

METHOD 15/33

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A Novel

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For Michael and Max, my loves.

“Brain development can be characterized as the gradual unfolding of a powerful, self-organizing network of processes with complex interactions between genes and environment.”

*-Karns, et. al., July 11, 2012, Journal of Neuroscience,
Altered Cross-Modal Processing [title truncated]*

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~*Carpe diem every day*~

METHOD 15/33

CHAPTER ONE

4-5 DAYS IN CAPTIVITY

I lay there on the fourth day plotting his death. Compiling assets in a list in my mind, I found relief in the planning...*a loose floor board, a red knit blanket, a high window, exposed beams, a keyhole, my condition...*

I remember my thoughts then as though I am reliving them now, as though they are my present thoughts. *There he is outside the door again*, I think, even though it's been seventeen years. Perhaps those days will forever be my present because I survived so completely in the minutiae of each hour and each second of painstaking strategy. During that indelible time of torment, I was all on my own. And, I must say now, with no lack of pride, my result, my undeniable victory, was no less than a masterpiece.

On Day 4, I was well into a catalog of assets and a rough outline of revenge, all without aid of pen or pencil, solely the mental sketchpad of piecing together potential solutions. A puzzle, I knew, but one I was determined to solve...*a loose floorboard, a red knit blanket, a high window, exposed beams, a keyhole, my condition...How do they fit together?*

Over and over I reconstituted this enigma and searched for more assets. *Ah yes, of course, the bucket. And yes, yes, yes, the box spring is new, he did not remove the plastic. Okay, again, go over it again, figure it out. Exposed beams, a bucket, the box spring, the plastic, a high window, a loose floorboard, a red knit blanket, the...*

I assigned numbers to give a dose of science. *A loose floorboard (Asset #4), a red knit blanket (Asset #5), plastic...* The collection

seemed as complete as possible at the start of Day 4. I would need more, I figured.

The sound of the pine floor rattling outside my jail cell, a bedroom, interrupted me about midday. *He's definitely out there. Lunch.* The latch moved from left to right, the keyhole turned, and in he burst without the decency of even a pause at the threshold.

As he had at every other meal, he dropped a tray on my bed of now familiar food, a white mug of milk, and a child-size cup of water. No utensils. The slice of egg and bacon quiche collided with the homemade bread on the plate, a disk of china with a rose-colored toile of a woman with a pot and a feather-hat-wearing man with a dog. I loathed that plate to such an unnatural depth, I shudder to remember. The backside said "Wedgwood" and "Salvator." *This will be my fifth meal on this salvation. I hate this plate. I will kill this plate too.* The plate, the mug, and the cup looked to be the same ones I had used for breakfast, lunch, and dinner on Day 3 in captivity. The first two days I spent in a van.

"More water?" he asked, in his abrupt, dull and deep, monotone.

"Yes, please."

He started this pattern on Day 3, which, I believe, is what kicked off my plotting in earnest. The question became part of the routine, him bringing my meal and asking if I wanted more water. I decided to say "yes" when he asked and steeled myself to say "yes" each time, although this sequence made no sense. *Why not bring a larger cup of water to begin with? Why this inefficiency? He leaves, locks the door, pipes clang in the hall walls, a spit and then a burst of water from the sink, out of eyesight through the keyhole. He's back with a plastic cup of lukewarm water. Why?* I can tell you this—many things in this world are unsolved, as is the rationale behind many of my jailer's inexplicable actions.

"Thank you," I said upon his return.

I had decided from Hour 2 of Day 1 that I'd try to feign a schoolgirl politeness, be thankful, for I soon discovered I could

outwit my captor, a man in his forties. *Must be forty-something, he looks the same age as my dad.* I knew I had the wits to beat this horrible, disgusting thing, and I was just Sweet Sixteen.

Lunch on Day 4 tasted like lunch on Day 3. But perhaps the sustenance gave me what I needed because I realized I had many more assets: time, patience, undying hatred, and I noted, as I drank the milk from the thick restaurant mug, the bucket had a metal handle and the handle ends were sharp. *I need only remove the handle. It can be a separate asset from the bucket.* Also, I was high in the building, not below ground, as I had first anticipated, on Days 1 and 2, I would be. By the crown of the tree outside my window and the three flights of stairs it took to get here, I was most surely on a third floor. I considered height another asset.

Strange, right? I had not yet grown bored by Day 4. Some might think sitting alone in a locked room would cause a mind to give way to dementia or delusion. But I was lucky. My first two days were spent traveling, and by some colossal mistake or severe error in judgment, my captor used a van for his crime and this van had tinted side windows. Sure, no one could see in, but I could see out. I studied and committed our route to the logbook in my mind, details I never actually used, but the work of transcribing and burning the data to eternal memory occupied my thoughts for days.

If you asked me today, seventeen years later, what flowers were growing by the ramp of Exit 33, I'd tell you, wild daisies mixed with a healthy dose of devil's paintbrush. For you I'd paint the sky, a misty blue-gray rolling into a smudged mud. I'd re-enact the sudden action as well, such as the storm that erupted 2.4 minutes after passing the patch of flowers, when the black mass overhead opened in a fit of spring hail. You would see the pea-sized ice-balls, which forced my kidnapper to park under an overpass, say "son-of-a-bitch" three times, smoke one cigarette, flick the spent butt, and begin our trek again, 3.1 minutes after the first hail ball crashed the hood of that criminal van. I morphed forty-eight hours of these transportation details into a movie I replayed

every single day of my captivity, studying each minute, each second, each and every frame, for clues and assets and analysis.

The van's side window and how he left me, sitting and able to survey our progress, led to a quick conclusion: the harbinger of my incarceration was a witless monkey on autopilot, a soldier drone. But I was comfortable in an armchair he'd bolted to the floor of the van. Suffice it to say, despite his many protests to my sagging blindfold, he was either too lazy or too distracted to tie the oil cloth properly and I, therefore, ascertained our direction from the passing signs: west.

He slept 4.3 hours the first night. I slept 2.1. We took Exit 74 after two days and one night of driving. And don't even ask about the colossal embarrassment of bathroom breaks at deserted rest stops.

When our trail came to an end, the van rolled slowly down the exit ramp, and I decided to count sets of sixty. *One Mississippi, Two Mississippi, Three Mississippi...* 10.2 sets of Mississippi later, we parked, and the engine sputtered in a lurching stop. *10.2 minutes from the highway.* From the topmost corner of my drooping blindfold, I made out a field cast in a twilight gray and glazed with a swath of full-moon white. The wisp-scratch branches of a tree draped around the van. *A willow. Like Nana's. But this isn't Nana's house.*

He's at the side of the van. He's coming for me. I'll have to leave the van. I don't want to leave the van.

I jumped at the loud metal-on-metal scrape and bang of the van door sliding open. *We're here. I guess we're here. We're here.* My heart ticked to the beat of a hummingbird's wings. *We're here.* Sweat accumulated at my hairline. *We're here.* My arms lost all slack, and my shoulders stiffened to straight, forming a capital T with my spine. *We're here.* And my heart again, I might have trembled the earth to quake, I might have roiled the sea to tsunami, with that rhythm.

A country breeze whooshed in as though rushing past my captor to console me. For a quick second, I became washed in a cool

caress, but his presence loomed and broke the spell almost as soon as it came. He was partially masked to me, of course, given the half-on, half-off blindfold, yet I felt him stall and stare. *What must I look like to you? Just a young girl, duct-taped to an armchair in the back of your shit van? Is this normal for you? You fucking imbecile.*

“You don’t scream or cry or beg me like the others did,” he said, sounding like he’d grasped some epiphany he’d been struggling with for days.

I turned my head fast toward his voice, as though possessed, intending in my motion to un-nerve him. I’m not sure if I did, but I believe he shimmied backwards a fraction.

“Would that make you feel better?” I asked.

“Shut the fuck up, you crazy little bitch. I don’t give a shit what you fucking sluts do,” he said loudly and fast, as though reminding himself of his position of control. From the high decibel of his agitation, I surmised we were alone, wherever we were. *This can’t be good. He’s safe yelling here. We’re alone. Just the two of us.*

By the tilt of the van, I could tell he grabbed hold of the doorframe and hoisted himself in. He grunted from the exertion, and I took stock of his labored smoker’s breathing. *Typical, worthless, fat slob.* Shadows and slices of his movement came toward me, and a silvery sharp object in his hand glistened under the overhead light. As soon as he got into my space, I smelled him, an old sweat, the stench of three-day-old body odor. His breath was like fetid soup on the air. I winced, turned toward the tinted window, and plugged my nostrils by holding my breath.

He cut the duct tape melding my arms to the bolted chair and put a paper bag over my head. *Ah shit-breath, so you realize the blindfold doesn’t work.*

Comfortable in the evil I came to accept in that traveling armchair, I had no clue what was in store for me. Nevertheless, I did not protest our move into what must have been a farm. Given the aftermath scent of cows grazing all day and the high blades and stalks that slapped my legs, I reasoned we entered a field of hay or wheat.

The night air of Day 2 cooled my arms and chest, even through my lined, black raincoat. Despite the bag and the drooping cloth on my face, light from the moon illuminated our trek. With his gun on my spine, and me leading a blinded way with only the moon as my pull, we waded through knee-high stalks of America's grain for one set of sixty. I stepped high so as to punctuate my counting; he sloshed behind in a gunman's shuffle. And such was our two-person parade: *one, swish, two, swish, three, swish, four.*

I compared my sorrowful march to the watery death of mariners sentenced to the gangplank and considered my first asset: *terra firma*. Then the terrain changed, and I no longer sensed the moon's presence. The ground gave a bit with my unnecessarily forced and heavy steps, and, by the sprinkle of dry dust around my exposed ankles, I supposed I was on a loose dirt path. Tree limbs scratched my arms on both sides.

No light + no grass + dirt path + trees = Forest. This is not good.

My neck pulse and my heartbeat seemed to catch separate rhythms, as I remembered the Nightly News' account of another teen, who they found in the woods in some other state, far from me. How distant her tragedy seemed to me then, so displaced from reality. Her hands were severed, her innocence taken, her carcass dumped in a shallow grave. The worst part was the evidence of coyotes and mountain lions, who took their share under the evil winks of devil-eyed bats and the mournful glare of night owls. *Stop this...count...remember to count...keep the count...focus...*

These dreadful thoughts caused me to lose my place. *I've lost count.* Pushing my horror aside, I steeled myself, swallowed a jug of air, and slowed the hummingbird in my chest, just like my dad taught me in our father-daughter Jiu-Jitsu and tai chi classes and just like the lessons in the medical school books, which I kept in my laboratory in our basement.

Given my quick blip of fear upon entering the forest, I recalibrated the count by three digits. After one set of sixty in the dense

wood, we skidded into short grass and back under the unencumbered illumination of the moon. *This must be a clearing. This is not a clearing. Is this? This is pavement. Why didn't we park here? Terra firma, terra firma, terra firma.*

We hit another patch of short grass and stopped. Keys clattered; a door opened. Before I forgot the numbers, I calculated and logged the total time from the van to this door: *1.1 minutes, walking.*

I did not get the opportunity to inspect the exterior of the building we entered, but I pictured a white farmhouse. My captor led me immediately up stairs. *One flight, two flights...* Upon landing on the third floor, we turned 45 degrees left, walked three steps, and stopped again. The keys clanked. A bolt slid. A lock popped. A door creaked. He removed the bag and blindfold and pushed me into my confines, a 12' x 24' room, with no way out.

The space was lit by the moon through a high triangular window on the wall to the right of the door. To the front was a queen-sized mattress on a box spring, directly on the floor, but strangely surrounded by a wood frame with sides and slats and rungs and all. It seemed like someone ran out of energy or perhaps forgot the boards for the box spring and mattress to rest upon. Thus the bed was like a canvas that had not yet been secured, only rested crooked within its picture frame. A white cotton coverlet, one pillow, and a red knit blanket dressed the makeshift bed. Above spanned three exposed beams, parallel to the door: one over the threshold, the other cutting the rectangular room in two, and the third running over my bed. The ceiling was cathedral and so, with the exposed beams, one could surely hang—if they so chose. There was nothing else. Eerily clean, eerily sparse, a quiet hiss was the only decoration. Even a monk would have felt bare in this vacuum.

I went straight to the floor mattress, as he pointed out a bucket as a bathroom if I had “to piss or shit” in the night. The moon pulsed upon his departure, as though it too let out the air it was holding in its galactic lungs. In a brighter room, I flopped

backwards, exhausted, and schooled myself on my roller-coaster emotions. *From the van, you went from anxiety, to hatred, to relief, to fear, to nothing. Get even or you won't win this.* As with any of my experiments, I needed a constant, and the only constant I could have was steady detachment, which I endeavored to keep, along with copious doses of disdain and unfathomable hatred, if those ingredients were needed to maintain the constant. What with the things I heard and saw in my confinement, those additives were indeed necessary. And easy to come by.

If there is one talent I honed in captivity, whether seeded by divine design, by osmosis from having lived in my mother's steel world, by instruction from my father in the art of self-defense, or the natural instinct of my condition, it was akin to that of a great war general's: a steady, disaffected, calculating, revengeful, and even demeanor.

This level repose was not new to me. In fact, in grade school, a counselor insisted I be examined due to the administration's concern over my flat reactions and apparent failure to experience fear. My first-grade teacher was bothered because I didn't wail or jump, screech or scream—like everyone else did—when a gunman opened fire on our classroom. Instead, as the video surveillance showed, I inspected his jerky hysterics, slicks of sweat, pock-marked complexion, enlarged pupils, frantic eye movements, track-lined arms, and, thankfully, fruitless aim. I recall to this day, the answer was so clear, he was drugged, skittish, high on acid or heroin, or both—yes, I knew the symptoms. Behind the teacher's desk was her emergency bullhorn on a shelf under the fire alarm, so I walked over to both. Before pulling the alarm, I shouted “AIR RAID” through the horn, in as deep a six-year-old voice I could muster. The meth-head dropped to the ground, cowering in a puddle of himself as he pissed his pants.

The video, which placed the issue of my evaluation on the front-burner, showed my classmates bawling in huddles, my teacher on her knees imploring God above her, and me atop a stool, trigger-fingering the bullhorn at my hip, and hovering as though

directing the mayhem. My pig-tailed head was cocked to the side, my arm with the bullhorn across my baby-fat belly, the other up to my chin, and I had a subtle grin matching the almost wink in my eye, approving of the policemen who pounced upon the culprit.

Nevertheless, after a battery of tests, the child psychiatrist told my parents I was highly capable of emotion, but also exceptional at suppressing distraction and unproductive thoughts. “A brain scan shows her frontal lobe, which supports reasoning and planning, is larger than normal. 99th percentile. Well actually, frankly, 101 percent, if you ask me,” he said. “She is not a sociopath. She understands and can choose to feel emotion. But she might choose not to, too. Your daughter tells me she has an internal switch that she can turn off or on at any given moment to experience things such as joy, fear, love.” He coughed and said, “ahem,” before continuing. “Look, I’ve never had a patient like this before. But one need look no further than Einstein to understand how much we don’t understand about the limits of the human brain. Some say we have harnessed only a fraction of our potential. Your daughter, well, she’s harnessed something. Whether this is blessed news or a curse, I do not know.” They didn’t know I was listening through the crack in his office door. I recorded every word to the hard drive in my mind.

The bit about the switch was mostly true. I might have simplified things. It’s more a choice, but since mental choices are difficult to explain, I said switch. In the very least, I was lucky to have such a good doctor. He listened, without judgment. He believed, without skepticism. He had a true faith in medical mysteries. The day I left his care, I flipped a switch and hugged him.

They studied me a few weeks, wrote some papers, and my parents yanked me back into a somewhat normal world: I returned to first grade and built a lab in the basement.

* * *

Upon Day 3 in captivity—first day out of the van—we began the process of setting up a pattern. Three meals a day, served by

him, on that stupid china plate, milk in a white mug, small cup of water, followed by a larger, lukewarm cup of water. After each meal, he would retrieve the tray with the empty plate, mug, and cups and remind me to knock only when I needed the bathroom. If I did not get a response in time, “use the bucket.” I never used the bucket. I never used the bucket for relieving myself, that is.

From there, our developing process-setting was punctuated by a couple of visitors. Yes, I was blindfolded correctly for visits, so I did not then ascertain their full identities. But after what happened on Day 17, I set out to catalog all of the particulars so as to later exact revenge, not only on my captor, but also on my jail cell visitors. What to do with the people in the kitchen below, however, I did not know. But let me not get ahead of myself just yet.

My first visitor came on Day 3. Certainly medical, he had cold fingers. I labeled him “The Doctor.” My second visitor came on Day 4, accompanied by The Doctor, who announced, “She is doing well, considering.” In a hushed tone, the second visitor said, “So this is her?” I labeled him “Mr. Obvious.”

When The Doctor and Mr. Obvious left, The Doctor advised my jailer to keep me calm and to allow me tranquility. But nothing changed to afford me calm or tranquility until the end of Day 4 when I asked for Assets #14, 15, and 16.

And so, as the light began to fade on my fourth day in captivity, the floorboards again rattled. Through Asset #8, the keyhole, I noted the time, *dinner*. He opened the door and handed me the tray with the nonsensically-patterned plate, mug of milk, and cup of water. *Quiche and bread again.*

“Here.”

“Thank you.”

“More water?”

“Yes, please.”

Locks door, pipes clang, water runs, he returns: more water. *Why, why, why does he do this?*

He turned to leave.

With head to chest and in the most submissive, insipid voice

I could tolerate, I said, “Excuse me. I can’t really sleep and I wonder if this hurts...anyway, maybe if I watched TV, or listened to a radio, or read, or even drew, a pencil with some paper, would maybe...help?”

I braced myself for a brutal, verbal tirade and even physical violence for my insolence.

He stared me down, grunted, and left without acknowledging my request.

About forty-five minutes later, I heard the now familiar floorboards rattle. I figured he was back, as was the established routine, to collect my plate, mug, and cups. However, when he opened the door, resting on his wide chest, he carried an old nineteen-inch television, a yard-sale radio about twelve inches long, a pad of paper tucked under his left arm, and a rather long, plastic school-kid case. The case, pink with two horses on the side, was the kind you buy for the first day of school and lose in a week. I wondered if I was in a schoolhouse. *Must be abandoned if I am.*

“Don’t ask for any more shit,” he said, yanking my tray from the bed and causing the empty plate and cups to topple and clatter. On his departure, he slammed the door. Noises. Uncomfortable noises with him.

Tempering my expectations, I slid the zipper on the pink case, anticipating one dull and stubbed pencil.

No way. Not only two new pencils, but a twelve-inch ruler, and a pencil sharpener too. The black sharpener had the number “15” on the side. I took immediate stock of this valuable asset, which I labeled, Asset #15, specifically the razor within. *Asset #15 presents with its own label.* I smiled at the whimsical thought that the sharpener purposefully joined my plot, a faithful soldier reporting for duty, and determined “15” would form at least a portion of the name of my escape plan.

So as to make my captor feel appreciated for his effort, I plugged in Asset #14, the TV, and pretended to watch. Obviously, I didn’t really care about his precious ego, but these ruses we engineer

to trick our enemies, lull and rock them safely in their weak insecurities, until the time comes to spring the trap, pull the cord, and strike with the swift hand of death. Well, maybe not *so* swift, perhaps a tinge prolonged. *He needs to suffer, just a little bit.* I unhinged the bucket and used the sharp ends of the handle as a screwdriver.

Not one creature in the house or in the fields beyond surpassed my consciousness that night. Even the moon shrunk to a sliver of dawn while I worked the whole of Night 4.

He did not notice the subtle difference in my jail cell upon delivering my breakfast on Day 5, again on the offensive china plate. At lunch, I fought back a giggle when he asked if I wanted more water.

“Yes, please.”

He had no idea what lay ahead for him, nor the lengths I would go to impose my brand of justice.

* * *

I don't care what the news said at the time, I did not run away. Obviously. Why would I have run away? Sure, they were mad. They were furious, but they would support me. They were my parents, and I their only child.

“But you are an honor student? What are you going to do about school?” My father had asked.

They were even more baffled during the clinic visit when they learned I had hidden my condition for seven months.

“How can she be seven months pregnant?” Mother said to the obstetrician, even though her voice did not match the way her eyes accepted the undeniable sight of me.

In reality, I had not merely “gained some weight,” but had grown a perfectly round globe beneath my then swelling breasts. Embarrassed with her own self-delusion, Mother hung her head and sobbed. My father put a tenuous hand on her back, not sure what to do with the woman who rarely shed a tear. The doctor looked at me and pursed his lips, kindly though, and he changed the subject to the near future. “We'll need to see her again next

week. I want to run some tests. Please stop at the receptionist for an appointment.”

If only I knew then what I know now, I would have been more perceptive and caught the clue in real time. Instead, I was too wrapped in my parents’ disappointment to realize the duplicity behind the receptionist’s glare or the chlorophyll fog surrounding her misplaced presence. But I remember now; I had subconsciously logged this information at the time. As we approached her, the white-haired, tight-bunned woman with green eyes and false pink cheeks addressed only my mother.

“When did the doctor say she should return?” the receptionist asked.

“He said next week,” my mother answered.

My father hovered over the scene, sticking his head into my mother’s space; his legs dovetailed hers—they appeared a two-headed dragon.

Mother fidgeted with her purse with one hand and opened and closed her other around a non-existent stress ball by her thigh. The receptionist studied her appointment book.

“How about next Tuesday at two? Oh, wait, she’ll be in school, right? Prospect High?”

Mother hates unnecessary dialogue. Normally, she would have ignored, even sneered, at the irrelevant question about my high school. Normally, she might answer such a superfluous question with her own biting query, “Does it really matter where she goes?” She is volatile and has no patience for stupidity or people wasting her time. Ill-tempered, highly efficient, particular, methodical, and full of disdain, these are her qualities: she is a trial lawyer. But on that day, she was just a distressed mother, and she hastily answered the question as she fumbled through her date book.

“Yes, yes, Prospect High. How about three-thirty?”

“Sure. Let’s put her at three-thirty, next Tuesday.”

“Thank you.” Mother was only barely listening at this point, and she quickly shuffled me and my father out of the clinic. The

receptionist, however, continued to eye us, and I eyed her eyeing us. At the time, I thought she was collecting town gossip about an “unfortunate” teen pregnancy from a “prominent family.”

She had our address from my records, of course, and just learned that I did not attend any of the local private schools, which meant she knew I lived a block from the public school, which, in turn, meant she could correctly conclude that I walked to school, down a heavily wooded and rural country road. Like a wrapped gift, I presented as the perfect target for this scout. Behind her squinting eyes of cold calculation and her curled hooked nose, she must have set things in motion the second we left the clinic. Perhaps my memory betrays me and makes me imagine this, but in the pictures in my mind, I see her pick up a phone and cover her pink-stained lips to speak. In this picture, her green eyes never lose sight of my return stare.

Mother most definitely would have noticed my developing condition much sooner, but for the fact that she’d been gone for most of the prior three months, on trial, in the Southern District of New York. She came home one weekend, and I made sure to be “skiing with a friend in Vermont.” My father took the Amtrak once to visit her. I stayed at home, unattended but trusted, to do homework and complete lab experiments in the basement.

Don’t get this wrong, my mother loves us. We knew, however, my father and I, we’d be better off leaving her be when she was in “trial mode,” a state of war where she became consumed with tunnel vision in her one mission, winning the verdict, which she did 99.8 percent of the time. Good odds. Corporations loved her. Plaintiffs hated her. Investigative units of the DOJ, SEC, FTC, and the United States Attorney General’s Office considered her “the devil incarnate.” The liberal press routinely vilified her, which only served to increase her book of business and solidify her status as a rainmaker. “Wicked,” “unrelenting,” “indefatigable,” “ruthless schemer,” these were the words they used and which she blew up and framed as art for her office walls. Is she wicked? Personally, I find her rather soft.

My father would not have questioned my developing weight because he sees details only in miniscule and undetectable things, such as quarks and protons. A former Navy Seal-turned-physicist, he has a specialty in medical radiation. At that time in our lives, he worked feverishly on a book he was commissioned to write about the use of radiated balloons to treat breast cancer. As I recall, he, too, became consumed with tunnel vision. My mother in trial mode, my father with a publishing deadline. With this perfect storm of parental absence, my condition remained inconspicuous to their hurried lives. But, this is not about blame. It is about reality. I got myself into my situation. I and another, of course, created my state. And I have never regretted what some might call a “mistake.” I never would, but some might.

In the car ride home from the clinic, I sat silent in the backseat as long as I could. My parents held hands and consoled each other, without pointing fingers, in the front seat. I assumed Mother ached in her maternal guilt, and I tried to tell her that her career had nothing to do with my predicament. “Mom, I didn’t plan this, but trust me, it would have happened even if you stayed home and baked brownies every day. There is, on average, a .02 percent failure rate with the latex condom, and, well...” I paused because my father audibly cringed, but I continued nonetheless; after all, science is objective. “Biology will find a way, even with the smallest of odds. I’m still getting straight A’s. I don’t take drugs. I’m going to finish school. I just need your help.”

As expected, I received a litany of predictable lectures about disappointment, how unprepared I was for this responsibility, and how I had made my own life difficult at a time when I should be enjoying my childhood and focusing on finding a college.

“I just don’t understand why you didn’t come to me sooner—and how you chose to reveal yourself. I, I don’t understand,” Mother said, her eyes weak and dark with a depression I’d never seen in her. It was true, the manner in which I showed her my pregnancy was a bit, well, stark. But let me not get ahead of myself here.

I didn’t answer her anytime she asked why I hadn’t told her

sooner because, frankly, I didn't know how to answer in a way that would please her. When you often neglect to turn on emotions, you act on facts alone, on practicalities. And the bare truth was, I was factually pregnant and I did not think it practical to disrupt Mother's trial. I understand this may be hard to understand. Perhaps my story will help to explain, even to myself, my thoughts. My actions and inactions.

"We love you though, very much. We'll get through this. We'll get through this together," she said. She repeated this mantra, "We'll get through this," in mumbles as she coached herself to action over the remainder of the week. And, as she calmed, she went to her safe harbor: scrupulous strategy. At some point, she called her office and said she wouldn't be back until the following Monday. She collected the appropriate prenatal vitamins and turned the library into a nursery. I did whatever she told me to, relieved and grateful for her support and, in spare moments when I released and tested my fear switch, scared out of my mind.

On the Monday following the clinic visit, the day before my scheduled follow-up OB/Gyn appointment, I slipped into my lined, black raincoat and grabbed an umbrella before leaving for school. My backpack was stuffed with books, a pair of stretch pants, sports bra, socks, and change of underwear—all needed for an after-school yoga class I had not signed up for. It was a tiny detail remaining from my months of unintentional deception, one I had neglected to tell my parents, for I was taking yoga on advice from a maternity book I had stolen from the library. Bottom line, to anyone else who didn't know, it appeared as though I'd left with a change of clothes.

Nevertheless, I slung my backpack over my shoulders and hunched out the front door, where I stopped. *Damn, I forgot the flat tacks and hair dye for art class. Lunch too. I better bring two lunches, so I don't pass out from exercising.* Without closing the front door, I went back to our butcher-block kitchen counter, grabbed the tacks—a mega-pack from my mother's law firm sup-

ply room—and dye and dropped them in my backpack, which I'd thrown on the counter. I then made four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, threw them in too, and, because I didn't have time to parse everything, I also stuffed a whole canister of peanuts, a bunch of bananas, and a two-liter bottle of water. Look, you try being sixteen and pregnant. You get hungry, okay?

With the strained parcel on my back and my belly out in front, I looked like a terribly drawn circle with stick legs. I continued on my way, with poor balance given the weight on top, and stepped to our gravel driveway. At the mailbox, for some unknown reason, I was compelled to pause and look back at my house, a brown gambrel, shaded in a pine forest. Red front door. I believe I wanted to see if my parents' cars were both gone and to confirm they had returned to work—to their regular lives. Perhaps I found security in believing they'd continued their routines despite our familial upheaval.

At the end of the driveway, I had an equidistant choice of turning left or right: the back entrance of the school to my left and the front entrance to my right. I timed the distance once, going to the left took 3.5 minutes, and going right took 3.8 minutes, door to door. Really, the decision of going left or right landed upon my daily whim. My whim got it wrong on that Monday.

I turned right and continued under the canopy of my black umbrella in the direction of traffic. Fat raindrops pelted my cover and the ground around me, as though an airstrike began or the gunman had returned. Whenever I hear firing pounding like this, I think of first grade, so naturally, I thought of alarm bells and the blessed sight of policemen pig-piling a gunman. Distracted in this way and lost in macabre memory, I failed to notice the wet, hard, gray clay morning was a prelude, a herald of bad fortune.

Had I gone left, he would not have been able to pull the van alongside me to take me by surprise. He would have caused too much of a scene, for he had only about five seconds of roadway to haul me in, undetected. They had planned this out. Practiced, I believe. At first, I supposed they thought me worth their time.

A healthy, young, blond girl with a healthy baby boy in her belly. An American girl with high honors, from a wealthy family, and the prospect of a startling career in science. I had received awards for my advanced experiments, demonstrations, models, and reports. Every summer since the age of six, I went to science camps, and all year I entered private contests. With the help of my parents, I built a lab in the basement with state-of-the-art equipment. A store-bought microscope had no place in my world. My equipment came from the same catalogs used by major universities and international pharma corporations. I studied, I measured, I counted, I calculated, everything. Be it physics, chemistry, medicine, microbiology, I loved all pursuits requiring order and comparison, calculations, and provable theories. I was coddled in this hobby of science and indulged by busy parents with a surplus of money. MIT was a foregone conclusion. *My baby and I are very valuable*, I thought as the abduction occurred. To my great dismay, however, I soon learned a hard lesson: we were not wanted for brains or ransom.

About twenty steps into my morning commute, a maroon van appeared upon a whisper, masked by a clap of thunder. The side door slid open, and a pot-bellied man pulled me in from my left. Simple as that. Quick as that. He threw me on an armchair, which was bolted to the corrugated metal floor of the van. He jammed a gun so close to my face, the steel hit my teeth, tasting of an inadvertent bite of the fork, the one that lingers in your mouth. One car whooshed by, splashing the quick puddles on the pavement, oblivious to my plight. Instinctively, I crossed my belly with my arms. His eyes followed my action; he moved the barrel of the gun to my navel.

“You fucking move and I’ll put a bullet in that baby.”

Stunned to frozen stillness, I gasped and lost my breath. My heart even paused, despite the otherwise wild beating. I am not usually rocked so—only in times of serious shock might I be jolted, my heart set to race. For most of my confinement, I mastered this personal flaw. In the van, however, suffering the debilitation of a flash of emotion, I sat motionless as he pushed me forward,

yanked the backpack from my shoulders, and threw it to the floor beside my open umbrella. He placed the gun on an olive-colored stove, held in place on the opposite wall of the van by a series of bungee cords. Then he ripped my arms from my stomach and wrapped duct tape around my wrists and the arms of the chair. For some inexplicable reason, which I have not quite figured out, he turned a green oil rag into a sloppy blindfold. *But I've already seen your face. Your beady black-eyed, puffy face of patchy stubbles and poor complexion.*

I was taken that fast. I was taken for turning right. I was attacked from my left.

He closed the umbrella, flung it to the back of the van, collected his gun, and hunched his way up to the driver's seat. All of which I did not see, but felt or heard, in the micro-filaments in the air, in the micro-decibels suspended on fractions of timing. It is these subatomic particles that now crowd my memory in cycles.

"Where are you taking me?" I yelled to him.

He said nothing.

"How much do you want? My parents will pay. Please let me go."

"We don't want your money, bitch. You're going to deliver that baby for us, and I'm going to throw you in a quarry with the rest of you worthless girls. Now shut the fuck up or I swear I'll fucking kill you right now. I don't need any shit. Do you hear me?!"

I didn't answer.

"Do you fucking hear me?!"

"Yes."

And those were the facts. I put my foot on the backpack to prevent it from sliding away.