effect

The admitting clerk was irate.

She had to redo all the paperwork, using my real name.

She made me wait for almost two hours

while she drank coffee and shuffled files.

The counselor assigned to my case was unsympathetic. He read my folder, nodding and hmmm

ing.

He told me being a loser was easy, then

ordered 24 hours community service.

Scott sulked like a pissed puppy. He

would have preferred lockup to my

picking up trash along the highway.

He refused to say one word, and his silence told me all I needed to know.

Mom manufactured a plethora of tears to accompany her long-suffering mother diatribe.

She had plenty to say about deceit, distress, and sexually transmitted diseases.

461

Jake was enthralled by the whole
idea of my temporary incarceration, and the reasons behind it.
He wouldn't shut up, just kept
asking inane questions.
As for me, I was less than contrite.
Picking up trash wasn't so bad. There were ways around GUFN.
And I now had a direct in with a monster manufacturer.

462

Back

in My Room

My life closed in around me. I was no longer my own.
Mom had poured through all
my stuff, scoured
my journal, letters, and address book.
She did find a bit of evidence--a
crumpled Marlboro

wrapper and a new
lighter. Hey, it made her day to discover
I was a hardcore
tobacco user. More
lectures, more useless
promises on my
end. She went off to work on her book.

463

A sudden wave of exhaustion swallowed
me. I'd walked through the last few days in a total haze. My system
had finally purged itself of "go fast." It was time to shut down. I laid down and
surrendered myself to the comfort of dreams.

464

R

esolutions

I awoke the next morning, semirefreshed.
As I got myself ready for school,

I made the following resolutions:

- * One week to the end of the quarter, grades slipping into gutter, I would ask for some extra credit work.
- * I would help out more around the house, show my parents

I

was

grateful for the many things they'd given me.

- * I would write to my Grandma once a week, even if she might not be sure who the letters were from.

- * I would reconnect with old friends. And my dad.

- * I would finish up the many projects I'd started while under the influence--a macramé wall hanging, a portrait of John Lennon, a song I'd written about my walk with the monster.

465

- * I would never shoot up again. I would smoke less, toot less, keep my bad habits manageable. (Notice I didn't say quit them.) I would also avoid sipping other people's blood.

- * I would go to Planned Parenthood and get on the pill. Making love with Chase was awesome, and we didn't need a baby spoiling that.

The problem with resolutions is they're only as solid as the person making them.

466

O

ther Problems

Mess with a teacher, even one that has always liked you in the past, you're liable to get screwed.

Ditch their classes, they might

give you makeup work, but they don't have to. I was four out of seven toward screwed.

I tried hooking up with

Sarah. She was nice but had

moved on to more reliable

friends. Straight friends.

Trent knew exactly what was what with his sister, and so with me. The Avenue most definitely wasn't his scene.

On the home front, I couldn't

buy Scott's trust by washing

windows or vacuuming. I had

zero idea how to turn it around.

467

Mom, she wanted her little girl

back. I couldn't go that far.

She wavered between forgiving, stern, spiteful, and loving.

I did write Grandma a couple of times, lively, newsy letters.

She never replied, but I

didn't really expect her to.

Hopefully, I brightened a few of her last days. She would pass away in January, cold and gray as a San Francisco winter.

When I returned to the macramé, my fingers struggled over the knots. I scrapped that project, but did finish John Lennon.

As for the song, I had lost the melody and my will to find it. And the lyrics brought me back to the fold of the monster.

468

Crank,

You See

isn't any ordinary

monster. It's like a giant octopus, weaving

its tentacles not

just around you, but through you, squeezing

not hard enough to kill you, but enough to keep you from reeling until you try to get

away. Try, and you
hunger for its
grasping
clutch, the way its
tendrils prop you
up, your need
intensifying
469
exponentially
every minute you
refuse to admit its
being.

470

By

Wednesday

I was starving for speed and for Chase, in that order. I bummed a snort from Robyn, borrowed her cell.

I made the call with trepidation but Lucinda had given me all I needed to know-- her name, her brother's name, and these very scary words: La Eme,

"Eme" meaning M, for Mexican

Mafia, hardcore importers and traffickers, plus a few chemists, doing their thing in desert hideaways. Roberto already

knew about me. (Lucinda had

used up one of her weekly calls and expected a favor one day.

La Eme is all about favors.)

Roberto set up a meet for the following afternoon.

Then I called Chase's cell, asked him to pick me up 471

last period, take me to the bank. (I had a D in P.E.; what could one more ditch hurt?)

472

The

Good

...

Seeing Chase's truck pull into the far parking lot. Hearing,

It's been a long four days.

Kissing him, knowing better things

lay in store, right up the road.

I've missed you so much.

Detouring to a secluded spot. Gentle

lovemaking, set to romantic sonnets.

It's never been like this for me before.

Riding into town, head on his shoulder, listening to words of love.

My heart will always belong to you.

He was the second person to tell me
that. The first, well, he had his Giselle.

... T

he Bad

...

Noticing the letter lying
open on the passenger-side floor.

I was going to tell you...

Chase had been accepted by USC-- the University of Southern California.

They have an awesome film school...

Early graduation, a full scholarship, for him, a dream come true.

I'll

leave after Christmas break.

For me, a dream or three, annihilated.

I didn't know what to say.

Please don't cry. It's not so far away.

It might as well be clear across the globe.

Out of sight, out of my mind.

474

... And

the Ugly

I was still upset when

we pulled up to the bank.

I was a ton more upset

when the teller informed

me that Mom had restricted

my access to my own account.

Okay, it had dwindled considerably.

But I had to have cash the next day.

You should not stand

a guy like Roberto up.

And I was in serious want of a fabulous bender.

I'm not sure which one of the two made me more panicky.

I asked Chase if I could

borrow some money.

But when I told him why, he told

me I was nuts and took me home.

475

I didn't even say good-bye, just slammed the door and went to check the mailbox.

I figured I'd better keep checking

it until my report card arrived.

It wasn't there. But something a whole lot

better was--two letters from Citibank.

Inside one was Mom's new credit card.

Inside the other was a PIN.

476

I

Did Think Twice

about using that Visa, maybe

even three or four times.

But it was just so easy, like fate

had mailed it directly to me.

Mom wouldn't miss it for weeks.

And then I would deny ever

having laid eyes on the thing.

Robyn gave me a ride to meet

Roberto. He didn't look near as scary as he really was.

The buy was a piece of cake.

Except for one thing.

Roberto wouldn't deal less than half-ounce quantities. That much, straight from the source, was relatively cheap. And Visa paid for it.

477

I didn't need it all, of course.

The plan was to sell some, so my own stash would be free.

Every dealer thinks that until their nose gets busy.

That's what I became that day. A dealer.

I had just taken a very big step up in the hierarchy of the monster.

478

I

Became an Instant Celebrity

out on The Avenue.

The crank was superb.

And I, being new to the deal, didn't know enough to cut it.

I sold it like I bought it--rich, yellow, moist, and stinky.

I offed the half, went

back for more, offed that, too.

My friends were happy.

Roberto was happy--

enough to front me even more.

And I was nonstop wired.

Nonstop tired,

I needed more and more just to get through the day.

More and more just to feel okay.

479

Who knows how much I'd be doing now!

Who knows how much money I might have made?

Who knows if I would

have smoked up all the profits?

Who knows if I would have

ended up in prison--or worse?

But one morning in early

November, I woke up and the moment I got

up, I heaved until I hurt.

It might have been the flu or a bad reaction to Mom's sloppy Joes.

But it wasn't.

480

Clear Blue Easy

was clearly blue.

But there was nothing easy

about finding

out I was pregnant.

I didn't know

what to do.

I didn't know who to turn to.

You've probably heard

that story before.

But until you're in those shoes,

wearing them seems so straightforward.

Keep your baby?

Give it away?

Abort your baby?

Give it life?

If you think you

have a clear idea,

481

try throwing drugs into that picture.

Not quite so cocky

now, are you?

So tell me. How

would you choose?

482

I Went

Through

the next few days

pretty much like a zombie.

People wanted crank.

I sold it to them.

Teachers wanted homework.

I gave it to them.

Jake wanted to razz me.

I let him.

Mom wanted to know what was wrong.

I had nothing to say.

The monster called to me too.

For once,

I refused to answer.

Friday night, I crawled into bed, sank way, way low.

483

Submerged myself in a world of watery dreams:

Tears. An ocean of tears.

And a baby, a boy, afloat in that salty sea.

He cried out to me.

Could I swim away solo?

Would I drown saving him?

484

Saturday

I spent the day:

Throwing up.

Sweating speed.

Shivering.

Shaking.

Tingling all over.

And otherwise fighting the symptoms of withdrawal.

Sunday

I spent the day:

Throwing up.

Sweating speed.

Off-balance.

Confused.

Weeping.

Tumbling end over end, deeper and deeper into the throes of depression.

485

Monday

I spent the day:

Throwing up.

Eating.

Emotional.

Dazed.

Lost.

Alone.

Finally, I went to the pay phone and made two calls. One to Planned Parenthood.
The other to

Chase.

486

My

Appointment Was at Two

Chase picked me up at noon.

Pale, shaky, I climbed in beside him.

Hi. You look awful.

I smiled. "Whose fault is that?"

We laughed at the not-funny joke and headed into town.

Are you okay?

I shook my head. "I'm pregnant, remember?" I leaned into my hands, let the tears flow.

Please don't cry. I'm here for you.

Here? He was going off to sunny
Southern California. I didn't need
him anyway. Did I?

I

love you. More than I realized.

"I love you, too. But I'm scared,
Chase." He pulled to the side of the road.

I'll

take care of you. The baby, too.

487

Was he giving me another choice?

Could I make that decision?

I was only 17.

Marry me, Kristina.

My knees buckled. My stomach
churned. Chase had stepped up to the plate.

The pitch was up to me.

488

P

lanned Parenthood

was a cinder-block

nightmare. It felt like prison without the comfort of bars.

Ugly in orange, the waiting room

made me want to throw up. So I did.

A dozen women

gave sympathetic

looks as I returned from the bathroom.

One by one, they

disappeared as a stern woman in white

called their names.

Chase held my hand as we watched them

reappear, one by one, ashen as ghosts.

489

A procession of wraiths, that's what it was. And I was in the back of the line.

I rocked against the hard plastic chair.

Finally the woman

called, "Bree Wagner."

Chase flinched, then
whispered in my ear:

I prefer the sound
of Kristina Wagner.

490

I

Already Knew My Options

I listened patiently as the saccharine
Ms. Sweetwater outlined them again.
She did confirm that should I choose
abortion, my parents would not

have to know. All I needed was \$500 and someone to drive me home.

She gave me the name of a local adoption agency, urged me to consider placing
my baby in a loving home.

And then she asked me the date of my last period.

Hard as it was, I thought

back to a night up at

491

Chamberlain Flat, when I used

that period as an excuse to say no.

It was the weekend before school

started. Add a couple of weeks and...

I gained a terrible insight.

Chase was not the baby's father.

Brendan was.

492

The

Realization

was like jamming a paperclip into a light socket: profoundly stunning;

like cinching a garbage bag tight around my neck: completely suffocating.

A mad surge of blood rushed to my brain, pounding temples and eardrums

before draining
away completely.

My face went Arctic, diving deep freeze,
glacier blue.

Graveyard cold
hugged me tight, rattling teeth and bones.

493

Chase called my
name. Ms. Sweetwater
skittered to her feet and everything went black.

494

P

assing Out

is the strangest thing.

One minute

you're here.

Then with a mere

cerebral flutter, you're not

Part of your brain

insists you're dead.

Of course, you're not.

Another part says it's

better there, in the dark.

Where, exactly, are you?

Somewhere, you hear

voices, urgent.

Could you be in limbo?

A thin beam of light

calls to you.

495

Will you reach heaven?

Brighter now, white and beautiful.

You hurry in that direction.

Your eyes acquiesce, and open to discover...

you're back in hell, after all.

496

Voices

Chase

Sweetwater

Nurse

Doctor

Kristina?

"Bree?"

"Honey?" "Young lady!"

Hello?

"Hello?"

"Heart rate?" "Accelerated."

Wake up!

"Wake up!"

"Breathing?" "Shallow."

Please?

"Now!"

"Here she comes." "There she is."

Talk to me.

"Talk to us."

"She'll be fine." "She's fine."

You fine?

"She's just fine."

Oh

Yeah, I Was Fine

Dandy in fact

Pregnant by a sex fiend.

Starving for the monster.

Scared to admit either

to those close to me who remained

clueless

eyes closed to every

negative

thing about me, or dying

To know every

dirty

little tidbit.

And the only one who knew every little

negative, dirty thing

would have

forgiven

me anything

498

C

hase Steadied Me

as we walked to his truck, hand in hand. He opened the door, helped me inside, slid in behind the wheel.

So tell me.

I considered playing

ignorant, but knew he wouldn't let go.

"About the baby..."

My eyes unlocked from his, but not quickly

enough to conceal the truth.

Brendan is the father.

My throat constricted, like a rubber band twisting around my admission.

499

"Oh, God, Chase.

It's all so wrong!"

Our eyes reconnected.

In his, I found sympathy.

And jealousy.

It doesn't matter, Kristina.

We can make it right.

500

He Drove Me Home--Slowly

My stomach flip-flopped with every curve and brake.

Finally, he asked,

So what do you think?

I had no answers.

None at all.

So he joked,

Should be a cute kid, anyway.

Which made me smile but still gave me no answers.

He offered,

Don't answer me now.

Not then, but soon.

I was already six weeks p.g.

He probed,

I

know it's a tough decision.

501

Tough. Too tough.

And all mine to make.

He dared,

but life is full of tough decisions.

Like a guy would ever

have to face

this

one.

He suggested,

Maybe you should talk to your mom.

502

My Mom?!?!

The ice princess? The bitch queen?

The "mother" of all mothers?

What was he thinking?

How could I talk to

her?

We hadn't really talked in months.

What would I tell her now?

That I was pregnant?

That I was pregnant because I was raped?

That I was raped because I would have done

anything

for just one more taste of the monster?

Where would I start?

Where would I finish?

How much to admit?

How much to hide?

503

How much to confess?

Where would I find such nerve without crank to open my mouth?

And if I did dig down deep enough to find it, would I crumble and weep?

Would she?

504

T

he Kitchen Was Warm

and carried a scent of hot butter, wrapped in cinnamon.

It reminded me of when I was little.

Before Jake.

Before Scott.

Despite Dad.

Back when I still believed

Mom was the perfect mother.

She, Leigh, and I were the trinity.

We baked together.

Canned together.

Planned together.

505

Plotted birthdays and holidays around homemade gifts that didn't cost much but time and love.

And the fun was not only in the giving, but in the shared creation.

I adored Mom then.

Could my own child

ever love me so?

506

S

omehow She Didn't Notice

the wavering tone of my "Hi, Mom."

I sat down at the table and she brought

me a plate of warm oatmeal cookies.

Hi, Honey. How was your day?

I almost laughed. I almost cried.

I managed to hold both inside. "Okay."

Good deal. Hey, I need your input.

My

input? Was this some odd

attempt at bonding?

What should we get Leigh

for Christmas?

Christmas. It would come right on schedule, despite my predicament.

I already put an Xbox

on layaway

for Jake.

Whatever choices I made, Jake would
indulge in the latest video games.

And I got Scott a new

set of clubs.

Come spring, regardless of my decision,
Scott would enjoy a great game of golf.

But I'm just not sure about Leigh..

..

507

Leigh. Would she ever know the pleasure--or terror--of pregnancy?

Does she have a DVD player?

I bobbed my head. "Heather does.

How about a Palm Pilot?"

Great idea! Leigh's so disorganized!

The ice princess gently stroked
my hair, and for one very scary instant...

There's the buzzer. More cookies?

I verged on coming clean.

508

I

Opened My Mouth

just as Scott rumbled through the door, winding down what I guessed must have
been a very long ramble:

...

out-of-touch politicians...

... the !@#!*#@ economy...

..

. the next round of layoffs...

..

. the boss's decision to scale

back raises and Christmas

bonuses, despite signing

off on his own 20% pay hike...

So much for ho-ho-ho.

So much for confessions.

So much for answers.

509

And then Mom made the mistake of turning on the radio as a weather forecaster announced

we could expect snow, and enough of it for the ski resorts to enjoy a lucrative Thanksgiving.

Scott went off again.

Just @\$%#@i perfect,

with the Jeep in the shop

and the Subaru needing tires.

November snow!

Can you imagine a worse omen?

510

O

mens! Great!

I wasn't about to try and dissuade the Powers-That-Be.

I still needed answers, however.

I picked up the phone, went into my room, and made a few calls.

The first was to Dad. Not sure why.

Got his answering machine:

Me and Linda Sue were feeling

blue, so we went to Mexico.

Leave your number.

I'm getting a hummer.

Linda Sue? Was she from Kentucky?

No doubt "Miss Louisville" paid for their trip.

But did the world have to know they had oral sex?

And who made Dad a (very bad) poet?

On a crazy whim, I called Adam next.

Guess who was whining in the background.

511

Kristina? [Momento, Lince. I'll be right there.]

Well, yeah, we're hangin' out pretty steady.

In fact

--you won't believe this--

I'm going to be a daddy next summer.

Oh, yeah, I believed it all right.

Apparently, though Lince still lacked
feeling in one arm, other parts felt plenty.

So much for Giselle. So much for summer visits.

I muttered congratulations and hung up without sharing my own "good news."

512

I

Thought About Calling Leigh

but figured she'd tell Mom, "for my own good."

I called Robyn instead.

"So I've got this friend who just
found out she's pregnant..."

Total bummer. How far gone

are y

--

I

mean... is she?

"Six weeks. She's too scared to tell her parents...."

No doubt. What about the father?

Does he know?

"No. And she's not going to tell him. He's a real a-hole."

No help from the father, no help
from her parents? Only one answer.

"You mean abortion. What about adoption?"

Let me tell you a little story about
what happened to a friend of mine.

...

Seems Robyn's friend chose adoption, then saw her baby and changed her mind.

"I don't see what's so awful about that!"

Ask the adoptive parents.

I'd tell you

to ask the baby, but you

can't.

Seems Robyn's friend wasn't really

ready to be a mommy.

"So... what? She gave the baby up for adoption, after all?"

She went on a three-day

bender. The

baby's crying drove her nut buckets.

Seems, arm in arm with the monster,

Mommy shut the baby up.

For good.

514

S

now

Began

to

Fall

come

dusk

lovely

tangos

wind

and

flake

silent

wisps

growing

bold

wicked

relentless

hinting

winter's

random

temper

silver

frosted

morning

white

landscape

reflecting

purple

painted

sky

breath

taking

dazzling

lifting

me to heights

I'd

never

approached but as

Newton

would

opine

what

goes

skyward

must

surely

crash.

515

S

now Day

No plows, no buses, no school, nothing to do but fret.

I picked up the newspaper.

There, headlining Local News:

MAJOR DRUG BUST with a picture of Roberto in a sporty pair of cuffs,
followed by a daunting exposé--

La Eme and the crank epidemic.

Plus, in

Sierra Living

a complementary piece

outlining the horrors of meth:

How it eats big holes in the brain,

Destroys the pleasure center. How it shows up in X rays as big black dead spots
spoiling gray matter.

How quitting is next to impossible and even those users who suffer through often
never recover completely.

Footnote:

516

Possible

pregnancy

complications

crank

baby

birth

defects

health and behavior

abnormalities.

517

Too Much

to think about.

Too much to bear.

And time was running short.

I knew

I couldn't marry Chase.

I knew he would stand by me.

But he deserved his dreams.

I feared

closing that door.

I feared the uncertainty of choosing parenthood.

I doubted

I could give my baby away.

I doubted more I could raise it on my own--with or without defect.

518

I needed a solid dose of courage.

I needed the strength only the monster could give me.

I regretted

my weakness as I inhaled.

I regretted making the decision to snuff out my baby's life.

519

I

Needed Two Things

The ride home was easy.

Robyn offered to drive, as long as it didn't interfere with her cheerleading.

The \$500, however, presented a challenge.

My bank account was low desert dry.

The Visa was maxed high.

Chase refused to help.

He was "floored" by my decision.

Another option came to mind, one
that owed me a lot more than money.

First Brendan denied paternity.

I reminded him about DNA.

Next he claimed poverty.

I threatened full disclosure.

To his hoity parents. To his toity girlfriend.

To his probation officer.

(A DUI, post-Air Races.)

Okay, he'd cough up the money.

520

Distasteful as it was to see

him again, it provided a matchless opportunity.

You sure you're pregnant?

You sure it's mine?

You're not b-s-ing me?

"I'm sure. It's yours. No bull.

Hard to believe your balls were big
enough to accomplish it, huh?"

521

H

ow Big

were

my

balls?

Big enough

to

follow

through?

522

I

Didn't Sleep

the night before, just sat at the window staring at starlight, gentle glitters upon a crust of new snow, wishing I could wish upon a star and make it all just an evil dream, one I could wake from, but no such

luck.

523

M

esmerized

By the come and go, the sad drift and flow

lives in painful transition,

I sat, waiting for an ending.

The clinic was gated, walled and secure, but nothing felt safe nothing felt sane.

Why do they make you

wait so long, trembling in the shadow of fear and remorse?

I wept, as my sisters

wept at what might

have been, had we turned in another direction.

And then, midst waves of heartache, I felt a flutter in my belly, no more than the whisper of an eyelash.

Later, my doctor and my

mom would tell me it was much too early to feel a fetus move.

524

Whatever it was, maybe gas, maybe God, I took it as a plea from the life growing viable inside me.

I would not abort my baby.

Nor give it away. I

would carry it proudly, and when it entered this world,

I would be the perfect mother.

I could only hope it wasn't Bree, materializing inside of me.

525

More

Choices

I told you once before that life is full of choices.

Sometimes, good or bad, hard or easy, we make the right choices.

When I told my mom, she cried and cursed
my choices.

Then she softened and thanked me for honoring my child.

She and Scott argued, talked and finally agreed to offer haven as long as I finished school.

Chase likewise promised to care for
us, work two jobs if need

be. It gave me even more to love

him for, but I sent him off to USC. As my baby grew, mother love 526

replaced romantic love,

almost

diminished love for the monster. I tried to quit, but my need was so deep

I did slip once or twice.

One tiny snort was all it took to satisfy desire so deep it snatched my breath
away.

But don't worry.

I swear it was only a time o two.

You won't tell, will you?

527

I

Won't Bore You

with all the tedious details of the next seven months-- the day-to-day grind, belly
burgeoning around the life growing

inside

me.

Instead,

I offer a few highlights, the top ten reasons my pregnancy wasn't so awful,
followed by a top ten countdown of lowlights

(I know that's not a word.

Consider it poetic license.)

528

H

ighs

10) Feeling my baby move at 16 weeks exactly, knowing it wasn't gas, but something--someone--

incredibly, remarkably, alive.

9) Calling Dad and getting

Linda Sue. Asking her to define "hummer" before imparting the fabulous news that her boyfriend was to become a grandpa.

8) My ultrasound--seeing a heart, beating strong inside me.

Having my doctor

inform me that my baby was all in one piece, then suggest I shop "blue."

529

7) school counselor,

Mrs. Green, arranging a home-study program to let me graduate right on schedule.

(Six days before I gave birth!)

6) Calling Grandma, expecting a lecture and getting one-- about how every baby, regardless of circumstances, is an angel on a special mission.

5) Scott's losing his anger

long enough to teach
me to drive. Getting
my driver's license when
Grandma left me her obnoxious (but mint) '75 LTD.
530

4) Jake, sharing his Internet
research on fetal
development. Did you
know that a fertilized
egg, 36 hours old, is the size of a pinhead?

3) Sorting through 35,000 names in the
Dummy's Guide
to

Naming Your Baby,
opting for the strong, masculine moniker

Hunter Seth.

2) Epidurals. I meant to do

Lamaze, really I did, but I managed to miss most of the classes.

Here's to labor, without unimaginable pain!

And...

531

T

he #1 Best Thing

about those seven months:

Holding

my baby for the first time, knowing just how to do it.

Thinking his red, scrunched-up face was really quite handsome.

Unwrapping the blanket to count fingers, eyes, ears, and toes,

Finding

all twenty-four, precisely

where they ought to be.

Crying because suddenly, for the first time in a very long time, everything felt right.

532

Lows

10) Morning sickness. Puking

my guts out as soon as I lifted my head from the pillow, each and every day for weeks and weeks.

9) Listening to Mom and Scott

argue. About me.

About the baby.

About the odds of it being some
sort of freak.

8) Trying to quit tobacco after learning how every puff made

my baby's heart

stop beating. How

could I be so hooked?

533

7) Going to school (before

my "condition" became

obvious) an outsider.

Knowing my old
friends and I had
lost all common ground.

6) Boredom. The succession of little-to-do
days, stretching
longer and longer toward the longest
day of the year.

5) Long letters from Chase.
USC was great.

The football team was great. Los
Angeles was great.
Great enough to call it home.

534

4) My dad's silence. He did call
once, to confirm Linda

Sue's tale. Then not a word, as if not talking about it could make the "problem"
disappear.

3) Losing Grandma, just when
I'd found her again.

A waterfall of flowers
brightened her funeral, but they couldn't disguise the stench of death.

2) My water breaking, mid-Walmart...

Contractions, uterine lightning

bolts, striking

immediately and not letting up for 18 hours.

And...

535

The

#1 Worst Thing

about those seven months:

My steady, needful, forever

relationship with the monster.

Learning

that "addiction" is much more than a buzzword.

Discovering

how very much it applied to my "me first" psyche.

Struggling

not to give in to inner voices
much stronger than my own.

Winning

most of the time, gritting my
teeth and "just saying no."

Losing in those moments

when the world

I'd created for myself

closed in around me.

536

H

appy Endings

I'd like to give you one.

But I'm not really sure

how this story ends myself.

Being a mother is hard.

A lot harder than I imagined.

My baby boy is beautiful.

I sense an Old Soul within him.

But he cries a lot and he doesn't really sleep like a newborn should. No lectures, okay? I accept my part.

I watch my mom with my son, loving him, as she must have loved me. She's patient when he cries. She paces him to sleep.

I wish I could be like that. But

I'm only 17. I feel like life is passing

me by as I stand here on the deck, listening to him fuss inside.

536

537

Sometimes I want to curl up in a ball and roll away. Sometimes I just want to die. I only know one

thing that can make me laugh again.

Crank is more than a drug.

It's a way of life. You can

turn your back. But you can

never really walk away.

The monster will forever speak to me. And today, it's calling me out the door.

537

