

MORE HUMAN, LESS BEING: STORIES

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of  
Texas State University  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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May 2017

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

First, I would like to thank Twister Marquiss, my thesis advisor, for his guidance, patience, and love of words.

I would also like to thank Dr. John Blair and my senior seminar fiction writing class for their worthwhile feedback.

I would especially like to thank my best friend, Skyler, for his inspiration, for sharing his life and journey with me, and for being the bravest person I know.

To my many other friends for sharing their stories, thank you.

And last but not least, a huge thank you to the Honors College, for all of the help and advice they provided.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Stories and the art of storytelling are important parts of relationships. Stories in this collection were inspired by real events and real people using fiction as a lens for reality. This collection contains a personal memoir of the Memorial Day Flood that drastically affected Central Texas and was a life changing experience. Two stories aim to focus awareness on the struggle and difficulties faced by many people identifying with the LGBTQ community. And another character's misadventures serve as a statement on dating, sexuality, and growing into the person who will go on to make more memories and even more mistakes. Each of the narrators struggles with self image in their own way. These characters described are known by everyone in some form or other, and someone somewhere, holds them close.

## Because It Doesn't Always End Well

Holy fuck, I needed to get laid. And holy hell, he looked fine as wine. Not like he used to. This guy could distract me anytime.

“What? What is it? Brisket in my teeth?” He caught me staring at him as he self-consciously ran a tongue over too-white teeth that shone against dark skin. I shook my head and grinned around my last mouthful of meat then winced. *That's not flattering.* We were almost done with too much food at a hole-in-the wall BBQ joint, our munchies nearly satisfied.

“Ready to go? Elissa will wonder where we are.”

“Almost.” He ran the edge of a napkin around his mouth, emphasizing his lips and then carefully, meticulously, wiped each finger on it ensuring that no remnants of sauce remained in or around his nails. “I’ll be right back.” Tony headed for the bathroom, and I, trying not to be melodramatic, sighed. I knew he was staring into a mirror double checking that I was telling the truth and that his teeth were indeed BBQ sauce-free. He emerged from the bathroom, all six-and-a-half gorgeous feet of him.

“I still think you should have worn a costume.” I noted, glancing over him. He was dressed in a silvery-gray suit and fancy shoes, making me self-conscious in my Rosie-the-Riveter jean shorts, crop top, and red bandana tied around my head.

“I told you. I’m a high-functioning alcoholic.” After looking left and right he pulled a black flask from the pocket of his navy blue vest.

*Why do guys always have so many pockets?* I asked myself yet again. “That’s not a costume. That’s barely a psychological condition.”

Tony laughed, the sound rumbling around his torso and vibrating out into his hands, one of which he used to grab mine. “Let’s go.”

We had smoked a joint earlier, and as we drove, the vestiges of my high watched street lights slide across my skin in a fascinating progression as we headed toward the party. I was unsuccessfully trying to get two very separate voices out of my head. One belonged to Elissa, my best friend, who would never judge me. The second belonged to Eric. It was a voice I was trying to forget.

“What’s your biggest fantasy?”

“Hmm,” I said. “I’d have to say a ménage a trios with me, you, and”—I hesitated, hoping he wouldn’t judge me—“your brother.” Eric was hot, toned with lean muscle that only a vigorous workout routine will get you. And his brother was just as attractive. Only problem was that Eric lived in North Dakota now. *Who the fuck lives in a Dakota?* Eric laughed and ran a deliciously calloused hand over my naked thigh.

“You would.”

I could hear the party pulsing from the parking lot. With two feet on the asphalt and one hand on my hip, I watched him stretch himself out of the driver’s seat and run a hand over his short hair. *Dammit, woman. Get your mind out of his gutter.* He came around to the hood of the car where I was standing, staring, again.

“Shall we?” he said raising an eyebrow, indicating my hand with his.

“We shall,” I said in the same ridiculous tone, taking that hand.

I opened Elissa's apartment door to hear Niykee Heaton going on and on about her "Bad Intentions" over a sound system. Though there were many strangers, I spotted my friends in myriad misplaced costumes sitting around on couches playing cards. Martin, who was no doubt too cheap to get a costume, had cross-dressed, probably borrowing Elissa's clothes, and Skyler's stripes gave away Waldo. Typical. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed strangers playing beer pong with balls that had bloodshot eyes drawn on them. Elissa spotted me from one of the couches that was too big for the tiny room. As she headed towards me, I noticed that she and James, her boyfriend, were dressed as skeletons reminiscent of Día de los Muertos. After she hugged me, I introduced her to Tony. Her already wide eyes widened as they took in the sheer height of him.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

But she was looking at me, raising her eyebrows. *Moving on so soon, are we, Alice?* Her look said. Did I detect a hint of approval? Yes, it was somewhere in the crease between her eyebrows.

"Drinks," I said.

"Witch's brew on the counter," she said, gesturing to a cooler full of punch smoking with dry ice.

I turned to Tony. "Drinks," I reiterated.

As I drank, the party stirred. Most of my contemplations ceased thanks to drinks following more drinks. I think I may have run the table for eight games of beer pong. I may have yelled at a Trump supporter. I definitely made elaborate plans to hang out with

a Super Girl. I needed a night like this where I could laugh with my friends, have my own little adventures, and not worry about what a guy in another state—who had no business thinking about me—was thinking about me.

Later that evening, drink in hand, Tony and I were leaning against the railing of the balcony. It was humid for October, and the balmy fall breeze teased ringlets of blonde hair on the nape of my neck as my mind wandered. Tony stood oddly quiet next to me. As I watched the city lights spread out beneath us, I wondered if Eric’s mind was wandering too. *You haven’t seen him since he moved to freaking North Dakota. Let. Him. Go.* With that thought, I turned to him.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hi.”

Maybe he read my mind, or maybe my face was just that easy to read. He moved until he was in front of me, inclined his head, and tilted my chin up to kiss me. *Ugh, there’s no way to make this less cliché.* But it was cliché. I felt like I’d just walked out of a Nicholas Sparks’ novel. *Oh, well.*

“Your lips are so soft,” he said, sliding a hand down my hip and pressing my back against the railing.

Something in my head thumbed a weak protest against my temple. My conscience felt vague and obscure, a visitor I told to give my libido some privacy. It was the way I wanted it. He tasted slightly of punch, and it was intoxicating.

“Come over?”

*Another adventure? “Yes, please.” I grinned. Yeah, I’ll come over. Come all over you. I’m an independent woman. Sex is an expression of my individuality, or something. He’s sweet, and intelligent and TALL.*

I was lounging on his bed with a Chinese textbook when Eric came into the room without stitch of clothing on, a sweating glass of ice cubes in his hand.

“Wanna try something?” He had that look on his face, a heady blend of less creepy Christian Grey meets a more realistic Prince Charming combining to form one super sex soldier.

“Always.”

In a single motion he was straddling me, an ice cube held between his lips. “Tell me if this is weird,” he mumbled around the cold.

I nodded. *Wow, I can feel my heartbeat in my ears.* He pressed the ice to my navel, sliding it towards my sternum following the trail it left with his tongue and running it over my breasts until I was shivering uncontrollably.

Even though we agreed not to slap a label on whatever we had, I again wished he was mine. But we needed to do the casual, open relationship bit until one of us needed the other enough to simply say so.

Tony helped me down the stairs and into the car. My reflection in the car window stared at me with hooded eyes as dark roads sped past. I watched him as he concentrated, street lights gliding over cheek bones. He wasn’t always this good looking. We had met

in our first semester of Chinese. Though I bragged about all the ways that I did not care about appearances, I had dismissed him. As Fate or Fortune, or whatever that bitch's name was, would have it, a summer working at the gym and a cleaner haircut had been so good to him that I finally noticed the intense glances he directed at me. To be fair, it did take weeks after Eric leaving for me to see Tony as anyone other than a classmate, but notice him I did.

“So this is where the magic happens.” His place was oddly immaculate. There were washed dishes drying beside the sink, and a vase of fall flowers on otherwise speckless counters. The carpet had vacuum marks streaked across it. Everything was neat and in its own particular place, down to the tucked sheets and throw blanket on his bed. Who the fuck has navy blue silk sheets? But as I walked further into his room, I noticed the edge of a pile of clothes spilling from his closet. *Ah, I see.*

I felt Tony's eyes on me as I continued to study his bedroom, wondering exactly how slippery those sheets were going to be.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hi.”

“I cleaned.”

“I can tell.”

Then sex stuff happened.

His lips were on me, and I was falling fantastically and irreversibly into a new adventure. I was falling onto his bed. He wrapped his arms around me, and we both fell

onto the bed. His shirt and slacks were followed by my shorts and top, all to the floor. This is about where Nicholas Sparks would have called it quits.

“You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this, baby. Daddy’s gonna take care of you tonight.” He swayed slightly as he hovered over me, his elbows pressing into the bed on either side of me. It was then that I realized he must be more drunk than I originally thought.

“Uh huh. You do that,” I said, trying so hard to go along with it.

He moved over me in a way that meant he wanted me to go down on him which would have been fine, but instead he—

*Thwap.*

He did not just—

*Thwap.* For the second time, his colossal half-mast dick smacked me in the face.

“Stop!” I grabbed the thing.

“What? You don’t like that, snow bunny?”

“No, no I don’t.” *Was he being a little bit racist? Wait. Does he think he is being sexy? He seemed so normal a few minutes ago.* “How about we don’t talk and do it normal?” I said trying to salvage the whole experience somehow. Though it was clearly a lost cause, but damn it, I was going to get mine.

A couple of relatively insubstantial thrusts later, I was on my back, and he was patting my face like a football player slapping a teammate’s butt to say “good job” or “congratulations.” He rolled over and passed out, leaving me to stare at the pimped

ceiling and mentally facepalm over and over again. I was so flabbergasted. This beautiful man that had so enchanted me an hour ago had done a complete one-eighty. *Maybe I just bring out the weird in people.* I closed my eyes.

His hair was longer, and it moved like seagrass underwater even without a breeze.

“Eric,” I called, but he didn’t seem to hear me. I tried to move toward him, but there was something holding my feet to the ground. As I watched, his skin rippled while muscles, bones, and tendons morphed him into someone else. “No no no. Eric, come back.” But he was gone, replaced by Tony who looked at me hungrily as moss started to grow over hands that were too smooth to be the calloused ones I craved. Shaking I covered my face with my hands. When I removed them, there was a mirror framed with carved oak floating in front of me. Mascara smeared down my cheeks. I attempted a smile but only managed to look grim. The girl in the mirror glared at me with a sinister look as her teeth fell one by one from her mouth to disappear into the dark.

I awoke panting and terrified to sunlight invading the bedroom and Tony lying on his side, his eyes riveted on my tits. The sheets were tangled around my waist in a distressed puddle.

“Morning,” he said, leaning in for a kiss.

*Oh, God he reeked.* His breath, combined with the scent of alcohol detoxing through his pores, made me want to hurl. I’m sure I didn’t smell much better. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes to stall him. My fingertips came away black. *Ah, shit.* My bandana

was still pinned to my head, turning my hair into a bird's nest of disarray. *Even better.*  
His hand skimmed along my rib cage to gently cup my breast and then jiggle it.

“I have to go.”

“What? Why?” He was so surprised.

“I have a thing that I'm late for with people. Or something.” I ignored the dizzying head rush as I went from lying down to standing in one motion. I pulled on my shorts and tied my crop top in front of me. “Where the hell is my purse?”

“Over there,” he said, pointing toward the door. I must have dropped it last night. He seemed a little hurt that I was leaving without another thwapping session.

“Thanks.”

“You need a ride or—”

“No. I'm fine. I'll find one.” I was out of his apartment and closing the door before he could say anything else. My phone had just enough battery for one call.

“Alice, how was he?” Elissa had that edge to her voice like an elbow to my side making me want to tell her everything, but I couldn't.

“Tell you later. I need a favor.”

“Where are you?” After I told her the address, she said, “Be there ASAP.”

I paced the sidewalk trying to clear my head while I waited for her. There was a family, a mother and father pushing a little boy in a stroller, walking towards me. The mother noticed me, whispered something to the father, and they quickened their stride as they passed me. I watched them go. *Great, now I'm the girl that got thwapped.*

She rolled down the window as she pulled up to the curb in her rickety-ass car that made a horrible wheezing sound every time she touched the brakes. “Girl, get in,” she said, noticing my post-walk-of-shame look. I nearly tumbled into the passenger seat. “Want to talk about it?”

“Maybe tomorrow, when I can laugh about it.”

She nodded, put the car in drive, and accelerated away from the curb.

I was glad she was quiet. I mentally berated myself. *You just had to have an adventure, didn't you?* Hell of a choice for a rebound. My head fell back against the seat, but all I saw was the reflection from my dream with her teeth falling out. I didn't want to see her, so I looked at my hands. The red nail polish was chipped, and there were still black smears on the fingertips from rubbing my eyes earlier. They weren't pretty, but they were mine.

## More Human, Less Being

“You know,” the man behind the counter said as I picked up the pen, “it can be anything you want,”

“Really? Anything?”

He nodded.

“This is gonna take a while.”

He gave me a look that said *Honey, you're holding up the line*, “Next!”

That’s how I thought changing my name was going to happen, but in reality, it was way more complicated. And expensive. I didn’t even know where to begin or what my new name would be, so I didn’t try for a long time. My friends said it was expensive, and I could barely afford my rent with what I was currently making. But then, what I was currently making wasn’t enough to cover entirely too many fast food runs, and some things are more important, even, than rent.

“Ahhhmeeeelia!”

I ignored Ruby calling me as I walked down a too-white hallway toward my history class. Maybe I could just make it before—

“Mia.” Ruby panted as she ran to catch up with me. Then she said, “What the actual fuck are you wearing?” as she managed that awful, bitchy one-hand-on-hip-with-one-eyebrow-raised look.

I cringed inwardly. *Why does she always have to be like this?*

“What’s possibly wrong with what I’m wearing now?”

I was dressed relatively normal if you looked at my top half. That was how I compromised with Ruby. My ash blonde hair was flat-ironed and hung straight to my shoulders; I was even wearing a touch of mascara and a pink v-neck. Pink! Light blue basketball shorts hung low on my hips, and that’s where her eyes were drawn as she scrutinized my evidently lacking life choices.

“We talked about this. No. More. Basketball. Shorts. They look terrible. Wear those skirts I bought you,” and the pushup bras, the dresses, the makeup, the Coach purse she spent too much on.

“Whatever,” I said. “I’m late for class. See you tonight.” And I did see her that night while we got drunk on each other and cheap wine we stole from my mom. That would not be the last sleepless and dizzy night we spent together.

Originally Ruby had been good for me, taking me to new places and helping me meet new and wonderfully weird people. She really could be sweet and caring, but hell, was she controlling, and nosy. Poor girl couldn’t help it though—her mom was also slightly “round the bend” as the saying goes. Ruby said her mother took meds, even gave Ruby some.

High school was fun with Ruby. We partied, fooled around, did every drug we could get our hands on. I was Ruby’s first girlfriend, but not the other way around.

Ruby was a year older than me, so she started college in Corpus Christi during my senior year of high school. We agreed to do the long-distance thing and still talked daily. When my eighteenth birthday rolled around, it was time to celebrate. I drove all the way

to Corpus to see my girlfriend. Ruby took me to a couple of college parties along the beach where I got, in so many words, delightfully and totally shit-faced, and I loved it. It felt nostalgic and incredible to let loose with Ruby like we hadn't been able to in weeks. It was like old times. It didn't matter that the people were mostly strangers, and I lost count of how many hits I took. Of what? I had no fucking clue.

I passed out in Ruby's dorm room that night, and luckily her roommate was nowhere to be found. I woke up a couple of hours later to something poking me in the back. *Uhg why is my head still ringing*, I thought. Too soon I found out that my head wasn't ringing, oh no. The poking was some strange man's shoulder as Ruby fucked him against my back, and the odd rhythmic whooshing sound that I assumed was in my head was actually the two of them trying to keep quiet.

“Ruby!” I yelled. “What are you—what the hell are you doing!”

“Mi—.” She tried to protest as she attempted unsuccessfully to gracefully jump off of him. The word was too calm, too commonplace, in this odd silence. I shoved at naked limbs until Ruby tumbled to the floor. I stood, alternatively staring down naked man-whore guy and my ex. She opened lips I used to not be able to look away from as if to say something.

“The fuck? What kind of sick twisted bitch are you? Fuck a guy next to your girlfriend?”

I didn't stay to hear her story. I was already slamming the door.

Walking was one of the better decisions I made that night. After I left her room, I meandered in the direction I heard waves. The sky wasn't dark enough for my mood

thanks to the city's light pollution, but the sand felt like it should, soothing my bare feet. Heat sank from my shoulders to lodge itself deep in my abdomen. I tried not to think as water wrapped my ankles. "You look ridiculous." I said to no one in particular watching the ripples my legs made in the water. My reflection was little more than a shadow on the water. "You don't look like me."

"You're so tall, you could be a skyscraper." Johnny—there was always a Johnny, and he wasn't the brightest crayon in the drawer, or however the saying goes. But I *was* pretty tall, to his credit, and I always have been. Of course, this was picked up by all the other kids who were jealous. Every tall object that could be turned into an insult or nickname I became. I remember the weirdest one being "maypole." I don't think they even knew what a maypole was.

"You're so tall you could touch the sky," they would say.

In truth no one really knew how to go about changing their name, so I did what every child of this generation would. I googled it. *How to change your name legally*. The words had an odd yet exhilarating sense of finality to them.

My hair was a few inches shorter when I started dating Sandra, a fantastically slender girl. When I put my hands on Sandy's waist, I could almost touch my fingertips together. Best of all, she didn't give a damn how I dressed or looked. God, I loved her inner hipster.

We met, through mutual friends, at a Chance the Rapper show. It was one of his first, but we both knew his work would one day be great. We managed to introduce ourselves through shouting into each other's ears. I slipped my hand into the back pocket of her ripped and faded black skinny jeans while I watched the stage lights map her skin. She let my fingers do the same.

For a while we spent every night together becoming inseparable. We were best friends when her mom kicked her out. She moved herself in with yours truly. It wasn't really a decision. One day she was just in my life so permanently and so right. It was good though: I needed another person to define myself by, not knowing who I was yet. So I used her, but I loved her. I used her to measure my worth and myself. *I'm Sandy's girlfriend, roommate, etc.* Sandy helped me figure it out, not because she prodded, poked, and nosed her way through my feelings. She was just incredibly and gorgeously Sandy. This girl, she never brushed her hair the whole time I knew her. It tangled until natural dreadlocks formed. Not one single time did she run a brush through her hair, while I was obsessed over mine, cutting it shorter and shorter.

She let me find my own way. I tried dressing femininely very briefly, but we both agreed it wasn't my style. Gradually my wardrobe changed. I gave away the tight v-necks and skirts and threw out the little makeup I owned. These were replaced with quirky band shirts, loose-fitting jeans, and snapbacks. Now when I looked in the mirror, I saw a person who looked more like me.

One of the biggest and most personal decisions I made was to buy a binder. My breasts never felt like they belonged to me. I often found myself staring at them like spinach in a stranger's teeth. Though binders could constrict my breathing, I liked being

able to turn sideways and look in the mirror at a flat-chested version of myself. I designed a tattoo that read “Good vibes,” and it was inked in Rasta colors on her hip.

#### PETITION TO CHANGE THE NAME OF AN ADULT

Everyone is taught the saying, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” But words are power, motivation, and worlds more. We learned that from Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. Words can keep a kid or a lover from tears, stop a fight, start a war. These eight words, they started my life over.

Sandy was a badass. Nothing was too much, and everything was not enough, except me. I was enough for her. You could dare her to do anything. She’d take the shot, throw back the pill, and take the hit of whatever happened to be there. I thought this made her fearless.

Little things that I ignored wouldn’t have mattered in isolated occurrences. We went out to eat, and after the waitress dropped off the bill, Sandy reached for her battered leather wallet to pay. When she pulled out her card, an insignificant, harmless looking baggie toppled to the table with it. She quickly stuffed the tiny white pills back inside her wallet and returned it to her purse, and I didn’t think much of it. I was past the pill phase, but I knew she still dabbled. I actually laughed and said, “Babe, stop fuckin’ with pills. We were going to quit together.”

“Hah,” she said. “I know, but Will had so many. He just stuck them in my purse. I thought what the hell, you know?” Her laughter sounded too natural.

My Sandy knew people. She was friends with everyone and trusted so many, too many. People from all walks of life seemed to know her, and we constantly were running into her friends and acquaintances. Meanwhile I stuck to a much smaller group of people that meandered in and out of my up-and-down life which was okay, because they were there to talk to when I needed them.

Changing my name was a corner, it was a step, it was a metaphor for starting over and defining a new me. It was a process, though. I printed all the documents (there were many) and filled them out, but then I had to get them notarized. I was fingerprinted at the police station. After I was sworn in, I faced the judge to state my petition and case.

“My given name, Amelia Taylor Davidson, is no longer appropriate for me to be myself. I don’t know what else to say. She isn’t me anymore.”

“I understand. Are you a terrorist?”

“What? Uh, no.”

“Are you pursuing this course with the intention of criminal activities of any kind?”

“No ma’am.”

She signed my paper, and three hundred dollars later I became Skyler Darren Davidson. Finally a name I could wear around my neck, put in my wallet, push up and out of my throat, and say without flinching. I could even say it with pride.

Sandy was drunk when I picked her up to tell her the news. She had been at a party with Will and some of her other friends. Still I was excited to tell her my new name, something I had been holding onto for far too long. Though her feet were on the ground, Will was supporting most of her weight. When I got close enough she fell clumsily into my arms saying, “Hey everybody, it’s my girlfriend.”

“I did it! I finally changed my name. I’m Skyler now!”

There was a pause and then, “What’d ya go n’ do thah fur?” She slurred the words, and they stung in a way that only words can as they poked at that place beneath my left breast. I let it go, like I always did.

I let her into the car as I greeted her friends and made awkward small talk. I didn’t think much of her reaction given her slightly altered state. When they walked away I stooped to pick up her sad looking phone that she was always dropping. I drove her home and put her to bed, placing a trashcan within easy reach just in case. Then I remembered her phone still in my pocket. The screen was shattered, and I decided I would take it to the store the next day to get it fixed.

When she awoke sober and hung-over, I retold my life altering news. I had hoped she would react better than the night before.

“But I love Mia. How can I love the both of you?” she said slowly.

“No, she’s not me anymore. You have to understand. You’re the only one that ever has.”

“It’s gonna be a pain in the ass remembering to call you another name.”

I was less than thrilled with how she was taking my new identity, but I wrote it off, giving her time and space as she had given me to get used to it.

Several days later I picked up her phone from the store. One of the employees brought it out to show me that it was indeed, once more, in working condition.

“I’m just going to open up some apps and scroll around so you can tell me if anything still looks off to you.”

He scrolled around and opened some games that she played frequently. One of the random apps he tapped happened to be the messages icon, so I saw a blurb of a text from another friend of hers, Josh. All I had to see was, “Sorry I walked in on you and Will in the bedroom earlier.” The text was time-stamped from the night after I had changed my name.

“Thank you, sir,” I said to the phone store guy. “Looks fine.”

I walked quickly to the car and immediately reopened her messages. I never looked at her phone. That was her business. But I had probable cause, or something. It was like I was suddenly seeing another side of a girl I had called mine. She had told me she was done with pills, but there were so many messages of her practically begging her “friends” for them. The dam broke, and I opened everything. She had a new Snapchat message. I opened it to reveal a guy I didn’t know jacking off to the camera. Too many times I ignored the signs. Too many people too familiar with my Sandy, but I guess she wasn’t mine anymore.

I don’t know how long I sat there attempting to cry, to melt into the seat, just trying to do or be something other than what I was in that moment. That was the longest

drive of my life. It was only five minutes. I pulled into the driveway just as Sandy long boarded her way up to the house. All she had to do was look at my face.

“What is it?”

“Inside.”

“Mia—”

“That’s not,” I took a breath trying and failing to calm myself and started over, “That’s not my fucking *name!*”

I followed her inside our place for the last time.

“I’m sorry, Sky, really, I—”

I rounded on her. “I know what the fuck you are. Could you be more human? I saw your phone. I know you slept with Will and god knows who else. I know you’ve been getting entirely too fucked up.”

“No, Josh was just messing around. I don’t know who those other guys are, I swear. I love you. You have to trust me.”

“Nooope.” I drew out the word a little longer than necessary. “You lie and manipulate me, even now when I need your truth and acceptance most. Worst of all, I trusted you.” I stopped for a minute to gather my thoughts, hands in my pockets. “You know something hilarious? Maybe not hilarious—*ironic* is more like it. Yeah, ironic.”

“Uhm, what’s funny?”

“You are the only girlfriend I’ve had that I’ve never cheated on.” I laughed a little deliriously. “Get out,” I said, still chuckling to myself. It wasn’t something I was proud

of, definitely wasn't something I advised. I chalked it up to my self-image being so fucked that I kept trying to find it in other women. Spoiler alert: it wasn't in anyone but me.

“But I live here,” she spat, suddenly savage.

“Not anymore. Get. Out.” I have never enunciated two words more clearly in my life.

After much more arguing, yelling, and cursing, she packed her things. I had calmed down enough to actually be sad instead of furious at her. Of course it was hard, ripping her from that place behind my ribs and placing her oh, so permanently outside the door of our—my house. But it was good, really it was. I could be Sky, be myself for a while, find out who Sky is and is going to be.

I took a bath, an old habit Sandy had gotten me into, to relax and think. Water swirled in rings around my toes and fingertips as I made my own tiny waves. My head fell back against the hard tiled wall. In my mind's eye I saw a future Skyler who didn't need a shirt to cover up, and showed off his body like a hard-earned reward. Much later I dressed in front of a foggy mirror that cleared while I towel dried my buzzed hair and covered it with my favorite cap. As I watched myself in my bro tank, Dickey's shorts, backwards snapback, bottom lip pierced, I lifted my arms up to either side and flexed. My reflection gazed back at me, a half-smile stretched across his face. My lips shaped the letters of my name over and over again. Before I could stop myself I was crying, still saying my name, tears streaming down the face that hovered in the mirror, a face that I finally recognized.

## Sky's the Limit

“Watch where you’re going,” he said, slamming his shoulder into mine as he passed us.

“Fucking faggots,” said his friend, identically dressed in so much camouflage that I almost didn’t see them.

“Like we haven’t heard that before,” Zeke called after them. He turned to me: “We haven’t heard that before.”

My feet wouldn’t move from the concrete. We hadn’t heard that before. I was torn between being oddly pleased and terrified. They called us faggots. *Both of us*. Would they want to fight? There’s no way I would last in a fight. My chest still ached from the surgery, the wounds not fully healed. One strategic hit and I’d be out for the count. I ran a hand through my short hair, lifting my arm a little too high. *Ouch*. This is how it was for me, always somewhere between being stuck and moving forward.

I was sitting at my computer, my omni-present glass of sweet tea sweating a ring onto the wood of my desk. On the screen I watched a trans guy explaining how he didn’t fit within the confines of the gender of his birth. Several hours down a YouTube rabbit hole, I saw a video detailing another person’s transition through surgery. There was an almost immediate realization that that was what I needed. Something solidified inside me. I started to realize that it was okay to be something other. It was the first time I felt someone understood me. I didn’t know if I could ever be that brave. But now I had a

word for what I was. That was the not-so-official start of my journey: when I figured out what it meant to be *trans*.

I was dressing more androgynous. I hated girls' clothes. They stuck too close to my body and made me uncomfortable. Ruby, my girlfriend at the time, made me dress more feminine in skirts, tight shirts, makeup, trying to make me someone I wasn't. Then she left for college, and I had my senior year to find out who "me" really was. I was more comfortable trying to find myself alone. To replace the clothes that were almost forced on me I chose looser fitting clothes, cut off my hair, and I threw out my irrelevant girly clothes. All of this made me more comfortable with myself, but I still didn't know I was trans yet.

But I could never stay alone for long. Sandy was my best friend and got me in a way Ruby never did. Sandy watched those videos with me and understood how the transgender concept resonated with me. I didn't tell Sandy I was cutting my hair off before I actually did it. She cried when she saw me walk into class.

I was grinning and had my hands shoved deep into the pockets of my jeans to stop me from trying to kiss her then and there in front of the whole class. I suddenly felt shy and self-conscious. "Babe, you did it." Tears created thin tracks in her makeup. I remember how quickly she wiped them away, so she could continue to take in my new look. She and I were the only ones who knew how big of a deal this was for me. With tears in her eyes she told me, "No one understands how good this is for you. I love you. You look great."

Everyone makes it seem like you have to follow this certain path. I read loads of literature, people like Laverne Cox and Caitlyn Jenner—each are worthy of respect in

their own right—who have detailed the steps on their individual journeys. There are so many steps that most people take to transition. I didn't know if that was the right choice for me. I didn't know if I wanted to be on testosterone. I'm not just a transgender person; I'm Skyler, a whole other being. It's a constant struggle to figure out what my own individual path is going to be without being totally constricted by this idea of particular steps that have to be taken.

When the term *transgender* comes up, I don't think people really consider the sheer cost. I quite literally had to buy myself a new name and changes to my physique. I looked up so many different surgeons and what their costs were and what was involved in getting scheduled. I listed things I would need for and after surgery. I found out which gynecologists would approve a hysterectomy, listed pros and cons of testosterone, and supplements to help hair growth with or without testosterone. Muscle growth and fat redistribution would be awesome pros, but the idea of stabbing myself in the leg once a week with a needle was about as appealing as the idea of having one of my limbs removed. I kept catching my reflection in store windows and expecting to see a more masculine version of myself. He had narrower hips and wider shoulders to better hold my partner. He had the peach fuzz of pubescent boy's beard sprinkled across his cheeks and chin. I was constantly being disappointed, because I wasn't him, not yet.

I knew I wanted top surgery from the moment I found out about it. My breasts seemed absurd compared with how I saw myself in my head. Wearing binders to make me seem flat-chested was also uncomfortable since it constricted my chest and sometimes my breathing.

I heard from another trans person from Texas who had the surgery that his insurance would pay for some of it and maybe mine would too. I did the math, and realized that I would be able to afford the surgery after insurance. I found out that the policy had changed and my insurance would now cover it. It was the same surgery center as the trans guy I talked to.

I didn't feel comfortable making a GoFundMe at first. I didn't want to out myself as transgender to hundreds of people and have to explain myself to strangers. But I needed this surgery, and I needed help to do it. So I told my story to the internet and shared it on Facebook. I hated depending on anyone else for something that was so important to me. I was already something of an insomniac, so I spent my nights constantly refreshing the page, celebrating every time someone contributed—no matter how small the donation. Sometimes hours or days would go by with no change, and I would feel a blinding sense of abandonment. This went on for a month as I would alternately be amazed at the generosity of strangers and friends only to be disappointed soon after.

The day I scheduled my surgery I had been approved for a credit card with a ridiculously high limit for someone my age. That, coupled with the GoFundMe donations, meant I would have enough to pay for it. I called immediately after being approved to schedule the surgery. I ran around my house telling everyone, “This is gonna happen. This is gonna happen,” over and over again.

The surgery was six weeks out. It was all happening so fast. They tell you to buy all these things—gauze, Neosporin, a neck pillow—because you don't realize how useless you will be after the surgery. I started getting really anxious. Surgery is a really

big deal, both the logistics of it and the inevitable emotional strain. I knew it would be good for me. I was lucky enough to have my mom and Charlotte, my girlfriend at the time, to take care of me. The day before surgery I had my pre-op appointment. I got so scared the minute we walked out of the building. Later I woke up in the middle of the night with a full-on panic attack shaking and hyperventilating. I kept putting my hand on my breasts, a sort of comforting gesture.

“Skyler. Hey, look at me.” Charlotte’s eyes were boring into mine when I finally did turn to look at her. A lock of unnaturally red hair separated itself from the black to fall over her forehead. She pulled my hands from chest and held them between her small ones.

“Baby, you can do this. I know how much you want this, how much it means to you.” Mom had her cold hand in mine. We were the same that way, our hands and feet always frigid. But my dad’s voice was running through my head, the conversation we had when Mom accidentally let slip that I wanted surgery.

“Baby, why can’t you just *say* that you’re trans?” Dad’s tone was entirely too condescending. “Surgery seems a little extreme.”

“Dad—” I was trying to stay calm and give him the benefit of the doubt.

He turned to Mom, effectively dismissing me from the conversation that had everything to do with me. “How can you let her do this? She is our *daughter*.”

I flinched, but no one noticed. The word *daughter* had become a cage, a juvenile idea that I had grown out of.

The next day I was given something to calm me down before I went under anesthesia. The moment I woke up from surgery, this feeling of total euphoria washed over me, and nausea, so much nausea. There was no regret though, so I just basked in the moment of this big, bold irreversible thing that I had done.

I remember looking at my nipples before surgery and saying, “I’m so sorry guys.” At my one week check up I couldn’t look at them.

Every time Charlotte changed the bandages for me, she would say, “Sky do you want to see?”

And I would shake my head wordlessly. “Not yet, babe.”

When I did finally look down, I almost cried. The aftermath of the surgery was rough. I was a hot mess. I couldn’t sit up on my own for a week. I needed help with everything. The nipples were the hardest part, but watching them heal made the pain of healing worth it. Instead of being black (from the skin graft,) they became a healthier reddish-pink. At the three-week mark they really started to look great. Now it just feels so right to look at my own chest. It’s really hard to describe the feeling, something like my chest being one more piece of the puzzle that is my self-concept falling into place. I felt rough at first, but as time passed, I felt more and more like me. After finally taking off all the bandages permanently, I smiled and cried.

When Charlotte put her hand on my chest for the first time after my surgery, I gasped like I was getting oxygen for the first time. It was such an awesome feeling, her hand on skin that feels brand new.

Ask any other trans person, and they'd tell you that I went about it all wrong. Most people begin by starting on hormones, and going through the second puberty that comes with it then following hormone therapy with a progression of gender reassignment surgeries. My path needed to be mine, so nearly a year after having top surgery I started using testosterone gel to avoid stabbing myself in the leg every week.

By this time Charlotte and I had grown apart. She had moved back to west Texas, and I had met Zeke. And I loved Zeke, partly because he was a fantastic partner and partly because he got me in a way that most people couldn't. He was wiry and pale like me, but in the middle of a transition that I had already committed too. I loved him because he would trace the new planes of me, the new scars I had that meant so much, and I would shudder.

I got out of the shower, and towel dried my hair, my scars. When I was done, I wiped the foggy mirror with my towel and ran my eyes over a body that I was still growing into. Zeke came in the bathroom to sit on the toilet lid in his underwear, chatting away while I pulled on latex gloves. It was the beginning of a ritual I performed every morning.

“You know I really think this new binder I bought will help me look more flat chested.” Zeke said, scrutinizing a photo on his phone.

I glanced at the little screen when he held it up.

“What? Uh huh, yeah.” I was trying to focus.

I squeezed gel from a bottle onto my left hand and rubbed my gloved palms together. I applied the gel evenly over the tops and insides of my thighs careful to rub it in all the way. After disposing of the gloves, I cautiously pulled on a pair of boxers patterned in four-leaf clovers. As Zeke continued his rant about binders, I turned on the faucet, letting the water run over my hands for a minute before I lathered them with soap, scrubbed under the nails, in between each of my fingers. There could be no remnants of the gel exposed or it could get on Zeke, Mom, or some of the kids that I occasionally babysat for extra cash. Apparently being meticulous was part of being a man.

I turned to lean against the counter. Zeke is me a year ago, so sometimes it's more complicated to have a real conversation, to tell him my insecurities because my insecurities are his insecurities. My doubts are his doubts, so after he went through his morning routine, dressed for work, and left to go make sandwiches for strangers, I was still leaning against the counter as I heard the front door close behind him. If I told him my thoughts, it would go something like, *How the hell am I ever going to be a real man? Will I ever be authentic?* And he would start to look nervous, start to cry, scream at me that if I felt this way, then he would never feel like a *real man* either. I couldn't have that conversation with him, couldn't bring him down, but I definitely couldn't bring myself up. I placed my hand on the doorknob, hesitating for a moment before I left to go babysit the neighbors' kids.

*I think I'm forgetting something.* But I couldn't remember what it was, so I closed the bathroom door behind me and left the house.

On the bathroom counter maybe my Android screen would light up with Zeke's name. Maybe the phone rang and rang, and I didn't answer.

## I Never Thought of the Water: A Memoir

The sun was slowly making my skin tighten and change color, but I didn't mind it. If I said anything it meant that my parents would make me get out of the water and sit in the shade.

“Alexis, honey, time to—” Mom called from the bank.

“Five more minutes!” I called back, interrupting her.

“Okay, make sure you're watching for snakes!” There were venomous water moccasins to avoid, but I played with tiny pink harmless blind snakes that lived in the gardens by our house.

“Daddy! Daddy! What's wrong with them?”

Two friends of mine floated belly-up in the waters of the Blanco River while a four-year-old me watched incredulously. I splashed my way out of the water to Dad. “No, sweetie. They're just playing.” By age three, I already knew how to swim, but this particular event scared me away from the water for several months.

I explored the banks of the river, caught frogs, and learned to grab rocks underwater so I could watch the fish and feel the current whip my hair out along my back. I felt a part of the water, but learned to respect the currents, especially when it flooded. In '98 the water rose to lap at the garage of our house my parents built in Kyle. It covered the bridge we used to cross a creek to get to the house. I knew the muddy waters of a flood only last a few days, and soon the river would shrink back into its banks so my sister and I could swim and adventure freely. My family and I would always go

down to the river as the waters receded to see how the landscape had been rearranged by the currents.

I lived on the Blanco River for twenty years, moving from Kyle to a rental house on River Road and Savage Lane in Wimberley in the summer before I turned seventeen. It was harder than I could've imagined, leaving the house I called home for sixteen years, and I mourned the loss of the land where I could have my own adventures. Wimberley brought us closer to friends my sister and I made when we started going to school there in 2007.

I received my acceptance letter along with a generous scholarship from Texas State in 2013 opening a door to new adventures. I finally decided to major in English my sophomore year. It was fitting that my love of reading would pay off, and this would also encourage me to write on a regular basis. The more I read, the more I realized that the vast majority of great art came from great pain, something I lacked for the most part. Aside from a few hard spots, life had allowed me to coast, until it didn't.

I never thought of water as a wild karmic force till I did. I'll never forget that night because it started off so normally. I was supposed to work a double that day. But because of the rain, business was pretty slow; I kept walking laps around the restaurant just so I would have something to do. I remember catching up to my boss right before my break and asking him, "Hey do you think you still want a bartender tonight? It's my sister's birthday today, and I want to take her to the movies."

He responded jokingly, “Who’s the bartender?” Sure enough, a few minutes later I called my sister to say I’d be home early to take her out.

We sat in the dingy movie theatre and watched some movie starring one of Lauren’s favorite actresses, Blake Lively, and had a great time. I drove us home on the slick roads through the rain careful not to take the usual shortcut that went over a low water crossing. I remember the water beating my windshield like a living thing fencing with my windshield wipers. We made it home. Our parents had fallen asleep before we got back. Lauren decided she was exhausted too and went to sleep early. I had fallen asleep reading *The Hobbit* that night. But I’m a light sleeper, and the water woke me. The thunder was deafening. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* was thumping into my bed frame. I jumped to the door from my bed. Standing in the black water I gave my door a heave, but it wouldn’t move. The water was starting to get pushy. I screamed and banged on the door. When that didn’t work, I spoke through the wall I shared with Lauren: “Are you okay? Can you hear me?”

“I’m here,” she said, “are you okay?”

“I’m alive. Can you open your door?”

“Yes.”

“Get Mom and Dad.”

She said, “I’m scared,” like a little kid, but I heard the door move through the water as she somehow managed to open it.

Moments later Dad was at my door. “Honey, are you hurt?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Get me out.” I was starting to panic; I felt it lodge itself firmly right beneath my ribs.

“You’re gonna have to help me. Pull the door and I’ll push.” The door gave. We each grabbed our phones and the computers we could. I held my hysterical mother’s hand as Dad got a ladder and got us up on the roof along with Rocky, our dog. It was so dark, but our eyes adjusted. Trees floated down the river followed by inner tubes, kayaks, and all kinds of trash.

The world was so loud. Too many sounds fought to be heard. I could hear the sirens, but that wasn’t all. As we sat there together, I began to distinguish sounds other than the water rushing like some living thing. It was still raining, but only a little. I realized that I could hear screaming, the kind only people at their wit’s end can make. A house that had come off of its stilts floated in front of us. The deep voice of the father tried to reassure his son, “We will be okay,” but he sounded terrified.

“Daddy—.” His little voice was cut off too quickly. They never found his body or his sister’s.

A wife sang hymns as she held onto the roof of their house after her husband was swept away from her. “Amazing Grace” wafted eerily over the water to our left. I held my sister as she shook uncontrollably. As the woman sang, Rocky became restless. She barked at the water from the edge of the roof. With each bark she slipped a little closer to the edge. Dad cried out as she went over, and we never saw her again. I reached for my dad and sat him down next to us. There was nothing to be done.

In the loudness not long after, I heard a small sound, the sound only tiny paws make as they swim for the first time. “Cloud,” I said. The color of the stormy sky, he was barely distinguishable from the water. I called him and called him guiding him towards us with my shaking voice. “Dad, I have to get him. Help me.” My dad held my shirt as he neared us. I reached and stretched like I never had barely able to grab him by the scruff of his neck. He meowed pitifully. “Baby, I got you. It’s okay.” Dad pulled us back safely onto the roof. I cradled him like a child. He was weak and tired from swimming. We were both filthy, but it was the kind that I didn’t think about. I wondered how on earth he survived, but I put that thought from my mind savoring the feel of his matted muddy fur between my fingers.

No one slept that night. The water receded nearly as quickly as it rose. Around seven we were able to climb down to look inside our house. Debris stacked against the door. Our neighbor’s very dented and scratched chair sat lonely in the driveway. One of our cars was in the creek next to the house. It had become a sort of landfill for people’s lost things. It would be days before we located the other cars.

That night of the flood could have easily occurred that way, and parts of it did. Many of our neighbors and friends were trapped in their homes. We were some of the lucky ones that were able to evacuate in time. The house that came off its stilts to break apart against the bridge on Ranch Road 12 was across the river and only a few houses downstream from us. A woman did really keep herself sane by singing “Amazing Grace” until help came. A man who lived across the street from us was trapped against the side of his garage with water up to his chest for hours. On May 23 in the summer of 2015, the

waters of the Blanco River rose 40 feet, destroying hundreds of homes, and killing 24 people.

I never thought of water as a wild karmic force until I did. That day had been so normal, almost unbearably so. I had managed to get off of work early, so I could take my sister to the movies for her birthday. Just like any other night, our parents and dog greeted us and asked how the movie was. They were watching some new Netflix series in the living room as the rain slid off the roof in sheets.

It wasn't yet eleven o'clock. Lauren decided to march her happy ass to bed while I lay down to read *The Hobbit* in my underwear. I was deep in the shire an hour later when my mother started to curse and yell. She had risen to let Rocky, our Rottweiler, out into the yard before they went to bed. "Holy shit, holy fucking hell! Jerry, the water is in the yard. The river is in our yard!" I jumped out of bed to see for myself. Sure enough, the river wasn't six feet from the porch. It rose around the base of a pecan tree for the few seconds I stood in the doorway. Dad immediately went into crisis mode tossing a set of car keys to each of us.

"Grab a bag of your things, get some clothes, your laptops, and put your valuables as high up as you can." I watched him nervously run a hand over his nearly bald head. Reluctantly I went into my room and grabbed a few things thinking to myself, *There is no way the water will get in the house*. Nothing this bad ever happens to my family. We are good people. I felt inconvenienced, and I was in denial so I didn't take the things I should have saved. The letters he wrote to me, my art, and my favorite earrings that Grandma gave me ten years ago before she died. My leather-bound diary my dad gave me stayed

on its shelf. I pulled myself into jeans, a sweatshirt, and running shoes. I stuffed my laptop, Kindle, and another sweatshirt in my backpack. Dad was running around the house shutting off breakers, unplugging computers, trying to save what he could, trying to save the world.

Next thing I knew I had my dog by the collar, and I was putting her in the backseat of my car. My mom and sister were each getting into a vehicle while my mother was yelling at my dad to come with us, but he was still making sure that things were in order in the house. My cat hadn't come to the house to eat that morning. With this realization the panic and fear lodged themselves firmly in that place right beneath my breastbone. I began to scream my cat's name wanting to take him with me. He didn't come. He was fourteen years old, and it took him longer and longer to come when I called him. Rain fell around us, drizzling its reminder.

I drove my car to the end of the road up to a three-way stop. If we had waited half an hour more the water would have covered the road. When I came to the stop sign, I was forced to stop short as two guys I had graduated high school with ran in front of my car into a house to my left that was already surrounded by the muddy brown water. We parked on the side of the road and waited for my dad to meet up with us. We spent a sleepless night in the parking lot of our small town grocery store.

The next morning found the four of us standing in the driveway staring at our house. It looked so normal, except for the pile of debris stacked against the front door. A tree had fallen across Savage Lane. The windows along the wall in the living room were blown outwards. There was glass everywhere. We managed to get inside of the house somehow; some of the details are blurry. We trudged through inches of mud inside the

house. Our dining table was turned on its side. The TV was on the floor covered in mud in a puddle of water. A couch was pushed along the wall of broken windows. I'll never forget the smell—like sewage went dumpster diving. It was nearly unbearable, but we dealt with it for weeks. There were a few inches of this sewage-reeking mud on every surface, in every drawer, on every shelf. It took hours before we found a way into my room. My bed frame had firmly wedged itself against the door. When a friend finally shouldered his way through the door, the first thing I saw was all of my books. There were hundreds of them. They carpeted the floor, so no matter how hard I tried I had to step on them. As I walked on my own tiny ocean of novels and stories, I looked at one of my bookshelves. It was the only article of furniture still upright because my dad had screwed it into the wall, but the water had twisted and warped it 'til it looked like a clock out of a Dali painting. I'd always wanted a piece of his artwork.

After we walked through our house to see the literal mess that was our life, they started to arrive. It's truly incredible what a natural disaster will do to a community. Slowly people started to show up. They came out of the woodwork while others were swallowed by it. I lost count of how many, but their cars, they lined Savage Lane. They helped us put our life back together and kept us sane. My friend's mom hugged me saying, "I know you don't want to hear this now, but sweetie, it's just stuff." I laughed a little. I must've sounded delirious.

"No, it's okay. That's the only thing that's been keeping me on my feet." Which was true. The loss of thousands of dollars of belongings didn't really bother me. It was a feeling of violation. The river had been a friend, a steadfast presence for so long, and was

never supposed to betray me like this. It was okay for it to rearrange the trees and rocks, the natural things. My family was supposed to be exempt from the wrath of the river.

Finally James showed up wearing his cargo shorts and work boots. I made my way over to him. Words fell too fast from my mouth as I tried to form a story, but he wrapped my hand in his calloused one without saying a thing. He marched me away from all of the people and held me together beneath an old pecan tree. That wall that kept back emotions broke when the water came through. There was a heat in my chest like my heart was too close to the surface. Any scratch would release a flood. But I kept it back a bit longer.

“Do you want to see my room?”

“Sure,” he said.

The window was the only way to get in, and as he climbed through he smiled conspiratorially at me, “This brings back memories,” he said grinning.

We trudged over my books pressing them more firmly into the mud. I turned in a circle looking again upon my ruined things. The only furniture standing was my warped and twisted bookshelf.

A couple weeks later I returned to work. Everything was the same except we constantly got calls that went something like this:

“Hi, I was wondering if your town was still there. Is your restaurant still open? Is the town totally destroyed?”

*No. I just like to standing in the middle of this leveled field answering a phone.*

“Yes, we are. Please come in. The town is still here and recovering from the flood. Wimberley badly needs business traffic.”

I learned that one of my favorite regulars escaped by jumping out of the window of his two-story house and treading water for two hours. Thankfully, his wife and son were out of town that night and were also saved.

While Wimberley was still in the midst of cleanup and salvaging, I found myself waiting on two middle-aged ladies who felt it their duty to tell me what upstanding citizens they were for volunteering in this time of tragedy: “We didn’t want to get our hands too dirty and dig through the mud, so instead we went to the Katherine Anne Porter School and have been helping to clean and catalog lost photographs.” Like they were too good to have mud pushed so far under their toenails that it would still be days before we would be able to get it all out. That was what salvaging was like. It was mud everywhere from my hair, caked to the inside of my shoes, in the corners of my eyes, and in the dust in my lungs. But I pandered to them.

“That’s so selfless of you. It’s people like you that are keeping this community afloat. No pun intended.”

“Were you affected by the flood?”

“Yes, we lost everything. There was six feet of water in our house. It’s been great how the community has come together like this. I don’t know what we would have done. I’m so thankful. This has been such a hard time though,” I shamelessly milked their pity. After all, I needed the tips more than ever now. That would not be the last time I gave my customers the tearful tale they wanted from this small town tragedy and collected their

pity tips accordingly. I've lost count of how many times I was asked the question, "How high did the water get?" At one point, one of my coworkers started a tally on a whiteboard in the kitchen.

Coming back to college at Texas State that fall seemed too normal, and I remember struggling for a way to express my experience that didn't come off as a sob story in a fiction writing workshop. The flood served as the push I needed to start writing again creatively. It was the first short story I'd written since high school. The story I wrote—pieces of which are contained above—gave me the outlet I needed to explore many residual emotions from such a life-altering event. The story provided measured ventilation for all the pent-up emotions I had. I was able to express the horror I felt at the possibility of being trapped.

I'm honestly thankful for the experience. People who truly cared for our well being showed up that day, and we still keep in contact with them. They are the people that kept us all going. Relatives that lived too far away raised money for us. The Dean of the Honors College sent me a personal email giving me resources that I could use for help and offering any advice she could. Wimberley High School's brand new gym was turned into a relief center full of cleaning products, clothes, and toiletries that were all donated and provided to victims for free. The town of Wimberley means so much more to me now. I can't drive over the bridge into town without thinking of the water, without seeing the posts that are all that remain of the house that was on stilts. I can no longer stand the smell of river mud, and have learned a great deal more of people than I ever thought I

would. When I swim, it is less carefree and more of an awe-inspiring experience. There is a zing of adrenalin under my skin that wasn't there before.