



Sickened

The True Story of a
Lost Childhood

Julie Gregory

“[Sickened] lacks the usual ‘woe is me’ victim tone. Gregory takes action, gets help, re-establishes a connection with God—and now is an advocate for Munchausen victims. She’s a talented writer and a strong woman.”

—USA Today

“A tale of courage, endurance, and real horror.”

—San Diego Union-Tribune

“A born storyteller with perfect pitch, Julie Gregory guides the reader through this surreal form of cruelty, in which the ultimate weapon is the scalpel, with originality, gusto, and heart-stopping courage.”

—Sylvia Fraser, author of *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing*

“This story of unfathomable child abuse is told with remarkable wit, compassion, and courage.”

—Augusten Burroughs, author of *Running with Scissors*

“Gripping self-disclosure by a remarkable young woman ... *Sickened* will surely and finally impact the proper diagnosis and treatment of children caught in the terror of MBP.”

—Chris Monaco, Ph.D., Director, Childhelp USA National Child Abuse Hotline

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Foreword by
MARC D. FELDMAN, M.D.

BANTAM BOOKS

Foreword

MUNCHAUSEN BY PROXY may be the single most complex—and lethal—form of maltreatment known today. It is formally defined as the falsification or induction of physical and/or emotional illness by a caretaker of a dependent person. In most cases, the perpetrator is a mother and the victim is her own child. Baron Karl von Münchhausen was a real historical figure, a soldier and an adventurer of the eighteenth century who became notorious for his outrageous stories. In 1951, a British physician borrowed the baron's name and introduced the term *Munchausen syndrome* for people who feign or produce illness in themselves to gain sympathy, nurturance, and control over others. In turn, MBP was coined to describe those who use a substitute or “proxy” for the same reasons. Most cases of MBP go unreported—indeed, entirely undetected—due to the covert nature of the maltreatment. A recent study indicates that when a case of MBP is finally recognized, up to twenty-five percent of the sickened child's siblings have already died—most likely earlier victims of the perpetrator. Only when the same pattern of symptoms appears in the second child of the family, or the third or fourth or fifth, have professionals and legal authorities been forced to realize that motherhood can twist into a strange illness-related type of abuse that, unlike battering or sexual violation, defies ready categorization. Even though the FBI has been vigilantly aware of MBP for several years, Munchausen by proxy is still a public health tragedy that, paradoxically, has been largely hidden from the public.

I entered the strange world of MBP begrudgingly. Having been primarily interested in Munchausen syndrome, I was reluctant to enter the difficult and troubling arena of child neglect and abuse. However, being a “Munchausen” expert meant attempting to master its variants; it meant wading into the waters of child protection despite the fact that MBP perpetrators almost invariably deny their actions, even when caught on tape. I have since consulted and testified nationally in numerous MBP cases, often before judges and juries who are dubious that such a bizarre form of abuse can even exist. I have discussed the syndrome in my own books and in chapters for books by others, and have answered over a thousand related inquiries through telephone, mail, and e-mail. I have worked in the field of MBP essentially every day for over a decade, and it still breaks my heart.

One day, while trolling the Internet for links to expand my website, I came across a new and important perspective on MBP. A woman named Julie Gregory had launched her own site where she shared aspects of her MBP victimization through vivid writing and moving photographs. She described her interest in writing a book and I e-mailed my encouragement, thus beginning a relationship that has culminated here.

In *Sickened*, we get an unprecedented look into the experience of MBP. There are over five hundred clinical articles and books on the subject, but until now no one has told the full story of MBP from the inside. Julie Gregory grew up not in a playground among friends, but in the weirdly structured and antiseptic world of doctors' offices and hospitals. Her life was completely focused on the falsely constructed world of her various “illnesses,” and the caregivers and doctors who might have nurtured her were co-opted into damaging both her body and her soul. Indeed, doctors are the unwitting accomplices in MBP, conditioned to have blind faith in what they are told by patients and families. It is undeniable that what a parent says is usually the best guide to what's wrong with the child, so it takes an enormous shift in attitude for a physician to accept that the stories ring untrue, that the test results are normal, that no treatment ever works, that no amount of testing is ever “enough,” and that the parent is more accurately called a perpetrator. Of course, the best lies are the ones that mix fact and fiction: children can show real symptoms, yet how they are created can remain conveniently undisclosed.

A parent can be ruthless in her quest to garner emotional satisfaction from the ailments of her child. She needn't be highly educated, only persuasive. If MBP perpetrators find that interest is waning in their drama of “selfless” caretaking, they can move on to new audiences: new hospitals, new emergency rooms. They often scour textbooks or the Internet for medical information to enhance performances that could put any good actress to shame.

As Julie got older, it might seem to the reader that she colluded with her mother in misleading doctors. Did she?

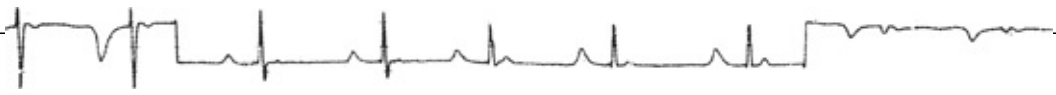
Never. She was simply overpowered. How can a child counter a mother's total self-absorption, an impenetrable world that is a whole unto itself? We know that even adult MBP victims may not disclose the true sources of their illnesses out of fear of abandonment or punishment if they stop being sick. Other elements creep into the MBP picture, such as *Stockholm syndrome*, epitomized by Patty Hearst's adopting the cause of her violent abductors: Children often protect their abusers and resist making revelations to the very medical and social service personnel who could rescue them.

Sickened does not consist of unreliable memories recovered through hypnosis or a therapist's leading questions, but of events that were never forgotten—a blessing and a curse for Julie. They were further validated by Julie's compiling the whole messy, disturbing stack of her medical records. It is from these records that we see how easily a mother's lies became insidiously transformed into medical fact.

Julie Gregory has a remarkable story to tell and a remarkable fortitude to share. She is also lucky to be alive. Author Philip Yancey has written, “Life is not a problem to be solved but a work to be made, and that work may well utilize much raw material we would prefer to do without.” Julie has a resilience only scarcely imaginable under the circumstances. That she has emerged not only with her sense of self intact but with enough clarity to write about it is amazing. I hope that her putting her life to paper in this searing and beautiful memoir can silence some of the demons of the past and help those still caught in the web of MBP maltreatment.

I expect *Sickened* to ignite a powder keg that brings MBP forever out of the closet, giving off a light that doctors, health care organizations, professional groups, child abuse workers, and the general public can never again ignore. Born of one of the darkest and most intractable of childhood situations, the words assembled here represent a monument, a genuine triumph of the human spirit.

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THE PART I HATED most was the shaving. I mean, if you're a twelve-year-old girl, how much hair can you have on your chest? But they'd lather me up anyway and run a new plastic Bic between my barely-there breasts. They needed me smooth and hairless so the little white pads would stick to those points constellated around my heart and record my heartbeat. And while they were preparing, I'd hover above myself, intent on studying the nubby white ceiling tiles, imagining a room where I lived, inverted, upon the ceiling, away from the clutter of our trailer, away from the hospital—just floating in pure, white peace.

The scent of the shaving cream pulls me back down from the ceiling: It's the same kind Dad used. Every day before dawn, he'd erupt in violent heaving and crawl off to the toilet trying to peel the Agent Orange from his lungs. Sometimes the sounds of his retching would come out the mouths of those elusive figures in my dreams, the worlds between sleep and waking merging seamlessly for a few groggy moments. He'd usually shave after he puked.

In an unspoken understanding, the examining room nurse folds a giant pile of cream from the can onto her palm, so much that as she smooths an inch-thick trail down my chest, my naked skin never touches.

Eventually the tide of Agent Orange would ebb and he'd lean dizzy in the doorway and say, "I'm selling Buicks, Sissy. Get it? Selling Buicks? Buuicck. Buuuuuiick." Then he'd cackle and brush the back of his meaty fist across his mouth.

The nurse picks up a new blue-handled blade and runs it neatly down my sternum, slicing out another clean, pink row.

And what do you do at seven in the morning but laugh with your big, lumbering father who's pretending the doorway of the bathroom is a lamppost and that he, leaning on it like a drunk, is hawking Buicks in his best barker accent?

And then they're done. The white pads have been spread with a clear magnetic jelly and pressed on to six different locations. Their wires run into one larger river of wires that flow from under my sternum down my abdomen, emerging out the zipper of my pants like I had some elaborate cable TV pay-per-view setup in there. The rubber-coated electrodes feed into a tape recorder that fits snugly into a rectangular leather harness; it looks like a purse. I wear the strap over my shoulder, and while my seventh-grade life ticks away, so do the heartbeats that go with it, right into the box.

FOR STARTERS, I WAS A SICK KID. Beanpole skinny and as fragile as a microwave soufflé, bruised easy and wilted in a snap. Kids in school used to walk straight up to me and ask point-blank if I was anorexic. But I wasn't; just sick. And Mom bent over backwards trying to find out what was wrong with me. It wasn't just that I had a heart problem. It was everything rolled into one, bleeding together with so many indistinguishable layers that to get to the root of it was impossible, like peeling off every transparent layer of an onion, and when I got old enough to peel the onion myself, every layer made me cry.

I was conceived in the sickly womb of a sickly mother—who starved herself and in turn starved me. She was highly anemic and blind with toxemia at the time of my birth—the

result, she explained, of high blood pressure cutting off the circulation to her eyes. I was pushed into this world premature at three pounds seven ounces, an embryonic little bird glowing translucently, and when they slapped me I didn't even yowl. They thought I was dead. The doctor, holding my bluish body upside down by the ankles, took one look at me and said, "My, what big feet she has." And then I was ushered into an incubator where I lay as all embryonic creatures do, waiting to hatch into the real world, outside the bubble. After that, my health only balanced precariously on the edge of a "Let's get to the bottom of what's wrong with this kid" kind of existence.

There were early nose-'n'-throat flare-ups, loud belching that defied my delicate appearance, pesky and persistent migraines, swollen tonsils that fluttered a plea for removal whenever I said "Ahhh," a deviated septum blamed for my mouth hanging open to breathe and elusive allergies that forever deprived me of sustenance from the four basic food groups. As we got closer to pinning down my mysterious illness in the cardiology department, Mom moved into micromanaged health care with the logistical vigor of a drill sergeant.

"Look, dammit, this kid is sick, all right? Just look at her. And so help me God, if she dies on me because you can't find anything wrong with her, I'll sue you for every cent you got. Mom's face was long, her eyes diving into slits, and she had that little white blob of thick spit that always played on her bottom lip whenever she got upset. Her voice trailed after another doctor who said no more tests could be done, stalked him down the corridor, sliced through the silence of the hallway.

"Jesus Christ," she hissed, returning to the examining room, "I cannot believe the incompetent son of a bitch."

"Don't worry, Mom. It's okay. We'll go find another one."

This is how I offered reassurance, by telling her we'd just keep going.

"Look, I'm trying to help you with this, sacrificing my life to find out what the hell's wrong with you. So stop fucking it up when we get in here by acting all normal. Show them how sick you are and *let's get to the bottom of this*, okay?"

"Okay."

WE LIVED TOGETHER day in and day out—me, Mom, Dad, little Danny, and then later, the foster kids—but Dad never knew I was getting my chest shaved. He was summoned by Mom with a set of "decent clothes" and the boxed white loafers only when a demonstration of fatherly support was paramount at a hospital. Otherwise, he was left to his back-to-back reruns of *M*A*S*H*, his red-stained pistachio fingers and mounds of empty nut carcasses piled high on his belly.

We lived in a double-wide trailer then, stuck on the dead end of a dirt road in a backwoods patch of Ohio; a wild, woolly green, lushed-out part of the country with roller coaster hills that held their breath in a *Deliverance* kind of way. I swear you could almost hear the banjo folded faintly into the breeze.

My parents had hauled their black velvet painting of Jesus crucified, with the 3-D blood from the crown of thorns blobbing down the side of his head, all the way from Arizona and then through the six other places we'd lived until we settled in the holler of Burns Road.

Our living room was outfitted with an early imitation-wagon-wheel velour sofa set, and

Jesus hung against the burnt-orange velvet wallpaper, which had been pasted over wood paneling, so that the grooves showed through as darkened, hollow stripes. Sticky shag (as if someone had vacuumed up honey) swayed like undulating seaweed across the floor. Miniature concrete farm animals dotted our yard in pairs and groups—white baby chicks, mini cows with pink udders, roosters a-courting hens, a donkey in a sombrero—and when we were in town for my doctors' appointments, Mom always kept an eagle eye out for additions to her barnyard collection.

I remember my dad then, manateelike; big, soft, scrubbed clean as if he'd just been run through a car wash on a La-Z-Boy gurney. Naked white skin stretched taut over an enormous belly, the pallor of sick clay. No hearing. No sight. No opinion. The dark living room of our trailer held nothing—except sporadic uproarious laughter to the endless hijinks of Hawkeye and Hunnicut.

Once, when I was seven, I lay in bed drifting to sleep when Dad roared, “Siiiss, Siiisssssy!” I leapt out of bed, thinking “FIRE,” and tore down the hall in slippery full-footed pajamas.

“Fix me some toast, will ya?” Dad's fingers placidly folded over his chest, thick calves propped up on the snapping-turtle hinges of the recliner footrest, he never took his eyes off the set.

Aside from trips to the doctor, we mostly stayed home in that trailer on the dead end of a dirt road, and there was a great gulf between how we really were and how we looked when we got out. I have a photo from when I was about eleven and Danny, my brother, was just four, when we drove up to Niagara Falls for a vacation. We're in a fake wooden barrel that looks like it was careening over the side of the falls, and we each wear a smile that couldn't have been more plastic than the water swirling around us. I am naturally blond by Clairmont, wearing the latest in JCPenney pastels, and exuding happiness.

But happiness is relative when you're twelve, sitting in a chrome-on-steel examination room, goose bumps giving you that plucked-chicken look, with a nubbly paper sheet tucked into your clammy armpits. Until now the answers had run like whispers over the hills just ahead of us. A little intermittent tachycardia here, some Marfanoid habitus there. Never anything code-red enough to get me completely, legitimately diagnosed. But they kept looking. Because Mom was positive that the answer was right there in my heart. A mother knows these things. She's the one who'd see me go ashy in the face, she's the one who'd take my skipping pulse, and she's the one who watched the weight fall right off my bones, all the while my height skyrocketed. So that's what flamed us onwards, after the answer. It was right there, just always right there before us, waiting to be sussed out, and then it would all make sense. And in some ways, she was right. But time might be running out for me, so when Mom insisted on another test and they wouldn't do it, well, that's when we'd get the hell out of there and try to find somebody who knew what they were doing.



MY MOTHER, SANDY SUE SMITH, was married at the tender age of nineteen to a man in his forties named Smokey, who kept a carnival act on the edge of town. Smokey was a small, tight man with crisp tabs of sideburns that sliced down from under his curled black cowboy hat. He had trick riding horses, horses trained for the carnival ring, and he taught Sandy Sue to do outrageously dangerous stunts with names like “The Apache Flyaway” and “Lay Over the Neck.” After the stunts, Smokey would strap Sandy to a wooden board and throw nineteen-inch-long knives at her. And then there she’d be, having survived the test of sharp blades that jutted haphazardly from the cracked wood around her, smiling brightly with one leg cocked, like a model, a dainty hand flipped above in triumph. This was before she had me but I’ve seen the pictures and they are stunning: She stands tall upon the bare back of a wild, white horse blurring across a field, with a ruby-tangerine-streaked sky as the backdrop.

In another photo Smokey is snapping a twenty-five-foot braided leather bullwhip over his shoulder toward Sandy, who stands pinned to the horse trailer with an expressionless face, the whip side-winding like a snake about to coil around her throat. They wear matching outfits of black-and-white yoked satin shirts with pearl snap buttons, silver conchs sewn down the trouser seams, and belt buckles the size of serving platters.

Years go by with Sandy strapped to the board: white leather, showgirl’s smile. Coal black hair separated down the middle into leather tunnels that lace up the side in Indian square fashion, accentuating the trace of Cherokee blood that gives her the high cheekbones and blushed full lips. She runs alongside as her gift horse tumbles into a full gallop, grips its long flying mane, and then, clutching the horn, springs into the saddle with a panther’s grace, pushing to balance her way up until she is standing tall while the spectators cheer. Still running at a breakneck speed, she plunges under the horse’s belly and thrusts her arm out in performance-style splendor, ta-daaaaa. This is the Russian Death Drag. She has captured an audience and, for the first time in her existence, something other than a life, a body full of pain.

IT IS DURING ONE OF OHIO’S BRUTAL WINTERS that Smokey comes down with his annual bad cold and Sandy has her psychic premonition. When Smokey wasn’t out on summer tour traveling behind the Grand Ole Opry with his act, he was working double shifts down at the Swan dry cleaning factory, sucking in the rich chemical-laden steam. And he usually got sick every winter. But no matter how hard he hacked or how many specks of blood flew out with a spit, there was no way in hell Smokey was going to go to any quack doctor at Sandy’s insistence. Air was nothing ever wrong with Smokey that a swig of Pepto-Bismol couldn’t fix. So when he woke up close to Christmas the color of dirty mop water, he had Sandy run into town to pick him up some. That burn in his chest was probably just indigestion, same as it ever was. All the while Sandy was driving, she wanted to keep on going, to never come back. She saw in her mind’s eye walking in to find Smokey cold and stiff, his face frozen in pain, and she didn’t want to come home to another man dead. She drove round and round curvy country roads frantically thinking of someone to call. But she had nobody but Smokey. When she did pull

a few hours later, Smokey was standing in the gravel driveway, as pissed as a bear with sore ass, chomping at the bit over his Christmas dinner being late. They climbed into bed that night around ten and not a half hour into sleep did Smokey bolt upright and let out a bloodcurdling scream, go into a death rattle, and fall back stiff onto the depression of the pillows.

Sandy was left with horses and bills, a mortgage on the new ranch, and loads of tack: shoes, bridles, saddles, blankets, and brushes. And, despite what sounds like a marriage arranged in hell, she loved Smokey. He treated her better than any man she'd ever known, if only by the baseline that he never beat her. Now, not only has she not got him but she's got no insurance, no money, no job, no family. She sells the horses and the knife-throwing wheel, the saddles, and the tack, just to afford a casket for the man no one comes to see. Sandy stands alone at Smokey's funeral in a nameless parlor, wailing over his body until the undertaker ushers her out when the rental time is up. She is twenty-six.

NOW. SOMEWHERE ACROSS TOWN is a smiling scrawny nineteen-year-old kid, freshly turned loose from the Vietnam War, having done a few questionable things to land himself in a VA hospital. He wears a permanent Westside look carved on his face from years of beatings by a father more interested in raising tomatoes in the backyard than his kids, a wary expectant look so that if somebody, anybody, looked back too closely or for too long then *he* knew that *they* knew something he didn't want them to know and it was either fight or run. Usually fight. He took that look into Vietnam, where he got a lung full of Agent Orange and then watched through it as his best friend from high school exploded beside him in the brush. He held his friend's broken head in his hands and wrung bottled-up, exhausted sobs from his own. Four months later he walked free from the war, with a low white bun between his ears, out into the sun from the VA psych ward with only a mild and questionable case of paranoid schizophrenia. This is my Dad, Dan Gregory the First. His actual time spent in Vietnam itself added up to only a few months.

Sandy and Dan bumped into each other soon afterward in the parking lot of the gas station where he worked, and they rushed one another with a hunger so penetrating it came to cannibalize their very souls. Sandy pulled in for gas at the Lane and Sullivan service station and took a sharp turn in her life by asking the mechanic on duty to check her oil. My father got in her car and never got out. They held court for three months, then tied the knot. Tight. Dad wanted to get married Catholic, and the priest sat Sandy down and said, "Do you realize this man is crazy, my child? He's crazy." She'd later say she had no idea he'd been in the psych ward at all and chalked up her nineteen years with him as a learning experience. Funny, there were just as many years with Dan as there were inches in the knives Smokey threw at her.

Now. IT IS ONE THING to see the VA papers that say your dad is crazy, to hear constant regurgitated bits from your mom confirming that he's crazy, and how he got that way. It is a different thing entirely to walk away from this scene, to look back years later and wonder perhaps the woman who is your mother is actually crazier than the man who is your father—only without the paperwork to back it up.



MY FIRST MEMORIES of medical mayhem began when we moved to Arizona to be closer to Grandma Madge, Mom's mom. I was three then, with long wispy hair the shade of banana taffy, pulled to a shine. I enjoyed the rich life of a three-year-old: roller skates strapped over my shoes and a pillow belted to my butt, frying an egg on the sidewalk in midday Phoenix heat, learning cuss words in Spanish from the Mexican boy next door, and visiting Grandma, who lived just up the street.

By then Grandma Madge was a born-again Christian and devout basement Sunday school teacher. She wore a fishing cap with a smiley face on it to match her own cheerful self, and would take me down to the lake on sweltering Phoenix afternoons to catch sunfish. On the way, we'd drive along the mountains, their tops shrouded by the pollution haze that hung over Phoenix and bled out into the desert. As we'd come up on Encino Mountain, the large peak, Grandma would lurch the sedan over on the dusty roadside and, with a hand shielding her eyes like a visor, scan the mountaintop haze for signs of Jesus. Once she spotted him, she'd tug me over onto her lap so I could pop my little body out the driver-side window and share the revelation.

"See him, Jewelly?" She'd thrust a wrinkled finger past my head. "He's *right* there." She'd squeeze an eye half shut like she was peering through a rifle viewfinder. Sometimes Grandma Madge saw him kneeling in prayer, sometimes standing, holding the Bible. Sometimes she'd squeak out a few tears from the sheer beauty of his majesty. Then she'd start jabbing again with her finger. "Can't you see him, Jewelly? He's *right* there, *right there!*"

Uh-uh, Grandma, I don't think I can. But Grandma Madge got so exasperated at my lack of vision that I began to guess at his wardrobe from fractured memories of Sunday school pictures.

"Oh, Grandma, is that him in the brown dress? With the baby goat? Ohhh, now I think I see."

Grandma Madge shuddered in rapture as soon as I started talking about his lace-up sandals. But then she'd suddenly clamp down on my little arms and swing me around to direct fire at her rotten breath.

"Did you really see Jesus up there?" she'd say. "You're not lying now, are you? 'Cause lying goes straaaaiiiight to hell," the "straight" reverberating from the very depths of what to me seemed like the black pit of hell right then and there. This is the only time Grandma Madge got mad at me, when I lied about seeing Jesus at the top of Encino Mountain, living up there in the industrial wastelands of outer Phoenix. So I started seeing him a little sooner and memorizing details from Sunday school that started to convince even me, until I could have sworn that the rock I laid my lies upon under Grandma Madge's pointing finger actually took on the shape of that bearded man in prayer.

SO WED GET ON DOWN to the lake and lounge on the smooth rocks and catch fish with prickly pears wherever I'd touch. "Sun fish," she called them, because they glistened in the light bouncing off the lake. There's a photo of me standing there knock-kneed with a scrunched-up smile that

shone no less than the sun itself, holding a fishing pole high over my head with a spiky little fish flopping on the end of the line. We always gave those little fish their freedom and that was my favorite part: handing them over to Grandma to peel the hook out of their mouths and then, squatting down at water's edge, watching them swim away. As for the ones that floated on top, I'd hope and pray to Jesus that they were as okay as Grandma said they were right after she crunched the hook out of the side of their face.

Then the sun would sink a little, feathering lightly into the surface of the water, and Grandma and I would climb back in the car and go off and get in a car wreck.

It was never anything too serious. A head-on here, a rear-ending there, always at slow speed and usually with old people like her. Kind of like bumper cars, only the real thing. Sometimes she'd say, "Here we go, Jewelly," which meant to scoot over and clutch the door handle, squinching your eyes shut. Her targets were usually red things: signs and brake lights. When she'd smash into another driver, she'd hop out of the car and disappear, melting into the small pool of people who were starting to gather.

I'd crawl out my open door (Grandma was always kind enough to stretch across the seat and open it for me from the inside before she got out) and wander around in the confusion. Usually some stranger would be shocked to find me at the scene of an accident, standing in the buzz of an intersection not knowing what part of the puzzle my piece fit. They'd scoop me up, fussing and full of questions, and carry me into a 7-Eleven or a bait-and-tackle shop or their own house, and eventually my mother would come to pick me up.

Grandma was never taken to the hospital or injured in any real way; she got in the car wrecks to talk to people. Standing in the middle of the street, she'd fish through her giant white textured leatherette purse—perched on the knee of her leg hoisted up to the wheel well—for her wallet, and show them the pictures of her four-year-old granddaughter who was with her—the four-year-old that no one seemed to notice was missing.

Even though Grandma's happiness at the scene of an accident was effervescent, she'd eventually get hauled away. The officer stood before her like a stone effigy and lectured on the dangers of her constant and questionable benders, and Grandma Madge just smiled, God bless him, and climbed into the back of the police car on her own, fingering her white Bibb like a Persian lap cat. So Grandma lost her license, and got forbidden to ever stick me in a car and drive off anywhere again, but she still came over to baby-sit me when Mom and Dad went out on dates.

WHILE MOM GETS DRESSED, Dad sits me on his knee and bounces me up and down: "Joe broke his toe, riding on a buff-a-lo." I toss my long hair and giggle. "Daaaad, I'm not Joe, I'm Jewelly!"

I adore my father. He takes me out to 7-Eleven and grabs a Clark Bar off the shelf. He rips it open and gives me half, then lets the empty wrapper fall from his hand as softly as a feather and we walk out the door, climb into our little peanut-mobile and roar off, giggling the whole way home.

ON BABY-SITTING NIGHTS, Grandma and I play Chutes and Ladders or Candy Land. We take a Morning Bubble bath and just before bed she digs around and pulls something out from the depths of her bottomless purse: clusters of sticky, fused-together Cracker Jacks that taste funny, o

some strange warped candy melded to its wrapper. Turning down your grandmother's candy is a breach of etiquette even a four-year-old knows better than to commit, so I'd sit at the kitchen table and nibble on whatever strange concoction she put in front of me, feigning "mmmmm"s while she watched. And when I was through, she'd start in asking.

"Honey, do you feel all right? You're looking a little peak-id."

I feel fine as I slide my hand down a shimmery wallpapered hall, heading to my room for jammies. Grandma Madge follows, muttering her thoughts out loud. "Oh, honey, I'm worried. You look so sick. C'mere, let Grandma feel your forehead." She flips my blond bangs out of the way and lays her icy knuckles against my face.

"Oh, God, Jewelly, you are burning up, just burning up. I better call the squad." Grandma is serious, her face etched in worry and hovering inches from mine. Her fingers spread my eyelids apart, looking for signs that she can report to the hospital. Maybe I am feeling something in my tummy. Maybe I do have a fever. *What does it feel like, Grandma? Am I sick, Grandma?*

"Oh, honey, you are so sick. But let's just wait till your mother comes home. Then we'll all go to the hospital. I'd take you now, but your daddy won't let me. I think you'll live until the get home. I hope so, honey." She pats my head while she shakes her own.

"Let us pray now." And Grandma Madge puts her hand in mine and bows her head. I start bawling. I don't want to die. But Grandma's not sure if I'll make it. My stomach is twisted like a braid. I'm propped on cushions against my headboard, just like the ninety-year-old lady down the street, who faded into her pillows and died last year.

Grandma asks me again about the sharp pains in my tummy and my hand slips under the covers to hold myself. I'm afraid to breathe in too much. I'm watching Grandma pace back and forth, back and forth between me and the phone: She picks it up, calls the squad, hangs up when they answer. She winds the curly phone cord around her finger, pulls it out, peels out my curtains, feels my forehead, runs back to the phone, picks it up to listen for the dial tone, sets it down.

And then soft headlights ease into the drive. The car creeps into the garage, the engine cuts. Mom and Dad slip quietly in the front door and Madge flicks on the foyer light switch, rushing them, blurting out that I've eaten something that looked funny and how a strange man had come to the house and given her the Cracker Jacks as a gift and she thought it was okay because he seemed like a *nice* black man and he didn't look like he would do anything poisonous or with razor blades like you hear about these days.

Grandma Madge clasps her hands to her chest like a praying mantis, her voice a bird pulled higher and higher by a string.

It takes a few seconds for Mom and Dad, with steady blinking, to decipher her words. And as they sink in, Mom explodes, "My Gawd! How could you, Madge? What the hell is wrong with you? She's a little girl. How could you give her candy from a black man?"

Dad surveys the two of them for a minute, scanning between their faces like a slow-motion tennis match. Then he drops his head to his chest, lets out a long whizzing hiss, and tromps past us to bed. He was twenty-five then.

Mom is frantic, running through the house, grabbing things to take to the hospital in case

they have to keep me, *in case I don't make it*, and barking out orders to Grandma Madge.

And then suddenly, I'm scooped up from behind, bundled in a blanket, and raced to the car. We veer around corners and punch through lights on our way to the hospital. Occasionally Mom leans over and whispers, "Check on her," and Grandma Madge flops a saggy arm back and gropes at the blanket to make sure it's rising and falling with each of my breaths.

Clunking into park in the ER lot, as Grandma sits on the shadowy side of the car, gathering her enormous purse, Mom turns around to face me in the backseat. With the yellow lamplight casting a jack-o'-lantern glow on her long face, she reaches back and smooths out the folds of my pajamas, her eyes latching on to mine.

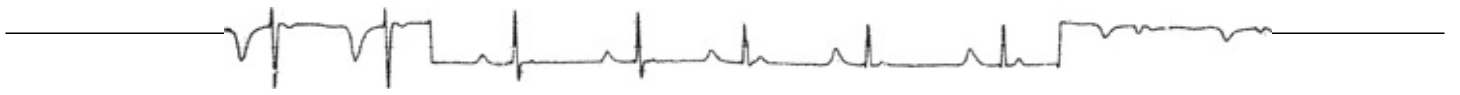
"Now, honey, I need you to show the doctor how sick you were back at the house, okay? I don't want him sending you home if there's a razor blade stuck inside you."

AND IT WAS AFTER FIVE TRIPS to the ER that Dad finally said, "That Madge is a fucking *battleac*. We're going back to Ohio." And so we loaded black velvet Jesus into the U-Haul and drove far away from the battleac pandemonium of Grandma Madge. And along the way, over the empty highways that in the 1970s still stretched between the desert and the sparse rolling hills of the Midwest, I'd sit on Mom's lap and rummage through her purse.

"You looking for the suckers, honey? Here, let me get 'em for you."

Mom pulls out a new book of matches and carefully bends back the cover to expose two fresh red rows of the minipops she's been giving me for as long as I can remember. My mouth waters when I see their shimmery crimson tips. The first one is always the best, and I pluck it out and get it fast on my tongue, waiting for the metallic zolt to rush my taste buds. Once the hardest layer dissolves, I flip the match against the side of my teeth and crunch the softer bits off the stick, spitting the white flimsy paper to the floor, swallowing the rest.

One by one, I devour the pack, trying to finish it off for Mom. Mom pulls out a hairbrush and strokes my long blond hair; my crown bobs toward her with each pull of the brush. She smiles softly at me with a sucker in my mouth as Dad clenches the wheel, lost in thought driving us as fast and as far away as he can from the crafty antics of a madwoman named Madge.



So *what* I'VE NOTICED, Dr. Phillips, is that Julie is mostly sick on schooldays and has soaring fever and really bad sore throats. I think it might be strep or tonsillitis.”

OHIO IS HOME NOW, and after enough moves to shuffle me through five different kindergartens we've finally settled into a swanky rural suburb, thanks to Dad landing a steady job with full benefits at the Rickenbacker Air Force Base.

These are the salad years: white two-story house, baby blue carpeting, sunken den, bay windows with furry African violet leaves curled up on the sill, hot with diffused sunlight streaming in through freshly Windexed double-paned glass.

And now that we've got full medical coverage, Mom's got to get me established with a pediatrician. Township Family Physicians lies about ten miles down the road from us. Since my first checkup, I've been back for sore throats, nausea, and headaches. Mom thinks I'm allergic to the new carpeting in our house, but Dr. Phillips puts me on an elimination diet to see if it's something I'm eating. He tells her to take chocolate, meat, eggs, dairy, and bread out of every meal I eat.

After our appointment, Mom and I amble down the aisles of the supermarket, my fingers looped through the metal slots of the cart as I watch what she pulls off the shelves: Oreos, cookies, pork chops, Grade A eggs, two-percent milk, and a couple loaves of Wonder. Bay Grocery doesn't seem to have any of the foods Dr. Phillips wants me to eat.

Today, I'm back at Township, getting seen for my headaches. Mom and I sit in the examining room, waiting for the doctor.

“How do you act when you're sick, Julie? Show me.” I slouch on the edge of the table, my limbs dangling. I hang my tongue out and my bottom lip falls away from my teeth like a *National Geographic* pygmy with a lip plate in.

“That's right. Now what do you think the doctor is going to say if he comes in here and you're sitting up and all smiling? Do you think he's going to believe me that you're sick? You got to show him how sick you are outside the doctor's office. We got to get to the bottom of this thing so Mommy can get some rest.” She licks her thumb and smudges dried egg from the side of my mouth. Her spit smells like rot.

“Okay, honey?”

“Okay, Mommy.”

“So, YOU SAY Julie's been running a fever, Ms. Gregory, along with some sore throats?” Dr. Phillips leans easy against his sink counter, scribbling notes on my chart.

arms were pinned. A crack in the air breaks the spell as she slaps her leg and turns in disgust. “Jesus, Julie, we've been seeing you sick and you've been telling me you've had headaches in the car all this week. Remember when you've been carsick?” She turns back to Dr. Phillip. “I'm sorry, Doctor, I don't know what's wrong with her that she's doing this to me. There's got to be something wrong with a kid that doesn't even remember how sick she was just yesterday. Julie, stop wasting the man's time and tell him what's going on with you. Now I mean it.”

“They're around my forehead like the first one you said.”

Dr. Phillips picks right back up.

“Is it a tight band that squeezes or more of a dull, throbbing, indirect pain?”

“Uh. A tight band.”

“That sounds like it could be a migraine. Why don't we start her out on a sample of Ergostat, Sandy, and you can get back to me next week on how this works out.”

“Thank you so much, Doctor.”

AND WHEN MOM SAYS I don't have a headache, I ride my bicycle to the next road over, and curve back its empty lane, pedaling fast along the smooth winding river of blacktop that loops back onto itself in a cul-de-sac overgrown with Queen Anne's lace and lofty weeds. My handlebars tassels whiz in the wind and the colorful spoke tire pegs blur on my speed machine. My Honeycomb license plate flaps wildly with each pump of my legs straddled along a glittering sparkle banana seat. My long blond hair cascades down my back and I swing it back and forth in the breeze, swerving all over the road singing, “*I can't smile without you, can't laugh without you. If you only knew what I'm going through...*”

MOM'S ELBOWS LOOKED LIKE they were full of buckshot, or wheel bearings. I used to sit on the backseat and hook my armpits over the front so I could slide the loose flesh between my fingers, transfixed by the purplish grainy pebbles moving back and forth under her skin. When I asked her how come she had rocks in her arms, she told me that Grandma Madge had sent her out one night with a carload of boys and she had to jump out the window as they sped onto the highway. The impact of her skid lodged pebbles so far under her skin that they stuck there permanently.

“Why did you jump out the window, Mom?”

“Because I had to, Julie.”

“But why?”

“I'll tell you sometime when you're older.” And she turns away, lips trembling.

Dad snaps on the radio and leans toward his window. I keep rolling the elbow flap between my fingers, isolating each blue-black pebble to study it closer, watching her tears fall and saying, “I'm sorry, Mommy, I'm sorry you're sad today.” But still I keep on rolling.

ANOTHER WEEK HAS GONE BY and nothing has changed. I still pee the bed and wake up in the morning soaked all the way down to my knees, my sheets and pajamas sticky and stinking. It started when we moved here. I can't help it. And I can't stop.

Mom and I sit in the Township office waiting for Dr. Phillips and I scour the reception

room for all the *Reader's Digests*. I speed-read the short stories and little funnies at the end of each article: "Laughter, the Best Medicine," "Life in These United States," "Humor in Uniform." I hope I can distract Mom into forgetting about the wet clothes she peeled off me this morning. I'd die if my doctor asked me why I wet the bed when I'm seven.

"You know, Mommy, my headaches I think might be worse. This girl at school got glasses and she never got headaches."

"Really, Sis? You noticing them getting worse?" Mom doesn't look up from her *Ladies Home Journal*. "Well, let's make sure we tell that to the doctor. Good job on thinking about what might be wrong with you."

In the examining room, Mom says, "Now, we're going to tell Dr. Phillips about the dull pains in your head, right about," she presses her fingers into my skull, trying to find them "here." She squeezes hard to remind me what they feel like.

"Now I don't want any kind of fiasco like we had last time, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'm the mom: I know what's going on here. So if he asks you questions, you just let me answer."

Dr. Phillips breezes in and apologizes for our wait. Mom gives him an update on my allergy diet and pulls out her list of new symptoms. Some he writes down, some he just listens to, moving his eyes between her and his chart. I sit in my sick pose, pretty sure that Mom has forgotten the wet bed.

As she runs down the symptoms, I know some of them aren't all the way true. I sit on the edge of the exam table, my eyes fixed on my knees, but I feel the words rise into my throat, words to correct her, flooding my mouth, rushing to get out. They crash against one another and then pile into a dam of all the words I cannot say. I have to press my tongue to the roof of my mouth to hold them back. Little clucks and ticks swirl around the inside of my mouth and escape through my hanging bottom lip.

Cluck. No, I don't have a sore throat *every day*, just yesterday. *Tick*. No, my fever last night wasn't *way up to 102*.

Cluck, Cluck! No, I don't go to the school nurse *every single day*. Dr. Phillips pauses, his pen lifted mid-sentence.

"Are you okay, Julie?"

I nod up and down.

"See what I mean, Doctor? Something is going on here." When Dr. Phillips steps out to get us a sample of another trial medicine, Mom gives a Spock pinch to my knee and growls I had better knock it off.

AFTER WE'D MOVED BACK FROM Arizona and settled into the white two-story, we'd all driven up to Columbus to see my grandpa—Dad's dad—for the first time since I'd been born. I was thrilled; I'd never met a grandpa from Mom's side, and the great-grandpa who used to write me love letters addressed to "Jewel" had passed away before I could gurgle his name. Mom told me he'd come to the hospital to pick her up when we were ready to go home, but at the last minute, he made Mom drive so he could wind his long arms around me and hold

me close. He said I was the most beautiful baby, an elfin queen, a princess, a jewel. The stories I heard about his love for me made him the man I was always waiting to meet again, the first man that got away. Dad didn't want me around Grandma Madge, and his mom had died before I was born, so Chester was my last shot at having a grandparent.

When we pulled up to the VA housing complex where Chester lived, the place seemed deserted.

Mom crossed her arms and said, "I'm going to wait in the car, Dan. Don't be too long."

Dad hadn't seen Chester since he left home for the Navy at sixteen, and I was nervous, too. I was getting a new grandpa today.

Dad and I stood at the curb. He took a deep breath; so did I. We looked at each other, then clasped hands and walked up the sidewalk, scanning the house for signs of life. The curtains were yellowing at the top and streaked with black soot from cigarette smoke; mail sprouted out of the letter box and weathered flyers stuck to the screen door and under the rubber mat in layers. But when we knocked, a gravelly voice warbled out, "Door's open."

We stopped in the hallway, blinded by white spots left over from the July sun, trying to adjust to the darkness. Chester had stacked cases of Bud Light up to the ceiling to block the light from the single window in the living room. Dad sat down on the ottoman between Chester and the television and I climbed on Dad's knee.

"You can call Chester 'Grandpa,' Sissy. Can't she, Chester?"

Chester nodded. "What's your name again, little girl?"

I pointed my thumb to my chest. "I'm Julie, but Dad calls me Sissy."

Chester talked to us during commercials and leaned around us when his show came back on, even though Dad kept on and on; about Arizona, my school, his job at the base, Mom. Chester grunted a few *uh-huhs* and *oh-yeah?s* before he let out a great hissing sigh and began pumping his thumb up and down on the remote volume, drowning out Dad.

At the next commercial Chester said, "Glad you could make it up, Peggy." Peggy was Dad's sister. I knew he was telling us to get out even though we'd only been there fifteen minutes. Dad just sat there. Tears welled up in his eyes and slipped freely down his face. He dropped his head and stood slowly, and I slid off his knee like I was nothing more than a sheet of paper. I wrapped my stick arms around his waist and hugged as hard as I could, clamping one hand around my other wrist and tugging tight. I was not gonna let him go. He stood there empty, his muscular limbs pinned to his side by the sheer strength of mine.

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Sissy."

IT WAS USUALLY AFTER MOM slipped the little white pill under my tongue that my migraines got worse.

"I can tell you've got a headache coming on. Here, open up. Lift your tongue. Gooood."

Sometimes I about threw up. Most times, I just needed to climb back into bed, as the pill sank into a pasty chalk under my tongue; that's how bad the headaches got. I still didn't know if they went across my head or over my face, but they burned my whole head on fire, my scalp felt nauseated, and the bottom of my throat jumped and rushed, like a watchdog.

snapping the leash.

Mom could never get a job because I was so sick. She never knew when a migraine was going to creep up or a fever soar past a hundred or my throat turn red and swollen with infection and she'd have to drop what she was doing and run me into Township.

During the day she scours and straightens each room in our big house, and on the days she thinks I might be sick, she keeps me home from school to watch me. Sometimes I hear her in the kitchen, laughing out loud. When I pop around the corner and ask what's so funny, she startles and says, "Oh, just thinking about a private funny between me and the nurse."

She puts me in the car one afternoon and says, "We are going to have to do something with that hair."

At the beauty salon, I sit in the swivel chair and she tells the lady with scissors to cut my long hair to an X-Y-Z shag, like the mom on *The Brady Bunch*. The woman looks down at my hair. I've been blond since I was a baby, but Mom says my hair's getting darker as I get older just like hers did. Pretty soon it's going to be growing in dirty dishwasher brown. But today I sit, with seven years of blond hair, silky straight, the ends almost white from the sun.

"Are you sure?" the lady asks.

"Look, I've tried and tried to get her to do something with it but this is what I get, so just cut the damn shag!"

I've never had a haircut before so when the lady turns me around to the mirror I don't even know where my hair went; it flips up to my ears, it's brown all over— not blond like I've always seen myself in the mirror.

"I want my hair back!" I cry.

I look ugly, like a boy, and I know so because even Mom starts laughing when she sees me. MOM SAYS SHE CAN'T STAND ME, she has had it up to *here*, she can't get any help around here, will you please do something with her, Dan? God, she is driving me crazy.

We're upstairs in my bedroom when Dad eases in the front door. Mom is tearing after me clawing at my X-Y-Z shag, stinging me with her hitting hands. Dad trudges up the steps. "Hey now, what's going on up here?" He comes in just in time to see me duck. Mom's back is to the door, her wild hair stuck to her face with spit and sweat.

"Sandy, what the hell are you doing?"

"Goddammit, Dan." She swings around and grabs at the canopy post of my four-poster bed. "This girl will not pick up her room, she will not mind. I can't get any help around here. I've had it, Dan, I mean it. You are never around. I can't take it anymore!"

My father is silent, looking at his shoes, listening. He pads across the carpet and leans against my dresser, pushing up his sleeves. "I'll take it from here, Sandy." He turns his face to me and I think I catch him wink. Mom backs away. He yells softly at first, his eyes twinkling into mine and I stop crying, saved by my father and by the pact he's just made with me: Let's do a show and get her off our backs. But the more Mom inches away, the louder Dad gets until his twinkle turns to black and I am crying even harder because I have never heard my father yell so loud or look so angry.

Dad hooks his fingers around my wrist and tugs me out. He stops in the doorway when

Mom's standing, "Now tell your mother you're sorry."

"I'm sorry, Mom."

"Now tell her you love her."

"I love you, Mom."

"Now go over there and give her a hug."

Mom stands bitter with a clamped jaw, looking away, fat tears rumbling down her cheek. I wrap my arms around her folded ones and give a little, one-pump squeeze.

Dad says, "You're coming with me today, kid, we're going to get you out of Mommy's hair. And he yanks me down the plush steps, with Mom trailing behind. "You know, I can't take anymore, Dan. I need help around here, you know?"

And Dad says, "I know, Sandy, I know," and lets the screen door slam behind us.

When we get in the car, Dad peels out, slinging gravel at the fence and scorching tire tracks through the side grass. I brace against the dash and catch a glimpse of Mom, her forehead pressed against the door frame, her fingertips slipping down the screen as she sobs. The car spits out onto the pavement and Dad slams into drive. We burn down the road and he smacks the wheel. "We did it, Sissy, we got out today!" I'm filled with a dizzy ecstasy of forbidden and stolen freedom, as if we have zipped out of Township just as Dr. Phillips was walking in.

But as we drive away, I lean my head to the window and tears slip from my eyes. I can't shake the vision of my mother, trapped in the house behind the heavy-gauge screen door, and us taking the only car. My father is calmer now. He reaches out for me and pat, pats my knee.

"Don't worry, Sissy," he says. "Mom is just in a bad mood because a baby is growing in her belly."

Dad and I spend our stolen Saturday sauntering through the big mall, holding hands. The smacks on my skin are almost faded from memory. I've never spent a whole day with my dad before. We meander by old people nodding off on the benches, we marvel at the indoor palm trees and stand in the mist of the thundering water fountains, tossing pennies. Dad dares me to reach in there and grab a few quarters for the candy machines. I don't even care about going to a toy store: I just want to be with my dad.

Somewhere behind us an eruption of laughter ignites and echoes through the four-level chamber of the mall. Dad jumps and spins around to face the sound, terror sweeping across his face. The roar is from a group of friends standing in front of a store, and I laugh, too, because it sure must be funny, whatever it is. Dad looks down at me, ominous. "Sissy, honey, do you know why those people back there are laughing?"

I shake my head.

"They're laughing," he scoops my chin into his giant palm and lifts my face to his, "and you know this is gonna hurt, honey, but they're laughing because of your ugly hair. You're just not pretty like other little girls. I know you're not smart enough to understand that, but I'm your daddy, I'll protect you. Julie, people will screw you with your pants on. But don't you worry, baby girl, stick with me and I'll take care of you."

I look back at the people who laughed at me and they're not even looking at me now, ju

standing in a little circle facing each other, and I see how sneaky they can be to turn away so fast when they know you're going to catch them making fun of you. Dad starts strolling again and I keep looking back over my shoulder, trying to catch them in the act.

“Love you, Sissy.” Dad gives my tiny hand a squeeze in his big one.

“Love you, too, Dad.”



THE DAY MY BROTHER WAS BORN I hopped on the school bus shouting at the driver, “I just had a baby, I just had a baby!”

Daniel Joseph Gregory the Second—complete with a Roman numeral to sound like royal—weighed in at a whopping ten pounds and was so healthy he had to be cut right out of Mom. Little Danny Joe looked just like a Butterball turkey and, unlike me, he came with a full head of hair and a healthy scream.

Danny was unexpected—a surprise or a mistake, depending on whether you talked to Mom or Dad—but nonetheless a miracle baby since the last two had died before they ever made it out of the hospital.

Dad sings out, “Joe, Joe, broke his toe, riding on a buff-a-lo,” beaming over his boy whose name is in the song he loves.

Now that Danny's here, people we don't even know stop by our house to see the baby. Twice-removed relatives send us invitations to family reunions we never knew existed. Even Grandma Madge is talking to Mom about making a pilgrimage from Phoenix to see little Joe as Dad's started calling him.

Mom coos over his bassinet and says “God love it” whenever Danny does anything from dropping a diaper to bounce up and down in his baby bungee jumper, gumming a smile at nothing.

I mimic Mom's words, her voice, her happiness.

“God love it, loook, isn't he just adorable?”

I answer our phone in the same Betty Homemaker voice, picked up from commercials and honed with inflections to match my mother.

“Hello, this is the Gregory residence, how may I help you?”

“Uh, Sandy?”

“Ohhh”(feign surprise). “No, this is Julie, her seven-year-old daughter. If you'll hold just a moment I'll get her for you. May I ask who's calling?”

Mom picks up the line and I hide behind the kitchen partition.

“That's my little helper, God love her.”

God did love me and so did my mom. “God love it” may have gone to Danny, but “God love her” went straight to me.

WITH A NEWBORN BABY came all sorts of dangers that threatened my brother's trek from infancy to toddler-hood; frantic ER trips when Mom would find him blue in his crib, an emergency run to the fire department over a possibly poisonous spider bite. But Danny was the cutest and healthiest thing that had ever come out of the Gregory family, and his knack for slipping away from illness and injury was abundant. Dad had the Agent Orange, Mom had the toxemia, Madge was a *battleac*, Lee was *off*, Chester was brain dead, and I was sickly. But here Danny was: a grinning mound of angelic jiggling baby flesh that knew no bounds of appetite, action, or glee. He was contagious. After Danny, we all felt better, especially me.

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