Shunned

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Even now I talk too much and too loud, claiming ground, afraid that I will disappear from *this* life, too, from this time of being mother and teacher and friend. That It—everything I care about, that I believe in, that defines and reassures me—will be wrenched from me again.

Family. Church. School. Community. There are not many ways you can get kicked out of those memberships. As a child in Hampton, N.H., I knew husbands who cheated on their wives. Openly. My father. I knew men and women who beat their children. We all knew them. We all knew men who were too lazy to bring in a paycheck or clean the leaves out of their yards, women who spent the day on the couch crying while the kids ran loose in the neighborhood. We knew who drank at the Meadowbrook after work each day and drove home to burn Spaghetti-Os on the stove for the children. We even knew a witch. We called her Goody Welsh, as if her magic had kept her alive since the Salem days. But this was 1966. All these people were tolerated. More than tolerated; they were the Community. The teachers and ministers' wives and football players and drugstore owners. They lived next to me on Leavitt Road and Mill Road and High Street. They smiled hello when I rode my bike past their clean or dirty yards, their sunny or shuttered houses.

Then I got pregnant. I was 16. Family, church, school—each, which had embraced me as a child—turned its back. Shunning is supposed to keep bad things from happening in a community. But it doesn't correct the life gone wrong. It can only expose the transgression to a very raw light, use it as a measure, a warning to others that says, "See? That didn't happen in our home. Because we are Good. We're better than that." The price I paid seems still to be extreme. But I bet it was a while again before any girl in Hampton let herself be fucked in the gritty sand by a boy from away who said love.

A friend once told me that when he was in seventh grade, he and his best friend, Nathan, fought. Nathan got everyone in school to ignore my friend the next day, incited them to the silent treatment. It only lasted until noon. One by one my friend drew his friends back, outmaneuvering Nathan. But still my friend remembers the impotent shame he felt for those four hours. The injustice.

It didn't last because my friend was a boy, a boy who knew how to fight back, a boy who believed that he could interrupt the current and draw his world back into order. It didn't work because he felt powerful, after all, worthy of those friends and their loyalty.

And it didn't work because there was no moral to be exalted, no messy failure to be feasted upon. But pregnant in 1965: If this could happen to Bobbie's daughter, then, like contagion, it could happen to anyone's girl. Unless we scared them so much they would never spread their legs again. Injustice. It had to be unjust. It had to be electrifying to work.

I have often wondered whether the grown-ups I went to church with, who had made sandwiches for me and their children on dreamy, summer days, who praised me year after year for my A's and my manners and my nice family, who paid me extra for watching their babies so well—I have wondered if they had to tell their children to shun me, or if the kids slid into it on their own. The motives of the grown-ups seemed quite different from those of my peers. When Diane and Pepper and Debbie and John and Stephen stopped speaking to me, when they started to cross the street in tight, hushed groups, when they left Tobey's Rexall, their cherry Cokes unfinished because I walked in—had they been told to steer so clear of me? Did they understand that if shunning is to work, it must be absolute? No soft heart to undermine the effect? Or did they find their own reasons to cast me out? "I never liked her, anyway" or "She thinks she's so smart." "Her father left, you know." Maybe I was simply too dangerous. If they did not abruptly turn away, they would be judged, by association, for being as dirty as I was.

This sort of shunning has the desired effect of erasing a life. Making it invisible, incapable of contaminating. I suddenly had no history with these kids. I had started school with them at Mrs. Winkler's kindergarten, in the basement of her husband's dental office. First grade, fifth, eighth, 10th—Mrs. Bean and Mrs. Marcotte and Mr. Cooper—24 kids moving together year after year. We all knew each other's parents and brothers and sisters and whether they went to the Congregational or the Methodist or the tiny Episcopal church. We knew who practiced piano after supper and who lived with a grandmother and who read secretly in the field behind Pratt's barn.

No one in our class was bad. We believed we were good children, and were. The 1950s still breathed its insistent, costly calm through our childhoods. When we said, "I'm in sixth grade," we meant, I belong with these boys and girls; we are bound in inevitable affection. The grown-ups reinforced for each of us this sense of our lives being woven together, sticky strands of a resilient web. We liked each other as a matter of course; idiosyncrasies and conflicts, like broken rays of the whole, were quickly corrected, the flaw made invisible and forgotten.

I still can tell you that Kenneth had a funny, flat head. That fat Jimmy surprised us in eighth grade by whipping out a harmonica and playing country ballads. That he also surprised us that year by flopping on the floor in an epileptic fit. That Jill, an only child, lived in a house as orderly and dead as a tomb. That I coveted her closetful of clothes. That Patty's father had to drag our muddy, sagging dog back every few weeks from hunting in the marshes; that he apologized politely every time to my mother, as if it were his fault. That in kindergarten Jay wanted to marry me and that I whipped him a year or two later with thorny switches his father had trimmed from the hedge separating our yards. That his father called me Meredy-My-Love, and I called him Uncle Leo. That Heather's grandmother, Mrs. Coombs, taught us music once a week, the fat that hung from her arms swinging wildly just offbeat as she led each song.

I still can tell you that Linda wouldn't eat the crusts. I thought she was spoiled. That Sharon smelled and was supposed to be pitied, not ostracized. That Bonnie wore my old skirts and dresses, found in the Clothes Closet in the church vestry, and I was never to mention anything to her, as though everyone had not seen those same clothes on me all the previous year. That Bev was Mr. Fiedler's pet, that her mother made cookies for the Brownies every Wednesday when we sat like grown women, gossiping while we sewed aprons and washcloth slippers for our mothers

and grandmothers at Christmas. That Johnny was a flirt and liked to kiss girls, and he would come to no good, although he came to something better than I did. That Sheila's mother sold us eggs. That Bill was almost as smart as I was, but he was a boy and never got all A's. That I followed the rules and craved praise, that I was cheerful and a pleaser, a leader who was headed somewhere.

These are myths, of course. We children touched ourselves in the dark and stole money from our mothers' purses and listened at night to our parents screaming obscenities. But the myths worked; none of those secrets were visible. There was a silent hierarchy based in part on social class but also on something less tangible—an unswerving sense of who came from a "good" family. They didn't need to have money. But the good family must protect its secrets. No grandparent could be a public drinker or an atheist. If Dad walked out, Mother must become a saint.

Lucky for me I came from just such a family. I was a good girl, the darling of teachers and chosen as a friend by these 24 kids I knew as if we were cousins.

I have a very small box containing everything that survives that childhood—a perfect-attendance pin from Sunday school; my Brownie sash; a jet-and-rhinestone pin given to me by a crazy old woman up the street; my toe shoes, the pink satin worn through; one Ginny doll, her hair half gone, and a few clothes my mother and I sewed for her; a silver dollar my first boyfriend gave me for Christmas my sophomore year; my prayer book, signed in the front by my mother, "To my beloved daughter"; and a class picture, titled "My Class," from 10th grade.

I don't ever look at this photo and should throw it out. I loved My Class. I loved belonging. I loved the promise I thought I heard, that they would become my past, my history. It is as if there was a terrible death and they were all lost to me, abruptly and all at once. But nobody died. The loss was only mine, a private and interior devastation.

Robin and I walked to school together every day until the day I was kicked out. I heard from her suddenly 10 years ago—24 years after I walked home alone at 11:30 in the morning with the green slip of expulsion in my book bag, my secret let loose and starting its zinging trip mouth to mouth—when her mother, my mother's best friend, Margie, was dying of Alzheimer's. Now when Robin and I get together, she tells me the stories of my own life that I have had to forget. Like an artist painting in the details of a soft charcoal sketch, she fills in the forgotten, the high-school years that I cannot afford to carry. She says, "You remember, Meredy. MaryAnn lived on the corner of Mill Road. You used to spend the night at her house a lot." I don't remember. Maybe a certain flip of dark hair or a faint laugh. But I vanished in my own mind, along with all the comfortable, small facts of my life, on that day of expulsion in 1965. Shunned, made invisible, I became invisible to myself. The photo of "My Class" is a record of the history I do not share.

I suppose they all get together every few years for a reunion. They were the class of 1967. I am certain that the space I occupied in the group for 16 years closed in as fast as the blooms on a shrub when one flower dies or is pinched out. I wonder what they would say if my name came up. I wonder if they ever think of me. I sometimes imagine that I will somehow find out where they will meet for the next reunion. I will arrive looking clean and successful and proud. But

what would I say to them? That this thing, this shunning, this shaming is an eraser, a weapon that should never be wielded?

Last year I had a student from Hampton in my writing class at the state university. I knew from her last name that she must be the daughter of Timmy Keaton. I told her that I had known her father all through my childhood. I didn't tell her that we weren't really friends, that I was important in class and he was one of those peripheral members no one ever really noticed. She came back the next Monday for a conference. To make conversation—or maybe, 30 years later, to reclaim some of my purged identity—I asked if she had mentioned my name to her father. She looked embarrassed, and I realized right away my misstep: I could not have a student knowing my dark and secret past. But she said, squirming in her chair, "He couldn't really remember your name. I tried to describe you, but he couldn't remember you."

Mrs.Taccetta played the small organ softly as I followed my mother and sister to seats up front. My shy brother was lighting candles on the altar with a long wand, his face shiny with embarrassment. This used to be Johnny Ford's house, a big colonial, gone to seed, between my house and uptown. The Episcopal church had originally met upstairs in the Grange hall, my mother and Mrs. Pervier and Mr. Shindledecker setting up folding metal chairs and restacking them each Sunday morning for six years. Finally those pioneers, seeing some crucial and mysterious distinction between themselves and the Congregationalists and Methodists, raised the funds to buy Johnny's house and turn his living room and dining room into a chapel. The kitchen stayed, but my mother donated our old refrigerator; I could still smell our potatoes in the old-fashioned flip-out drawer in the bottom. The fridge gave me a sense of ownership in the church. So did my mother's role as president of the women's auxiliary. Exotic, deeply embroidered stoles and altar cloths hung in her closet, carefully washed, starched and ironed and laid over my absent father's wooden coat hangers. My mother walked up to the church each Saturday afternoon to set up, arranging flowers and replacing the grape juice and communion wafers.

I felt important there, and loved. I heard every Sunday as we walked into church, "Oh, Bobbie, you have raised such wonderful children." My mother told us we were special, a family united by the trauma of my father's going, and made stronger for it. Church allowed us to parade our family's bravery and fortitude. Smiling, slim and tan and absolutely capable, my mother led us into the gaze of our congregation. I was proud. When Mrs. Palmer and Mrs. Zitrick and Mr. Keniston and Crazy Lulu and Reverend Andrews nodded and smiled their hellos, I felt the light of adoration shine on me. In the pew, in the little chapel she had helped to build, my mother held my hand, and I was a child of grace.

I was kicked out of school on the day we returned from Christmas vacation. I was a junior, 16 years old. My mother had watched me with cool suspicion as I refused to eat breakfast. Five months pregnant, a slim dancer, I had zipped my wool skirt over my hard, round belly and prayed for one more day of hiding.

In gym class that morning, we had used the mats for tumbling. Over and over, Miss Millett had made us practice running somersaults, kips and splits. When my turn came to do a move called the fish-flop—a backward somersault, legs held high for a pause in the follow-through, and an arched-back slide down onto the chest and belly—I balked. I was starting to understand that what

had ended my periods, what made my belly grow, was not just a terrifying threat, an ominous messenger telling me that I was doomed; it was becoming a life—a child, curled inside me in, perhaps—why not?—the same dread and fear of its future that I carried every minute. Suddenly, watching the girls ahead of me slamming back down onto the mats, I felt a confused and ferocious protectiveness and a giving-in, two of us too tired to hide anymore. The class watched as I ran out of the gym into the girls' locker room.

My best friends, Kathy and Chris, followed me. "What's wrong?" they asked earnestly. I hadn't showered after gym class for a month, but they had bought my excuses about not having time before biology class. This time I turned and faced them in the clammy room. "I'm pregnant," I said. I remember now that they both visibly drew back, sucking in air, suspended. Maybe not. Maybe they just stared for a minute. Maybe they looked at me and considered how to react. But I was surprised, after all the months of rehearsing the scene in my mind, to see them turn silently to their lockers, fumble with their clothes, and leave together without saying a word to me. If I hadn't understood during those five terrified months that everything I had ever been, everything I had ever believed in and dreamed of was gone, I understood it at that moment.

Miss Millett may have called Mrs. Zitrick, the school nurse and my mother's helper on the women's auxiliary at church. Or maybe Mrs. Zitrick watched me one day too many as I ran up the steps of the cafeteria into the bathroom to vomit lunch, my skirt stretched tight. Maybe she saw the change in my face, the darkness of fear and aloneness underlying the charade of walking and talking and sitting. She called me to her office. She was surprisingly tender as she handed me the expulsion slip.

"Do you want me to call your mother at work?" she asked.

"No, thank you," I answered. "How will I take my midterms?"

Mrs. Zitrick sat back in her chair. "You understand that you may not return to this school?"

I left my books, left my notes, my notebooks, with my childish penmanship of looping phrases and doodles and who-loves-whom, on her desk. I walked down the silent, polished hallway to my locker, put on my jacket and mittens, and walked alone through the White wing, past the office staff staring at me through the big window, and out the door. The first phase of outcasting was done.

"Well," my mother said that night after work, sitting on the couch across the room in her trim wool dress and heels. "Well. You can't stay here."

The second phase.

I was supposed to move to my father's house the next morning. I asked my mother if I could wait until Sunday so I could go to church. She looked surprised. "Haven't you figured anything out?" she asked. "You can't go to church like that. They won't want us anymore." I don't believe my mother ever went to church again. When she died my brother and sister and I argued about whether she would want a minister at her grave. I believed that she would; I knew my own

ambivalent heart. Finally we asked a nice man from the Unitarian church to come, a neutral voice who was delicate in referring to a benevolent God.

No one from church ever called or wrote to me after I left Hampton. The silence made me feel as if I had never been part of their Christian body. The beloved smells of leather prayer books and wax and old women's perfume, the swish of Mr. Andrews' robes, the sweet wheeze of the organ, Mrs. Taccetta's tiny feet in stubby, black heels pumping the pedals; the voices of the church rising together, proclaiming God's mercy and forgiveness; the refrigerator humming in the kitchen; my mother's hand wrapped around mine while we stood to sing and knelt to pray; Mr. Spellacy or Miss St. Germaine smiling at me during the long sermon; the permanence and comfort of the affection of grown-ups. The radiant, bored peace of church. All this evaporated when word got out.

Last Easter I finally succeeded in getting my grown sons to accompany me to a service in the local Episcopal chapel. They had never been in a church, and I had not been in one, except for funerals, since I was 16. "Come," I said. "Easter is a joyous time in the church. Lets go sing about the rebirth of the Earth." They liked it. I sang by heart every word of "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" and gave the responses to the Nicene Creed like a believer. I wasn't. But I was home—the sublime faces and the murmurings and the music and the candles and the lilies. The warmth felt deceptive, though, and seductive. Dangerous. My old defenses rose up again instinctively, and I defied the beautiful place and the pious hearts and the father on the altar to catch me again.

I hadn't spent time with my father since he had remarried six years before. He and Dorothy lived in a large, old colonial in Epping, 15 miles from home. They were renovating the house themselves, and Dorothy was a terrible housekeeper, so it was crowded with sheetrock panels and five-gallon buckets of plaster and boards and crushed boxes of nails and screws and tiles for the bathroom and old magazines and piles of mail and clothes strewn over chairs. The kitchen was greasy, and mounds of dirty dishes filled the sink. My father and Dorothy both traveled for their jobs and were seldom home. Dorothy told me to keep the thermostats at 64; she bought cottage cheese and pineapple so I would stay thin and not "lose my shape." I had never slept alone in a house before.

I was not formed yet, not a decision-maker about my life. I was not yet born to consciousness. But here, suddenly, I was facing the results of being in the world. In those empty, slow, lonely days, I had to be born into my next life, as I lost my old self in a kind of death.

My stepsister, Molly, was still on her winter vacation from Deerfield Academy. The morning before I arrived, she was moved from her home to her grandmother's house in western New Hampshire. We were told to stop writing letters to each other; my father explained that Molly was still only 15 and they didn't want her exposed to "things like this." I was forbidden to go outside because no one in town was told that I was there and pregnant. Once after a deep, comforting snow, I shoveled the driveway and walks, thinking that my father and Dorothy would be happily surprised when they came home the next day. They were angry and reiterated that I must never go outside again.

I spent long, silent days and nights in the house. When my father and Dorothy were home, they often had dinner parties. I was sent up to my room early with a plate of food and told not to make any noise. I didn't dare go to the bathroom down the hall, afraid that someone would come up the stairs. So I lay under the covers in my frosty, gloomy room, holding my pee, waiting. The laughter rose in bursts from the room below, voices from lives lived on another planet.

The winter was very long and very cold and very gray. The house, my room were large and cold and gray. I waited for calls from Karen and Chris, from friends at school who would be missing me, and then stopped waiting. Once I got a letter from a boy named Bill, a kind letter referring obscurely to my trouble and asking me to write back. It was a moment of tenderness that threatened to break my new, tough heart. I could not afford to cry and could not figure out what I—a dirty pregnant girl hiding upstairs in a cold, lonely house—could say to a handsome boy who still went to history class and shoveled driveways on Saturday mornings. I never wrote back.

I know now that what happened that winter was a deep and scarring depression. Despair and a ferocious, watchful defiance saturated my young life. I was formed largely in those four months, those months that isolated me from any life, from any belief, from any sense that I belonged to anyone. I was alone. My fear and grief burned like wildfires on a silent and distant horizon. I watched the destruction day after day, standing by my bedroom window, staring out over the snow-covered fields that belonged to my father.

My mother finally called in March. My birthday was coming, and she wanted to bring me home for dinner. I was pushed to excitement. I missed my mother badly, the mother of my childhood. I missed my bedroom and my cat. I missed that life, that girl, and wanted to reclaim her for a day.

I was exchanged between my parents' cars on the Route 101 overpass at noon. My mother stared at my large belly and didn't hug me. We drove in silence to Hampton; I wished I had not agreed to come. Being near her, being in our car, which belonged now to before, approaching my town on roads as familiar as my own body had once been, all agitated the deep, deep sense of loss that I had struggled so hard to kill. When we turned onto Lafayette Road near town, my mother told me to get down on the floor of the car. I didn't move. "We might see someone," she explained. I squeezed my baby and me onto her floor and watched my mother's faraway face staring straight ahead as we drove home.

My bedroom was a museum of another life. It was pink and soft and sunny and treacherous. I sat all afternoon on my bed, fingering the white chenille bedspread and stroking my purring, black cat. I called up my numbness. A white lace cloth, one I had ironed when I was a child in this house, covered the bureau. The blue plastic clock whirred quietly. Cars slid silently down High Street, carrying people I knew: Mrs. Shindledecker and Corky Lawrence and Sally and Mr. Palmer. They were in a movie, and I watched from beyond the screen.

I don't remember my birthday dinner, at 17 years old and seven months along. I am sure my mother gave me something nice. I hid on the floor of the car in the dark and was relieved to return to the empty obscurity of my father's house.

I had a keen sense of my baby and me being outcasts together. My father and mother had decided immediately that "we" would give the baby up for adoption. I didn't fight; I understood with absolute clarity that I would have no one helping me, that I had held one summer job in a candy store at the beach, that I could never return to high school. That we would be loved and protected nowhere. My sister and brother "knew," but no one else in the family had been told. I still don't know where my grandparents thought I was that year. I do know they were not there telling me that families don't give babies away.

The sense that I had a foreign and threatening force inside me had given way to an intense feeling of connection, of being lost together. We spent the dead-quiet hours alone, our heartbeats measuring together the passage of time, the damage, the unexpressed grief. We would be separated forever in two more months. We shared time in a strange and intense and encompassing sorrow.

My sister, six years older and longing since she was 10 to have a baby of her own, said to me, "This is a baby. A baby is growing inside you." I could not afford it with her.

"I hate this baby," I said to her, scaring her away.

I could feel his small heel or an elbow pressing hard against the inside of my belly as he rolled. I spent the days doing nothing but thinking, learning to live in my head, my arms wrapped under my belly, my baby absorbing my stunned sadness. He had hiccups in the night. I lay in the deep, cold emptiness of the house, the night shared with another living being. My blood flowed through him. Tenacious threads joined us outside the world. I could not feel loved by him, ever. But we were one life, small and scared and alone.

"You have got to let this baby go!" the doctor roared at me. He smelled of cigarettes. We had been there a very, very long time. "You cannot hold this baby inside you," he said angrily. "Push!" My baby was born on Memorial Day, 1966.

Four days after the birth, my mother drove me to High Mowing, a small boarding school on a mountaintop in western New Hampshire, for an interview to enter in the fall. That morning she had found me crying as I squeezed milk from my impacted breasts into the bathroom sink.

"Oh, Sweetheart," she had said. "My poor Sweetheart."

I whipped around and hissed at her, "Get out." They were the first and only tears I had shed throughout the pregnancy and birth and the terrible, terrible drive away from the hospital. We had moved beyond mother and daughter forever. Whatever she felt, watching me cry, could not help me now.

She was cheerful and talkative on the way to the school. "This is a time to regroup," she told me, "to get back on track." She didn't look at me as she drove. "You need to forget these difficult months and make a new start," she said.

My belly was empty and soft. I had stuffed handkerchiefs in my bra to soak up the milk that spilled and spilled from my breasts. I felt old. The fierce sense of aloneness intensified. My other being, my baby who shared life with me, who was alive in me when everything else had died, was left alone someplace on the third floor of the hospital, the absolute outcast, a castaway.

"I'm relieved," my mother said, "that this whole ordeal is over." She reminded me again that some of her friends had dropped her when they heard about me; she had paid a big price, she said. I was lucky she had found this school, the only one that had agreed to consider me. She talked on and on while we drove toward my next life.

Mrs. Emmet met us in the living room of the old farmhouse. She was 83, a wealthy eccentric and educator who carried her ideas from Germany and Austria. I felt at home; this was a world away from Hampton and Epping and my school friends, who had become cardboard cutouts from someone else's past. If I did not get in here, I would have to go to work without a diploma. I had always imagined I would go to Smith or Wellesley, the first generation. Now I hoped this old woman would let me finish high school in her strange little school for fuckups.

She said I could come, even though I had "run amok." I had to promise I would never talk to any of the girls about what I had done; I would have the only single room, to isolate me from the possibility that the need to talk would compromise my promise. In September, ancient and so diminished I barely felt alive, I joined 80 children for a final year of school. I graduated in 1967, the same year my old class finished up in Hampton.

For several years after that, I occasionally went "home." I slowly grew bold and defiant and would walk uptown and into the familiar stores. I always saw someone I knew. Inevitably they stared and then turned away abruptly. If two were together, they bent together in whispers and walked away from me. Patty, who had been for six years the only other member, with me, of an experimental, accelerated class, refused to sell stamps to me at the post office. Mrs. Underwood stayed busy in the back of the five-and-10, folding and refolding clothes until I left. Once as I got out of the car in my mother's driveway, Diane drove by with three girls from my class. They whipped around in the next driveway and stopped in front of my house. Diane leapt out of the car, smiling at me. "Is it true—" she asked loudly, grinning back at my old friends, "Is it true you got knocked up?"

I have not been to my father's house for 30 years. There are many things and many places that speak to me of what has been lost. I long, in an odd way, for my gray and forsaken bedroom in that lonely house, where someone lay close to my heart.

There are other truths, of course, behind this history, glimmers and flickers of understanding that underlie these memories. I was not the do-good child I thought myself to be. For example I know now that I hated school. I was bored and arrogant, clamoring for more from better teachers. I once told the principal to go to hell. I offered to replace Mr. Belanger as French teacher when he couldn't answer my questions. My brother was a day student at Phillips Exeter, and I was jealous.

I think I was a skeptic—actually a cynic—by the time I was in high school. I was outspoken, with strong opinions—even defiant. I was intolerant of ignorance or injustice. I read the daily

paper and Atlantic Monthly and knew that people suffered terrible inequities. I laid blame passionately around me—the battle was between the haves and have-nots. I believed in the Truth, in what was Right, and must have been righteous. I tended to be a loner; I had lots of friends, but they knew, I think, that I always reserved some elemental piece of myself. I imagined myself always on the outside, by choice on the days I felt loved and by some fated flaw on those other days. I carried a deep sadness, a melancholy that belied my cheerfulness.

I did love my church. But when at 14 I attended confirmation class, I grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of answers to my questions. I perceived this as a failure on the part of the minister and the church to own up to its limitations and hypocrisies. I challenged Mr. Andrews; he appeared to tolerate my confrontations, but I left confused and agitated each Wednesday evening. Two years before my expulsion, I realize now, my beliefs in God and my church had already started to fray.

It is true that my mother might not have continued in the church after I left. But she had met Paul the year before. He was a jazz musician, a writer, a thinker. I remember going to church alone for a while, probably during that year of tumultuous changes in my mother's own life. She became a radical, started keeping a journal, sketched faces on the phone pad. She worked for Paul at a new job with a small, artsy magazine. After work they joined friends at the house Paul rented at the beach for long nights of drinking and talk and cigarettes and music. That was the summer I got pregnant. Leaving the church may actually have happened for my mother months before my outcasting. Of course I believed completely that she was a nearly perfect mother and any trouble I found was born in my own reckless, selfish heart.

It is true that my shunning was a message from our community to my mother, also: Bobbie Hall thought she was so high and mighty, but she couldn't keep her husband, and now she hangs out with beatniks at the beach. And don't even mention her youngest. You get what you deserve. Her rejection of me was a measure of the humiliation she felt. She believed until her death that I caused her to lose her friends and her stature in our town.

I struggle to reckon with my own silence, my lack of fight. I allowed my family and community to abandon me while I was drowning. Worst of all I allowed my baby to be abandoned. I abandoned my baby. I never said a word. Sometimes my own failure of courage feels like the most hideous kind of cowardice, a flaw in me that confirms my unworthiness for love. Sometimes, rarely, I get a flicker of understanding about other realities and feel a powerful protectiveness of that stunned and desperate girl.

These various truths sometimes collide with memories I have used to reconstruct the puzzle, but they cannot alter the perfect truth I carry of having been turned out.

It is a function of shunning that it must eliminate the sunned completely. It feels like a murder and is baffling because there is no grave. No hymns were sung to ease my going or to beg for God's blessing on my soul. Shunning is as precise as a scalpel, an absolute excision, leaving, miraculously, not a trace of a scar on the community body. The scarring is left for the girl, an intense, debilitating wound that weeps for the rest of her life. It's quite a price to pay for having sex, scared sex, on a beach on a foggy Labor Day night.

The shunning has created a deep shame that infuses my life. It makes me feel wildly vulnerable. I struggle still to claim a permanent space, an immutable relationship to those around me. It negates forever the ability to have a real friend. To speak in a room with confidence. To walk anyplace without believing that I have no right to be there and that I am in danger. In response I have built a formidable tenacity; my grandmother, never knowing its source, called me her "little rock of Gibraltar." I sometimes meet women and recognize in them an instinct to run, to be gone before harm can come again, mixed with a ferocious recklessness because nothing else can be taken. I wonder what they could have done to be paying such a price.