

Eyebrows:

A Collection of Stories about that Family You Saw in Aldi's Last Week

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### Abstract

This creative thesis will begin with an introduction to the idea of creative nonfiction and will also present a short collection of creative nonfiction stories. The creative body of the thesis will consist of short stories taken from the author's own life that center around the common theme of family, focusing especially on the author's role as a big sister in a family of nine children. Following these short stories, the conclusion of the thesis will briefly consider the value of personal stories like these in the larger scheme of literature. For those unfamiliar with the genre, this thesis hopes to provide a brief introduction while also presenting five stories for the enjoyment of those interested in creative nonfiction and those who will only read this thesis because they are related to the author.

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### **My Creative Nonfiction Story**

In my own personal story, I came across creative nonfiction quite by accident. I had no idea what the term meant, no understanding of what the literature looked like, and no earthly idea how to write. I simply needed to complete an assignment, and somewhere along the way, I found creative nonfiction.

My junior year of undergrad I took an Advanced World Literature class where we read literature from all over the world, written by authors from several different countries. Perhaps most importantly, we did not read a single American that semester. The stories and experiences we lived in that class made me relive my own memories of living in Brazil as a child when I was ten. These were memories that I had not thought about in years, but suddenly there they were: loud, vibrant, and impossible to ignore. Because of various Honors Program requirements, I was required to write an additional paper, and the professor and I decided to attempt something new: I would write a story about my own experiences living overseas, inspired by the course's literature.

I had no idea what I was getting into.

I naively sat down and told the only story I knew how to tell: my own. I innocently thought that this literary experience would be easy and simple. I did not anticipate the rehashing of memories or the tears shed in frustration, and I could not anticipate the closure that would come with reliving my memories and presenting them on a page. After the fact, I was told that what I had considered ramblings were actually

categorized as creative nonfiction, and that there was an entire literary field dedicated to stories like mine. So I began my foray into the world of creative nonfiction.

### **Defining Creative Nonfiction**

Before I could begin to understand the literature, I had to first define what I was looking at. Surprisingly, no one really knows the origins of the term “creative nonfiction” (Gutkind 11). Despite existing without a label, this type of literature has been around since the time of the Romans (Bishop 62). As simple as it is, the term “creative nonfiction” accurately and effectively captures the essence of the form. While “nonfiction” denotes that this is a work containing factual truth, adding “creative” addresses the fact that the author still employs certain artistic elements. The truth is told, but through a story—not a presentation or lecture of facts and figures (Gutkind 12). While creative literature like poems, novels, and dramas shirks the label of explicit, factual truth, creative nonfiction claims the label proudly (Bishop 68). Once I began to define the term, I realized that I had been reading creative nonfiction for most of my life.

As modern readers have become more inclined to read creative nonfiction, the literature has evolved and refined itself. In the early stages of the modern understanding of creative nonfiction, the label was originally associated with journalism, but has now evolved to align more closely with the work of an essayist. The term actually refers to a form rather than a genre, describing a way of writing rather than a field (Freeman). Creative nonfiction allows the author to artistically present facts and information like a reporter without the standard rules of journalism and reporting (Gutkind 14). Today, most creative nonfiction focuses on the personal and the autobiographical (Freeman). Often,

creative nonfiction is intensely personal, presenting a stark contrast to the impersonal reporting many journalists strive for.

### **The Pieces of Creative Nonfiction**

While differing in their execution, many of the tenets of creative nonfiction mimic those of fiction. As a genre, creative nonfiction's intent should be use memories to tell a story grounded in real life (Bradley 204). To accomplish this goal, creative nonfiction emphasizes the 5 Rs: real life, reflection, research, reading, and 'riting (Bishop 65). These five areas form the main focus of creative nonfiction, and in this focus we see several familiar elements emerge: plot, character, conflict, and scenes (Morely 179). The structure of creative nonfiction is often very similar to that in works of fiction, and by its nature yields itself to a story. Part of the appeal of creative nonfiction is that the author never claims to be doing anything more than telling a story: but in telling that story, he or she offers their life to the audience.

As I sat down to write that first story for *Advanced World Literature*, I found that I inevitably ended up writing about the things I knew best: my memories and my stories. I am not alone in this choice of subject: often, creative nonfiction focuses on the personal. After all, "the foundation of good writing is personal experience" (Gutkind 17). In writing, we often gravitate towards the familiar, choosing to tell our own story in hopes that we will be able to present something new to the reader. Yet even then, very few of our ideas can even be solely attributed to us (Fowler 101). We have stolen, borrowed, shared, and combined our favorite stories and memories with the other stories we have encountered along the way. Creative nonfiction serves as the attempt to convey the personal story in order to reveal a universal application.

Writing a work of creative nonfiction requires one to find the balance between the creative and the nonfictional. Any type of creative nonfiction requires the author to balance both a story and an accurate, factual report (Cheney 2). Since it is not straight nonfiction, there is freedom in that the author is allowed to decide for herself how much she will employ the use of fiction when writing her story (Miller 81). How creative will she be? But there are also lines that cannot be crossed when writing creative nonfiction. The author must ask: can anything in this story be embellished, and if so, what will I add? (Miller 75). Finding the balance between fact and fiction is a daunting task, especially when the story is personal.

### **Memory in Creative Nonfiction**

When memory serves as the inspiration for the story, the lines between creative and nonfiction become even more blurred. Critics regularly debate the ethics of the preservation of personal memory in creative nonfiction. Where is the line between fact and fiction (Steinberg 16)? If the author writes stories drawn from his memory, these stories are tangled up in imagination—at times, the two can be inseparable (Miller 82). Additionally, memory is unreliable, transient and malleable because of the impact of time, impressions, and subsequent experiences that have altered the original understanding (Steinberg 17). While “a story grows from real and imagined experience,” an author can hardly distinguish between the two once the memory has been embedded into his own personal history (Morely 177). When working with memory, an author must also face the fact that the mind has a way of deleting, rewriting, and inserting new memories into the storyline (183). Memory adds a twisted layer to the story, underscoring the meaning, yet also complicating the writing process as the writer must decode the truth

preserved in his memory. Salman Rushdie says it best through the voice of one of his own characters in *Midnight's Children*:

“I told you the truth,” I say yet again, “Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent versions of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own.”  
(268)

Each work of personal creative nonfiction exists as the final result between remembering and deciphering the memory, the culmination of a struggle to discern what is truth and what we remember as truth. Deciding what to present to our readers takes a toll on the writers as they struggle to depict reality as it happened, but also as they know it.

Sometimes the truth lies directly between the two.

At the end of a work of creative nonfiction, the reader should feel inclined to mull over the story itself, not the facts and details. If the emotional truth of the story is conveyed but requires a compromise on the part of factual truth, then so be it (Miller 83). For the sake of the story (and their sanity), authors must determine what is more important to emphasize to the reader: the exact details of what actually transpired, or the personal impressions of how the event is remembered (Steinberg 17). Sometimes the author’s message is hidden in the remembering of an event, not necessarily the actual facts. Steinberg reminds readers and writers of creative nonfiction that memory may be half-invented, but that does not make it a lie (18). Often, memories make a story, and the

author must learn how to incorporate memory without entirely sacrificing reality and historicity.

### **The Personal Experience**

With stories dedicated to personal experiences, the “I” becomes all-important, a loud voice that directs the meaning of the work throughout its pages. In creative nonfiction, there is no place for the author to hide—her personal “I” is front and center, directing the story as she bares her soul (Schwartz 27). Ego cannot and should not be completely eliminated from the work, because without a healthy dose of ego the work would never have begun (Morely 187). Only bold willingness and confidence could enable someone to write a story about herself and then tell other people to read it. However, while personal experience is the solid foundation of good writing, even in creative nonfiction the danger is that one will become too self-focused (Gutkind 18). Readers might want to read a story about you, but they will tire quickly if your story is the only important one. Learning to balance personal experience with a healthy outward focus is necessary for any writer, but especially in this genre. If a story cannot appeal to anyone else outside the author’s sphere, it is not a good story.

When I sat down to write my story, I found that my family members kept popping up on the page, refusing to leave me alone even in print. Writing about family members adds a certain level of difficulty because these are real, living, breathing people that I know and love. As Gutkind points out, “no one can be completely objective about family” (61). Additionally, when writing about family members, the author must write carefully, because there will be consequences. If you can write without worrying about your family members, then so be it; but most of us must still care about our family’s

reactions at the end of the story (Gutkind 61). Once the story is written, it becomes more than personal. The story always belonged to the author and to those who lived it, but once it is in the hands of the readers it also belongs to them (Miller 89). Putting the story on the page means letting it go, relinquishing ownership, and preparing to face the consequences of the words.

Creative nonfiction benefits from a close attention to detail as the author tries to capture reality as best as he or she can. After all, the more detailed the writing is, the closer to a real, personal experience the work will be. If the reader can experience the moment, she will become invested in it, and then she will want to keep reading (Miller 74). The gems in creative nonfiction that make it stand out are the hyper-focused, intimate observations, the small pieces of the big picture that the author can offer his reader (Gutkind 23). With creative nonfiction, the readers know that these experiences really happened, but they will only believe in them if author earns their trust.

In personal creative nonfiction, the author is the most important voice, and she must prove her authority in order to convince her readers of the validity of her story. Writing a detailed, personal account can help authors win their readers' trust by presenting believable, authentic portrayals of reality (Miller 77). Authors also earn their readers' trust by creating an authentic "I." They bring in details and experiences that ensure the reader that these events really happened, and that they mattered. The authors laugh at themselves, point out their mistakes, smile in reflection. Above all, they maintain their own vulnerability, well aware that they are baring their soul to the reader (Miller 79-80). When the author offers so much of himself, the reader believes he is receiving a gift.

When I first began writing creative nonfiction, I did not know what I was doing. But I kept writing, because I found closure in the simple act of finding the words I had buried in my soul and forcing them out of their hiding places. The stories that flowed onto the page came from some place next to my soul, and seeing them on the page taught me to appreciate them more. Creative nonfiction has the potential to change a generation of readers, but it is an art that should be carefully approached, not casually experimented with. From the outside, writing creative nonfiction looks easy, but opening the pages and delving into the words reveals that creative nonfiction is so much more than just a story.

## Dedications

To my parents, who never really talked about having kids, and so of course had nine.

To Ryan, who listened to every idea I've ever had and pointed out every stupid one.

To Ty, who at fourteen and a half decided he needed to be everyone's big brother (even mine and Ryan's), and has offered to punch every guy in the face since then.

To Tate, who keeps us sane, and always knows the plan (even before we've made the plan).

To Rowdy, who gives the best hugs and delivers the worst punch lines, and so keeps us laughing and smiling.

To Hudson, who solves our problems, and figures out things like how to fit everyone at the dining room table.

To Tal, who hears more than he says, and reminds me to listen.

To Treader, who figured out the concept of negative numbers by himself at the age of five, and so will become a millionaire and provide for our retirement.

And to Austen, who surprised us all.

Without you, I'd just be me, and that (as you have previously informed me) would be a very boring existence.

### **Wesley, like the Boy**

I used to want to be named something else, usually when I was standing in front of the bike license plates trying to find my name in pink to match the sparkles on my bike seat. Even as a child, I didn't like the attention that having a boy's name garnered: strangers tell me that I have the wrong name, and everyone corrects me, as if I could have possibly said the wrong name.

“Lesley?” asks every single person who answers one of my work calls.

No, Wesley.

“Oh—Leslie,” comments the Starbucks barista as she scribbles on a cup.

Actually, Wesley, like the boy.

“That's my middle name!” exclaims the guy I just met.

He proves my point without meaning to—everyone knows a boy named Wesley.

“So, do you spell it W-e-s-l-i-e? Like the girl?” asks the woman at church, quite concerned.

No, I spell it the way “Wesley” is spelled. I refuse to believe that my gender is tied so intricately to my spelling.

Until elementary school, I thought Wesley was a perfectly acceptable name for a girl. I had never met another girl named Wesley, but I didn't think that had anything to do with the name's gender. My Mississippi childhood was filled with so many Sarahs, Emilys, and Hannahs that I thought that not being in the Bible was more odd. But then the boys started showing up. There was a boy named Wesley at church, two more at Dad's work, and four in my class alone. I began to sense a pattern, and I was the outlier.

Most of my introductions consisted of explaining myself, repeating my name to the deaf elderly in my church, yelling in the schoolyard, correcting the ticket agent at the airport. Their confusion frustrated me, and I wondered why I couldn't have been named Katie like my five school friends. Girls named Katie did not have to explain to camp directors that they couldn't sleep in the boys' cabin, and when they walked into an interview, they were never greeted with "Oh! We were expecting a boy."

Weren't we all. In the photographs of my first day on earth, a bright blue "It's a Boy!" balloon floats through the frames, bobbing in and out of view. Most new mothers pick out names months before the baby arrives, but most mothers also find out the gender of the baby months before. My parents declined—they wanted to be surprised. And anyway, they knew they were having a boy.

They had picked out several boy names to choose from, but could only find one girl name that they liked: Presley. I'm not saying I have anything against girls named Presley, but I am saying that I live twenty-five minutes from Elvis' house, and I don't really even like him. Thankfully, Presley was vetoed shortly after I arrived, because I didn't look like a Presley. I evidently looked like a boy named Wesley.

Despite my frustrations, I found that there was a rareness that comes with having a boy's name. Most people tend to remember my name, because I am probably the only girl Wesley they have ever met. I'm the only one that I've ever met, and I vainly enjoy being the only one of something. Regardless of who I meet, I always have something to talk about, because few can resist laughing when I introduce myself as "Wesley—like the boy." I'd rather be compared to a boy than have to answer to Lesley for the duration of our conversation.

In high school I contemplated changing my spelling. Just a single new letter and I would be undeniably a girl: Weslie never gets mistaken for anything else. I questioned why my mother hadn't chosen a "prettier" spelling, but she would not budge on her self-governed naming methods. While she loved interesting names, she did not love interesting spellings. She had already yoked us with a last name that could not be keyed into electronic systems. Our ñ told the story of our ancestors in a single letter, but it did not fit easily into the English script of our yearbooks, driver's licenses, and diplomas. My mother decided that in this family, we would adhere to the traditional spelling of unusual names.

I never did anything more than doodle Weslie on the side of my notes in class. I found that I did not know this girl named Weslie. I only knew myself, and in the end, I could not let go of my original name, even with its masculinity.

After a while, I worried less about the fact that I supposedly had the wrong name and more about its meaning. My name only means "from the western meadow," while my sister Ryan's means "little ruler." I feel that there is a great injustice being done here, whether or not my parents choose to acknowledge it. There was no good reason for naming me Wesley: no dear friend, no avid devotion to John Wesley, and no incredibly attractive actor that year (I asked). I wanted there to be a reason, but there really was only hormones and bad medicine. If I wanted a story, I would have to look elsewhere. After twenty-two years, nine first names, and nine middle names, my mother has gotten quite good at naming her children. But I was her first attempt.

I realize now that most parents share the naming of their children, but in this family, Mom has final say. She let Dad name the oldest son after himself, but then she

had control over the rest of the crew. Dad is allowed to have an opinion and one vote, but she holds two votes.

After naming me Wesley, my mother wanted to name her next daughter Victoria, but she felt that it would be unfair to me. So she named the next girl Ryan, and a new kind of pattern was formed. Four girls, four boys' names that could also be last names: Wesley, Ryan, Tate, and Austen. To help soften the masculinity of our first names, she coupled us with middle names borrowed from women in our family tree: DeeAnn, Elizabeth, Jacqueline, and Kelly.

Having a name like DeeAnn did not seem like enough to confirm my femininity, so I spent hours in study hall perfecting the curls and swirls of my excessively girly signature. But I found DeeAnn to be comforting, even though it did not seem to be me. DeeAnn was my mother's middle name before she took my father's, and I find it comforting to have her name settled between mine and my father's. My mother and I share looks, personality, humor, and temperament, and as I grow older my middle name serves as a comforting reminder of those similarities.

My sisters and I carry our family names with us wherever we go. Our grandmothers lend their names to Ryan and Tate, and Austen Kelly is named after a cousin. In this way, our story is not our own—we are more than just these Peñas. Many women came before us, and they gave us so much more than just their names.

Inevitably, someone asks if the boys have girls' names, and I say yes, because I can't resist watching a stranger struggle to maintain composure. But my mother is not that strange: Ty, Rowdy, Hudson, Tal, and Treader could hardly pick manlier names. Ty is short for Timothy Joseph, named for our dad. Rowdy Edwards is named after a distant

Texan ancestor and our grandfather, and he has broken more bones than the rest of us put together. Hudson Taylor and Tal Saint are named after missionaries, and Treader Real is named after our other grandfather.

Even when we were newborns, my mother wanted to give us stories. My Tal and Treader are the only ones I've ever heard of, and they'd like to keep it that way. Tal comes from the Hebrew word for blessing, and my parents chose this name during a particularly hard chapter in our family's story. When Tal was born, he was too early, too small, and my dad was too sick. He was the seventh child, and Mom labeled him "blessing" before we could begin to doubt the gift.

In a very Peña turn of events, Rowdy named Treader after listening to my mother read *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* to him. He wanted to name the expected baby Dawn, but Mom was against it—she knew a Dawn, and didn't need to know another one. And anyway, we had no use for a girl's name. So Rowdy suggested we name the baby Treader, since he was only six and didn't realize that most people do not name their children after fictional Narnian ships. We adopted Treader as a nickname for the baby bump, and it became so familiar to us that when he came home, it seemed natural that he would be Treader.

I find myself telling this story of our names every couple of months, pulling out my party trick for new and old friends. My friends like to compete to see who knows the most siblings' names, listing them off using fingers and toes to count. None of my friends' siblings have names quite like ours, but I don't mind anymore.

**Large Family Problems**

[Treader's Homework—WORKSHEET KEY]

For each of the following problems, fill in the correct answer. Explain your reasoning.

(Where applicable, show your work.)

1. [Logic] It's Sunday morning and 8 of us are going to church (Dad, Tate, and Treader are staying home). Mom's car holds 12, Dad's car holds 9, Wesley's car holds 8, Ryan's car holds 7, and Ty's car holds 5. Which car do we take?

Answer: Mom's, Ty's, and Dad's.

Explain: Ryan's car would hold everyone else, but her backseat is full of the boxes she moved out of her college dorm but couldn't fit in the house. Ty has to leave church early, so he takes his own car. Dad leaves for church late, so he brings his car. Mom's car would hold everyone with space for Rowdy's lacrosse stick, but no one is ready when she leaves for church. 3 cars to church.

2. [Values] a. If our house has 1,950 square feet, how many square feet per person?

Answer:  $177.23\text{ft}^2/\text{person}$ .

Explain:  $1,950\text{ft}^2/11 \text{ people} = 177.23\text{ft}^2/\text{person}$

b. If Wesley and Ryan leave for college, now how many square feet does each person have?

Answer:  $216.67\text{ft}^2/\text{person}$ .

Explain:  $1,950\text{ft}^2/11 \text{ people} - 2 \text{ people} = 1,950\text{ft}^2/9 \text{ people} = 216.67\text{ft}^2/\text{person}$ .

3. [Recall] If Wesley is 22 and it's December 29, how old is each of your siblings?

Answer: 22, 19, 17, 15, 14, 11, 9, 7, and 3.

Explain: If it is December 29, Wesley, Austen, and Rowdy have already had their birthdays. Since everyone is almost exactly two years apart, there are three months where everyone (except Austen, because she's the odd one out) has an odd age or an even age. Wesley has the first birthday in the birthday cycle, so the fact that her age is even means that everyone is turning even (except Austen). So Wesley and Rowdy should have an even age (22 and 14, since they've already had their birthdays) but everyone else should still be odd. So if Wesley is 22, then Ryan is 19, Ty 17, Tate 15, Rowdy 14, Hudson 11, Tal 9, Treader 7, and Austen 3.

Extra credit: What is the earliest date that everyone will all have an odd age again?

Answer: Never, because Austen.

4. [Problem-solving] If Austen is only 3 and Wesley is a senior in college, how old will Wesley be at Austen's high school graduation?

Answer: 36.

Explain: If Wesley is a senior in college, she's 22, Austen is 3, and Austen will probably graduate when she is 18, so  $22 - 3 = 19$  (age difference) + 18 (years spent in school) = 36.

5. [Identify] If Peña = Tim + Cara + Wesley + Ryan + Ty + Tate + Rowdy + Hudson + Tal + Treader + Austen, what is Wesley equal to?

Answer: Unknown.

Explain:

$$\text{Peña} - \text{Wesley} = \text{Tim} + \text{Cara} + \text{Ryan} + \text{Ty} + \text{Tate} + \text{Rowdy} + \text{Hudson} + \text{Tal} + \text{Treader} + \text{Austen}$$

so

$$- \text{Wesley} = \text{Tim} + \text{Cara} + \text{Ryan} + \text{Ty} + \text{Tate} + \text{Rowdy} + \text{Hudson} + \text{Tal} + \text{Treader} + \text{Austen} - \text{Peña}$$

so

$$\text{Wesley} = (\text{Tim} + \text{Cara} + \text{Ryan} + \text{Ty} + \text{Tate} + \text{Rowdy} + \text{Hudson} + \text{Tal} + \text{Treader} + \text{Austen} - \text{Peña}) / -1$$

so

$$\text{Wesley} = - \text{Tim} - \text{Cara} - \text{Ryan} - \text{Ty} - \text{Tate} - \text{Rowdy} - \text{Hudson} - \text{Tal} - \text{Treader} - \text{Austen} + \text{Peña}$$

Answer still unknown.

### **Eyebrows**

In the downstairs of our house, there is one bathroom with two sinks. This is the girls' bathroom, and only ours. On the rarest of occasions, like a mud fight or a sudden, torrential downpour of apocalyptic proportions, the boys might be allowed to shower in the girls' bathroom—but only if they can prove that a shower is absolutely necessary, and their bathroom is currently occupied. Only then are they allowed to enter, because in a house of shared spaces, this space is undeniably and unapologetically the girls' domain.

When they added on to our house, Pop insisted that this bathroom should have two sinks, because he said that the girls needed a place where they could all get ready. For a sixty-year-old man with only one daughter of his own, he had great insight into the preening habits of sisters.

Over the years, the bathroom has become our gathering place, at various times a conference room, a counseling center, even a war room. The small space reeks of girls. We have filled the shelves with disasters: lotions that smell terrible, perfumes that burn your eyes, soaps that make you itch, and curling irons that won't turn on. A collection of unnecessary necessities is stuffed in the cabinets: face washes and nose strips and nail polishes. To our mother's chagrin, the grout in the floor features not one but two prominently placed, hot pink nail polish stains. The second sink is a perpetual collection of someone else's dirty clothes, and there are always too many towels on the back of the door.

Necklaces hang from the edges of the mirror, and they have been there so long that no one really remembers who they belong to. The countertop displays whatever the

current collection of Peña makeup features: Wesley's matte lipsticks, Ryan's bright lip stain, Tate's eyebrow filler, and Austen's Disney Frozen collection of lip gloss.

The eye shadows are up for grabs. What's yours is mine, as long as you don't catch me using it. The foundations, on the other hand, are non-transferrable. Palest of ivories for me, a dusting of bronze for Ryan, shimmery sand for Tate, and nothing for Austen, still too little to know what's bad for her.

I catch glimpses of myself in pictures of my sisters and impressions of my sisters when I look in the mirror. We three oldest sisters have always looked similar enough to be mistaken for a combination of twins plus one. The minute differences that sisters find so glaringly obvious—rounder face, darker eyes, paler skin—are not often considered by strangers. Tate is younger and her face is thinner, but her eyes squint in pictures the same way mine do. Ryan and I might pull the same facial expressions, but Ryan's lips are full and expressive while mine seem like just lips. We all have long, thick hair, prone to clogging drains and getting tangled, an inheritance from our father. Mine grows the fastest, and Ryan styles hers the most daringly, but Tate can straighten hers faster than anyone else.

To stare at a mirror full of faces like yours is both comforting and unsettling. We swap and share features while striving to create a unique look, embracing our similarities while struggling to set ourselves apart. The awkwardness of puberty was only compounded by the fact that in learning to be myself I had to also figure out how to be not-Ryan, not-Tate. As children Ryan and I would resort to fist fights when we came out wearing the same dress for church, and now I couldn't stop myself from looking like her.

I love my sisters because they are everything I want to be, and I fight with my

sisters because they are everything I want to be. If Ryan is the fashionable sister, I cannot be the fashionable sister. If Tate is the willowy one, I cannot also be the willowy one, and I know that whatever I do, Austen will always be the cutest one because of her age. With all these sisters, what will be left for me to be?

For so long we had so many different looks going, it took something drastic to bring the three of us together. Cara Delevingne was the best thing that ever happened to the Peña girls' fashion sense, because we had thick, long, dark eyebrows before her model face convinced the world they were acceptable. We came together over eyebrows, plucking and pulling and filling them in to get what we decided collectively was that Peña look. I used to listen to what everyone said about the way I looked, but now, my sisters are the only ones who are allowed to have an opinion on my eyebrows—at least any opinion that I care about.

As we continue to play at being ourselves, our sense of makeup and our looks have evolved. I tend to focus on my eyes, emphasizing their undistinguishable color. Ryan goes bold—big lips, deep reds—or she does nothing at all, content with a hipster's simplicity. Tate learned everything we never had the time for, and so she always looks classy, put together while I still don't really know how bottom eyeliner works.

But regardless of makeup, the eyebrows stay the same. We cram into the girls' bathroom and we shuffle the dirty clothes around to make space for Austen to sit and watch and Ryan steals someone's hair brush and Tate lends her concealer and I try to teach Tate how to curl her eyelashes and we all make sure our eyebrows are done. We all put pore strips on our noses to try vainly to eliminate black heads, and the rule is we have to compare the results before we throw them away. Whoever's nose strip has the most

nastiness on it wins, and this is the most competitive we get nowadays. We take it very seriously.

In that bathroom, we are only ourselves. Better than anyone else, my sisters know what I look like without makeup. They have seen the unfinished color of my soul, and I know it is the same family of hues as theirs.

### **One of My Brothers Doesn't Love Me**

Like most of his good jokes, Treader's greatest joke started quite innocently. I was leaving the house for school, or work, or church, or practice—it didn't really matter what, but I was late. I was calling out goodbyes as I ran through the house, not stopping for kisses and hugs but trying to at least see everyone before I left. Treader was the last one, hidden in a back room building Legos.

“Bye, Treader! I love you! See you later!” A very standard greeting in this household.

The Lego Master could not be bothered with my love. “Ok.”

“Ok? Just ok? Treader, I love you!”

“Ok!” he said again, louder, and I had to leave because goodbyes in this house take way too long, but I was laughing. I had thought I had misheard him, but maybe it was just another miscommunication. The fifteen years between Treader and I mean that sometimes that we speak two different languages, and when I'm at college, our main form of communication is when he steals Mom's phone and texts me all the emojis he can find, along with the occasional riddle. I try to remember the kind of books to a seven-year-old boy, and he tries to read them. But soon after, the same thing happened: I was leaving again, goodbyes were in order, and Treader was last.

“Bye, Tread! Love you!”

This time he had prepared.

“I know,” he said smartly, and that was all the response I got.

The joke was on. Regardless of what I did, I could not get that child to tell me he loved me. I'm not saying that Treader doesn't love me, but Treader's not saying that he does.

One time I told him I loved him and he responded with a snappy: "You would!"

Do you know how unsettling it is to hear a child say that with a straight face? It's infuriating, I tell you!

I know that Ryan loves me because she steals my clothes and tells me which lipstick not to wear with the navy dress. I know that Ty loves me because when he uses my car to run to Kroger he brings it back with more gas in the tank than it had when he left. I know that Tate loves me because she posts Instagram pictures of my jacket that she stole when I am away at college, and I know that Rowdy loves me because he still snuggles on the couch with me at fourteen. I know that Hudson and Tal love me because they smile real big when they see me walk through the door, and I know that Austen loves me because she pouts when I leave. But I have learned that Treader loves me because he refuses to tell me.

Once I yelled my love for him from one room to the other, but despite the volume of my declaration, there was no response. I poked my head into the next room and repeated myself.

"Treader, did you hear me? I said that I loved you."

"Shhhh....I'm playing the quiet game."

My role in the joke is easy. I tell him I love him, and when he responds, I fret and I fume and I yell in frustration. On a good day, when I've been practicing enough, I can turn red on command. He has the hard job of thinking up the response, but he loves it.

Every time, as soon as I tell him I love him, he smiles as cunningly as a little boy can.

This has become our ritual, our tried-and-true trick.

When I call home, Treader is the one who always knows how many days I have left until break. He still won't say that he loves me, but with the advent of the FaceTime, he has added a new layer to the joke: he will sign that he loves me using the sign language that he learned at school, but he will not actually say the words. But I keep telling him, and he keeps scheming.

### Four Others

I didn't know of their existence until after the fact, because they were so little and I was so young. Only when I was older did I learn to cry over them.

One night when I was in high school the five oldest were all fighting, engaged in the kind of yelling and screaming that doesn't matter even when it's happening. But Mom was tired, and maybe even crying, which seemed unusual given the pointlessness of the argument. Tired and grumpy and quiet, she had had a long few weeks, but of course we didn't really notice. We were not used to having to notice Mom. In the middle of our constant crazy, she seemed to juggle kids and husband and practices and meals and laundry and the occasional cat easily. Cara Peña can be summed up in one word: constant, for herself and everyone who knows her. And we were young enough to think she was fine. But my father, on the other hand, is the unpredictable emotion to her steadiness, and he became furious at the sound of our arguing. Our father's passion is limited to short but intense outbursts, always directed at furniture. In my ninth grade year, he broke a desk drawer over the idiocy of a student's life choices, and my sisters' bedroom door still has a crack in it from where he punched it after hearing my sister mock Mom. But this was a different kind of anger.

He dragged all five of us big kids into their bedroom, leaving the three little boys to fend for themselves at the dinner table. Mom was on the bed, really crying, and as soon as I realized she was crying and he was so angry, I didn't know where to look.

Dad started explaining what had happened, and I felt as if the conversation was taking place somewhere far, far away from my parents' bedroom. I felt very small again, the weight of the loss pressing against me, pushing me down until I felt as if I couldn't

breathe. The room was too small, with too many people in it, but he wouldn't stop talking.

He might have been crying, too.

Over the past few weeks, while I had been worrying about what to wear to school, and whether or not the cute boy in geometry noticed me, another tiny life had been growing. They hadn't told us at first because they wanted to be sure, and they wanted to surprise us, and then life happened and one thing led to another until long after most parents would have already told their children. Suddenly, she was already in her second trimester, and then it was too late—they had waited too long to tell us. The life stopped growing, and then they felt like they couldn't tell us. After all, we were so young.

This miscarriage was harder than most. It came so late, and her body held on to the child for longer than it should have, and in the middle of my mother's crazy life—children and dishes and laundry and school—there was the constant, overwhelming reminder of what might have been.

I think my dad told us because he couldn't bear it anymore—the mundane annoyances and aggravations of life insisted on continuing while his wife was hurting. And no one knew. He yelled and he fumed as he told us, but even then I knew that this was his way of expressing his pain.

I took on the responsibility of not having known, horrified that I kept on living like normal when something so tragic had happened. I was appalled that I hadn't known, but I didn't blame my parents for not telling me. I just couldn't believe I hadn't noticed something like this, that I hadn't instinctively realized there was a cataclysmic eruption in the fabric of my family. I should have known—I was their sister.

At first, I was in shock. I didn't fully understand anything, and I hadn't yet begun to feel. But that night I retreated to my room and I couldn't stop thinking.

What was the baby like?

Did she have hazel eyes, like Tate and I, or brown, like Ryan and Rowdy? Would he have been funny, like Ty and Treader, or thoughtful, like Tal? The magnitude of what we had lost only became clear to me when I tried to name what had been lost. I could not mourn the way the baby's fingers wrapped around mine, the way the child smiled, or the sound of the baby's laugh, because I did not know. We would never know.

A bundle of cells had died. A collection of tissues had failed to thrive. We could call it a fetus and move on, but I couldn't bear the sound of the word. I thought of the potential that had been, the opportunities that had been lost, and I cried.

I loved that child as best I could, the way you love things you never know.

Later I was told that there were four miscarriages in all, two between me and Ryan and two between Treader and Austen. The first two made her fear that she'd never have any more children, and the last two nearly broke her. But she was still constant. And two years later, at forty-six, she was pregnant with Austen, the biggest surprise and greatest blessing our family has ever seen.

Sometimes I wonder about the four of them. Who would they have looked like? Who would have been their greatest ally, and who their sworn enemy? Who would have shared their room? The four of them fall in a hole we don't talk about, because there's no way of knowing what might have been. Now there are eleven of us: two parents, four sisters, and five brothers. Plus these four others.

## Afterword

Why write stories like these?

Perhaps no one will read them.

I am surprised to say that I would be all right with that. I did not write them so that you would read them—I wrote them for the sake of telling them.

I believe that we need more stories like these. As humans, our favorite, dearest recollections are deeply tied to our feelings, not our knowledge (Cheney 3). Creative nonfiction appeals to readers today because in reading another's memories, they remember their own. A surrogate experience, reading creative nonfiction requires that the reader borrow the author's emotions in order to remember his own.

Not all of us write these stories down, but we all have them. "Each of us must have a created version of the past," states Bradley (205), speaking in a voice that resonates with the current generation. In a society filled with the fleeting and marked by the temporary, many feel the need to cement the past in their minds and find a way to remember. They are not interested in facts, dates, or figures, but rather in finding a way to preserve their own experience before it is lost forever.

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