

Too Tall to Be a Hobbit, Too Short to Be an Elf

by

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Abstract



What follows is a memoir of obsession, escapism, and the Lord of the Rings.

For the first two decades of my life, I was fanatically religious. My interests, opinions, and desires were all determined by the fundamentalist evangelical belief system that ordered my rural town in Alabama—until, when I was seventeen, my best friend died suddenly in her sleep. When no theological framework could support a tragedy of this scale, the foundation of my faith began to crack. Shortly afterward, I began a bachelor's degree in biblical studies and theology, and as the pressures of formal study were applied over the next three years, my worldview eventually collapsed.

Debilitated by grief and depression, I grasped for the thing that had been my most reliable source of escape since childhood: the Lord of the Rings. A film adaptation of *The Hobbit* was already in the works in New Zealand, so I dropped out of college, sold my car, used the money to buy a plane ticket, and moved 8,000 miles away to be a part of it.

I arrived in Auckland deflated. For the first time in four years, I had enough free time to absorb the shock of everything I had endured—my friend's mysterious death when I was seventeen; my parents' divorce that same weekend; my family's alcoholism and drug abuse; the dissolution of my faith. As I navigated life in a new country, forming new friendships, learning the ropes of a new culture, I also began to grasp the extent of the harm I'd suffered under a certain kind of Pentecostal Christianity. I was told I could heal sick people. I believed I could perform miracles. I alienated all manner of people who cared about me in my pursuit of radical separateness, which I called holiness.

Of course, I experienced more than just grief during the year I spent in New Zealand. I also experienced deep care from people who barely knew me. I learned to accept help from others and, for the first time, felt the therapeutic effects of interdependence. And as I leaned head-first into my lifelong obsession with the Lord of the Rings, I had fun—making pilgrimages to filming sites, following the start-and-stop news of *The Hobbit*'s production, combing the internet for casting calls so that I could audition to be an extra.

The first six chapters of this memoir are included here, and they alternate in time between my life before college and my year in New Zealand. The chapters from before college chart my friendship with Brittany, my childhood best friend and accomplice in religious extremism. After her mysterious death the summer before our senior year of high school, I spent the next three days plotting a way to raise her from the dead. In the chapters that take place in New Zealand, I chase my dream of being an extra in *The Hobbit* while navigating the difficulties of life in a new country, trying to find a job, and coping with the cargo of trauma I'd carried with me across the Pacific Ocean.

The Lord of the Rings is a lifeline throughout. My obsession with J.R.R. Tolkien's books and Peter Jackson's movies developed when I was thirteen, and it sustained me through some genuine horrors in my life, both as a child in survival mode and a twenty-one-year-old who lost her grip on reality and tried to disappear into a world of fantasy. But despite my considerable efforts, I was not ultimately cast as an extra in *The Hobbit*. I was too tall to be a hobbit and too short to be an elf—the very picture of a woman straddling two extremes.

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To Jess and Jono

1.

I have a long history of obsession. Ever since I was a child, I've developed feelings of devotion for anything that elicits a strong emotional response. I crave the fervor: whipping love into a frenzy, feeling my emotions spike, giving myself over to exhilaration. Amassing so much knowledge about something that I shrink beside it. Fixating until my identity fuses with the object of my affection.

I experienced this for the first time when I was five, at a showing of *The Lion King*. I can't remember who I was with or where I was—whether we drove twenty miles to the nearest movie theater or if I watched it at a friend's house in my hometown in Alabama. I only remember that it moved me deeply. The feeling I had when rain extinguished the blistering embers of Pride Rock—like a knot inside my chest had burst apart, sending streaks of anguish, elation, and longing to every district of my body—made me want to swan dive out of my mind and disappear inside the movie. It had drawn these feelings out of me, heated them up until they gushed out like molten iron, and this amazed me. I understood instinctually that anything that could conduct emotion like electricity must be powerful, and afterward I felt reverent, overcome by a desire to dedicate myself to the experience.

And so I did. I wore a Simba and Nala fanny pack every day for the next two years, dragging a stuffed Simba toy by its tail behind me. Whenever an adult asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I told them I was going to be the voice of Simba. The truth was I wanted to *be* Simba—someone who eats bugs from a log, swings by a

vine into a lake, inhabits his destiny—but since I was a human girl and not a cartoon lion, I had to find a workaround. Voicing the character of Simba was the next best thing, I thought, since it would allow me to exist inside the tangle of TV show spinoffs, branded toys, and theme park attractions inspired by *The Lion King*. It would be my whole life, and in turn, I would be essential to its operation.

When I was seven, I left my stuffed Simba at a rest stop in Missouri, and I wept like a limb had been severed from my body. After that, the flame of my obsession dimmed for a while—but a sanctuary had been carved out inside me, consecrated by the experience of loving something so much that it made me ill. From then on, I always wanted something to fill it.

I found the next thing that would turn me inside out with yearning when I was eight, the first time I heard the Spice Girls. Before then, I had mostly parroted my brother's taste in music—Oasis, Silver Chair, Nirvana. He was seven years older than me and therefore a teenager during the late 1990s, with a butt cut and a profound love of alternative fuzz rock. Because of his influence, Weezer's *Blue Album* was the first cassette tape I ever bought for myself. I wrote in my second-grade yearbook that my favorite song was "Bullet with Butterfly Wings" by the Smashing Pumpkins.

And yet, the first time I saw five women posing in platform shoes in 1997, peace signs outstretched, wearing dresses constructed of less material than a bath towel, it electrified me. I loved their British accents, their pleather clothes, their distilled personalities. Baby Spice's persona especially resonated with me, probably because we both tended to surround ourselves with stuffed animals. For two years, I remade myself in her image, stockpiling lollipops and wearing knee socks with lace frills. I told my third-

grade teacher that my favorite donut flavor was Boston cream pie, even though I had never tasted Boston cream pie, because I'd read that it was Baby Spice's favorite flavor. I learned everything I could about her, studying articles on the dusty tile floor of the magazine aisle at Winn-Dixie while my mom shopped for canned green beans.

The best part—the thing that made it possible for me to imagine myself all the way into this fantasy—was that Baby Spice had four best friends, and so did I. At the lunch table at Hazel Green Elementary School, I lobbied for Brandi, Sarah, Kelli, and Brittany to adopt the other Spice Girls' identities, and after a little convincing, they agreed. For my ninth birthday, my mom drove the five of us half an hour away so we could spend an evening holding up peace signs in front of the carousel at the Madison Square Mall while my mom took pictures of us with a disposable camera. Instead of “Cheese,” we chanted “Girl Power” in a unified shriek.

Afterward, at a Dairy Queen that was attached to a gas station, we ate ice cream cake and opened a few presents. My favorite by a mile was the doll Brittany gave me—a miniature Posh Spice looking statuesque in a plum dress overlaid with black lace. I trembled as I peeled back the paper, eyes bulging, crooked teeth jutting into my open mouth. Brittany smiled at me from across the formica table, shy but gratified.

I had dolls of all five band members now, each dressed in animal print and glitter. I kept them in their boxes, with the miniature microphones and cellphones still suspended against the cardboard backing with clear twist ties. Instead of playing with them, I lined them up across the back wall of my closet like pastel monoliths. Then, across the carpet in front of them, I spread out a mandala of stickers, magazines, plastic rings, lollypop wrappers, and CD cases that I had collected over several months. Each week I arranged

and rearranged the pieces until they were symmetrical, straightening the row of postcards until they were perfectly aligned. Afterward I sat on my knees just outside the closet door and peered into my grotto, solemn.

That spring, the Spice Girls announced a North American tour that would crisscross the United States and Canada between June and August. One of their stops was Nashville, two hours north of where we lived in Hazel Green, Alabama, and from the moment this information entered my mind, it consumed me. I called my friends every afternoon and, when their parents answered the phone, pressed the receiver up to my mother's face. I leaned into the passenger's side window of their family car in the pickup line at school, asking again whether their mom had given it any thought. I bargained with my own mom, offering to sweep the garage, dust the blinds, and pick up the crab apples that formed a rotten ring around the tree in our yard. I don't know which strategy did the trick, but eventually one of them worked. In May, my mom handed me an envelope after dance class containing tickets to the Spice Girls concert at the Starwood Amphitheater—the cheapest tickets for the worst seats, and the best thing had ever been given to me. That night, Brittany, Kelli, and I initiated a three-way call on our cordless telephones so that we could scream.

I stayed the night at Brittany's house that weekend so we could plan our outfits for the concert—though I probably would have stayed the night even if we didn't have tickets to see the Spice Girls. We spent almost all of our free time together, walking through the empty field beside her house, doing our homework on the cranberry-colored carpet in her living room. We'd only known each other for nine months, but our

friendship was already outpacing the others, drawn inward by our mutual love of spelling tests and dolphins.

Brittany wasn't cool, but she emanated goodness. She wore oval wire-framed glasses, and her teeth were a little big for her mouth but perfectly straight. When she was backlit on the kickball court at school, the baby hairs that framed her face sprayed out like a halo, which was apt, since her personality was gallingly angelic. When the rest of us dressed up as the Spice Girls for Halloween and went trick-or-treating, Brittany's mom outfitted her in a feathery dove costume for their church's "fall faith" event. When we arranged our stuffed rabbits in what we imagined were sex positions, Brittany tucked her rabbit into bed and read it a story.

I didn't mind. I liked Brittany—the way her nostrils wiggled when she laughed, how her own stupid jokes brought her to tears—and I stayed at her house as often as her mom would tolerate me. At my house, I stayed shut inside my bedroom to avoid my brother, who would often get high and fill the house with the music of Pink Floyd. If I didn't lock the door, he would sit cross-legged in my doorway and ply me with questions about the government that I did not know the answers to.

Other times, I went to Brittany's to avoid my dad. He was soft-spoken with a dry sense of humor during the day, but at night he drank until he screamed—about how my mom's professional success insulted him, how nobody respected him, how he was going to kick somebody's ass. You could feel the air in the house change and crackle on nights when his mood was likely to detonate. Fear kept me awake, pumping me full of adrenaline until all I could do was lie in my bed listening for cues that I should call the police. Then, when the house got quiet after my dad had passed out, I would sneak out of

my room and circle the house, making sure the door was unlatched so that my mom could get back inside on nights when my dad pushed her into the front yard and locked the door.

Meanwhile, Brittany lived with her mom and older sister in a small yellow house that smelled like clean laundry. When I was there, I didn't have to study anyone's eyes to gauge the sharpness of their red blood vessels, or listen for that moment when someone's syllables began to blur together. Instead, we jumped on the trampoline in our bathing suits, painted our nails, and made pancakes. At night, I would drift off to sleep on Brittany's bottom bunk without even trying, lulled by safety and the strong smell of fabric softener.

On the day of the concert, Brittany, Kelli, and I crowded around the mirror in Brittany's one bathroom and combed our hair into high pigtails. I braided mine and wrapped them into buns, which Brittany helped me pin in place. Kelli parted her black hair down the middle so that it framed her face like Posh Spice's signature bob. All of us smudged white glitter eyeshadow on our eyelids and smothered our heads in hairspray.

At the Starwood Amphitheater in Nashville, we sat on beach towels on the grass near the chain-link fence. From that far away, the Spice Girls were the size of thumbs, teetering on platform shoes and hopping in synch on stage. Brittany, Kelli, and I were undeterred by the distance, and we used the extra room to throw our arms around, singing along with Sporty Spice that we wanted "a man, not a boy who thinks he can." It was a feeling unlike anything I'd experienced before—to celebrate your obsession in an open-air arena, drowned out by a thousand other sparkling children screaming like their lives were ending.

On the drive home, Brittany, Kelli, and I were insufferable, cackling about our smeared eyeshadow, talking over one another until the back seat was an unbroken wall of sound. We barely took a breath for thirty minutes, until the headlights in Brittany's mom's car went out, and all of us went silent. It was late enough that all the sun had emptied out of the sky, and we still had an hour and a half of curving through blown-apart mountains on the dark interstate before we reached Hazel Green. So we pulled off at the first exit with a Super Walmart and parked underneath a lamppost on the grocery side. Brittany's mom, Angi, walked inside toward the automotive department to see if anyone was still working, and Brittany, Kelli, and I took off at full-speed in the opposite direction.

We loved being at Walmart late at night, when all the respectable shoppers had gone to bed and only the stragglers remained. Whenever I stayed the night with Brittany on a Saturday, we'd inevitably have to go to Walmart at 11:30 p.m. because Angi had forgotten to get the glitter she needed for the Sunday school class she was teaching the next morning. Angi was always running late, always speeding down the backroads, putting on mascara in the rearview mirror and driving with her knees. Most of the time it stressed Brittany out, but we loved these chaotic late-night trips to Walmart. We loved to run down the empty aisles at midnight, bouncing marbled plastic balls and swinging body pillows shaped like fish. The next morning at church, we would nod off while eating Goldfish crackers in our windowless Sunday school room, delirious from lack of sleep and giggling all the way through the Bible lesson. Then, in the parking lot after service, we would reenact for all our friends the scene when a Walmart employee yelled at us for

climbing the shelves in the electronics department, beaming at our own misbehavior, forgetting everything we'd just learned about gentleness and self-control.

That night in the Walmart outside of Nashville, Kelli, Brittany, and I played hide and seek in the home goods department while Angi consulted a parking lot stranger about her car's battery. I was wearing lace-up platform Sketchers, which made it a little easier to clamor into an extra tall trashcan and lower the lid over my head. I waited a long time, shaking with silent laughter and wrapping my arms around my knees, until the lid flew back and Brittany let out a squawk. When I jumped up to see what had happened, I found Brittany lying on the ground, laughing so hard that her nostrils seemed to tremble.

"You scared me!" I said, standing just tall enough that you could read the word *SPICE* on my T-shirt.

"I didn't think you'd actually be in there," she said, bursting into a new fit of laughter.

"OK, well when you're done peeing your pants, I need help getting out of here."

Brittany lifted herself off of the floor slowly. Her too-long limbs reminded me of a flamingo, and the baby hairs around her face even looked like down feathers. I gestured for her to hurry up, and her eyes narrowed, suddenly mischievous.

"Whatever you're thinking of doing, don't," I said.

Brittany grinned. "Count to fifty before you come find me!" she yelled, setting off at a run toward the towel wall and tripping over her own foot. I could hear peals of laughter shrinking as they got farther away.

Eventually Kelli found me, and she helped me lower the trashcan onto its side so I could climb out. I was annoyed with Brittany, but not unamused. This was how she

was—irreverent, puckish, laughing whether the moment called for it or not. Kelli and I finally found her lying flat on the bottom shelf of the shower curtain aisle, tucked in behind two stacks of bathmats, and we agreed that this was the funniest hiding spot yet.

Angi's headlights flickered off and on for the whole drive home, even after the stranger in the camo hat had installed a new battery for her. Brittany, Kelli, and I slept in the backseat with our heads on one another's shoulders, only waking up every now and then to look out the window as the car plummeted through the darkness with nothing but fog lamps to light the way. When we got back to Brittany's house at around 2 in the morning, we changed into satin pajamas and made pallets on the living room floor. With our hair still in pigtails, we watched *Spice World* on VHS until images of women in sequin body suits danced behind our drooping eyelids.

The Spice Girls broke up two years later, at the end of 2000, and I mourned the loss all the way into middle school. I tried to fill the void with a few other things—most notably, a club in which Brittany, Kelli, and I pretended to be from the planet Venus and wrote a monthly newsletter called “The Venatron Chronicle”—but nothing quite took. I drifted through the seventh grade without a dependable conductor for my emotions, waiting for something new to flick on every light in my body and shock my system awake.

Then, in the winter of 2001, I found it. After years of starts and stops, of heating up and cooling down, I finally encountered something with the power to consume me.

But this didn't happen all at once. Being incinerated by an obsession takes time, and in fact, my very first viewing of *The Fellowship of the Ring* barely produced a flicker. I saw it on a field trip when I was twelve, in a theater full of middle schoolers

whose familiarity with the material depended on whether or not their dads had read the book in the 1970s. My dad had a bluegrass band and a pet rooster in the 1970s, so I had never heard of it.

What I remember most about that first viewing is the violence. I was an inherently squeamish seventh-grader, and I spent at least 20 percent of the movie turned backward in my seat. Even then, I could hear the metallic note of an axe each time it sliced into a monster's skull, and the sound made me flinch like my own life was in danger. This made Brittany laugh hysterically in the seat beside me, her glasses flashing in the light from the screen as she wiped tears away from her eyes.

I retained almost nothing else from the movie that day. As we streamed into the parking lot after our matinee viewing, the other kids reenacted battle scenes, their breath making white clouds as they swung invisible swords and died in slow motion. I didn't get it. Meanwhile, the girls discussed which characters they believed to be hott with two t's, but that didn't resonate with me either. I seemed to remember a short man with eyes like a cartoon bush baby, and a blonde man in a dress made of felt and leather, but I hadn't comprehended enough of the movie to have a preference. I rode the bus back to school in a daze, still confused about the difference between a Sauron and a Saruman.

That would change the following year. In November of 2002, our eighth-grade literature teacher told us that we were going to read *The Two Towers* together before the next movie was released. At that point, I still hadn't read *The Fellowship of the Ring*, and I couldn't imagine making time to read two whole books. So I asked my mom if I could rent the first Lord of the Rings movie to refresh my memory before I started the assigned reading.

The town I grew up in was sparsely populated and sprawling, with most houses separated by soy bean fields and cow pastures on either side. Every gas station sold live crickets, and the only video rental store in town doubled as a tanning salon. So after my ballet class that week, I waded through the tang of coconut oil at BJ's Tan and Video until I found what I was looking for. There on the VHS sleeve, leaning against the wooden shelf, was the image that would eventually be as familiar to me as my own face: Elijah Wood as Frodo standing in the center, glowering in a moss green cloak. On either side of him, Aragorn and Gandalf looking dirty but refined. Around them, a ring of other characters posing with weapons and long wigs—Galadriel draped in heavy white cloth and blond hair, the Black Riders frozen in mid-gallop. All of them shrouded in gold, amber, and olive drab.

I took the video home and waited until the following Saturday when I would be alone. That afternoon, once the rest of my family had left the house, I pressed the VHS into the thirteen-inch portable TV that we kept in my parents' bedroom when it wasn't plugged into the cigarette lighter in our van. Spread out on their floral bedspread, listening to our chihuahua bark at skinks outside, I hit play.

When Galadriel's disembodied voice whispered the first words of the film—*I amar prestar aen*—a chill swept up my arms. "The world is changed," she said, her voice deep and fluid, echoing out of a black screen. "I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air." She hissed this last line, and I turned up the volume. "Much that once was is lost—for none now live who remember it." A cluster of violins played an eerie melody, and hammered bronze words materialized out of the darkness: *The Lord of the Rings*.

For the next two hours, I held a tasseled throw pillow to my chest and did not move. When Gandalf's cart rattled across the bridge into Hobbiton, warmth spread across my chest and dripped into my stomach. Long grass swayed in tufts along the path he followed, and sheep grazed at mathematically perfect intervals in the background. A tin whistle lilted above crackling gravel, the sound sharp but honeyed, and children slapped the ground with their bare feet. I gasped when a dragon made of sparks exploded on the horizon at Bilbo's birthday party. When Frodo set off with Sam toward Bree, my shoulders inched closer to my ears, and they stayed there for the length of their journey to Rivendell, fleeing villains lit by burning torches.

By the time the Council of Elrond convened, my internal metric for how much velvet is a normal amount of velvet had shifted considerably. I had suspended my disbelief—surrendered it, really—and I did not want it back. I leaned fully into this world where men cloaked in velour decided the world's fate, until I felt myself tip forward into a beckoning chasm.

As the Fellowship darted around columns in the palatial caverns of Moria, orcs clamoring down each pillar like a swarm of ants, the edges of my vision darkened until all I could see was Gandalf's shining staff. Soon a new monster, tall and burning, emerged from the crack beneath the Bridge of Khazad-dûm, and my pulse quickened. My temples throbbed as they faced each other, and my chest hurt from holding in my breath. Finally—when Gandalf let go of the crumbling ledge, opened his arms, and fell backward into the abyss—a switch flipped, and I began to cry.

I cried as a single tear slid down Frodo's cheek outside the Dimrill Gate. I cried as Galadriel descended her treehouse stairs in Caras Galadhon. I cried as the Fellowship

paddled by Isildur's enormous stone toe at the Argonath. I cried as Sam and Frodo hugged wetly in a canoe. Some hidden capsule of emotion had broken open behind my sternum, and for those remaining seventy-eight minutes of the movie, I stared up at a TV screen no larger than a graham cracker and wept with abandon.

The sun had set by the time the credits began to roll, and I sat suspended in a solution of sorrow and yearning. I was afraid to stand up, sure that it would break the spell and scatter this feeling of total transfixion, of being transported so far away from myself that I forgot the conditions of my own life. So I sat completely still, watching hundreds of names drift past in white script, listening to a boys' choir sing as I pondered the fellowship, the quest, and the doom of Middle Earth.

After another five minutes, the phone on the bedside table rang. I answered it as slowly as I could, still sniffing as my mom asked how many eggs we had and if she needed to buy more toilet paper on the way home. I stood up and shuffled toward the kitchen to count the eggs in the refrigerator, and as I did, I returned to my life. But something inside me had shifted. I had crossed a threshold in the last three hours, and the door to my old life had clicked shut behind me.

The next day, my mom drove me to Books-a-Million, where I bought a paperback copy of *The Two Towers* with Saruman on the cover, holding his staff at a threatening angle. I read it over the next few weeks and understood only parts of it, which prompted me to rewatch *The Fellowship of the Ring* over and over, studying it for the pieces of information I had missed. Each rewatch yielded some new scrap of insight—about the horn of Gondor, about Bill the pony—until names like Celeborn and Glain lost their strangeness and became mundane.

By December, when my literature class took our field trip to watch *The Two Towers*, I was strung out on anticipation, nearly miserable with excitement. Watching it with my classmates was as close to an ecstatic experience as I had ever had, all of us clapping, cheering, and openly weeping in turn. When ents broke the dam that had been holding back the River Isen, flooding Isengard and forcing Saruman back into his black tower, we pumped our fists into the air, eyes shining.

My fanaticism escalated more quickly after that. For Christmas I asked for the extended edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* and a TV with a DVD player for my room. On Christmas morning, and every day after that, I shut myself in my bedroom and pored over hours of DVD features about costume design, sound design, and digital special effects. My favorites were “New Zealand as Middle Earth,” in which Peter Jackson stood on various hilltops in New Zealand, pointing at textures and landscapes that mimicked Tolkien’s descriptions from the book; and “Fellowship of the Cast,” about the actors fucking with each other during filming. I was fascinated by the intensity of the cast and crew’s bonds, forged through sleepless nights of carving wooden beams out of styrofoam and early mornings having latex feet glued over their actual feet. It sounded grueling, but everyone talked about it with a feverish enthusiasm that drowned me in jealousy.

I saw *The Two Towers* seven times in theaters that winter, most of them alone. That spring, I covered my bedroom walls in movie posters. When May arrived, I learned that the summer reading assignment for the incoming freshman class was *The Hobbit*, and I bought a glossy paperback copy at Books-a-Million. The day after finishing it, I

bought a boxed set of the Lord of the Rings. After reading all of them twice, I bought *The Silmarillion*, and I continued to read all five books on a loop that lasted for two years.

I still don't know why the Lord of the Rings hooked me the way it did. It may have just been the right timing, when I was still too young to be consumed by self-consciousness but old enough to make sense of words like *attercop* and *gainsaid*. During this window, I would wander into the woods behind my house with a portable CD player and listen to *The Two Towers* soundtrack while walking along a creek bank. Afterward, I would spend whole afternoons tying up the family computer by reading about the Welsh influence on the Elvish language of Sindarin. For our first foray into research paper writing in the ninth grade, I wrote nearly 3,000 words about the true identity of Tom Bombadil, quoting at length from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*.

Brittany and my other friends humored my latest fixation; several of them had read the books and seen the movies at the same time I did, as part of the same literature classes, and so they liked talking about it for a little while. But whenever I said something like, "Did you know that all the actors who were part of the Fellowship have matching tattoos except for John Rhys-Davies?" Brittany would sigh and say, "No. Did you know that the sum of all the degrees in a triangle is 180?" and wave the worksheet we were supposed to be doing. Everyone else had a limit—a point at which they wanted to move on to another topic, to season the conversation with other themes. I had no such limit.

I carried on this way until I was sixteen, collecting enough movie posters that I ran out of room on my walls and had to start hanging them on my bedroom door. The largest one, of Sam cradling Frodo's lacerated body on the slopes of Mount Doom, hung above my desk, and across the bottom I taped all eight ticket stubs from every time I'd

watched *The Return of the King* in theaters. Above my bed, Aragorn's eyes glinted the same color as the hilt of his sword. Next to my window, an enlarged version of the image from that *Fellowship of the Ring* VHS at BJ's Tan and Video hung in a thin black frame.

It makes a kind of sense that when the bottom fell out five years later—after my parents divorced, after they found Brittany dead on her futon mattress, after my grip on reality slipped—the Lord of the Rings sprung to mind as a solution. For nearly a decade, I had cherished it as something intoxicatingly comforting, a deep well of fantasy and that I leaned into headfirst whenever life was too harsh. I needed that kind of escape again, and as my mind roved for something sufficiently narcotic, I could think of only one thing.

From the moment the idea occurred to me, it took me about an hour to figure out how to apply for a working holiday visa in New Zealand. Five days later, I got an email from the New Zealand department of immigration saying that my application had been approved. Within three months, I had sold my Kia Spectra, used the money to buy a plane ticket to Auckland, and withdrawn from college. I submitted a leave of absence to my job at Target. I found someone to take over my lease.

Then, in July, I got on a plane and crossed the Pacific Ocean alone. My quest: to be an extra in *The Hobbit*.

Winter was just starting to fade in the Southern Hemisphere when I landed in Auckland in July of 2010. The flight from Los Angeles had taken fifteen hours, and I was seated next to a man who had read my palm within the first ten minutes. Every time I got up to go to the bathroom, I would return to find him holding my tiny airplane pillow in his lap. Taking it from him, I would say, “Oh . . . I thought you were asleep,” and he would smile as if to say, “I would never sleep in the presence of a woman.”

When we landed, the palm-reader gave me his number, assuring me that he had a very large stereo system in West Auckland. I crumpled the piece of paper at the bottom of my backpack and pushed my way into the stream of deplaners.

It was a Sunday morning and mostly quiet at the Auckland Airport. Outside of the terminal windows, I could see gray mist sweeping the landscape and turning everything a muted, wet green. The grass and the angle of the hills in the distance looked unusual, though I couldn't put my finger on why. A different geological, ecological story had rippled the ground here into unfamiliar textures and grown the bushes darker and more densely. Even as my mind registered trees, grass, sky, horizon, I couldn't fit any of them into the shapes of things I already knew. I stood still for a moment with my backpack over one shoulder, looking out the window while I waited for my consciousness to catch up with my body. I had crossed the Pacific Ocean in my sleep and was now 8,000 miles from home—closer to the Misty Mountains than the Smoky Mountains—but this

information had not yet traveled the electric pathways in my brain to the part responsible for belief.

At baggage claim, I found my flatmate Jessica, and we hugged without hesitation. In May, Jessica's pastor's secretary had forwarded her an email from his friend in the States saying that his son's friend's friend was moving to New Zealand and looking for a place to stay. It just so happened that Jessica and her husband, Jonathan, had a room to rent and were looking for a flatmate. So she sent me an email.

Originally I had been searching for flats in Wellington, New Zealand's capital and the headquarters for their film industry. It's where Weta Workshop, the special effects company that had done all the digital and practical effects for the Lord of the Rings movies, was located, and where all the actors had been stationed during filming. However, I'd had some difficulty connecting with locals from seventeen time zones away, so I eventually broadened my search to the whole country. New Zealand isn't very big—it has about the same surface area as Colorado—so if one city didn't suit me, I figured it wouldn't be hard to travel to another one once I got there.

Jessica and Jonathan Price were the only people who had responded to my queries about lodging, and as far as I was concerned, that made their offer perfect. They were a married couple in their mid-twenties who lived on the North Shore of Auckland in a three-bedroom house that was convenient to bus stops and markets. Jonathan was a dean at a high school on the North Shore; Jessica was an administrative assistant at Ernst & Young. Best of all, they wanted me to live with them.

Now Jessica and I were standing in front of each other, and so far, she seemed exactly who she had claimed to be. She was a few years older than me, with straight

mink-brown hair that hung below her shoulders, and her face was dusted with freckles that gathered into the cracks around her eyes. “Kia ora!” she said, and I smiled uncomprehendingly. It sounded like she had said “key aura,” which was a cryptic but not uninteresting greeting. “Can I grab one of those bags?” she asked, and I handed her one of my rolling suitcases. She gave it a tug and staggered under its weight. “Whoa, far out. You weren’t mucking around with this packing thing,” she said. Using context clues, I confirmed that, yes, I had brought a lot of stuff. I managed a smile, but everything she said sounded like English but inside-out, and I wondered if I was having a stroke.

“Did you bring a jumper? The weather’s pretty full-on today. Here, you can hold the broolly.” Jess handed me an umbrella, which I took, trying not to seem puzzled. Guessing about her first question, I pulled a sweatshirt out of my backpack before we stepped out the sliding doors and rolled my suitcases through what Jess called the “car park.”

“Jono was gutted that he couldn’t be here, by the way,” she told me. “He was really keen to come, but he had to take care of some stuff on the Shore this morning.”

I nodded, concentrating hard. “Oh . . . that’s ok,” I said, speaking over the sounds of planes taking off and the wheels of my suitcases rattling across the pavement.

When we got to Jess’s hatchback Subaru—which she pronounced with the emphasis on the second syllable, like Sbarro pizza—she popped the trunk, hoisted the first suitcase into the car, and said, “Here we are. You can just chuck it in the boot.” I stared at her, my mouth frozen in an open grin, waiting for comprehension to dawn.

When I had first announced that I was moving to New Zealand, a surprising number of my friends at college had asked me what language they spoke. I was

incredulous the first few times this happened. How had they never seen *Flight of the Conchords*? *Whale Rider*? The extended edition of the Lord of the Rings? If I pressed them on this, however, it became apparent that they thought New Zealand was somewhere in the Middle East, and I would wag my head. “New Zealand is in the Pacific Ocean,” I explained. “Yes, it’s south of Australia. Yes, they speak English there. Mm hmm, it was colonized by white people.”

I knew from videos I’d watched on YouTube that New Zealand had several slang words that were specific to their dialect of English—chilly bins for coolers, togs for bathing suits, jandals for flip-flops—but as a native English speaker, I thought I’d be able to understand most of what they said. Now I wondered if I had been wrong.

When I showed no signs of chucking anything in anyone’s boot, Jess reached over and loaded the second suitcase into the car for me. When she was done, she slammed the hatch and said, “Sweet as.”

My eyebrows shot up. “What?”

“What?”

“Did you just say sweet *ass*?”

“No,” she said, and laughed until her eyes closed. “Sweet *as*.”

“Sweet as . . . what?”

“*What?*” she asked more forcefully.

“Sorry,” I finally said, defaulting to my Southern manners. “I’m sure I’m just jet lagged.” I walked around to the right side of the car, but Jess remained by the hatch.

“Wrong side,” she said, just as I noticed the steering wheel through the window.

“Right,” I said, continuing my lap until I reached the car’s left side. Jess smiled but looked at me sideways as both of us climbed in.

We drove for about half an hour, and I couldn’t stop staring, mindlessly saying the names of things out loud as we passed—Takapuna, Ponsonby, Rangitoto. In downtown Auckland, we drove past the Sky Tower, which pointed into the air like an elongated Space Needle. It looked like a 1,000-foot-tall syringe jutting above the rest of the skyline, which was layered with steel and glass. As we crossed the Auckland Harbor Bridge, bright water stretched out beneath the overcast sky, and hundreds of boats lined the shore, bobbing in place next to white poles. Everything about the morning was cool and damp in a way that made me feel clean, even after spending fifteen hours soaking in other people’s breath. The world looked new in every direction, and it made me feel like all my frayed edges had been trimmed off.

As we got closer to Sunnynook, my new neighborhood, we passed cafes, Vietnamese restaurants, and a row of furniture stores. Leaving the main road with businesses strung along it, we looped around a roundabout, turned into a residential area, and drove deeper into the North Shore.

After a few moments, we pulled up to a small white house, set back from and at an angle to the road. I had noticed on our drive that none of the houses in Auckland seemed to face the road. Most of them were turned sideways, showing only a little sliver of their side. Jess helped me lug my suitcases up the stairs of their porch, which was painted cornflower blue, and into their lounge, where the air was almost as crisp as it was outside. The walls were made of knotty pine planks, sanded and sealed so that they shone like a jar of honey. We rolled my stuff across the carpet, down the hallway to the third

bedroom, which was empty except for a bed, a desk, and a small electric heater. There was a basket with a few kinds of candy sitting on the desk, and I picked up a bag of something called Pineapple Lumps and carried it with me into the dining room.

Jess turned on the electric kettle in the kitchen and then set about opening all the curtains in the lounge and dining room. She explained that most of the houses in Auckland were positioned in a way that allowed the windows to get the maximum amount of sun throughout the day, which must have explained the strange placement of all the houses we'd passed.

We each had a cup of tea, and Jess offered me some Marmite and butter on a piece of toast. "You've got to try it," she said, scaping what looked like tar across a piece of bread from the toaster. "It's really savory and nice."

She set the plate on top of the white tablecloth, and I picked up the toast slowly, making eye contact with Jess as I took a bite. It tasted like soy sauce and was the consistency of glue. "What did you say Marmite was made out of?" I asked, not really chewing so much as just holding the bite of toast in my mouth.

"Yeast!" Jess said, still watching my face for signs of delight. "You don't like it?"

"You *do*?"

"Well it's loads better than Vegemite at least," she said, taking the plate from me and biting into the toast herself.

I opened my bag of Pineapple Lumps, eager to get the taste of Marmite out of my mouth but a little suspicious of anything that would put the word *lumps* right there in the title. I took a bite. The chocolate on the outside was smooth, and it quickly melted off the candy and pooled on my tongue. Beneath the chocolate, there was a spongy piece of

pineapple-flavored candy that felt like a cross between taffy and a yoga mat. As I began to chew, the muscles in my jaw flexed and tightened, straining against the candy's memory foam texture. I thought about throwing the rest of them out when Jess wasn't looking, but after estimating that it would take around five hundred years for a single Pineapple Lump to decompose in a landfill, I decided against it.

"Oh, I just remembered that I brought you something," I said, setting aside the bag of Pineapple Lumps and walking to the bedroom. I returned with two mugs that I had picked up during my layover in Los Angeles, both emblazoned with a glitzy emblem of Grauman's Chinese Theater and the Hollywood sign.

"Aww, cheers," Jess said, looking them over. When she got to the bottom of one of the mugs, she stopped. "What's this?" There was a warning printed on a clear sticker: "CAUTION: This item contains chemicals known in the state of California to cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harm." I hadn't noticed it before, so common were these warnings on the things I bought in America. As I watched Jess's face drop, I realized this was not the case in New Zealand.

"Oh—that's nothing to worry about," I said. "They put messages like that on everything, but I'm pretty sure it's just for legal reasons . . ."

"Well, thank you for the gift," she said before taking the mugs to the kitchen cabinet and pushing them to the back of the highest shelf.

Jess came back to the table and wrapped her hands around her tea, steaming in a white ceramic mug that would not cause birth defects. "Tell me more about why you wanted to come to New Zealand," she said. "You mentioned in your emails that you wanted a break from uni, but why come all the way to New Zealand for that?"

“Yeah,” I said, and then hesitated. The answer to this question was complicated, and I wasn’t sure how much to reveal to a person I’d just met, who had graciously agreed to let me live with her for a year without necessarily knowing what she was agreeing to.

It was true that a large reason I had come to New Zealand was to get a break from school. In fact, when the idea to leave the country first came to me, it had been a way to procrastinate studying for a midterm. Three months earlier, at around 1 in the morning, I was sitting on my bed in Cleveland, Tennessee, already sapped from my shift at Target, which hadn’t ended until 11 p.m. I was still wearing my red polo shirt and nametag from work, though I had traded my khakis for pajama pants. Spread out in front of me were notebooks, loose leaf pages with smeared notes, and photocopied excerpts of *The Church Dogmatics* by Karl Barth. I had a systematic theology exam the next morning and an orange highlighter open in my hand, but my mind bucked each time I tried to ease it into the material.

This had been happening a lot lately. I was finishing up my junior year of a bachelor’s degree in biblical studies and theology, and I hadn’t had a night off in about three years. When I realized during my freshman year that I would have to take summer classes to complete both my New Testament Greek and writing minors in four years, I went ahead and signed up. I would be in town during the summers anyway because I couldn’t afford to take time off from my job—and because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. After I went away to college, both of my parents, now divorced, had moved away from the town where I grew up. There was now a room at my mom’s apartment in Nashville where I stayed when I visited, but it wasn’t my room. It was where everyone

stayed when they visited—my aunt, the bass player for my mom’s bluegrass band, a songwriting collaborator in town from Maryland.

So I stayed in my college town year-round, taking classes during the day and working at Target at night, routinely staying awake for 32 hours to complete papers on the grammatical syntax of 1 Peter. For the first couple of years, this breakneck pace made me feel invincible. Each time I waited until the last minute to begin studying for a Doctrine of Christ final, reviewing my notes all night and then rushing to class in the same Christmas tree sweatshirt I’d been wearing for two days, I would marvel at my own durability. I maintained a 4.0 GPA this way for a while, running off of food bank muffins and ambition. But eventually, I ran out of steam.

That night in my bedroom, I was trying to decide whether it was too late to turn things around. I hadn’t shown my face in my Koine Greek class in a month. Another class, about women’s portrayal in the Old Testament, had slipped so far out of my grasp that I’d lost count of how many assignments I was missing. I hadn’t turned in my Spinoza paper for my philosophy class either, and now my eyes were involuntarily closing when I tried to make them read the words “ontological foundations of predestination.” Maybe I had been born with a limited number of all-nighters, and that presentation about incarnational spirit Christology in the fall semester has used up my last one. Ever since that night, with its final push of endurance, its final glow of achievement, I’d lost my ability to stay awake until dawn memorizing the dates of the Avignon papacy. I don’t know what changed exactly; just that my sense of depletion had finally exceeded my drive to excel.

Truth be told, I had every reason to feel depleted. I put in 30 hours a week at my job at Target, collecting strangers' discarded Starbucks cups and refolding T-shirts in a Sisyphean loop. I spent around 16 hours of the week in class, copying down dry erase sketches meant to represent theological models of the trinity. And the rest of my time was spent on homework, usually in lieu of bathing, sleeping, or socializing. Of course, since I had stopped attending most of my classes that semester, I'd had more time for things like lying in bed and crying to Bon Iver, as was our custom in 2010. And yet, this had not made me feel replenished.

I yearned for an escape—something that would get me out of more than just this midterm. I didn't want to choose between sleeping and passing my classes anymore. I didn't want to choose between resting when I was unwell and making enough money to eat. On my desk at the foot of the bed, there was a stack of pamphlets from a number of seminaries and divinity schools across the country—Princeton, Candler, Gordon-Conwell, and others. My professors had been pushing me to attend graduate school after completing my bachelor's degree, and though I had begun to look into it, the thought made me weak with reluctance. More of this? *Years* more? I could think of almost nothing I wanted less.

Heat rose up my neck and into my face as I leaned on this thought, trying to push it out of my head. I didn't have time to worry about this right now. My exam started in seven and a half hours, and I had two months' worth of material to read and memorize. I forced my mind to narrow its focus, directing my panic into a stream that I could aim at a single object. But I could only form one thought, which rose in pitch until it buzzed in my ears: "I don't want to do this."

Exasperated, I thought, “What *do* I want to do?” and the answer echoed back at me with startling clarity.

“I want to be an extra in *The Hobbit*.”

Even in the midst of my panic, I had to laugh. I *did* want to be in *The Hobbit*—more than I wanted to study for this exam, more than I even wanted to finish this degree. For ten years, I had watched DVD footage of the production of the Lord of the Rings and squirmed with regret that I had been too young in 1999 to be a part of it. I would have done anything they’d asked—sew brass buttons onto vests in the costume department, wear full-body prosthetics as an Uruk-hai at Helm’s Deep—if it meant I got to be inside the tangle of wires and gears that moved this masterpiece I loved.

But the timing hadn’t been right. I didn’t even know what the Lord of the Rings was when they filmed it in 1999, and even if I had, my child-proofed AOL account and \$12 of birthday money from my Mimi wouldn’t have gotten me far. But it wasn’t 1999 anymore, and I wasn’t ten. More than a decade later, I was an adult with legal rights and wi-fi. I no longer had to languish in wanting, alone in my room. I could leave if I wanted. I could even go to the other side of the world, if the urge was strong enough.

I considered the timing now: I was twenty-one years old with no serious job, no relationship, no commitments that couldn’t be put on hold. Plus, after years of rumblings about whether a film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* would ever get made, rumors had begun circulating online about the movies’ preproduction. According to a news story I’d recently read, Peter Jackson, the director of the original Lord of the Rings trilogy, was going to write the script and produce the project, and Guillermo del Toro was

in line to direct. Many of the original actors were confirmed as reprising their roles, and the latest reports predicted a July start date for filming.

Seeing no possible downside, I applied for a New Zealand visa that night. I found a blog post by a guy in Wellington who gives tours of Lord of the Rings filming locations, and he suggested that anyone who wasn't a New Zealand citizen apply for the working holiday visa, which would allow them to have a tax ID number when it came time to work on the *The Hobbit*. He even gave details about casting calls for extras that were already underway, including the address of the studio in Wellington who would be casting extras. Pushing my systematic theology notes aside, I filled out the form on New Zealand's immigration website and hit submit.

That I had come to New Zealand to have a more beautiful setting for my nervous breakdown was embarrassing, but I was more embarrassed to tell Jess that my ultimate goal was to be an extra in *The Hobbit*. Back home, I'd led with the story about *The Hobbit* as a way to soften the truth about my tattered mental health, and my friends needed no other explanation. Together, my roommates and I would lie on our couch and enumerate my most elflike features: wavy hair that hung to my ribs; my long, straight nose and narrow face; fingers that stretched out in delicate lines; pale, slightly pink skin. I began to flirt with the idea of being in this movie as my destiny, and as my trip fell together—as a place to stay materialized, a buyer for my car came out of the woodwork, interlocking dates aligned—it even started to seem divinely ordained.

Sitting through my last month of classes, I daydreamed constantly about showing up for a casting call for extras and being *discovered* for having the unmistakable appearance of a Silvan Elf. While I demonstrated my ability to glide from one corner of

the room to another, the casting director would lean over and whisper in the ear of the person next to her. They would ask me to read a few lines for a character from *Mirkwood*. I would stammer about my lack of acting experience but ultimately give it a shot. The casting director would make a call. More people would enter the room, and I would deliver the lines again. Maybe they would ask me about my sword fighting experience (none), or maybe they would skip straight to writing down Fran Walsh's personal cell phone number on the back of a business card. I would have to have headshots made for the press release, of course. I would have to extend my visa. I would have to find lodging in Wellington, but by then, I was sure to have an assistant who could help with that sort of thing.

When my eyes finally focused on the dry erase board again, it would be full of sketches meant to represent theological models of the trinity, and the page in my open notebook would be blank.

I described these hopes freely to friends in Tennessee, but here in Auckland, I worried that the Tolkien stuff might carry a different weight. For people who lived in New Zealand, there was a sense of national pride about the *Lord of the Rings* being filmed in their country, but maybe there was exasperation, too. Nearly ten years after the first movie's debut, the *Lord of the Rings* was still all a lot of people knew about New Zealand, and I could see the novelty of it wearing thin.

So I decided to tell Jess just the bottom half of the truth—the parts I hadn't paraded across the internet or shared with most of my friends. I pulled my mug a little closer, trying to decide where to begin. "I did need a break from school," I said. "I

practically stopped going to classes this spring, and my grades got away from me. Actually, I failed two classes.”

“Is that unusual for you?” Jess said.

“Oh,” I replied, almost laughing. “Yes. I don’t think I’d even failed a quiz before this semester.”

Jess hesitated for a moment and then asked, “Did something happen?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it again. Finally, I said, “Not really. It’s more like, I got worse at dealing with the things that had already happened.”

She nodded and leaned on her elbow. Her face was expectant—maybe even nervous.

“I’m sorry. I don’t have a lot of experience trying to explain it,” I said, smoothing back my hair.

“You don’t have to explain it if you don’t want,” Jess said, still watching me.

“It’s nothing I’m trying to hide,” I said. “I’m just conscious of the fact that we only met today.” We each took another Pineapple Lump from the bag, and it got quiet for a while with both of us chewing instead of talking.

In truth, I was desperate to spill my guts—always a little too eager to feel seen, always talking over people in my impatience to be heard—but I had learned over the years that this urge did not endear me to others. I thought I should at least attempt to stifle the impulse, for the sake of politeness, but my leg started to jiggle under the table from the effort of keeping quiet. I chewed, wondering how much longer I could pretend to be reserved.

“Do you want some more tea? I think I’m going to make another cup,” Jess said, standing up.

“No, thanks,” I said, and then added, “My friend died,” as if it were part of the same sentence. Jess stopped and turned to face me. “She died in her sleep when I was seventeen, the same weekend that my parents got divorced, and then I left for college, and all of my family moved away.” Jess sat back down, careful not to set her mug on the table too hard. “Plus, everything I ever learned about the Bible has turned out not to be true, but I haven’t had time to consider all the new stuff I’ve learned at school because I work so much, and even though I work so much, sometimes I don’t have enough money to buy shampoo.”

“All right,” Jess said. She was holding very still, like she was trying not to spook a wild animal.

“I’m sorry,” I said again, touching my face and exhaling. “I know it’s a lot. But I promise that it’s nothing you need to worry about. All I want is to sleep for eight hours a night, eat three meals a day, and work one job for a while. That’s why I’m here.”

Jess considered this for a moment, twitching her mouth to one side in thought. “It sounds like you did need a break,” she said. Her brow was furrowed and soft now, and her gentleness put me at ease. “I guess I’m still curious why you couldn’t have taken a break in America.”

“Oh,” I said, suddenly realizing the gap in my story. I tried to think of another reason someone would travel thirty-two hours to an island whose dominant population was sheep, but after my string of confessions, my reflexes were dulled. “I’m a really big Lord of the Rings fan,” I said, tugging at the sleeves of my sweatshirt.

“Oh, you are? Hopefully you can get down to the South Island while you’re here. I think they do tours about the movies or something.”

I nodded, trying to appear casual but grinning. “Yes. I believe they do.”



Around lunchtime, Jess and I drove to her parents’ house on the west side of Auckland to meet up with the rest of her family. When we arrived, we rolled down a long, steep driveway and turned into the paved area in front of their house, which was tucked in behind another house that abutted the road. The Doughertys’ house, at the bottom of the slope, was two-story, white, and crowded by other cars parked around it—a lot of other cars, actually. I wondered briefly why one family would have so many cars, but as we burst through the front door, I quickly understood.

Eight other people were inside, all jostling, yelling across the room to one another, changing the channel on the TV, chopping things in the kitchen, and scooting more chairs around the table. “The American is here!” a man with gray hair said, and seven other smiling faces snapped in our direction.

Jess introduced me to her whole family at once—her two sisters, Abbi and Shayna, and Shayna’s husband, Mike; her two brothers, Tim and Eamon; their parents, Deborah and Patrick; and Jess’s husband, Jono. Most of the Doughertys were blond and fair, like Jess, except for her youngest brother, Tim, who was a few years younger than me with dark brown hair and broad shoulders. There were only eight years’ difference between him and his oldest sister, Shayna, and all five Dougherty siblings dotted those years in an even span.

Patrick, the man who had announced our arrival, and his wife, Deborah, approached me first, welcoming me to their home and introducing themselves as Pat and Deb. It seemed like this was the custom—to have a full multisyllabic name but be known by only one clipped excerpt. Already I'd gleaned that Abbi was actually Abigail; Tim was actually Timothy; Jess, Jessica; Jono, Jonathan; and so on. I was pretty sure I'd even heard someone call Eamon "Eamz."

Jono addressed me next. He was the tallest person in the room with tan skin and thick, dark eyebrows that hovered close to his eyes. He was in his mid-20s, and even though it was winter, he wore cargo shorts and no shoes. "I'm Jono, your other flatmate," he said in an ambassadorial tone. Jono spoke like a practiced figurehead because, as Jess had told me over email, he was the dean of a college on the North Shore. However, it would still be a few more weeks before I learned that this meant he was the principal of a high school, not the 25-year-old prodigy director of a university, as I originally thought.

After a few moments, everyone returned to their previous chores—Patrick looking for a particular Sky TV channel that was airing a rugby game, Eamon pulling dishes out of a cabinet. Two sliding doors along the back wall flooded the house with light, which spilled over a white tiled floor and worn cream leather couches. Jess and I walked to the kitchen, where we found Abbi spreading a number of cubes in different shades of purple, yellow, and orange across a baking sheet on the countertop. "What are those?" I asked, trying to match what I saw with my working knowledge of potatoes.

"Ah, this is pumpkin, and this is kumara—which I guess is like what you'd call a sweet potato," Abbi said, pointing first to the orange squares, then to the yellow and purple.

“You’re roasting pumpkin?” I asked, breaking into a grin.

“Yeah, that’s how you cook it,” she said. “How do you eat pumpkin in America?”

“We don’t really. It comes in a can,” I said, and Abbi burst into laughter. She had slightly rounded front teeth, and her eyes turned down at the corners when she smiled, which made her look jolly. “We usually make pie with it,” I went on, and Abbi laughed harder.

“Americans are funny. Here, will you put these in the compost bin on the bench over there?” she asked and handed me some kumara peels. I accepted them with both hands and then spun in a circle looking for a low wooden seat somewhere in the room. Jess put her hands on my shoulders and guided me to a small trashcan for food scraps on the kitchen counter, and I deposited the peels without understanding.

Before long, Jono and Tim closed the lid to the smoking grill on the patio and came inside with a tray of sausages. All ten of us squeezed around a large wooden table in the dining room and passed around the sausages, bowls of tossed salad, heaps of roasted vegetables, and, curiously, a plate of runny fried eggs. I sat next to Jess’s dad, Pat, who peppered me with questions. “What’s your first impression of the land of the long white cloud?” he asked, looking at me over the top of his wire-rim glasses.

I looked from Pat to Eamon, who was sitting across from me, searching for a hint. I was feeling more jetlagged as the day went on, but I suspected that my comprehension troubles went beyond my need for a full night’s sleep. “What’s that?” I finally asked.

“Oh—the Maori name for New Zealand is Aotearoa,” Eamon said, “which means land of the long white cloud.” He had the same long, rounded front teeth as many of the Doughertys and straight blond hair that hung across his forehead.

“That’s cool,” I said, cutting into a sausage. At the other end of the table, Mike and Tim were arguing loudly about tomato sauce. “Why do they call it that?”

Eamon thought for a minute. “I actually have no idea,” he said and let out a loud, unselfconscious laugh.

I laughed, too, but wasn’t sure if it was the right response. “Are the clouds here especially long?”

“Nope,” Eamon said and went back to his salad.

“Remind me, which part of Tennessee are you from?” Pat asked.

“I’ve been living in the eastern part of the state for the last three years,” I said, “but my mom lives in Nashville, which is in the center of the state.”

“Which part does the whiskey come from?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

Jess gave her dad a look from the seat on my other side. “Cheeky monkey,” she said, wagging her fork at him.

Everyone laughed, but I was still trying to determine if it was real question or not. I guessed that it was probably a joke, but I answered anyway. “You’re thinking of Lynchburg, where Jack Daniel’s is. It’s toward the bottom of the state—south of country music, east of the KKK.”

A few pairs of eyes flicked up at me, and I paused with a piece of purple kumara on the end of my fork. “Tennessee has beautiful forests,” I added. Across the table, Jono glanced up at Jess before looking back down at his plate.

Patrick cleared his throat. “And you decided to come all the way down to little old New Zealand, ay? Jess said you’re taking a gap year.”

“A gap year?” I hadn’t heard that term before, but unlike some of the other terms I’d heard for that first time that day, this one’s meaning was clear right away. “Yeah, that’s a good way to describe it.”

“I think it’s important to get out there and see the world a little before you’ve got too many responsibilities,” Pat said, dragging a sausage through the yolk of an egg.

“So do I,” I said.

“Tim here is thinking of taking a gap year in Canada before uni,” Deb said from farther down the table.

“My friend Caroline is actually taking a gap year in Canada with her partner right now,” Jess said.

“Her brother, Greg, is doing his gap year in Germany, isn’t he?” Jono asked.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Jess said. “And Sam is in Thailand.”

“No,” Abi called out from a few seats down. “Sam’s in Vietnam.”

“No,” Jono said, “Sam *was* in Vietnam, but now he’s in Cambodia.”

“You’re confused, old man,” Abi said, reaching for the tomato sauce.

“Begging your pardon,” Jono shot back. “I’m only five years older than you.”

“Well you’re already starting to lose it,” Abi said, tapping the side of her head.

“Abz!” Deb said.

“What?” Abi said with a mouth full of pumpkin.

My eyes bounced from speaker to speaker, struggling to parse people’s meaning. Everyone started talking over one another, yelling from opposite ends of the table, grinning while they teased each person in turn. I didn’t know how to act. By comparison, my family was small—just my mom, dad, brother, and me—and we typically only ate

together on holidays, even when we all still lived in the same house. I was used to stifled silence when family was around, to swallowing whatever was on my mind. At my house growing up, people's resentments vibrated just under the surface of every interaction, either cooling to depression or boiling over into anger when we were all together. Mostly I just tried to stay out of the way.

Jess's family was, to put it mildly, different. They wore their emotions on their faces, reacting in real time with joy and indignation. They disagreed, openly, without extinguishing the conversation. They got in one another's way. Maybe they didn't share every thought they had, but they certainly weren't suppressing their feelings. In fact, in the forty-five minutes that we sat around the table, I didn't hear one beat of quiet amid the bouncing sound of happy chatter.

I felt disoriented, like I'd been underwater for too long and didn't know which direction to paddle to find the surface. After swimming through a new culture all morning, reaching toward symbols, language, and norms that I couldn't yet interpret, I suddenly found myself in an unfamiliar culture within an unfamiliar culture: a family more oriented toward openness than secrets.

After lunch, the room went back to bustling as everyone took their plates to the kitchen, scraped their scraps into the compost bin, and took clinking porcelain mugs down from the cabinet. While everyone else talked and clamored, I crossed the room with a cup of tea and sat on the couch by myself, hoping for a chance to recalibrate. Between the time change and the onslaught of attention from nine jovial strangers, I was starting to feel scattered. My mind had been getting foggier as the afternoon wore on, and now I felt like I was suspended in jello. Sounds seemed muffled. My body was slow. I hoped to stay

awake until nighttime so that I could adjust as quickly as possible to Auckland's time zone—eighteen hours ahead of middle Tennessee—but I felt drowsy and full as I stirred sugar into my tea.

No one seemed to notice that I had excused myself, which was fine with me. There were so many people in this house already, and I was just one more mixed into the swarm. However, after a few minutes, Jess crossed in front of me to get something out of her purse hanging on a peg by the front door, and she smiled as she passed. As I followed her with my eyes, I got the feeling that she was checking on me, but I could only guess whether it was out of hospitality, curiosity, or concern.

Before I could fret about what sort of impression I'd already made, Abbi announced that it was time to go. There was a church service that night, and she, Eamon, and Jess had to be there early because they were playing in the worship band.

This sent a shock of anticipation through me. I was eager to experience what church was like here, curious about the ways a different culture might shape its liturgy and theology. I had already explored most of the traditions Alabama and Tennessee had to offer—Southern Baptist, Pentecostal, nondenominational charismatic—and had tapped them dry. I needed help imagining other options, and though I was reluctant to admit it, I felt hopeful that New Zealand might be able to refresh my expectations.

I had grown up Christian, but after three years of a theology degree, I had all but lost interest in it. I could no longer hear a preacher say something as simple as, “Everybody turn to your neighbor and tell them you're glad to see them in God's house today,” without a diagram erupting in my mind of all the historical, geographical, and political events that coalesced in that one sentence. Listening to a whole sermon was even

worse, my mind whirring the whole time, calculating each statement's subterranean parts. Was the speaker operating from a place of high or low christology? What level of textual inerrancy did their hermeneutics assume? Did they take historical context into consideration before presenting a particular verse as instructional for the congregation? Or did they read it literally, detached from the verses and chapters that surrounded it, isolated from its author's influences and context? What words did they use to speak about salvation? What expectations did they communicate for Christian community? Did they use masculine pronouns for God? What clothes did they wear? What songs did they select for the congregation to sing together? How many flashing, colorful lights were projected across the stage?

I didn't know how to turn off these thoughts once they began their chatter. It reminded me of how the churches I had attended growing up cautioned people against getting too much education. They said it would make it harder to have faith, as if faith and knowledge were two magnets that pushed each other away the closer they got. I found this outrageous as a teenager, and I judged the people who circulated this view. My youth pastor, who was a refrigerator salesman before he became a full-time minister, often articulated his gratitude that God didn't expect him to be smart or well educated to preach the gospel. I used to shift in the pews when I heard him say this and think, "What if I *want* to be well educated? Can't God use a mind as well as he can use a heart?"

I went on to study theology in college. I had always been a good student, and I believed it was my Christian responsibility to use the things I was good at in service of God. I also believed that most American churches were busted—preoccupied with membership rosters and bank accounts and buildings that broadcasted their inclination

toward domination. I wanted to instigate change, and I thought the best way for me to sharpen my critique was to study God under the florescent lights of a classroom.

Now that I was over halfway through my program, however, I felt embarrassed about the optimism with which I had started my degree. Education had eliminated my ability to believe anything with ease, just like my Baptist youth pastor had said it would. But something else had happened, too. As I dismantled the beliefs that had been instilled in me since childhood, I learned to recognize their composite parts. Suddenly, whenever I read a church's mission statement or listened to a worship song, I could identify the echoes of events that began thousands of years ago and branched off in a hundred different directions on their way to the present. The language people used, the verses from the Bible they emphasized, the way they structured their services—everything was heavy with inherited meaning, dripping with implications that I suddenly knew how to read after a lifetime of illiteracy. It was a powerful feeling, but one that made me ache with sadness over the loss of my ignorance. I understood now why people had cautioned me against this course of study, and it unnerved me.

When we arrived at the Auckland Girls Grammar school, where evening services for Every Nation Church were held, I felt cautiously optimistic. I sat in one of the rows of padded black theater seats toward the middle of the hall, looking down the slope of auditorium seating toward the stage where Abi tuned her guitar, Eamon twisted the cymbals of his drum set, and Jess played scales on her fiddle. A few people came up and introduced themselves, and we chatted about jetlag and Pineapple Lumps. More people trickled in over the next hour, until around fifty people had found seats across the theater.

When the music started, a tall Pacific Islander man with glasses spoke into a microphone on stage and told people in the audience to clap, which they did. Abbi strummed her guitar to an upbeat song, and the two backup singers jumped in place. I didn't know the song, but it sounded like something you could have heard on any Hillsong United album from the past twenty years. The lyrics projected onto the screen behind the band proffered a number of indistinct claims about God's goodness and strength. Afterward, the band played a second upbeat song, but one that was slightly more subdued. Finally, they transitioned to a slow song, which was everyone's cue to close their eyes, lift their hands into the air, and sway.

I sang along but kept my eyes open, looking around to observe how people moved their bodies to the music. A lot of people did the one hand on the chest, one hand in the air move. A couple women bent over with both arms stretched out to the sides, reciting private prayers. One guy waved both arms in the air like he was helping to land a plane. It was all tediously familiar to me. I tried to corral my thoughts before they scattered, but my stomach still sank.

When the music portion was over, people took their seats in a contemplative hush as a white man in a suit jogged up to the stage and situated himself behind the pulpit. He was in his fifties, with wavy gray hair and a smile that could sell you an extended warranty. He looked pretty standard, as far as preachers go, but I was still excited to hear what he had to say.

When he began to speak, my breath caught. "Good evening, everyone," he said, his o's pursed and his r's hard. This guy was American. "Isn't it good to be in the Lord's house tonight?"

His name was Pastor Ken, he said—like the doll, I thought—and he shared his hope that everyone had had a blessed time at that morning’s service. He’d just landed in Auckland earlier that afternoon, he said, because he’d been visiting family—in Tennessee.

I thought I was going to burst into tears, but instead I laughed. I couldn’t believe I had come all this way—to an island in the Pacific Ocean that is closer to Antarctica than it is to Hawaii—just to hear a preacher from Tennessee extol the benefits of tithing. I looked up to the metal rafters and breathed in deeply. For forty-five minutes, I listened to a white man in a suit talk about money in an American accent, which is something I had done so often throughout my life that hearing it now nearly put me in a trance.

After the service, Eamon bumbled over with an unphased grin and asked what I thought. I smiled weakly, but the optimism that glowed out of his face seemed to shield him from my gloom. “Pretty wild that he’s from Tennessee, huh?” I said.

Eamon looked over his shoulder at Pastor Ken, who was chatting with a tall Chinese woman I had met before service, and then looked back at me. “Oh, yeah. I guess that is pretty wild.”

On the ride home, I sat in the back seat of Jess and Jono’s Subaru and read the shop signs that passed by as we drove through the dark. Fish and chips takeaway. Tip Top ice cream. Chemist. Dairy. There was a billboard for something called L&P soda with the tag line, “World famous in New Zealand.” So much of it was unfamiliar to me, except for the glowing neon directive to shop, buy, and spend, which was the same everywhere.

When we arrived at home, I stopped in the driveway to listen. Birds were twittering in the trees outside my new house, even though it was dark out. Their melodies jumped up in pitch and then zig-zagged down before squealing upward again. The tone was metallic somehow, like the squeaking joints of a robotic bird instead of the fleshy song of a real animal. This, at least, was not something I had heard before, I thought, before climbing the front porch steps to go inside.

After the Lord of the Rings, I developed only one other obsession.

In a way, this obsession began before I was born, as an accident of geography. In Hazel Green, Alabama, being a Christian was equivalent to being alive. There were dozens of Southern Baptist and Church of Christ congregations in our town of just 3,500 people, and almost everyone attended one of them. In this way, I was a Christian before I ever recognized it as something separate from myself. I was born into it, swam through it, drank it in.

My mom grew up as a charismatic Christian, first in upstate New York and then in Huntsville, Alabama, where her dad took a job at NASA when she was thirteen. My dad's family was vaguely Methodist, though my dad himself was more interested in bluegrass and weed than God. By the time I was born, my family usually spent Sundays driving home from a gig my parents' band had played, hurtling down the interstate instead of attending church. Sometimes my mom tried to spring a Bible lesson on me and my brother, extoling the ten commandments to her captive audience in the back seat of the van; but for the most part, our religious identity was an amorphous undercurrent of prayers before supper and bedtime songs imploring the Lord to bless and keep us.

When I got old enough to stay home without my parents on the weekends, I went to church with Brittany. At first, going to church on Sunday morning was just the price of admission for staying the night at Brittany's house, but I soon discovered that I liked it. In the Sunday school rooms at Charity Lane Baptist Church, Brittany and I would eat

animal crackers and drink lemonade. We learned songs about forgiveness and stood on the burgundy carpeted stairs of the sanctuary to sing them for teary-eyed grandpas. Sometimes, after service, there would be piles of potato salad, sliced ham, and rolls set out on a plastic table cloth in the one-room annex. Watching over the potato salad were framed portraits of Jesus, always white, always dying, while women in beige pumps leaned down to help me with my plate. At home, my family rarely had any time leftover for me after sparring with their addictions, but church was full of people who looked me in the eye, called me “sugar,” and asked me if I wanted a deviled egg.

That was when love first took on the shape of church people, with their dowdy skirts and tight hugs. From then on, I accepted whatever thorny ideas about God that this church instilled in me because they were accompanied by macaroni and cheese and attention.

But that wasn't the only reason I embraced Christianity. I also found a comfort in rigidity that made fundamentalist religion feel natural to me. For most of my life, my world had been a violent and confusing place—where holes were punched through the drywall, where the police came but never helped—and religion organized my pain into a grid that I could understand. I loved the structure of doctrine, with rules I could learn, follow, and enforce. The first time I read about God's spirit sweeping over the waters in the opening passage of Genesis—hovering there until the darkness took on a shape, creating form out of the void, order from chaos—it made perfect sense to me why you would worship someone who could do that.

After a couple of years at Charity Lane Baptist, Brittany's mom decided to change membership to a bigger church with more young people and better music, and I went

with them. Compared to Charily Lane's musty hymnals, Bethlehem Baptist Church was slick. It had three services every Sunday morning, a gym, and a drum set on the stage. The pastor talked about building campaigns as often as he talked about the bleeding mortal wounds of Jesus, and every sermon ended with an altar call.

I would attend this church until I left for college, and most of my time there would be spent on benign youth group shit, following the annual cycle of an earnest church kid: Wednesday evening services in the youth chapel, making up hand motions to the christological lyrics; one week-long camp experience during the summer, spent doing volunteer work during the day and crying to emotional worship music at night; a few months of residual zeal, during which I might pray before eating lunch at school in an attempt to evangelize my classmates; then back to a state of spiritual equilibrium, hiding in the church bathroom during boring sermons so that Brittany and I could practice our handstands and discuss what we would order at the Mexican restaurant after service.

But as I got older, it became less benign. This is true for a lot of people who grow up in a conservative, fundamentalist Christian tradition, peddling that worldview, absorbing those corrosive ideas—that we are inherently evil, that our physical bodies are bad, that we shouldn't trust ourselves because our intuition is corrupted by sin. But in my case, it was more than that. If I had stayed the course of a regular evangelical upbringing, nurturing my fear of hell and my instinct to follow directives, I'm sure I still would have had plenty to regret once I outgrew it; but when I was 16, I turned a corner toward something I would regret much more.

It started with our church's dance team. The other churches in Hazel Green, the more traditional ones with velvet pews and a single piano, already labeled people who

went to Bethlehem Baptist Church as “Bapticoastal”: half Baptist, half Pentecostal. We were certainly more animated than the other Baptist churches in town, who had been slow to push the envelope since their founding in 1920. We even raised our hands when the worship band played a slow song, and we had a billboard near the highway that advertised this fact to the rest of town: “A Church Alive Is Worth the Drive,” it said, with a picture of a dove diving into an open Bible. This meant, you may have to drive a little farther to get here—past the Butter and Egg Quick Stop and that one trailer with an emu in their front yard—but once you arrive, the music will be too loud for you to doze off during the offering.

Having a dance team was considered eccentric for a Southern Baptist church, but Brittany and I loved it. We joined when we were in high school, hoping that we could use our formal training in ballet, tap, and jazz to glorify God on the weekends. During those years, we spent most Sunday afternoons in the empty sanctuary, pushing chairs aside to make room for our crew of teenagers and young adults to rehearse. The routines we learned were from a DVD that our instructor, Donna, had ordered from a place in west Alabama called the Ramp. We didn’t know anything about this place except that they also had a group of young people who danced as part of their worship services. Following their lead, we learned routines with names like “Stomp,” “Revolution,” and “Prophecy” and performed them at interdenominational youth rallies across the Tennessee Valley.

This was going well; our team was getting invited to perform for bigger audiences, and we were recruiting more kids from the youth group. So in the fall of 2005, Donna arranged a special trip for us to visit the Ramp in person and see the dancers who had inspired our team. We caravanned in two church buses from Hazel Green to

Hamilton, Alabama, for the Ramp's two-day fall conference in October. On the drive, someone said they'd heard that people spoke in tongues at the Ramp, which thrilled and terrified me in turn.

I thought I knew what to expect that weekend, based on my past experiences of souped-up youth conferences—but within fifteen minutes of being at the Ramp, I realized I had no idea what I was getting into. The building was a converted warehouse, dark inside except for a brightly lit stage at the front of the room, where college students in black clothes jumped and spun in circles until their shirts clung to their chests with sweat. These were the dancers we'd seen on the DVD, but instead of performing choreography in unison, they danced spontaneously, moving to the music in sporadic jerks and rhythmic hopping. There were no chairs in the audience, which I soon realized was to make room for all the people lying on the floor, rocking back and forth, jumping up and down, and screaming above the music. I didn't know how to interpret these expressions of worship, but they seemed authentically spiritual. At the very least, the people in the crowd seemed to know what they were doing, which put me at ease.

For the most part, I stood at the edge of the room and observed everyone else, giving myself time to acclimate. The kids on stage all had conversion stories about how they were drug addicts or sex addicts, Muslim or gay, before they met Jesus. They took turns sharing their stories into the microphone, their eyes blazing while the band played softly behind them. Jesus had set them free from a life in bondage, they said, and to express their gratitude, they jumped as high as they could and sent strings of wet hair spinning away from their faces. I didn't understand half of what they said or did, but I couldn't look away.

Compared to the formulaic services of our church at home—two fast songs and a slow song, a thirty-minute sermon, and an altar call—the unpredictability of these services at the Ramp intrigued me. During the Saturday morning session, a woman on stage began to pray for the Supreme Court and became so engrossed—yelling into the microphone, squeezing her eyes shut, slapping the ground with her hand—that everyone in the room prayed for three full hours, and no one preached. At the session after lunch, the sermon was short, and the service turned into an hour of laying hands on sick people to pray for healing. In the evening, the preacher—a man with a bandana tied around his head and tattoos crawling up both arms—stood at the center of the stage and bellowed, “The same spirit that resurrected Jesus’s crucified body is yours to wield.” I wasn’t yet persuaded, but I felt entranced by this possibility.

By the final service, I was emotionally pliable enough to try out some of the gestures I’d seen other worshippers use. I jumped up and down to the beat of a fast song, stretching out my arms and reaching into the air. When the music became slower and more intense, I bent over at the waist and, to my surprise, began to weep—racking sobs that made my body twitch and sway. This was the presence of God, they told us, and suddenly I believed it.

I had never experienced this kind of overpowering emotion in a church service before. I had certainly cried at the altar, but usually with one eye peeking out at what others around me were doing. At the Ramp, however, I became so overcome with feeling that all consciousness of myself and others evaporated. I existed for half an hour in a state of pure sensation, my chest vibrating from the music, my body wilting until it was flat on the ground. This, I thought simply, is something I could devote my life to.

That was all it took. Something new had stirred up my frozen emotions until they thawed and flowed out of me, and from then on, I would be loyal to it.

At the end of our time at the Ramp, the preacher commissioned us not to read our Bibles every day or to invite a classmate to church, like so many other preachers had done before. Instead, he instructed us to heal the sick, cast out demons, and raise the dead; to prophesy and have prophetic dreams and visions. These were all things Jesus had authorized his followers to do, he said. They were things we could do, too, if we believed we could—and now I did.

Afterward, at the Pizza Hut next door, I learned that Brittany had also been electrified by our pilgrimage that weekend. This comforted me. She was always more measured than me, smart and a little hesitant in ways that could make me think twice instead of running headfirst into whatever had most recently given me a good feeling. But this time she was running, too, and so I dove in without reservation.

For the next six months, I spent hours every week trying to re-create the ecstatic experiences I'd had at the Ramp. Mostly, I prayed—at home, at church, in my car, after hours at the dancewear store where I worked. Preachers at the Ramp had told us that any divine mystery could be unlocked by God's Spirit during prayer, and I took this message to heart. I prayed for myself—that God would drain me of all my thoughts and desires, leaving an empty vessel to be filled with supernatural power. I prayed for my church—that God would shake them awake, rip off the blanket, disturb their complacency. I prayed for my school—that the Holy Spirit would baptize my classmates in the fires of Pentecost. The only people I didn't pray for were my family—not even as my parents began negotiating their divorce, or as my brother spun out into a pill addiction. Maybe I

thought asking God to change them was too tall an order. More likely, I thought their troubles were their own fault, beyond God's help unless they took responsibility for the trail of wreckage scattered behind the storm of their sin.

People at the Ramp had also told us that prayer influenced world events. More than politicians, more than television or the internet, it was godly people committed to prayer that shaped the world's political and social realities. God could be petitioned to change his mind, they said, and in changing his mind, to change the world. But to achieve this, you had to be bold enough to approach him in the throne room of heaven and beg for what you wanted to see. Even if it was something that, in theory, God would have already been in favor of—like a spiritual revival at school, or the political will to pass godly laws—it couldn't come to pass without humans interceding between heaven and earth, like a line of people passing down buckets of water to douse the encroaching flames.

Brittany and I embraced this view—gradually at first, then all at once. Once we'd gone back to the Ramp a handful of times, using the \$7 an hour we made at our jobs to pay for gas, we stopped wasting our time on silent prayers for our classmates' salvation. Instead, we spent hours apiece locked in our bedrooms, praying for God to “shake the nation,” “send revival,” and “rend the heavens.” We prayed for presidential candidates to be elected, for Supreme Court cases to be overturned, and for blood to be washed from our collective hands. It was cosmic stuff—prophetic visions, declarations against evil powers and principalities. It felt good to wield that kind spiritual power after spinning our wheels playing air hockey at church lock-ins for so many years. It felt like we were finally doing something that mattered.

One evening that spring, we left our bedrooms and drove around Hazel Green in Brittany's Jeep Grand Cherokee, which was only a few years younger than she was, trying to think of somewhere we could pray together. We needed somewhere we could be loud, where we could double over and cry out if we felt moved to do so. There were other people at both of our houses that night—my dad drinking a case of beer in our living room, Brittany's mom watching TV and trimming her hair with finger nail clippers in their living room—so we couldn't go home to pray. I had been feeding a family friend's cats while they were out of town that week, and we talked about going to their house; but I couldn't remember if they said they'd be home that night or the next, so we decided not to risk getting caught.

We eventually drove to Bethlehem Baptist Church to see if any doors had been left open so that we could use an empty Sunday school room for a couple of hours. We circled the whole complex, tugging on every entrance that we came to: the door to the fellowship hall; the door to the brick addition where Sunday morning services were held; the door to the sheet metal addition where kids played basketball; the door to the basement where children's church was held. All of them were locked.

The last door we tried was under an awning where trucks could unload kitchen supplies for the café that sold hamburgers and hot dogs before Wednesday night services. Those double doors were also locked, but the lights on either side were still on, swarmed by June bugs that clinked against the glass. We decided to set up shop there. The nearest houses were a cotton field away, and there were no other cars in the parking lot, so it was as private as we were going to get. Brittany parked her car on the concrete under the awning and opened all of the doors so that a song called "Prepare Ye the Way of the

Lord” could pour into the open night. The singer was a piano player we’d seen perform at the Ramp and whose CD we’d bought at the gift shop. That night, he sang that the kingdom of God was at hand, and Brittany and I leapt into the air in agreement.

Then the police came. When we heard the gravel crunching, I leaned into the driver’s side of Brittany’s Jeep and turned down the music. The police officer parked his car in front of us, flashed his lights, and stepped out. “Evenin’,” he said, holding onto his belt and squaring his shoulders in our direction.

“Evenin’,” we said back, standing stock-still on either side of the Jeep.

“Your music is awful loud,” he said, his eyes moving between the two teenage girls in front of him. He looked like he was straining to make sense of what he had just walked in on.

“Yes sir,” I said, reaching up to wipe some sweat away from my eyebrow. My hair was in a ponytail, but after jumping up and down repeatedly, the hair tie was slipping down my back.

“The church was locked,” Brittany said. I could hear in her voice that she was holding in a laugh. “We felt an urgent call to prayer, but the best place we could find to pray was this awning.” She smiled, more insolent than friendly.

“I see,” the police officer said, still looking doubtful. “Do you go to this church?”

“We do,” I answered. “We’ve gone here since the sixth grade. We’re on the dance team. She sings in the choir.” I pointed at Brittany before realizing that she was still smirking and therefore that I probably shouldn’t draw any more attention to her. “Did you get a noise complaint? We tried to find a spot where we wouldn’t be bothering anyone.”

“No,” he said. “I was just patrolling on Elkwood Section, and I saw some commotion over here.” He looked at me for what felt like a long time, and I worried that he recognized me. If he patrolled this area of town a lot, it was possible we had met during one of the times the cops had come to my house.

“Are you going to tell us to go home?” I asked, clasping my hands together at my waist.

The police officer’s mustache relaxed. “No,” he said. “So long as you turn it down.”

“We will,” I said, a little too quickly.

The police officer climbed into his patrol car and pulled away, moving backward down the long gravel path. “Have a blessed night!” Brittany called after him, and then laughed out loud.

“Oh my god, what are you doing?” I said. Brittany leaned over on her knees as she laughed, and I grabbed the sweatshirt from the driver’s seat of her car, balled it up, and threw it at her. “I can’t take you anywhere,” I said, and then I started laughing, too.

That was how it was for six months. We prayed in grocery stores, in malls, and at school. We peppered our speech with Bible quotes until some of our friends stopped talking to us. Every few weeks, we drove two and a half hours to Hamilton, Alabama, to spend a weekend immersed in music, darkness, and a crowd’s worth of shouts. It felt like having all the nerves in my body plugged into the wall every time I closed my eyes and yelled on command.

Brittany and I did normal teenager stuff, too—when we weren’t crying for unborn children and praying against the scourge of pornography. The night before she died,

Brittany came with me to see a friend's band play in Huntsville, the nearest city thirty minutes south of Hazel Green. She was drinking a gas station cappuccino when she walked in, and she had just gotten a haircut—short, up to her chin. When we went to the bathroom together at the venue where our friends played DIY hardcore shows, she kept trying to fix the sections of hair closest to her face in the mirror. Finally, she groaned, stuck her head under the sink, and turned it on. I gasped, then stood with my mouth open as she dried her hair with the hand dryer, hitting the button to turn it back on every fifteen seconds.

“What do you think?” she asked as we walked back into the room where scene kids stood around talking.

“I thought it looked fine before,” I said, and she shoved me.

The next band was one we didn't like as much, so we left and ordered fried rice at the Chinese restaurant next door. Sitting across from each other in a booth, we argued about whether *Elf* was a good Christmas movie. We discussed the possibility of a pop quiz in calculus later that week. I told her more about the house my mom and I were moving into the next morning.

“Speaking of which—I probably need to head home,” I said, picking up the empty takeout box in front of me. “I'm not done packing my room yet.”

“Are you glad you and your mom are moving?” she asked, suddenly sincere.

I looked up at her, surprised. Her short hair was wispy and straight, and it caught the florescent light at the top of her crown. She had started wearing contacts a few years earlier, so I could see straight into her enormous blue eyes, smudged along the lash line

with mascara. “Yeah,” I said, looking back down at the table. “If anything, I’m annoyed that it took my parents this long to split up.”

“I don’t think I’d stay married to someone if I was miserable,” she said. “Do you think that’s, like . . . unholy?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so.”

Both of us stood up. She was taller than me by four inches, wearing an old T-shirt from elementary school and jeans. Sometimes it bothered me how beautiful she was, because looking at her forced me to think about my own crooked teeth and long nose. She’d been crowned the prom queen a month earlier, and when she walked up on stage in her coral gown, I remember thinking that her smile looked like one from a toothpaste commercial. I tended to bluster—to talk too much, to volunteer my opinions too loudly—but Brittany could just smile, and people would be on her side.

I wonder now how long it would have taken me to doubt my radical new beliefs if they had remained theoretical. In theory, I thought I could lay my hands on a sick person and heal them of their disease—that I could perform a whole roster of miracles. Plenty of seventeen-year-olds in Alabama did, and for them it might have been harmless, little more than misguided curiosity about the boundary between themselves and reality. But most of those other seventeen-year-olds probably never got a chance to put their delusions to the test.

Brittany and I walked to our cars, slung our purses into the passenger’s seats, and looked over at each other. It was May, and the warm night made us want to linger. Instead, we both waved, checked our mirrors, and cranked our cars. My CD from the

Ramp started playing, and I sang along to songs about God's mercy as I drove away into the second half of my life.

I slept for nearly my whole first month in New Zealand. It was the first time since the summer when I was 15 that I didn't have a job or any commitments, and therefore the first time in six years that I could lie down and sleep if I was tired.

And I was tired, body and soul, all of the time. Jess and Jono seemed to worry that something was wrong with me, but I assured them that I was entirely content—that, in fact, this was what I'd hoped for in coming here. Jono, whose expressive eyebrows often betrayed him, would wrinkle his forehead and say, "All righty."

I loved having time to sleep, but my dreams troubled me. Many mornings I woke up from the same dream about Brittany I'd been having for the last three years. In it, I would encounter her suddenly—turning the corner in her old house and finding her standing in the narrow hallway, lingering outside the room where she died—and realize that she had come back to life without telling me. I knew right away that she wasn't happy to see me; in fact, I got the impression that I'd caught her and spoiled a secret she meant to keep from me. After looking at me sternly, her eyebrows pressed down so that they brushed the tips of her long eyelashes, she would turn away. Perhaps it was a testament to our once-deep friendship that I understood from that one look that she was angry with me. We'd look into each other's eyes for only a few seconds, and I'd know that she didn't want to be friends with me in the second leg of her life, after the brief intermission of death.

No matter how much I slept, these dreams left me feeling more tired. For the first ten minutes of each day, I lay in a bewildered fog, staring sideways at the patterns in the wooden walls of my room and wondering what I had done wrong. I stayed that way, listening to the morning commotion outside my door as Jess and Jono rushed off to work, until the house was quiet again and I was alone.

Once I had the house to myself, I would slink into the living room, open my laptop, and check local news outlets and Lord of the Rings fan sites for any Hobbit news. Sir Ian McKellen said he now expected filming to start in January. MGM, the studio that held the film rights to *The Hobbit*, was still \$4 billion in debt. More rumblings about an Australian actors' union that wanted their New Zealand colleagues to join the fight for better pay and working conditions. So far, the reports remained the same: a setback following another setback, a snag after a snag.

The movies didn't even have a director anymore. Between the time I bought my plane ticket and the time I arrived in New Zealand, Guillermo del Toro had announced his departure from the project after 18 months of preproduction work, reportedly because he couldn't afford to spend any more time waiting out the never-ending delays. I began to wonder if I would eventually find myself in the same position. My visa was good for up to two years, but even if I extended my stay past the year I was planning to be there, I still wasn't sure *The Hobbit* would get made before those two years were up.

But I had more immediate problems to worry about. After reading about the latest cluster of production problems each morning, I would close my laptop, get dressed, and spend the rest of the day looking for work. About once a week, I took the bus downtown and handed out copies of my CV at the shops along Queen Street, wearing heels and a

pencil skirt in case I needed to make an impression. After a full day of returning disinterested smiles from women in blazers, I would climb back onto the bus, ride it across the Harbor Bridge, and then walk a mile home from my stop. My feet ached from marching on pavement all day, and my long ponytail would be tangled on the underside. Once I got to the small park between the bus stop and my house, I would take off my shoes and walk the rest of the way barefoot through the mud, black stiletto heels dangling in my right hand.

On the days I didn't look for a job in person, I applied to whatever retail and service jobs I could find online. I applied to dozens of postings, always clarifying that though I was American, I had a working holiday visa and a tax ID number. Just one place had gotten back to me so far—a cupcake shop in Ponsonby. Only after I had taken the bus thirty minutes across town to meet the owner did she ask whether I could make coffee using an espresso machine. My answer was no, which ended the interview. They sent me home after five minutes, with a strawberry cupcake as consolation.

In the meantime, I did some data entry work for a friend of Jess's dad, sitting at the dining room table with my laptop and making notes of the best names (Tofu Shalom and Willie F. Dicks) I came across in the pages of voting rosters. I had a little money left over from the sale of my car, which I hoped would last me until I could find a job; but if I didn't find something within a month, I would fall behind on the weekly rent I paid to Jess and Jono, and life would become decidedly more difficult.

One of the mallets that had driven me into the ground over the previous three years was a lack of money. I was tired of being broke—tired *from* being broke—and this feeling exacerbated every other difficulty I'd experienced. Back in Tennessee, I made

\$7.10 an hour at Target, which covered my rent, utilities, and internet, but just barely. I ran out of gas so many times, trying to wring every mile out of my fuel tank before I put in another \$5, that my brother got me a portable gas canister for Christmas when I was 20. When I shopped for groceries, I brought a calculator so that I could choose foods that would give me the most servings per dollar—a box of cream of wheat, a bag of rice—and so I could calculate the tax before I got to the register, to avoid overdrafting my bank account. I began visiting the food bank on campus to pick up a sleeve of bagels and a couple of bell peppers once a week. Whenever a college event offered free food, I was there, and if there was food leftover at the end, I took it. I got by this way for three years—but every morning that I had to eat a bag of Doritos that I'd stolen from a College Republicans event for breakfast, my heart sunk a little lower.

My financial precarity was made worse by the fact that my parents didn't have the resources to help me. After their divorce, it took a while for them to get on their feet again, and neither was that stable to begin with. I was closer with my mom, and therefore more likely to ask her for assistance. But as a musician, her income ebbed and flowed with the calendar and never seemed to surpass her debts—so I did not ask for help as often as I needed it.

Occasionally I did get desperate enough to ask her for money though—when, for example, a single unaccounted-for charge of \$1.34 at CVS set off a chain reaction of \$40 overdraft fees, and I woke to find that my checking account was \$100 in the negative. Once when this happened, I called her in a panic to see if she could help. She sounded strangely good-spirited as she said, “My account is already \$1,500 in the red. What's another \$100?” and sent it to me. I almost never asked her for help again after that.

I never asked my dad for help either. He was an accountant, and pretty good at managing money overall, but his drinking sometimes made it hard to maintain steady employment, and I never knew when he might have money or when he might be strapped. Once during my sophomore year of college, I drove to Alabama to visit my dad even though I only had enough gas to get there and didn't have enough money to refill my tank for the drive home. I'd felt bad about how many months had passed since I'd last seen him and how infrequently I called. I had stopped answering his calls after 7 p.m. because he was always drunk by then—keeping me on the line for long stories about the time someone gave him a joint laced with PCP or about the nuclear bomb drills they did in his elementary school—and this meant we now spoke even less frequently. So one Sunday when I didn't have to work, I drove to have lunch with him at his house, hoping this would buy me more time until my sense of guilt started to throb again.

Secretly, I'd hoped that my dad would give me money for gas without me asking—the way parents sometimes did with their college-age children, slipping \$20 into a care package, or sending them back to school with a sack of groceries. But once lunch was over and we had each taken a turn discussing our cats' latest goings-on, that seemed to be it. I told him I had better start driving soon, since my college was three hours away and I lost an extra hour because of the time change, and he walked me to my car to say goodbye. As soon as I drove away, I started to sob, knowing I couldn't make it more than an hour on the gas I had but too ashamed to tell my dad. I was afraid to be vulnerable enough to admit I needed help, sure; but more than that, I was afraid that even if I asked, I would discover that the help I needed wasn't available.

When I got to the center of town, I noticed that the Walmart near his house had its own affiliated gas station. My Mimi had recently mailed me a Walmart gift card, which I'd been using to buy a few groceries whenever my paycheck from Target ran out early, so I used that to put \$20 worth of gas in my tank. My heart pounded as the numbers scrolled by on the gauge and I realized how close I'd come to a desperate situation. How could I have come all that way without a plan for how to get back? What would I have done if that gift card hadn't still been in my wallet? These questions rolled around in my head all the way home, and by the time I reached East Tennessee, I had come up with half a dozen other solutions that allowed me to avoid asking my dad for anything.

It was occasionally nerve-wracking to be this self-sufficient, but most of the time I didn't mind being responsible for myself. Many of my friends' parents also made their kids pay for their own rent and gas—though more as a way to impart life lessons than as a matter of necessity—so I at least felt like we were all struggling together. But paying for school was a different story. My parents didn't contribute to my tuition, which put more pressure on my academic performance at school than most of my peers. I had a scholarship that covered all of my freshman year's costs and half of each semester after that, so long as I maintained a certain GPA. But by the time I left Tennessee, I had let enough assignments slide to lose my scholarship, meaning that if I returned to school, the cost would be higher and require more student loans. I tried not to think about this, needled by shame over how bad I'd let things get. Instead, I woke up every morning in Auckland, opened my laptop, and sent another email asking a boutique manager for a job.

In September, since I was still unemployed, Jess proposed that I take a break from the job hunt and come with her to Cambridge for the weekend, two hours south of

Auckland. Her family had played in a band together when Jess and her siblings were growing up—Jess on fiddle, Abbi on guitar, Eamon on drums, Shayna on flute, Pat on bass, Deb on guitar—and sometimes gigs still turned up for one or more of them based on their old connections. This time, Jess had been hired to play the fiddle at a Highland ball in Cambridge, and she thought this would be a good opportunity for me to see a bit of the countryside as we drove. I sensed that she didn't believe I was actually content lounging around in pants with a drawstring waist all day, and I suspected that she was just trying to get me out of the house. But I needed no convincing—especially when she added that we'd be staying with her grandparents in Matamata.

I sat up straight and peered around my computer screen at her. “That’s where Hobbiton is,” I said. The words come out in a loudish whisper, as I tried to contain my excitement but overshot my mark.

“Pardon?” Jess said, looking up from her date book.

I cleared my throat and added, “Hobbiton—from the Lord of the Rings. It’s just a sheep farm now—they took down most of the set after filming—but there are still a few pieces leftover from the movies, and you can see them if you take a tour of the farm.”

Jess scrunched her forehead. “You want to tour a sheep farm?”

I explained that when the New Zealand government first agreed to allow the movies to be filmed in their country, one of their stipulations was that afterward, everything had to go back to exactly the way the movie crew had found it before filming. Because of this, the original Hobbiton movie set was made of impermanent stuff like polystyrene and plaster, since it was never designed to last longer than a few weeks. After filming, the crew disassembled all the doors, windows, gardens, and fences that had

briefly transformed a rural family farm into a place where wizards blew smoke rings into the sky. They removed the hobbit holes' colorful Styrofoam facades first, leaving the plain white wooden structures underneath. Then, on the day the crew was supposed to return to finish removing these edifices, a rainstorm swept through, and so they didn't. Rather than rescheduling, the farmers who owned the land decided to keep the empty hobbit dwellings where they were, and they've been surrounded by loitering sheep ever since.

“You should book a tour for the morning after the ball,” Jess said, jotting something down. “You can go do that while I visit with my grandparents for a bit.”

I had the website pulled up before she had even finished her sentence.



We left Auckland the first Friday in October, less than a week before the first day of spring. As we drove south out of the city, the grass transformed into long, shaggy stuff that shook in the wind and shone along the steep hills—except on the slopes where sheep grazed, where the grass was parakeet green and cropped close to the ground. Patches of trees popped up scrubby and thick, and rocky outcroppings occasionally rose out of the earth like the bald, cracked heads of submerged giants. These stretches of scenery, in between little towns with multiple cafes each, had a mythical quality about them: shockingly green and so rippled that pools of shadow and sunlight got caught in the little dimples along the hillsides.

It was obvious why New Zealand had become our facsimile of Middle Earth. Looking out the window, it was so easy to overlay the view with visions of walking trees and dwarves riding ponies—which made it that much more upsetting that my morning

news survey had begun to uncover rumors about production for *The Hobbit* moving to Eastern Europe. Earlier that week, an international group of unions for people who work in arts and entertainment had put out a press release urging their members not to accept work on *The Hobbit*. Film industry workers and performers in New Zealand had struggled to secure standard rights and conditions since the success of the Lord of the Rings films ten years earlier—wages equivalent to their colleagues overseas, residuals on any productions they worked on, and so on—and union leaders thought that a high-profile project like *The Hobbit* would provide the best opportunity to negotiate better terms. But so far their tactic of barring New Zealand’s talent pool of craftspeople and actors only seemed to agitate Warner Brothers. In the statement Peter Jackson released in response to the unions’ advisory, he suggested that the movies would be forced to move offshore if they continued with their boycott.

At the time, I didn’t understand the importance of collective bargaining or the ham-fisted whims of American film studios. All I knew was that the fate of *The Hobbit* hung in the balance—and that because of this, there was a real chance I had moved to New Zealand for nothing.

We pulled into Cambridge at around 3 in the afternoon and parked at the edge of the town square. The Cambridge Town Hall, where the ball would be held later that night, was a tall, butter-colored building at the center of the square, bolstered by columns and stamped with half-moon windows beneath the gable roof. We followed the red brick sidewalk around its perimeter until we found a place to have a hot drink.

Jess ordered a cappuccino with cinnamon on top, and I ordered a pot of tea. We sat at a table outside, still wrapped in our jackets but warmed by the slanting sun, and chatted about my tour the next day. “Are you sure you’re ok to go alone?” Jess asked.

“Oh, sure,” I said, swiping my hand through the air. “It’s probably better this way. I can’t guarantee how I’ll react when I get there, and I don’t know that I want you to see me like that.”

Jess laughed. “You’re a pretty full-on fan then?”

I nodded slowly. “You should have seen my bedroom in high school,” I said, but stopped short. I was going to tell her about my movie poster collection, but as soon as I said it, the image flashed into my mind of me stuffing them into the kitchen trash at the house where my mom and I lived for a year after my parents’ divorce. The posters had been in the trunk of my car ever since the morning when I was supposed to move out of our old house but had to go to the hospital instead, after hearing that a MedFlight helicopter had airlifted Brittany from her backyard. I spent the rest of the day crying in the pediatric hospital waiting room, and I never got a chance to move the posters into my new bedroom. They stayed in my trunk for fourteen months, catching on the edges of the boxes I hadn’t yet unloaded and sliding around when I turned sharp corners. I didn’t open my trunk to look at them until I was packing my car for college the next summer, and by then, all of them were ruined: rained on, shriveled in the sun, and torn. I threw them away sobbing, folding them over and over until they fit into the garbage can. My mom was somewhere else that weekend playing music with her band, which had reassembled without my dad after their divorce, so I was home alone. My sobs echoed through the house, multiplying in volume because we had so few belongings now that everything had

been divided in half. Without enough furniture to absorb the sound, it bounced off of the old tile floors and rattled the glass panes in the windows.

“What about your bedroom?” Jess finally asked, and I snapped my eyes back to her face.

“Oh,” I said, trying to smile. “I just had a lot of merch from the movies—bookmarks and posters and magazines and stuff.”

“Far out,” she said. I poured more milk into my tea and stirred it quietly.

After finishing our drinks, Jess and I found the event organizers at the Town Hall, and they led us into a back room where we could change into our formalwear. Jess joined the band on stage so they could warm up, while men in kilts trickled into the large wooden hall and set up round banquet tables around the room’s edge. I found a chair in the corner where I could watch the glow of sunlight shrink behind the high stained-glass windows.

The rest of the evening was a blur of tartan and contra dancing. Servers handed out paper ramekins of haggis. Scottish flags hung from the rafters. People slid one- and two-dollar gold coins—embossed with a Kiwi bird on one side and Queen Elizabeth on the other—across the wooden floor to try and win a bottle of whisky. At one point, even more kilted men burst through the front doors of the hall playing bagpipes. The band played hours of jigs and reels, and Jess’s turquoise dress glinted as her arm sawed back and forth. I didn’t know any of the dances beforehand, but I was able to pick them up after a couple of eight counts, linking arms with strangers and moving in and out of the great circle of dancers dressed in plaid.

At the end of the night, Jess and I walked outside into the cold, still red-faced and dewy from sweat. We loaded our things into the back of the Subaru and drove away, comparing notes on the peppery taste of haggis.

It was late when we arrived in Matamata, but Jess's grandparents came out to greet us in their bathrobes, smiling and squinting through their glasses into the dark. Her grandfather, Basil, had fine white hair and covered his mouth with his hand when he introduced himself to me. As he turned to lead us inside, Jess whispered, "Granddad already took his teeth out."

That night we slept on pallets in the living room, which was trimmed with grandmotherly baskets, ceramic figurines, and framed photos of family members standing on a beach. I could just make out Jess's face in the yellow gleam of the hallway nightlight, pressed against her pillow next to me, smiling drowsily. As my eyes drifted closed, I couldn't remember the last time I felt this carefree, tired from dancing instead of work, resting my head against a pillow that someone else had set out for me. Tenderness was the last sensation that crept over me before I fell asleep.



The first thing I noticed when I woke up the next morning was how bright the room seemed. Jess was still asleep on her palette next to me, and the rest of the house was quiet. I felt around on the floor nearby until I found my phone—a pink plastic brick that Jess and Jono had lent me—and I flipped it over to see the time. 8:45. My Hobbiton tour departed at 9:30.

I leapt off the floor, and Jess rolled over. "What's the time?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

“It’s 8:45,” I said over my shoulder, already halfway down the hallway with my makeup bag in my hand.

The two of us thudded around the house for the next half hour, attempting to tip-toe while slamming suitcase lids, throwing clothes onto our mattresses, and digging around for our shoes. By 9:15, I had put on new clothes, redrawn my flaky eyeliner from the night before, and reconfigured my hair into the same shape it had most recently been in. I grabbed my coat, my purse, and a muffin wrapped in a napkin and stumbled out the front door at 9:19.

Jess’s grandparents lived about ten minutes from the city center, where the tour was scheduled to depart from. As I saw Matmata by daylight for the first time, the landscape was already recognizable as the Shire, even where it was dotted with vinyl-sided houses and bus stops. The hills rolled away in a familiar pattern, and the grass was noticeably brighter, warmed by spring. As I slapped on mascara in the visor mirror, I thought of my 14-year-old self, hunched over a keyboard in her bedroom, interpreting minute details in the background of a leaked photo from *The Return of the King*. I could only imagine what she would think of me now.

When we reached the center of town, we passed a sign that read “Welcome to Hobbiton,” posted next to a statue of Gollum sitting on a hunk of rock and clasping his hands. On the corner beyond that was the visitor information center: a Tudor-style house with a thatched roof, a stacked stone chimney, and a round, green front door.

Jess dropped me off at the curb. We’d made it with two minutes to spare, so before I hurried inside, I turned around and waved triumphantly. Jess grinned and waved

back with both hands. “Give me a shout when the tour is over, ay?” she called out the window, and I gave her a thumbs-up.

Despite the whimsical exterior, the visitor center had gray carpet and florescent lights inside. There was no one around, not even a clerk behind the desk, so I spent a few minutes browsing Hobbiton-themed postcards and thermoses, waiting for the rest of my tour group to show up—and for my heart to stop pounding. Maybe I was early? I knew I wasn’t. When two minutes had passed and no one else had entered the gift shop, I walked up to the front desk and said, “Hello?”

A woman appeared from the back room and seemed startled to see me. “I’m here for the 9:30 tour?” I said, as if it were a question.

“Oh, they already left,” she said.

“What? Why?” I looked at my phone “It’s only just now 9:30!”

“I dunno,” she said. “But the van already drove off.”

“I registered ahead of time,” I said, slapping my hand over my eyes. “Why didn’t they check the roster and see that someone was still missing? Why did they leave *early*?”

The woman’s eyebrows crept up her forehead as she looked from side to side, like she was checking for the nearest exit. “I’ll call the van and tell them to wait for you,” she stammered. “Do you have somebody who can take you to meet them?”

Without answering her, I fumbled for my phone and called Jess. “Come back!” I yelled into the small pink rectangle. “You have to drive me to the sheep farm!”

I huffed as I climbed back inside Jess’s car a few minutes later. Per the instructions of the woman behind the desk, we drove about nine miles and then turned onto a gravel road where the Hobbiton van was idling on the shoulder. “Let me know if

you encounter any more emergency clerical errors,” Jess said, and I gave her an exasperated look as I got out of the car for the second time and ran over to the van.

I climbed into the front seat next to the tour guide, who wore a Hobbiton Movie Tours hat over short blond hair. I barely concealed my resentment, but she just smiled and handed me a form to sign, saying, “Glad you could join us!”

As the van began to roll forward, I looked through the information on the piece of paper. Name, date of birth, contact information—and then, at the bottom, a nondisclosure agreement. It began, “The property you are about to enter is a working film production location. Everything here is the confidential trade secret and proprietary information of the film production company, 3 Foot 7 Limited.”

My head snapped toward our tour guide. “Why do we have to sign an NDA?”

“You’ll see soon enough,” she said, looking straight ahead.

I kept reading. “Information acquired by you here **must not be disclosed** by any **means to anyone** (including your family and friends).” There were restrictions around social media, restrictions around any photographs taken, and finally, a short contract binding the signee to a legal obligation of confidentiality for which they would be sued if they breached it.

What on earth? I thought. All this for a sheep farm with some leftover hobbit houses on it?

Almost as soon as I’d signed my name, our van crested the hill we’d been climbing, and everyone gasped. In place of a few faded white structures, a fully constructed town of hobbit holes flashed its brightly colored doors at us: red, blue, purple, and orange. Hedges ran along the outside of flowering gardens. A mailbox was

mounted at the end of each pebbled walkway. Garments fluttered on a clothesline outside a small gate. In one sparkling instant, I understood: *The Hobbit* was happening, and it was happening in New Zealand.

As we drove a bit closer, I could see that the set was still under construction—there were mounds of dirt and wooden beams lying in piles, and black tarps covered some patches of dug-up earth—but the amount of detail was already astonishing. Window boxes with herb gardens. Brick chimneys. Long green grass that swung from the earthen lip above each round front door.

The tour guide drove us down the slope to a gravel parking lot, and ten of us clamored out of the van looking astonished. Across a short stretch of grass, Bilbo's Party Tree rose up like a green mushroom cloud, next to the lake where Gandalf's draconic fireworks swooped across the water and exploded. On the other side of the lake, I could see the stone bridge that Gandalf crossed in his wooden cart when he first arrived in Hobbiton, next to a timber frame that was on its way to becoming the Green Dragon. When I rushed out the door that morning—so quickly that I would have forgotten my handkerchief, if I carried a handkerchief—I had no idea what was in store. Though even if I had known, it wouldn't have prepared me for the shock of excitement that lit up my body like I'd grabbed an electric fence.

Our guide walked us from site to site, telling stories from when the casting directors discovered this location and quizzing us with bits of Lord of the Rings trivia. "Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh's children have a cameo in each of the three movies, the first of which was filmed right here," she said, gesturing toward the Party Tree. "Does anyone know where they appear?"

I looked around at the other members of our group—middle-aged white couples with jackets tied around their waists, a man in polarized sunglasses, a college-aged woman in combat boots—but they remained silent. It hadn't occurred to me that a casual fan would go on a tour like this. I had assumed that everyone here would love these movies as furiously as I did, though there was no good reason for me to believe this. *The Return of the King* was the second-highest grossing film in history when it came out. Reaching that milestone would have required the participation of millions of people, both dedicated and indifferent.

When no one else answered, I raised my hand. "At Bilbo's birthday party when he's telling the story about trolls, in the caves during the Battle of Helm's Deep, and in Minas Tirith when Faramir is leaving to defend Osgiliath." I felt people's eyes on me—but where if not here, in the shadow of Bag End, could I air out the full proportions of my devotion without feeling embarrassed?

"What about Sir Peter Jackson's cameos? He appeared in each of the three installments, as well," the tour guide said.

This time, people looked at me before I answered. "Eating a carrot in Bree, throwing a spear during the Battle of Helm's Deep, and as one of the Corsairs of Umbar right before Aragorn gets the Army of the Dead to take over their ship."

"Right again," the tour guide said, this time sounding like I had stolen her thunder. They weren't hard questions—but I dared not say as much.

After that, we took pictures with the hobbit holes, and I noticed that the houses had been built out of real stone, wood, and bricks this time. Every beam was carved with carefully weathered angles. The curved bottom of each door was faded or muddy, as if a

hairy foot had been kicking it open at teatime every afternoon for a decade. I knelt down, rested my arm across a fence that only came up to my knees, and smiled impossibly wide for a picture.

At the end of the tour, our group walked across the farm to a metal barn at the far edge of a sheep pasture, and I jogged to catch up with our tour guide. “It looks like they’re making good progress on the set,” I said. “They must be close to filming.” I hoped that my American accent would imply that I was only visiting New Zealand for a couple of weeks. If she knew the truth—that I lived in Auckland and had set my laptop’s homepage to theonering.net—I thought she might be less forthcoming.

“Yeah, nah,” she said, almost laughing. “They’re so embroiled in studio discussions, they’re likely to discuss it right into the next decade.”

I took another look around. “But they’re obviously not going to film the movies in Europe,” I said, gesturing to the active construction site.

She shrugged. “The filmmakers don’t have the green light from the production studio yet. I think they’ve just got their fingers crossed.”

She branched off when we entered the barn, where a burly man in a tank top was standing on a small stage with his hands on his hips. Our group sat on wooden benches and looked on in horror as he brought out a live sheep, flipped it on its back, and wedged its head between his thighs so that he could demonstrate how to shear the animal.

Next, the man in the tank top walked to the side of the stage where a gate restrained two baby lambs, jumping on their hind legs like dogs waiting to be invited into the kitchen. “Here ya go,” he said and then tossed two bottles full of milk through the air to me and the girl in the combat boots. Milk splattered across my black peacoat as I

caught it, just in time for the gate to open and the lambs to bound toward us. I held onto the bottle with both hands, trying to keep it steady as one lamb sucked violently at the rubber nipple, sending white speckles through the air, across my face and his. When the milk was gone, he bounded off, bleating and kicking his back feet. We all trekked back to the parking lot covered in hay and smelling like a petting zoo.

Before climbing inside van, I turned and looked out across the fields and hills one more time. I wasn't sure how much longer I could afford to stay in New Zealand, and I worried no one would hire me and that I'd have to change the date of my return ticket and spend the rest of the year in my mom's guest bedroom in Nashville. That wasn't at all what I wanted—but if that's what it came to, I felt grateful that I'd gotten this chance to stand in a place I'd dreamed of since I was twelve.

One of the posters I'd stuffed into the kitchen trash had looked pretty much just like this, I realized—hedgerows and hills and little flashes of color where hobbit holes settled into the slopes. I'd cut it out of a magazine to fill a gap on my wall between Aragorn and Legolas, and I used to brush my hand against it every night when I turned off my bedroom light. I hadn't seen it in over four years. In fact, the last time I laid eyes on that image was probably the same day I last saw Brittany alive, right before I left my house to meet her at the show. I'd never expected to see it again. Now that I had, I was sad to be leaving it.

Standing on the van's running board, I took my digital camera out of my back pocket and took one more picture. Then I dipped into the back seat, slammed the door shut, and rode back down the gravel path to the real world.

On the morning of May 21, 2006, the day after eating fried rice with Brittany, I couldn't decide whether or not to go to church. I'd already missed Sunday school, but I couldn't make up my mind about whether I should skip the service, too, to give myself more time to drive all of my clothes, books, bedding, and tap shoes across town to my mom's new rental house. I'd already put a few things in my car—a garbage bag of dance costumes, a box of yearbooks, and my Lord of the Rings posters—but the rest of my bedroom was only half-packed when I woke up that morning. I deliberated, looking around at my now-bare bedroom walls, and decided I didn't want to miss seeing my friends or singing worship songs to slow-strumming guitars. So I changed into jeans and put on a T-shirt that read, "What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?"

When my phone rang, I was standing barefoot on the cold linoleum floor of the bathroom, putting on mascara in the mirror. It was May, already nearing 90 degrees outside, and the air conditioning vent was rattling on the floor. It was Kelli calling, my other friend who had gone with me and Brittany to see the Spice Girls. We'd remained good friends over the previous eight years, singing in the school choir together and going to hardcore shows, but lately we hadn't seen as much of each other. A year or so earlier, she'd stopped going to church and started doing pills with her boyfriend, so our spheres didn't overlap as much as they used to.

"Hey," I said, still swiping mascara.

“Has anyone called you yet?” Kelli asked. She sounded like she was choking.

I stood up straight and stepped back from the mirror. “No.”

“I think Brittany’s dead,” she sobbed, and I could hear spit bubbling in her throat.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t move. I just listened to Kelli cry and stared at my crooked eyelashes in the mirror until she had calmed down enough to take full breaths. If someone had walked by just then, I would have looked calm—the blank look on my face, the vertical line of my back—but inside, my heart had begun to pound.

Finally, Kelli told me what she knew. Her grandmother, who lived in Brittany’s neighborhood, had called earlier that morning to say she’d seen a MedFlight helicopter leaving Brittany’s backyard. As she stood at the window, watching the leaves from the tree line behind Brittany’s house whip around violently, Brittany’s mom, Angi, sped by in their car with Brittany’s older sister in the passenger’s seat. Once the machine gun sound of helicopter blades had faded, she called to see if Kelli knew what was going on, but she didn’t. Kelli called Angi, but she didn’t answer. She called Kristen, Brittany’s sister, but she didn’t answer either. Now Kelli was calling me because she and her mom were going to drive to the hospital to try and find out what had happened.

When I hung up, it took another fifteen seconds for me to realize that my hands were shaking. I finished putting on mascara, dug out a pair of shoes from a box in my closet, and threw my Bible in my purse. It was small, only about five inches wide, and had a green leather cover embossed with a leafy filigree pattern that reminded me of Lothlorien. That’s why I had bought it. Then I remembered that I’d bought it from the Lifeway store where Brittany worked, and I felt a sensation like a black hole opening in my stomach.

My mom had already left for church—not Bethlehem Baptist but a more charismatic congregation called the Oasis, one town over. My dad was still asleep. My brother wasn't there. So I brushed my hair, took a cereal bar from the kitchen, and left without telling anyone.

Kelli and her mom picked me up in their champagne minivan, even though my house was out of the way. We ran half a dozen red lights with the emergency flashers on as we drove the half hour south to Huntsville Hospital—stiff with fear one minute and squealing from the thrill of running a red light the next. Kelli and I were juniors in high school and hadn't yet been on the threshold of this kind of seismic change. We didn't know that when you are this afraid, it feels like excitement, and so we were surprised to find ourselves laughing instead of crying every time the van swerved through another intersection.

At the hospital, we sat in the waiting room as other people we knew from church trickled in. Donna, the leader of our dance team, was there, dabbing a tissue under each lens of her rimless glasses. Bethlehem Baptist's youth pastor, Lon, was there, too, running one hand over his dark mustache. We said hello but otherwise barely spoke to one another, looking at our shoes while sun poured in from the glass wall that faced the street. No one knew what had happened. So we shuffled from bench to bench and looked at old copies of *People* magazine, waiting for someone to tell us.

Angi and Kristen were in a private room down the hallway, waiting separately among throw pillows and dim electric candles. After about an hour, when the doctor appeared with his scrub cap still on, silently slipped into their room, and shut the door, everyone in the waiting room seemed to know what it meant. Even I knew, which

surprised me, since I had nothing but TV dramas to guide me. A moment later, Angi's screams echoed down the brightly painted corridor of the pediatric ER, confirming it. The rest of us covered our faces and made sounds like dying animals.

After the first half hour of crying, the mascara I had applied before leaving the house hung in dark circles below my eyes. I stepped outside every few minutes to call someone else who I thought would want to know—Brittany's ex-boyfriend, friends from our dance studio, friends from French class. And my mom. I called my mom every five minutes for two hours, and each time it rang the full five times before going to voicemail. This happened all the time. She left her phone in the car when she went to the grocery store; she turned it off and left it in her purse during movies. I had asked her many times what she expected to happen if there were ever a real emergency. "This is why you have a cell phone," I would say, wagging my own phone at her face. Now, standing outside the sliding glass doors of the hospital, under the awning where ambulances dropped off children on their way to the emergency room, I left a string of screaming voicemails, screaming at her for not picking up.

Everyone else in the waiting room made phone calls, too. We hugged. We expressed our disbelief. Then, after a certain point, we ran out of things to do. All of us had cried until the necks of our T-shirts were dark and wet. Brittany's family had been ushered through the swinging doors and hadn't yet returned. So with no other way to commemorate the fact that our lives had just changed forever, Kelli and I left to get lunch.

A new Panera Bread had just opened nearby, and we took Kelli's mom's minivan to see it for ourselves. It was crowded. The novelty of so many bagel flavors was still

fresh, since this was the first Panera to open in Huntsville, and the after-church crowd was particularly thick that day. Kelli and I slid between men in pastel Izod shirts to get to the counter, our faces gray and swollen next to everyone who was handing out smiling handshakes.

After we settled into an upholstered booth with our cinnamon crunch bagels, my phone rang. I turned it over expecting to see my mom's name, but instead it was Tiffany, a woman I'd become friends with through the church dance team. As it turned out, she had arrived at the hospital, along with several other people from our church, just as Kelli and I were leaving. "We must have just missed each other," I said. My voice sounded hoarse, and as I scraped cream cheese across the flat side of my bagel, I felt slow, like I was running in a dream.

My mind was half wandering, thinking about bagels, thinking about the chips of cinnamon sugar that clinked as they fell to my plate, when Tiffany said, "A group of us are about to go into Brittany's room to pray for God to raise her from the dead." I didn't say anything back. I only stared ahead, holding my knife with one hand, my phone against my ear with the other. Finally she added, "Do you want to pray with us?"

I still didn't say anything, but not because I was shocked by the request. My mind was still stretched tight by the events of the morning, and this new information poured over the surface but didn't absorb.

"I don't think I can," I said finally. "I'm at lunch. And Kelli drove."

"That's ok," Tiffany said. "You can just pray from where you are."

When I hung up, I looked across the table at Kelli, who seemed not to have noticed I was even on the phone. She was looking at her tray, and black tendrils of hair

fell down the sides of her face like when we were kids. The three of us—me, Kelli, and Brittany—used to do everything together when we were kids, and it always felt meant to be. When we were in middle school, we even realized that all of our initials interlocked. Brittany’s initials, BCK, were the same as the first letters of our three first names: Brittany, Christy, Kelli. My initials, CAL, were the same as the first letters of our middle names: Celeste, Anna, Leigh Ann. Kelli’s initials, KLS, were the same as the first letters of our last names: Keel, Lynch, Smith. If you stacked all of our initials on top of each other, it formed a block that was exactly the same whether you read it in rows or in columns. It was uncanny, and we spent years scrawling it onto our notebooks, signing it in each other’s yearbooks, and scraping it into the paint of the handrail at church—an emblem of our fated connection.

After Kelli stopped going to church, our threesome was reduced to just Brittany and me. We still hung out with Kelli at school, but I’d noticed that our distance had grown wider ever since Brittany and I started going to the Ramp. Kelli never articulated her exact feelings about mine and Brittany’s new brand of zeal, but she bristled at our sermonic way of speaking—especially at me, who lacked Brittany’s gentleness in delivering news I considered harsh but true. Gradually, she and I grew apart, while Brittany and I grew even closer.

Brittany and I were almost never apart during those last six months. On the rare occasion that I wandered around church without her, some old man from the choir would inevitably stop me and ask, “Where’s your twin?” He didn’t even have to say who he meant.

We also took a lot of road trips together now that we were sixteen, especially to the Ramp. Brittany's sister went to college at the University of North Alabama, which was only an hour away from the Ramp; so we would often sleep on her couch on Friday and then get up early to drive the rest of the way before service started on Saturday. It was all so new to us—speaking in tongues, prophecy, faith healing, intercession—and we didn't know where else to learn about these things. Plus, every time we went to the Ramp, God seemed to reveal something crucial about the nation's future to one of the preachers who had been invited to speak. It was like a beacon shone straight from heaven to Hamilton, Alabama, so frequent were these revelations among the Ramp's leaders. I thought maybe the atmosphere was more permeable to the spiritual realm there, burnished through hours of prayer, through worship that wafted up like incense to God's nostrils, until the veil between creation and God's presence became threadbare. Brittany and I were afraid to miss even one gathering, in case it meant missing out on a new disclosure about God's coming kingdom.

The previous December, we'd had an especially strong feeling about the Ramp's three-day winter conference. When Brittany and I talked about it, we described a mutual anticipation that became heightened when we prayed about it. God must be getting ready to do something momentous, we figured—and since we had sensed it ahead of time, we thought God must want us to be there.

The only problem was that tickets were sold out. They had been sold out for weeks, and no matter how often we checked their website, no new tickets ever became available. We waited for something to change throughout the first week of December, the second week, the third week; then, with only one week left until the conference, we

decided we would just drive there in faith, confident that if God wanted us to be there, he would make a way for us to attend.

That Thursday, we got into Brittany's green Jeep and drove the familiar two-and-a-half-hour route from Hazel Green to Hamilton. When we crunched into the gravel parking lot at 5 p.m., the sun had already set, and the sky was fading from slate to black. Brittany turned off the engine, and we sat in silence for a few seconds, listening to the disembodied clicks coming from inside the car's dash.

"What should we do?" she asked, twisting her earrings.

"I think you should go inside and talk to them," I said.

"Me?" Brittany pointed. "What about you?"

I thought for a second, running my tongue over my braces. "I'll stay out here and pray," I said.

She groaned, opened the door, and slammed it shut. The temperature was dropping into the 50s, and Brittany stuffed her hands into the pockets of her zip-up sweater as she walked over the gravel. I felt a little guilty, but I also believed that letting Brittany explain our situation would better our chances of success. She was pretty, with nice teeth and skin like a nectarine, and it was no secret that people listened a little more closely when she spoke.

After ten minutes, I saw her stomping back through the parking lot, swinging her long arms to help her balance on the shifting rocks. She climbed back into the driver's seat without saying anything.

"Well?" I said.

"They can't let us in."

“Did you tell them that God has been saying that we’re supposed to be there?”

“Yes,” Brittany said.

“Did you tell them that we drove two and a half hours?”

“Yup.”

I touched my mouth and looked out the window. “There isn’t *anything* they can do?”

“I talked to Lindsey, Ms. Karen’s daughter—she was the one working the sign-in table—and she said that she wished she could help but that if they admitted any more people, they’d be violating the county’s fire codes.”

I shook my head. “I really thought God was telling us to come.”

“Me, too,” she said. It was quiet for a while as each of us stared straight ahead, metabolizing our fallibility. On the other side of the Ramp’s nearest wall, a drum set boomed. Somebody’s voice bellowed out of the speakers, and hundreds of muted screams answered.

“What now?” I finally said.

Brittany shrugged. “Are you hungry?”

We drove the hour back to Kristen’s college town and texted her that we’d be arriving earlier than we thought. She replied that she wouldn’t get home from her shift at Applebee’s until later that night, and so Brittany and I went to the mall to pass the time.

We didn’t know how to make sense of the fact that we had misheard God, or at least that God had not responded to our act of faith when we drove to the Ramp without being registered for the conference. The two most important tenets of living a spiritual life, we had learned, were to be attuned to God’s voice, poised to respond to his

instructions; and to follow God's will with total confidence, since even a speck of faith could alter reality.

We thought we were embodying both of these principles that afternoon, but our reality had not been altered. Was it because our faith had been too weak? Was it because our minds had been too clouded by selfish desires to hear what God had actually been saying?

Without any answers, we resigned ourselves to spending the evening in a less spiritual milieu. At the Regency Square Mall, we ate hibachi chicken in the food court and, after laughing about the instrumental Kelly Clarkson cover that was playing over the speakers, started to feel less sorry for ourselves. We decided to play one of our favorite mall games, where we went into a store, found the stupidest looking piece of clothing there, and then gave it to the other person to try on. Dillard's was closest, and its clothes were so ugly that we spotted two potential outfits before we were even all the way inside. I made Brittany try on a clearance prom dress that was purple zebra print from the waist down, and she gave me a sweatshirt that said "Grandma Spoils Me." We made duck lips and snapped pictures of ourselves with my digital camera in the dressing room mirror, laughing so that I worried we were going to get kicked out.

By the time we left the mall, we felt lighter—still sad that we were missing Winter Ramp but at least less philosophical about it. Kristen said she still hadn't been cut from her shift at work, so Brittany and I drove over to the University of North Alabama's campus next, just to walk around for a while. We put on our jackets and strolled to our favorite fountain outside the library, talking about our respective futures, carefully

avoiding the fact of our separate college choices. Brittany hoped to go to this school like her sister. I planned to attend a private liberal arts college in East Tennessee.

Sitting on the lip of the fountain, Brittany talked about getting an apartment and choosing a major, and I listened silently, nodding and looking wistful. I felt an aching sadness that, if it had been any stronger, might have felt like happiness. Her face was lit from below by the spotlights in the fountain, exaggerating all of its dimensions. They were so familiar to me and yet so different from when we first met. Her face was sharper now, older, less curved from her cheek to her jaw. The only mark on her smooth face was a scar above her eyebrow from a bicycle accident when she was seven. I hadn't known her then; though now it felt like there had never been a time when we hadn't known each other. We had been friends for more years than we hadn't been friends, and I was afraid of our relationship changing during college. But neither of us said anything about that. We went on talking about life after high school, pretending that we couldn't see the fork in the road just ahead.

Sitting in the booth at Panera, I still couldn't grasp that our paths had finally veered. It wasn't the gentle swerve of growing apart that I'd already been bracing myself for—making different friends at school, visiting each other during the summer. Instead, the break was sharp and clean: an early morning MedFlight from her backyard; her mother's screams vibrating down a disinfected hallway.

Kelli and I didn't return to the hospital until after Tiffany and the others from church were done praying. Later I was surprised to hear that Lon, our youth pastor, had led the charge. Lon had a gospel-tract approach to saving souls—more Baptist than Pentecostal, not terribly concerned with the miraculous. But desperate times and all that.

When I saw them again in the waiting room, no one told me what exactly had happened when they circled around Brittany's hospital bed to pray for her to come back to life—though their silence made it clear what hadn't happened.

When it was our turn to visit Brittany's hospital room, I walked in front, with Kelli and her mom following behind me, holding onto each other's arms. I recognized Brittany's body before I reached the doorway—still familiar, even in its horrible new form. As I got closer, I could see that her face, neck, arms, and fingers were now blue, swollen from the hours they'd spent trying to resuscitate her, bloated with strangers' breath. Angi lay beside her in the half-reclined hospital bed, and mascara ran in stripes across both Angi's and Brittany's cheeks. She had one arm wrapped around Brittany's torso and the other was petting her hair. I thought Angi must have been petting it for a long time because it looked greasy. When I'd seen Brittany the night before, her hair had been glossy and fine.

Angi lifted her head, and when she saw it was me and Kelli at the door, her face crumpled. She waved for me to come in, but I didn't want to get any closer. I still didn't know why Brittany hadn't woken up that morning, and I was suddenly petrified—that someone could go to sleep and never wake up again, that death could make their face puff up, make their neck bulge, make their arms dangle like untwisted balloon animals, make the flesh around their purity ring inflate until you couldn't see the silver anymore. Angi whispered, "Girls. Girls," reaching out to me with the arm that was under Brittany's back. The movement made Brittany's body jostle softly, her head lolling from left to right before settling in the center again, and the shock of it made me burst into tears.

A florescent light flickered above the bed. Brittany looked so soft, like if you pressed your thumb into her forearm, it would leave a sunken bruise. At the thought of touching her, the room seemed to tilt, and I grabbed the edge of the door to steady myself. Someone put their hand on my back to brace me, or maybe to push me forward, but I couldn't move. I wanted to scream—to release some of the terror that had clamped down on my neck, making my throat grip the air like a closed fist—but all I could do was open my mouth in a silent wail. I covered my eyes with one hand, bent at the waist, and gripped the door. Kelli and her mom moved around me whimpering, while I stood alone and cried.

I've only been inside a hospital a few times in my life. The earliest was when I was eleven, the first time my older brother almost died. He had been drunk and high, driving home at three in the morning, when he flipped his truck eight times across four lanes of traffic. By the time my parents took me to see him, he'd already spent several days in the NICU with staples in his head. The gash at the top of his skull was still caked in dark blood, and his body looked tie-dye from the bruising. But his eyes were what frightened me the most. The parts that should have been white were hot red where all the blood vessels had burst, and tears were leaking onto the pillow that propped up his swollen head. In the doorway, my mom put her hands on my shoulders and pushed me forward while I squirmed and tried to turn away. Every time I looked at my brother's face, all I could see were his pupils, staring out at me like the black hearts of red field poppies.

That was the point at which my parents lost control of him. They didn't know what to do about it except to scream at him, to call the police when he fought back, to lock up their instruments and jewelry. If they'd had the money, maybe they could have sent him to rehab. Instead, my brother sunk deeper into opiates, psychedelics, meth—forms of boredom that spread like bamboo through rural Alabama in the early 2000s.

My brother went to the emergency room again a couple years later, when he wrecked his motorcycle and got third-degree burns on his leg from the engine—though I didn't visit him in the hospital that time. Nor the time after that, when he made himself

faint while sitting on top of a stack of tumbling mats at school and fell six feet to the polished gym floor. Nor the time after that, when he broke a toilet tank while he was drunk and sliced his hand open on the porcelain.

When I was eighteen and he was twenty-five, he almost died a second time. He had stolen my dad's motorcycle while on pills, and he wrecked it, breaking his back. It was the last week of my senior year of high school, almost exactly a year after Brittany had died, and I couldn't bring myself to go back to the emergency room so soon after seeing her corpse slumped over on the inclined hospital bed. So instead of visiting my brother, I finished my final exams, turned in my literary analysis of *Fear and Trembling*, and went home.

In all that time, I never went to the hospital for an injury of my own. After watching my brother chart his fucked up, zig-zag path to adulthood, it sapped any curiosity I might have had about drugs, alcohol, or exceeding the speed limit. Not only was that kind of behavior dangerous for the person whose body could be rolled like dice across the pavement, I learned, but it threw everyone else's lives into disarray, too. My parents were always yelling at my brother when he stumbled home in the middle of the night—demanding to know where he'd been, what he was on, why he kept trying to die. They had to miss work to take my brother to the doctor. They had to buy clippers to shave his head so he wouldn't get lice at the detention home. They had to make sure they'd be in town for his court dates. They had to make sure I could get another ride home from school. To me, it seemed like they would have rather been doing anything else, and I decided I did not want anyone to feel that way about me.

In this way, I managed to stay clear of the emergency room's swinging doors for twenty-one years. In fact, by the time I moved to Auckland, I was sure my chance to visit the hospital as a patient had already passed, so tame were my interests by then, so firmly rooted indoors. There were plenty of ways to injure yourself in New Zealand, of course—bungee jumping, white water rafting, cliff diving, spelunking with glow worms—but as of that September, the most dangerous thing I'd done was feed a giraffe a piece of celery at the zoo.

As it turned out, when my moment finally came, I wasn't doing anything dangerous. I was at home, watching TV with Jono as the opening credits for *Criminal Minds* scrolled across the screen, and I had just sat down on the floor of the lounge with a bowl of green curry. I said, "Did you know that Matthew Gray Gubler draws cartoons? In addition to being sort of weird and handsome."

Without looking at me, Jono said, "I think you and I like this show for different reasons."

After they zipped up a corpse in a body bag on screen, I set my bowl to the side and got ready to stand up. "I'm going to bed. Gun violence makes me homesick," I said, and started to laugh—but before I could stand up, pain sparked like an emergency flare in my side, and I doubled over on my hands and knees.

"Are you all right?" Jono asked. On the TV, special agent Derek Morgan slammed his fist on a desk and yelled something about hostages in Utah.

"I don't know," I said. I lay down flat on my stomach and pressed my face into the carpet, but the feeling in my side was now a steady blaze. I rolled over and drew my

knees into a ball, trying to stretch out the part of my back that felt like it was being pinched by glowing fire tongs, but the pain stayed the same.

Suddenly, a surge of nausea caused me to sit up, and I ran down the hallway to the toilet. Holding my hair in a knot at my neck, I smelled the onion-stink of panic and bile as I threw up into the toilet bowl.

When it seemed like I had vomited all I could, I crawled back into the lounge and writhed on the carpet, looking up at the blue speckled couch cover and the horizontal pine planks in the walls. Jess came out of the kitchen, where she was grilling a lambchop, and stood over me, still holding a spatula. "It's my side," I said. I had begun to sweat, and my hands were shaking. Everything after that came out in long, tearful sobs.

"I'm taking you to the A&E," Jess said, and she helped me up with both hands.

Twenty minutes later, Jess was helping me check into North Shore Hospital. She filled out a form in the chair to my left while I sat doubled over in the seat next to her, sobbing and hugging my knees. I had never experienced pain like this before, and I was afraid. Afraid that I would need emergency surgery. Afraid of how much it would cost. Afraid that I would die before they started filming *The Hobbit*.

Once I was allowed to go through the double doors, Jess followed me to a cubicle with a curtain around it where two nurses helped me change into a hospital gown. They put me in a crisp white bed, where I continued to writhe and sob, positioning my body in any way that might lessen my discomfort. When I told them I was going to be sick, they handed me a white plastic tub, which I threw up into three more times from the pain. Each time tasted less like coconut milk and more like stomach acid.

“We’re going to give you an IV so we can get some morphine to you,” one nurse said. She began to examine my arm, but I snatched it away instinctively.

“An IV?” I said, and my eyes fluttered. I couldn’t even *look* at my wrists without feeling light-headed. The blue stripes running between my palm and forearm; the tender space between the bones that run parallel through my arm—watching them for more than a few seconds at a time, even when I wasn’t lying in a hospital bed, made my chest tighten and my breath disappear.

I’d had an IV once before—for oral surgery—but I wasn’t fully conscious when they inserted it, and I didn’t know it would still be there after the surgery. As I came-to in the recovery room, my eyes roved around the room’s perimeter, registering the dim lamps, the brown carpet, until they found the tube emerging from the tender flesh at the top of my forearm. When I realized what it was, I erupted into muffled, unintelligible sobs. Tears rolled down my swollen face, and though I tried to enunciate around the gauze stuffed into my mouth, the staff couldn’t understand why I was crying.

That scene flashed through my head, and I felt a similar mounting panic. “Do you want us to help you hold still?” one nurse asked, exchanging a look with the other. I nodded, embarrassed by this strange accommodation but certain that I would need it. She reached over and pinned my shoulders to the bed while the other nurse crept toward my right arm with a needle. Jess sat in a chair beside me, nodding and clasping my left hand. I was swimming in exhaustion now, desperate for all of this to be over, and tears fell down both of my cheeks when I squeezed my eyes shut.

The nurse with the needle put pressure on my right arm and prodded its most visible veins. “You’ll just feel a little pinch now,” she said, and I looked as far in the

other direction as my neck would crane. By the time a third nurse appeared to hold down my legs, I could feel the air in the room passing over my skin, the blood moving up and down inside my limbs. My view of the curtain partition began to blur around the edges, and I twitched my feet involuntarily.

“Here we go!” she said, and I did feel a pinch. I gasped, closed my eyes, and gritted my teeth. Then, all at once, I relaxed.

The hospital workers let go of me, looking around at one another for reassurance. I was too scared to look at my right arm, but I moved it a little closer to me as I stared at the ceiling, panting. Blood was still throbbing in my ears, and beyond it, the fluorescent lights buzzed. I lay still while morphine chased the adrenaline wending its way through my circulatory system, until my heart slowed down to a languid thump.

Once it was clear that I wasn't going to rip the IV out of my arm, the nurses peeled off one by one to check on other patients. Jess settled back into her chair at my bedside, flipping through a travel magazine she had picked up in the lobby. Doctors came and went over the next half hour, sometimes bringing me paperwork, which Jess helped me with, and sometimes asking me questions about my family medical history; though the more that morphine dripped into my IV, the more I just smiled and nodded no matter what they asked. By the time the on-call ultrasound technician arrived an hour later, I felt nearly giddy. Thinking it was probably an ovarian cyst, he wheeled me in my bed through several doors that had to be opened with buttons so he could take pictures of my ovaries. A few minutes later, I was back in my cubicle having my IV hole patched by a Band-Aid.

At around midnight, a doctor pulled back the curtain and introduced himself to me and Jess. “Miss Lynch, you’ve had quite a night,” he said, stepping inside. He was bald, and the overhead light reflected off his head. “We didn’t find anything on your ovaries—but you said the pain is gone now?” I confirmed that it was, and he scribbled something on his clipboard. “Just take it easy for a few days and come back if you have any more problems,” he said, and then left.

“That’s it?” I asked. Jess shrugged, and I stood up to put on my pants. I couldn’t believe I was leaving without a diagnosis—after all the thrashing, all the vomit—but mostly I was just ecstatic not to be in pain anymore. Jess and I left the hospital and weaved through the rows of cars in the parking lot, looking for her Subaru in the dark pockets between pools of lamplight. There was still a little bit of early spring warmth in the air, and we laughed as if I hadn’t just thrown up in front of her three different times.

The next morning, I woke up with my hospital bracelet still on and lay frozen in my bed, remembering everything that had happened the night before. I felt embarrassed by the scene I had caused, seemingly for nothing, and immediately my stomach filled up with the fear that someone was mad at me. To quell it, I did a few chores around the house—putting away some clean dishes, hanging laundry on the line outside. After two months of living with Jess and Jono, they’d finally told me that using the dryer for all my clothes was making their energy bill spike. I had no idea how much higher energy costs were in a country without nuclear plants. I had just been doing my laundry the only way I knew how, and I was mortified to realize that I’d been costing them extra money—again. Only couple weeks before that, they’d had to increase their monthly internet plan to accommodate my wi-fi usage. I also had no idea that the internet was priced by the gig in

New Zealand, and I had been streaming Morrissey documentaries on my laptop as if the wi-fi were unlimited—until Jono told me it wasn't.

Now, after keeping Jess at the emergency room until after midnight, I felt I needed to renew my commitment not to bother anyone. To put my shoes away when I got home. To wipe down the countertops after making tea. To leave no trace.

My resolve only lasted for two days. On Monday, while job-hunting at the Albany Mall, the feeling that there was a meat cleaver in my abdominal oblique reappeared, sudden but more familiar this time. I stood frozen outside a Vodaphone store, bathed in panic, squeezing my eyes shut to try and slow down my thoughts. As the pain escalated, I realized I didn't know what bus route to take to the hospital. The mall was farther north than I usually traveled, and I had no idea how to get from Albany to Takapuna by myself. I considered trying to wait things out in the food court, but I was afraid of what would happen if I let my body run this agonizing course—afraid that pain strong enough to immobilize me might be capable of doing much worse if left unchecked. I couldn't call Jess, who was at work downtown; but Jono was at home that afternoon. Without knowing what else to do, I stumbled outside, gripping my abdomen, and called him.

“Hey, Christy,” he said, picking up after one ring. Maybe I was imagining it, but I thought he already sounded exasperated.

“Hey, Jono,” I said, grimacing as I leaned against the concrete wall of the parking garage. “I was just wondering, could you take me to the A&E?”

“What's happened?” he asked.

“It's my side again,” I said, and I believe he sighed.

“Sure, yup, be right there.”

I did not blame Jono. Not everyone responded to my floundering helplessness like Jess, who was a renewable source of lightness and care. Jono didn't exude enthusiasm about helping, but he still helped—explaining the local bus system to me, offering advice about my CV. His approach was to stoically follow the path toward goodness, making even-headed calculations about right and wrong without sparing more warmth than was necessary.

But that wasn't what bothered me. Ultimately, it didn't matter how spiny or soft my helper's disposition was, because I hated asking for help. I hated *needing* help, and I certainly wasn't accustomed to receiving it. Since arriving in New Zealand, I had utterly depended on other people's kindness, and it was making me miserable. If it was raining or cold, I had to be driven to the grocery store. If I left a concert late enough that my bus had stopped running, I had to be fetched from downtown. If I didn't have anywhere to be on a Saturday afternoon, someone would drag me along to Denny's, or the movies, or the park. I could feel everyone's watchful eyes on me, making sure I wasn't alone for too long, checking that I had the things I needed. Instead of basking in it, I longed to hide, to return to the dark familiarity of being unseen.

On top of everything, I had run out of money, and I still didn't have a job. I had discussed the possibility of going home early with Jess and Jono, but they thought I should stay a while longer and keep looking for work. Jono even wrote up an agreement that allowed me to continue living in their spare room for free until someone hired me, at which point I would increase my weekly rate until my back rent had been paid. It was an extravagant form of kindness—but because I was inexperienced in the art of support, it only made me feel indebted, pitied, and ashamed.

Now Jono was on his way to pick me up as I stood stranded in the mall parking garage, physically incapacitated and in enormous pain. This kind of dependence, in which not even my body was under my control, uncovered a new level of despair. While I waited, I rehearsed what I would say to express my gratitude when he arrived—to show Jono that even when I was bawling and sweating through my blouse, I could remember my manners. Instead, once we entered the highway and started picking up speed, I threw up out the passenger's side window, streaking the back door of his Subaru with food court tikka masala.

Jono dropped me off at the A&E and then left to hose the puke off his car. I checked myself into the hospital, scribbling through paperwork while doubled over in a vinyl chair. After going through the same routine—cry, throw up, IV, morphine—the hospital staff took me in for a CT scan instead of an ultrasound this time, which was how they discovered that I had kidney stones.

Kidney stones! This was a strange revelation. Nothing about my age, diet, or family medical history indicated that I was at risk for developing kidney stones. I didn't drink coffee. I didn't eat beets or nuts. As far as I knew, no one I was related to had ever had kidney stones. Yet there they were, tiny clusters in my ureter, lit from behind by the white light of an x-ray film viewer.

I left the hospital a couple hours later with a codeine prescription and instructions to spend the next two weeks peeing into a nonporous container. The doctor had suggested I have my kidney stone analyzed to see what in my diet had caused it, that way I would know what foods to avoid so that I never felt this kind of blinding, soul-splitting pain

again. However, the only way to have the stone analyzed was to collect your own pee, check it for gravel, and then fish it out by whatever means necessary.

This was a new low, I thought on the bus back home that afternoon: the dank, slick floor of hell's basement. Watching the ferns streak by outside my window, I lashed myself with the tatters of my grand adventure. I had no job. No money. No way to support myself. Just a bowl full of piss and rocks clogging up my urethra.

That evening, I picked out a plastic container from the kitchen cabinet—an empty Tip Top ice cream carton, hokey pokey flavor—and took it with me into the bathroom. After hovering over the square tub, I held the warm plastic in my hands and searched its depths for a sign—but I didn't see anything.

For the next two weeks, I would piss into this tub multiple times a day, pour the stone-less contents into the toilet, and then wash it out in the utility sink in the laundry room. I declined several invitations to hang out with new friends during this time, afraid to be away from the house long enough that I might have to pee. If I did have to leave the house—to buy groceries, to attend church—I would strategically limit my liquid intake beforehand, swallowing dryly until I was back home with my ice cream carton.

And still, after all these precautions, I never saw my kidney stone.

I began to wonder if this had been a mistake: dropping out of college, leaving the country, selling my car—everything. I was still in the habit of searching for signs in spinning pools of circumstance and happenstance, and I thought that all these troubles surely signified that I was not on the right path. As soon as I had decided to move to New Zealand, everything had fallen into place: my lodging, my plane ticket, my chance to put everything at home on hold. All of it had landed in my lap with a soft thud, and I had read

this as confirmation that I was doing what I ought to be doing. But ever since I'd arrived in Auckland, there had been resistance. Rejected by every job I had applied for. *Hobbit* delays that were ten tiers beyond my control. And now two hospital visits within the span of a week, when I could count on one hand the number of times I had been memorably ill before that. Maybe I had misunderstood all the crumbs I'd followed to get here. Maybe someone emailing you out of the blue to offer you a place to stay in the city you're moving to doesn't *mean* anything, except that your friends had been excited for you, and that word about your plans had spread.

I tried to accept that these things might be true, but mostly I teetered on the edge of despair for two weeks: Tipping my tub of piss from side to side to look for something that wasn't there. Slinking back to my bedroom to read Jess's copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Only coming out to make toast after Jess and Jono had left for work.

Then—before the paint on my new belief in life's meaninglessness had quite dried—my luck began to change.

Jess's older sister, Shayna, told me one Sunday afternoon in October that her office, an organization that monitored traffic cameras, was above a café she especially liked in a North Shore neighborhood called Smales Farm. "I know the owner, Jason, a little bit," she said, "since I'm in there every day. I think I could probably introduce you to see if he'll give you a job."

Shayna and I arranged to meet there at lunchtime the following Tuesday, and when I arrived, Jason was there and ready to shake my hand. The café was beautiful, with three walls of floor-to-ceiling windows that opened like bi-fold doors so that the dining room became open air. Little finches swooped in and hunted for scone crumbs, and a

cross-breeze carried away the perfume of espresso. Behind the counter, polished brass coffee chutes gleamed in rows, and milk steamers squealed together in a dissonant chord.

Jason was tall and broad with dark hair cropped close to his head, and when he greeted me with a forceful “G’day!” I nearly jumped. We sat across from each other in leather club chairs while he read through a copy of my CV. Because I didn’t have much professional experience at that point—two years at a dancewear store in Huntsville, Alabama, and two and a half years at Target—there was room at the bottom to include a short summary of my interests, one of which was tea. Jason perked up at this. “You’re a tea person, ay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, clasping my hands together in my lap and spinning the ring on my index finger. “One of my friends from back home, Daniel—his mom is German, and she’s the one who taught me how to brew a pot of tea.” A beat of quiet followed as Jason finished reading my CV, and I barreled forward to fill the silence. “Before that I was warming the water in the microwave and leaving the bag in too long. Stuff like that. Me and my friends from college make big pots to help us stay awake all night when we study for Greek exams—or we did anyway. I’m not in college anymore. But I still drink tea in the mornings. I like black teas mostly—breakfast tea, and Earl Grey, and any other flavored black tea. I like Irish breakfast tea, too. They sell big bags of Ceylon tea at this Russian grocery store in my college town, and I like those because they have pictures of dead aristocrats on them.” Jason had finished reading now and was looking at me, waiting for me to finish. “The one with Nikolai II is my favorite,” I said.

Jason asked me a few questions about my visa, about my time in New Zealand so far, and about my plans for the future. The whole thing took ten minutes, and at the end, he told me I could start the following Sunday.



On my last day of unemployment, Jess and Abbi took me to Muriwai Beach on the west coast of Auckland. It was my first time seeing a black sand beach, and I spent the whole day with my sleeves rolled up, picking up lumps of wet sand and letting them seep through my fingers like motor oil. *I get to stay*, I kept thinking. I get to keep living in New Zealand. Maybe see a penguin. Maybe be an elf.

I never learned to like the beach in America—gritty and hot, with a stink like the kitchen of a seafood restaurant—but this one was cold and cloudy, with dark water and reedy cliffs. In the midst of my elation about having a job, I forgot about my fear of crabs and spent the day leaping over tide pools and climbing sand dunes. At the end of the evening, Jess, Abi, and I sat on towels with a basket of fries to watch the sun set, scorching the roofs of our mouths while the sky burned pink. The sun glinted off the sand that had been smoothed by the tide, and it shone like polished concrete. I listened to the water, running my hands over the beads of water and salt on my braid, until I felt myself inching upward out of a thick fog. All at once, I could see good things taking shape beyond it: A new job. A place to live. Friends who will splash in the pockets of water stranded on the shore at low tide.

I marveled at this sudden surge of lightness, but it was not a mystery. For three months, help had been given to me like medicine forced into my throat, and because of this, I felt better. Before this year, I had always found ways to evade people's help—by

working harder, getting by with less, disciplining my needs until they vanished. But this time I'd had no choice: alone in a new country, unable to drive myself to the hospital, to find a job, to pay for the room where I slept. I had to accept the help I was offered or else go home to Tennessee, and so, wincing, I had opened my hands.

On the way to the parking lot, Abbi threw a squiggle of seaweed at Jess, who covered her baseball cap with both arms and screamed. All three of us were winded from laughing and coarse with sand as we climbed into the car, and I gazed out the back window as Jess drove, letting the sound of idle chatter wash over me without hearing the words.

After showering off and climbing between the covers that night, my head fizzed with leftover happiness from the day and excitement about starting a new job in the morning. Eventually I opened Twitter on my iPod Touch, intending to scroll myself to sleep, when I saw a rash of headlines announcing that *The Hobbit* had been greenlit for filming. The shock rattled all the tiredness out of my body, and I sat up to read the press release: once, twice, a third time time to make sure it was real.

I knew I shouldn't assign cosmic significance to this news—but how else was I supposed to interpret it? *The Hobbit* had been approved to enter production the same weekend I started the job that would allow me to stay in the country long enough to see it happen. What else could this mean except that I was headed in the right direction, toward whatever magnificent opportunity had led me here? After reading as much as I could find about the announcement, I fell back onto my pillow full of that sticky sweet feeling of *supposed to, inevitable, meant to be*.

When I finally turned out my lamp that night, I stared at the ceiling for a long time, imagining that the twisting shadows of trees from outside the window were actually hooded cloaks and crooked walking sticks, until my eyes felt heavy enough to close.

