Two Works in Creative Non-Fiction: *The Marine Wife* and *Novosibirsk*
An Undergraduate Honors Thesis by Katrina Mehl
English 4995
University of Missouri
Advisor: Professor EJ Levy
Spring 2011
Critical Introduction

The art of writing creative nonfiction comes with the conscious decision to tell the truth. Fiction must feel real; nonfiction must be real. It is read and written as truth. What distinguishes creative nonfiction from journalistic reportage of fact is the way it is written. Creative nonfiction applies the tools and techniques of poetry (e.g., metaphor, lyricism, image) and fiction (e.g., dramatic action, character, setting) to the rendering of fact. As Lee Gutkind puts it, “Creative nonfiction demands spontaneity and an imaginative approach while remaining true to the validity and integrity of the information it contains.” The composition of that truth is the art; the structure and juxtaposition of information are what distinguish creative nonfiction from other nonfiction forms. Creative nonfiction demands an attention to detail, and an ability to find a larger human truth in facts and information. Often, creative nonfiction goes beyond entertainment to teach its readers about the world.

The masterful literary journalist John McPhee has pointed out that a nonfiction writer can put as much artistry into a piece as they like. They can manipulate the way time is written in a story; they can add to the story with research, but they cannot make it up. There is nothing that can be included as fact that is not. Dialogue must be truthful, limited and factual. It cannot carry elements of being strung together by what an author thought someone might say. Without this commitment to the factual, nonfiction is no longer nonfiction, and a reader is being manipulated rather than informed.

There are three basic kinds of creative nonfiction: essay, memoir, and literary journalism. Essay interrogates a subject outside of the self in order to in turn learn about the self. Literary journalism requires reportage, blending rigorous factuality with a personal vision of their subjects; as Norman Sims says, “Like anthropologists and sociologists, literary reporters view
cultural understanding as an end.” It is the illumination of culture itself that sets their work apart, giving it importance and convincing the reader of the importance of their subject.

Memoir, of all the forms of creative nonfiction, arguably takes the most personal approach to the rendering of information, since it recounts facts filtered through memory. St. Augustine, who lived and wrote in the fourth and fifth centuries, is considered the father of the memoir form, having documented his life in Confessions, introducing a genre that remains popular today. The women of Tsarist Russia wrote their memoirs in the guise of journals. They are not just the musings of women on their lives; they connect to important social and historical issues. Ekaterina Slanskaia, for example, wrote House Calls: A Day in the Practice of a Duma Woman Doctor in St. Petersburg. Not only did she document the difficulty of her work as a female doctor, but also the reality of the living conditions in the city at that time. The connection of her personal story to social issues tells the reader something important about that history, elevating her memoir beyond entertainment to address issues of social significance.

Much like literary journalism and essay, memoir must teach something to the reader; it must be more than a good story, it must be a meaningful one—and the writer must excavate that meaning in the facts she records. There must be a reason for the reader to read it. It can be artistically woven with research or someone else’s story, but it must be true. The work must convince the reader that it is an essential subject that the author is taking up, one that will affect the way the reader considers the world.

I chose to write my two creative nonfiction pieces as memoir because memoir allows me to demonstrate the deeply personal effect of the social and political events that I address. The subjects could be written as part of a literary journalistic work, reported through interviews and artistically woven with research. However, the essential tie between a personal history and the
connection to larger societal issues could get lost. Each of my memoirs refract a public issue through an intimate lens to personalize the military experience of a young couple and of a family in post-Soviet society. Blending memories with facts, I hope to set an example for readers to seek connections between a larger picture of society and their own lives. In this way, memoir can work to illuminate a bigger picture, informing us of who we are as part of this world.

I have often wondered why literary portrayals of periods of political and social turmoil are frequently presented to the reader at an arm’s length. We dehumanize war, for example. The last ten years our nation has grown inured to war, watching endless news reels on CNN and other news networks, the men and women overseas going almost unnoticed until they are on the plane in the seat next to you, ordering coffee as they head home for leave. Anthony Swofford’s *Jarhead* told the story of the early 1990s Gulf War. Ernest Hemingway fictionalized his World War I experience in *Farewell to Arms*. What is the story of the young soldiers in this war? What is the story of their young wives? How can these things affect the younger generations in American society who seem to move along without noticing their cohorts coming and going to perform their military duties overseas? So I took a story not my own, but one that affects me: the story of my friend and her husband, a young Marine, who joined right out of high school to fight in the Iraq War. I wanted to know: How does the tragedy of a young couple dealing with war affect their friends (or do the friends even notice)? Are these young men and women isolated by an experience that so many other people in their generations have not had?

Memoir personalizes this story. The fact that this story is a common one—many Americans know soldiers fighting in the Middle East, and have seen them come and go—is not a distraction. It is essential to this piece. The piece is meant to point out the way in which this society overlooks those veterans who return home, those who leave for war, and those young
people struggling who have served their country. It demands that a reader to look into their own lives and relationships. It brings the reality of war home, to the doorstep of every person who knows a soldier or a veteran of this latest war. The memoir brings this story home.

The second piece in my thesis Novosibirsk has been written as memoir in order to humanize a culture long-vilified in the United States—that of Soviet Russia; specifically I consider a community outside the city of Novosibirsk in Siberia after the fall of Communism. It is not that literary journalism would not have worked, but it would have given the story a remote quality. The intimate details that make this story compelling come from that place of memory. It is not as much as story about the Russians themselves, but a group of Americans living in a specific location within a Russian community in the early 1990s. My work could be linked to travel writing, in the spirit of Colin Thubron’s work, documenting the exotic far eastern portions of Russia after the fall of Communism in his In Siberia. However, my work is not just a travel memoir, but an investigation of political unrest. It thus aligns itself more closely with Joan Didion’s Salvador, which documents her 1982 trip to El Salvador, exploring US-Central American policy there. At the same time, my piece is concerned with universal personal dilemmas, such as how a family works as a team to overcome challenges that arise in a foreign location.

Writing Novosibirsk as memoir not only allows me to write what my parents and their friends experienced learning Russian in that setting, but also allows me to contrast their experience with my own memories of being there as a child. What I remember, or even what I imagine in contrast with what my parents can tell me or recall draws a fuller picture of family instead of a story just of my parents or just of me. Interviewing my parents also allowed me to touch on the important aspects of being in a country in a time of political unrest. My parents
could tell me information about what they were told or how Russians reacted to the 1993 Constitutional Crisis in Moscow. It gives more to the story, than what I might report from the perspective of childhood memories. It allows the political to seep in, but also describes human reactions to some of the first elections Russia had seen since the Soviet era. It gives the people a name, a face, a political agenda other than lumping a whole country into the Communist Party.

After years of considering the Russians the enemy during the Cold War, it seems important to recognize that the fall of the Soviet Union, the collapse of currency, and so on, had a profound effect on human lives. My memoir aims to humanize historical events so that we can see past ideology to consider how changes of regime or military campaigns affect the lives of ordinary people, providing a literary lens through which we can gauge the human cost of government policy and social change. By bringing post-Soviet Novosibirsk to life through the intimate observations of memoir, I am able to uncover a little of that history. I am trying to put a moment of momentous historical change into perspective for readers. The farther events move into the past, the more difficult it becomes to consider the serious ramifications political action can have on human beings. In a time of political unrest around the world, it would seem pertinent to remember what it is like to live through that, to experience such change, even if I am only representing it as an observer. We do not get to pick and choose which history to live through. No matter with what slant that history is told, we ignore it at our peril.
This is not my love story. It is a love story that belongs to military couples of my generation. Young military couples who are ignored, and yet studied. They have PTSD, are hard of hearing, scarred and wounded, but they also have fifty years of the future together. They come home from the desert to each other, but they have memories tattooed onto their bodies, taking old trials with them into new days. It is the story of hard work and harder joys and growing up too fast. This is a love story that belongs to these couples, and it might not be a love story at all. But Jennifer Holsten would tell me to believe it is.

* *

I’m standing in the backyard of a bed-and-breakfast in Little Rock, Arkansas, watching my nineteen-year-old, ex-roommate Jennifer clutching her green peacoat in one hand, hurl a rock with her softball arm at a squirrel up in a tree while pivoting on little, brown high-heeled boots. She turns to the group of eight girls standing behind her and tries to giggle. She’s tired. It’s the night before her wedding.

Researcher Benjamin Karney looked at statistics in his study of stress on military marriages and found that people serving in the military had different marriage statistics than their civilian demographic. However, the military as a cause of earlier marriage among couples was not proved, though there seemed to be strong correlation. Jennifer and Cameron Holsten dated for five years before they were married in December of 2008 at the ages of 19 and 20. Their wedding was attended by 100-150 people in a historic house owned by her aunt and uncle a block down from the Governor’s mansion in Little Rock, Arkansas. They had a three-day
honeymoon before they spent Christmas with his parents in Concordia, Missouri. In January of 2009, he flew back to Hawaii to wait until he shipped out on his second tour to Iraq and Afghanistan. Jennifer moved to Hawaii in 2009 to be with him when he returned. At the end of his contract in the spring of 2010, Cameron and Jennifer moved from Hawaii to Arkansas.

* 

In Concordia, Missouri in February of 2004, it is our freshman year at boarding school. There are five girls, all fourteen-years-old just back from a dance. None of us are with our beaus, because none of us are allowed to date until we are sixteen. I am standing behind the couch in the lobby of the girl’s dorm, and the five of us are pulling our jackets around us because it’s February and the Winter Dance wear (tight fitting tank tops and spaghetti straps) is not warm enough. We don’t want to go to bed yet. Kari flops onto the couch, kicks up her feet onto the table and smoothes her dress over her curves. All 107 lb., five-feet of Jennifer crawls up onto Kari’s legs and sits the way a four-year-old faces her mother, still young enough to straddle her legs. Jennifer puts her face into her hands and whispers “but I like him so much.” Cameron was so quiet around her it was be hard to tell he liked her or would have been if he had not stared so much in Algebra. Or if we had not heard him tell his twin brother Kendall that she was so beautiful he didn’t know what to say. He would try to show off by annoying our Algebra teacher or throwing his pencil out the window to get out of class. But as much as he could open his mouth to annoy the teacher, he could not open his mouth to talk to Jennifer. He had asked her to dance that night though, six months after they met. Cameron is a lean, sixteen-year old, blonde-haired bad-ass who works in the mechanic’s shop at the four-way stop in town; Jennifer is her mother’s tiny, brunette fourteen-year-old southern belle with a pretty face. Jennifer sits there on
Kari’s lap with her face in her hands, and Kari whispers into her ear that it will be okay. Every rule is broken by someone. By the end of the school year she and Cameron were dating.

* 

Fifty percent of the United States military personnel are between the ages of 17-24. The Marine Corps specifically recruits for young, non-career personnel. Jennifer knew from the time that she and Cameron began dating that he planned to join the Marines at the end of high school. He would drive down to a nearby town and see the local recruiter several times during a semester. There was no family legacy he was fulfilling; Cameron had chosen this himself before Jennifer had come along.

When he was eight or nine Cameron would go out with his friend Isaac (a neighbor boy) to play Army like a lot of other young boys. They would go to the local high school campus, making the tree house at the edge of his friend’s lawn home base. Forbidden by their parents to shoot at each other with their fake guns, the boys would pretend the trees on the campus were enemy soldiers. And like the many boys before them, they would crawl through the grass, play sniper from the trees, make the road into a river they had to wade across to reach safety and ran from building to building pressing their small boy bodies against the brick walls, peaking out to see enemy soldiers. When Alex—an intelligent boy with big ideas from Florida—came to visit his grandmother who lived in the neighborhood the game was kicked up a notch. They would pretend his grandmother was the enemy, and the imaginary fighting was more ferocious than ever. They collectively decided they would join the military; it was always their plan. Cameron joined the Marines in 2006, Alex joined the Marines in 2010, and Isaac went into the Navy in 2009. They were not any different than a lot of other boys. And after they joined they were not that different from a lot of the other men.
It would happen that the boy who spent a good deal of his time playing Army, was incredibly nervous the first time he met Jennifer’s dad at the end of our freshman year of high school. Jennifer’s father Steve Alexander is maybe 5’3”. He had been a wild kid until about eighteen when he was in a bad car accident. Afterwards, he joined the Army, became a Green Beret in the Army Special Forces, and upon finishing his contract went to medical school and became a surgeon. Cameron is substantially taller than Steve, but as someone considering serious military service, the term Green Beret called up a deep respect in him. Jen was Steve’s third daughter, his last child. Her mom had said once that Jen was a Barbie, a pretty girl who liked clothes, and she was not sure what her daughter would do with herself. Steve drove up from Arkansas to pick up Jen and her sister from boarding school for summer vacation; it seemed normal that he would meet Jennifer’s boyfriend. I remember Cameron and Jen standing in the dorm lobby before her dad got there. I could not hear them, but I could tell Cameron was fussing to her about meeting her dad, and while she was trying to encourage him, she was just as nervous. She kept brushing her brown hair out of her face and biting her lip. He was looking down at her from where they were standing against the wall, his face tight; she was looking at the tiled wall across from them.

* 

According to researchers Kelty, Kleycamp and Segal the generation of men and women who make up the 17-24 year-olds of the US military do not have the benefits of a shared military experience that men of older generations did or do. The military today focuses their efforts on training younger groups of soldiers, creating a new order of socialization. It requires a level of independence and social responsibility that most eighteen-year-olds like Cameron did not have. Most eighteen-year-olds like Cameron were not going to be sent to Iraq to fight for the people
standing next to them. It is a transition into adulthood that many of the rest of that generation do
not get until long after they have left college, if they ever do.

*

In 2005 we are 16, Jennifer and Cameron (who was 17) have been dating for around a
year. Cameron and my boyfriend Adam, take Jennifer and me to see Jarhead with Jake
Gyllenhal. Adam and Cameron go up to the window to buy tickets. The woman tells them, “You
may only buy one rated-R ticket at a time.” They turn to the other line in the AMC lobby, forty to
fifty people milling around them, standing in line, and buy two other tickets. “Damnit, my tickets
are for two different times.” Cameron holds his out to show Adam while buckling his seat belt
back in the Jeep. “Dang. So are mine!” The four of us inspect them under the dome light of the
car. “One couple could take the 7:45 tickets and the other see the 8:30.” This seems like the best
choice since the boys are sneaking us underage females into an R-rated movie anyway. Cameron
takes the 8:30 tickets. Jennifer and I point out Fazoli’s on the other side of the parking lot.
Unlimited breadsticks are calling our names.

We sit one couple per booth. Cameron puts his arm around Jen and squeezes her so tight
that it’s a joke, and she makes an “Umph” noise. She giggles and rolls her eyes at the same time.
“What are you going to get?” “I don’t know. Pasta.” To kill time after dinner, we decide to go to
the mall to look for clothes Cameron can wear in his senior pictures. “Cameron’s mom gave him
like 100 dollars to spend on clothes for his pictures, but he really wants to buy Band of
Brothers,” Jen tells me. “Really?” He drags her by the hand into a video store. Cameron holds
up a tin DVD box in his hand. “You find it, man?” Cameron looks sort of pathetic actually,
“Yeah, but it’s like eighty dollars. What do you think I should do?” The second question is
quieter and directed at Jen. She pulls her free hand from a shyly smiling mouth, and she lifts it up in a sort of exasperated upturned manner, as if to say she knows he wants to buy it, but he shouldn’t and she would rather shop for clothes, but he can do what he wants. Their arms attached at the ends by their fingers are pulled into a triangle as she tries to move away from the seasons of TV. “I’m going to buy it.” I lean up and whisper to Adam as the two walk to the register, “I thought his Mom gave him the money for clothes.” “Yeah, but she’ll give him more money.” I shake my head in disbelief. “Nancy’s cool,” Adam says.

We go down to Dairy Queen for dipped cones. Cameron has his arm around Jen’s shoulders the same way he will when they sit for the entire five minutes they have together at their wedding reception several years later, and kisses the top of her head. I point them out to Adam from behind. He nods in recognition. At the movies,Adam and I walk into our showing fifteen minutes late to escape the door monitor for R-rated movies, leaving Jen and Cameron on their own to manage the ID monitor at the later showing. After Jake Gyllenhaal makes it through Marine boot camp, and one guy gets shot, Cameron and Jen find us in the front row, and Jen plops down next to us. “Couldn’t get her past the guy at the door,” Cameron says to Adam while squeezing by. Jen and I are bent away from each other in the chairs. It is like being on a giant couch, each couple bent in on itself. When we get a chance alone later that night I ask Adam “Why would Cameron take Jen to see that movie?” and he shrugs. Cameron had already signed with the Marines.

* 

In 2005 around the same time that Jarhead came out, we are sophomores in high school Jennifer, Cameron, and two other kids get caught drinking. The next morning I hear yelling as I
walk to the bathroom to take a shower. A friend of ours is standing there screaming at Jennifer. The tile walls seem very white, the sun is coming through the windows and the lights were on. “CAMERON IS NOT A GOOD BOYFRIEND.” It is echoing off the tile when I walk in; it was like I was cued. Jennifer and Cameron fought the repercussions of that mistake for a while because the incident was blamed on “Cameron’s bad influence.” It was tied to another frequently-said-point on the anti-boyfriend side, “Jennifer, he pulled a knife on a guy!” The story is that he was threatening a guy in grade school who was trying to hurt his brother Kendall. I do not know for sure if the knife part is true. I do not know if the story is true. But I do know that he would stand up and fight for his brother. He will join the Marines and stand up and fight for his brothers there. Regardless of what is true, Jennifer and Cameron will deal with Cameron’s “bad reputation” and her parents’ struggle to understand her love for him up until they set a wedding date.

* 

Tattoos have long been a part of the military experience, though controversy has been raised over the appropriateness of certain tattoos. The Marines’ choice to have a tattoo policy is to help members in their search for post-service careers; limiting the amount of visible ink done expands options for most members when they seek jobs in the civilian world after their service. But even those who advocate for less ink point out that tattooing is part of the bond of Marines. Some tattoos serve as reminders, some represent who they have lost, who they served, and what they were a part of. Like civilians who tattoo their bodies, they consider it self-expression. The most common among the Few and the Proud involve the Corps, like the recognizable Eagle, Globe and Anchor. Most acquire their first tattoo after boot camp. And whether or not the
emphasis or desire to tattoo is good or bad, it is a part of the shared experience. Before he went
to boot camp, Cameron tattooed the Eagle, Globe and Anchor onto his chest over his heart.

It was June of 2006 when he left for boot camp; he was 18 and Jennifer was 17. They had
been seeing each other for 2 years, and Jennifer came up to visit him in Missouri before he left. I
think this might have been the time her dad and brother came up with her to stay for three days
as chaperones and went to see movies all day for several days in a row while she saw Cameron.
Her parents were frustrated because he had never come down to Arkansas to visit her there at
their house. The guys in town got together and threw a party for him the night or two nights
before he left. I didn’t go, but I can imagine Jen standing there loosely holding his hand while the
two of them leaned against his red Dodge pick-up at the bridge over a nameless creek in a field
five minutes outside of town. He’d be talking to his buddies, making fun of them, laughing the
whole time. She had been upset that her family did not let her go alone.

Back at school that fall, she was even more upset when she did not get to go to his
graduation. Jennifer had spent all summer chasing down the postman in his truck. She would
write a letter for Cameron the day she planned to send it, but sleep past the time the mail came
the next morning. She said she would run out of her house still in her pajamas to hand the letter
to the mailman as he drove from house to house (mostly likely an exaggeration on her part, but
that’s probably how it felt). Or she would wait by the door in the afternoons when the postman
hadn’t come yet to see if there was a letter. It was the summer she was in an unrequited
relationship with the local post office.

To go to Cameron’s graduation, Jennifer would have had to take time off school—it was
our senior year. She knew she would have been awkward with his family; she did not know them
well, and she’s a quiet girl, rather shy. But three years later she’ll tell me she regrets not going. I believe her. There is a picture of them the first time she saw him after boot camp, the night he walked up to the dorm at our high school in Concordia, Missouri. It is a tiny three-by-five, faded in color. She is in a purple spaghetti-strap top, clinging to him around the waist; he’s in uniform, sunburnt and very, very slender. We were all down in the lobby when he came up to the benches outside. Everyone wanted to say congratulations to him, but everyone felt there was something repulsive about them being there like that. It felt like a private moment we had all walked in on; it was a moment too mature for our secure lives, and the strength of the emotion did not belong to us. Our dorm counselor finally told Jennifer she could go over with him to his parents’ house to get them away from our prying eyes.

*

While Cameron is still on leave right after boot camp (sometimes personnel are given a break to see their families before going to more training), I walk into the dorm lobby at our high school. One of the girls leans back from the couch as I approach the carpeted area where they are watching TV. “Jennifer pierced Cameron’s ear,” she says, smiling while she looks up at me.

“Jennifer, what did you do,” I say as I slide around the couch to where the two of them are sitting on the floor between the couches and the TV. It’s not a question.

“Look!” She lifts Cameron’s left earlobe where she has punched a hole in it now bearing her blue studded, flower earring.

“You use a needle?”

“Nope, just shoved the earring through.”

I ponder the earring now in Cameron’s ear.

“Ow.”
“It bled a lot,” offers Cameron.

The dorm counselor makes them go to the bathroom to pull it out so they won’t get blood everywhere. He leaves holding a paper towel to his ear, climbs into his dodge pickup.

“Why’d you pierce it?” I ask.

“Cause he said I could.”

“Seems like a waste if he just has to take it out.”

“We were bored.” She shrugs. It seemed as though he was still there, attending school with her for a little while.

When Cameron’s leave is over the Marines sent him to California again for a short time before stationing him in Hawaii.

*

Cameron will spend most of his service stationed in Hawaii. While Jennifer is struggling through physics and pre-Calculus our senior year of high school, he will be jumping out of helicopters. She is working on papers for a Mark Twain literature class, he is telling her the benefits of being married in the military. There is a pay increase; they can be together. It used to be that men waited to get married until they had exited the military, particularly during the Vietnam War. The number of married military couples and couples with families increased since it became an all-volunteer service. In 2005, fifty-two percent of enlisted personnel were married. Jennifer reminds Cameron she was wants to go to college and become a nurse.

In February of 2007, our senior year of high school, she packs a birthday/Valentine’s day/anniversary package to send to him in Hawaii. She ties up nineteen little baggies of Skittles in red and pink tissue paper for his nineteenth birthday and places them in the bottom of the box.
It seems to be a tall box, maybe two feet tall. I think if she had been brave enough to develop pictures of herself partially clothed she would have and thrown them in. She is trying to keep his attention, knowing that the guys went to the strip clubs on the weekends (among other things). She tells me one Friday that she is going to talk to him until 2 AM or so while his buddies went out. He couldn’t have his phone until the evening most days, and would call late sometimes, at two or three in the morning because of the time change. Sometimes I heard them underneath me on the bunkbed talking about the irrelevant things couples talk about. Some nights she would leave, shutting the door behind her on the dark room and sit on the tile in the hall. Some Saturdays I would walk into our dorm room and see her sitting on her chair by the window between our dressers, her feet propped up on her open drawers laughing at something he said.

Not long after Jen sent Cameron the package in February, he sent her a leopard print bra. Jen took a picture of herself in it on her phone and sent it to him. The camera on her phone had a timer, and she put it to work after that first picture. It was like she had broken a barrier. She took a picture of herself in just an unzipped coat and underwear. Pictures of her mostly naked on her bed. Pictures of her in a matching underwear set. He wanted to send a picture of himself in return. He finally did; it was of him naked in the community shower at the barracks on base. He sent it through email, and she opened it on my computer. “I don’t really want a picture of him naked,” she said to us in a desperate sort of way. She was attracted to him, but there is something backwards about the idea. She doesn’t want to offend him either. She laughs sort of embarrassedly when she opens it with Jill and me in the room. She sends him a text saying something like “Oh, yes, honey you look very sexy.” There is also some with his new eagle-globe-and-anchor tattoo on the left side of his chest. He is still skinny. A skinny, little Marine. In spring or summer of 2009 while we are at separate universities, I will receive a message from Jen
listing off several creative ideas for what to put in packages to send to a loved one elsewhere and asks me to help her choose some to send to Cameron. She talks of fortune cookies, picture frames, and DVD videos. She’d been sending packages for years by then.

*Cameron was a 0351 Infantry Assaultman. He was part of weapons platoons or companies, manning heavy weapons to support other squads, companies or platoons. Ammunition hung around his neck and shoulders. He was a part of the fire, protection for other soldiers, and the front lines of this desert war. He could not learn Spanish in high school to save his life, but he learned hillbilly Arabic on those lines.*

When a member of the military leaves for deployment it is common for the couple to fight before the separation. Author Kristin Henderson points out that sometimes the spouse or loved one will imagine their soldier’s death, what they are going to do if they don’t come back. Jennifer never talked about it. I do not know if they fought, or even what she imagined. We had left high school by then. The most she said was that she was starting to have dreams where she was not with him anymore.

Cameron’s first tour to Iraq began sometime in the last six months of 2007 after we had graduated from high school, and the chances they got to talk were more scattered. She was at university in Arkansas at the time, taking classes to work towards a nursing degree. When Cameron would not be able to talk to Jennifer for a week or more at a time she would try to come up with ways to fix it. The first time he could not talk to her he had desert training in California, she lamented in our dorm room that it would be a week before she got to talk to him
again. Deployment meant something else; something more difficult and harder to comprehend. The space between them, the space between what he could tell her and what she could understand.

* 

He put pictures up on the Internet of both his tours. The two albums are separated by one letter in their titles, “s”. The first is “deployment pic,” the second is “deployment pics.” No capitals. The pictures have three things in common: desert, weapons, and sun. There is desert camouflage, desert sand, desert dirt, deserted roads. The sun touches every corner of the pictures. In nearly every picture they are holding some form of gun, or manning a gun, or have ammo strung around their necks. In one picture, Cameron is kneeling next three Iraqi boys (children) with another Marine on the tile floor of a house. One of the boys has his hand on Cameron’s shoulder. The caption reads “hearts and minds.” In another, there is a mound of dirt that covers the entire background of the picture. Sitting on the ground, covered in dust and dirt, surrounded by dirt clods is a green, metal box. The caption reads “(IED) thank God for metal detectors.” According to a CRS report for Congress more than 3000 combat deaths in Iraq were the result of IEDs, suicide car bombs or roadside bombs before Cameron was even deployed the first time.

* 

They got engaged in April of 2008 when Cameron was able to come back to Missouri after his first 6-month tour. He went to visit her in Arkansas, one of the first times he had made that kind of effort, which had been one of her family’s gripes against them as a couple. They went to a Dierks Bentley concert, and he asked her to marry him during one of their favorite songs. It was as though they were a normal couple in the Midwest. The ring was a rock on Jennifer’s tiny hand. It was big enough that they decided it would suffice alone without a
wedding ring when they got married in December. There was some confusion as to whether or not Jennifer’s dad Steve would be angry or not when the ring mysteriously turned up on Jen’s finger without Cam having had seemingly sufficient time to ask her parents, but in the end it made no difference. They were still married.

Miss Jennie, Jennifer’s mother and a former pious Catholic nurse, married Steve Alexander while he was in med school, after his time in the Green Berets. They had four kids together. Before Cameron and Jennifer got engaged, Jennifer said that it seemed like Steve and Jennie just ignored the fact that she and Cameron were still dating. Truthfully, they did not come down for her junior prom when he actually attended, but offered to come down the year after, when he was already stationed in Hawaii and could not go. She told them no. “If they wanted to come, they should have come to the one I cared about.” Jen frequently lamented after they were engaged that her parents kept telling her she was immature and that they could still break up even if they were engaged. She sent me a message in frustration discussing how excited even some of Cameron’s non-military friends were for them, but her parents would not stop an infinite stream of “you need to finish school, you are really quite young still, just wait.” She came up to visit him in Missouri, turning her phone off to keep from having to answer the numerous phone calls that came from her parents.

And though she claimed she wanted to, Jennifer never actually slapped anyone who asked about her wedding plans. When they got engaged, they did not really know when they were going to get married. Jen complained more than once that the Marines were making it very difficult for her to plan anything. Finally she narrowed it down between January and December of 2009. It was October when they finally solidified the date for December 20th.
Research about the war in the Middle East has suggested that deployment strengthens the relationship of a couple while a military member is on active duty. It can bring two people together by creating a buffer for the things young couples might usually fight over. It gives them a goal to focus on instead of petty arguing: making it until they can be together again. Getting married in between Cameron’s tours became a moment of unification for their friends and family. Once the date was set Jennifer’s sisters helped lay the plans, her parents began to show their support, their love for their daughter being most important to them. A small community of people banded together to try to help or just be present for the couple, who felt like they were the only ones in the whole world that had had this trouble.

In Cameron’s “deployment pics” album is a picture of him and his twin, Kendall, at Cameron’s wedding reception in the tent in the backyard of the house Jen and Cameron were married in, smashed in between two pictures of the desert. The brothers standing on grass, Cameron in his uniform leaning towards Kendall, who is in a tux, their arms around each other’s backs.

It was a small wedding with one hundred people or so, at a historical house in Little Rock with the reception in the backyard. Jen did her own hair for the wedding. She put a little diamond-and-pearl studded brooch in her brunette hair as a pin, and wore no veil. Cameron wore his dress uniform. They were married by his brother in front of the fireplace in the living room. His sermon was on how “semper fi” could be applied to their future together, not just Cameron’s life now. Everyone cried. Cameron, Jennifer, both families, the wedding party. They were so young—nineteen and twenty.

*
Ground troops are the most likely to test positive for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This makes sense since many of the traumatic experiences happen away from the Navy sailors and Airmen, and occur among the Army and Marine personnel. PTSD is an anxiety disorder that 14 percent of the military personnel test positive for when coming back from Afghanistan and Iraq. The less time there is to recover from a traumatic experience the more likely it is for PTSD to occur. In the War on Terror with prolonged and repeated tours, recovery time is limited.

Several of Jennifer’s friends are sitting at the kitchen table in January of 2009, a month after her December wedding. Jen is getting ready to leave after taking Cameron to the airport the day before so he could fly back to Hawaii, and I had just gotten back from winter break. One of our friends smiles and says, “Dad found a leopard print top that looks like a piece of lingerie in the laundry after you all left the cabin on New Year’s day.” She’s looking at Jen. I know exactly what she’s talking about; it is the piece of lingerie I gave to her for her shower the night before the wedding. Two of us managed to pick leopard print in honor of the leopard bra he had sent her while she was in high school. Jen laughs, “Whoops.” She has nothing to be ashamed of. She’ll drive home to her parents, the ones who paid for their daughter’s wedding and will fly her to Hawaii to see her husband. About a half hour later she says, “Cameron has post-traumatic stress.” She says nothing to preface it. There was no comment about why. From Cameron’s deployment pictures it was easy enough to gather that trauma was a part of helping wounded civilians and dealing with Iraqi soldiers. As we sit there, I wonder what it’s like to sleep in a bed next to a guy with post-traumatic stress. Do they sleep? She pauses a moment and says, “He doesn’t take anti-depressants. He says he doesn’t want to.”
She went to Hawaii twice before she moved there with him several months later in the
fall of 2009. Once was in 2008 before they were married. They slept together outside her parents’
door in the living room portion of their rooms at the hotel. She flew out in March of 2009 for her
birthday to see him before he shipped out.

* *

In classes for military spouses they point out that it is easy to get addicted to reading the
news constantly while a spouse is away at war. This can lead to serious psychological problems
including anxiety and depression during deployment periods. Most spouses are advised not to
look at the news and to keep away from reports in order to maintain as normal a lifestyle as
possible.

In March of 2009, before Cameron left for his second tour, marinecorpstimes.com
announced that “U.S. deaths in Afghanistan increased threefold during the first two months of
2009 compared with the same period last year, after thousands more troops deployed and
commanders ramped up winter operations against an increasingly violent insurgency.” His
second tour was slated to begin in April of 2009. On April 11th I was greeted with a headline at
the Washington Times website announcing that 5 U.S. troops had been killed, the deadliest attack
for U.S. soldiers in a year. I decided that Jennifer probably did not read the news. I decided not to
ask her if she did.

While Cameron was on this second tour, Jen went to school in Arkansas while living at
home with her parents. She continued to take classes to work towards a nursing degree. They
stored their wedding gifts at her parents’ lake house to wait until the two of them moved back to
Arkansas after Cameron’s contract was up a year from May. She prepared mentally to move to
Hawaii in September. She came to visit Missouri in June—to see her friends before she left. She was impatient. She wanted him to come home.

* 

Facebook, Cameron Holsten to Jennifer Alexander Holsten, July 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2009:

“Hello there Mrs. H. I am back and sorry for not being able to call for so long. I got stuck just across the Syrian boarder for about 6 days. Had to drive all the way through Iraq to get there. A lot of gypsies in northern Iraq. It is prettier and greener there than the rest of Iraq. I should be going on an Afghan trip here in a couple days. I love you and hope you are having fun in FL. Show me some pictures.”

There were other pictures. A small watchtower and Hummer sitting in the middle of the desert. The sky turns from blue to white as it touches the fuzzy horizon, and the caption reads “inside an Afghani army base. truly a beautiful country.” There is a close-up picture of several Marines and Afghani soldiers standing in a circle on what appears to be a base in Afghanistan. There are several trucks and barricades in the background. One of the Marines is pointing. The caption reads “we drew a line and told them not to cross it.” The next several pictures are of Afghani soldiers in their red berets, holding assault weapons. One picture shows several sitting down next to a shed, out of the sun, the caption says “Afghani army working hard.” Following these is one of a small hole in the ground that seems to be lined with blue plastic, as though a bucket was stuck in the ground. Around the hole and leaned up against a brick wall are an assortment of weapons carefully laid out. The caption reads “one of many cashes.” For 17-24
year civilian age group there seems to be down-play of the reality of this war. It has been going so long that we forget what war is like, even modern war in a desert.

*

Cameron came home in September of 2009. Jennifer flew to Hawaii early to be there when he arrived. She told us all that she was packing her things into large red suitcases. When she got there, there was no Cameron, just a hotel room and a lizard to make friends with. He called her and told her he’d be late, the earliest was three days after the original date, the latest was five days. I call her to make sure she’s okay (I’m fairly certain I’m one of seven women that call her multiple times during that week). She told me she mostly ate cereal, slept and watched TV. Cameron tried to convince her to go look at a place to live or at least see the housing offered for Marine families. She stayed in the hotel room. She waited, and she was there when he arrived home. A week or so later she sent a message with a picture of a beagle. His name is Oliver.

Divorce rates of military veterans who served between the ages of 17 to 24, are higher than that of their civilian peers, but then they are also more likely to be married than civilians their age. The military provides a buffer to distract from common marital issues, but after the contract ends, personnel struggle with independence and relationships as they transition back into civilian life. In some ways Cameron and Jennifer were better off in that they had several years together before they were married, young years, but years. When he asked her about staying in Hawaii a couple of extra months to help with training, she put her foot down. She had had enough; she said no.
Sometime after he came back from his second tour, Cameron received hearing aids. He was partially deaf in both ears from an explosion, but he only liked to wear one. Their dog ate two of the aids before they figured out a system where Cameron would not leave them where Oliver could find them. Jennifer spent two days cooking for their first Thanksgiving dinner. He taught her to drive his truck. They shopped for furniture at Rent-A-Center. Jennifer hunted for colleges to go back to when he finished in April, while Cameron went to work every day. They stood on a hill when the tsunami missed the island in 2010. Cameron got a new tattoo to go with his eagle, globe and anchor after he was home awhile. He had an angel holding a sword tattooed onto his right arm surrounded by the clouds and skulls with roses. He struggled to sleep at night and would stay up watching TV with Oliver while Jennifer would sleep catty-cornered on the queen-sized bed. In April of 2010, they moved back to Arkansas to live in Little Rock. She started nursing classes again; he began attending college classes and searched for a job at a fire department. They were 21, 22 and together.

In December of 2009 while she and Cameron were still in Hawaii, Jennifer sent me this message:

Hey boo. Sorry I waited to write back. I don’t know why. But now I am finally sending you some love. I guess its okay that you are not getting each other presents. Me and Cam are exchanging. I got him a hair and nose trimmer for the strays in his nose, a gift card to his favorite frozen yogurt place, and some weight lifting shoes he wants.
The only Christmas thing we have is a tree. I am glad we bought it. We also had to buy lights and ornaments, but it is the only way I feel like it really is Christmas. Its not like the weather is putting me in the Christmas spirit. Sun is silly in December, but I still love it.

Besides the soon to come Christmas, there is another day to celebrate: first year anniversary.
Novosibirsk

By Katrina Mehl

I come from a generation that believes in making personal possessions seemed aged—not old, but vintage. We mix old with new, we borrow from our parents’ generations but tote around the latest technology, and we want what we own to look matured. A new shirt looks four years old. Our coats and hats look recycled even though they were purchased the same winter we wear them. Our material collections are to appear matured, put together through a selection process that signals we what own is only what is oldest and dearest to us. And yet I belong to a generation that is beginning to forget the long history that was pounded into our parents’ minds. We are selective about our memories the same way we are selective about our possessions. We are a group of people with cultural wounds that we ignore through various cathartic activities, to the point where one of the largest wounds we suffer is our loss of memory. We ask, “What were those things that happened to us as a group, what were our changing moments?”

When we moved to Siberia, my parents were 34 and had two little girls. They are both pastor’s kids. They each had four siblings and grew up in small Missouri towns. My dad planned from high school to become a pastor; he wore white button-down shirts and blue jeans to school every day, played football, and sang in the school choir. My mother also sang in choir in high school, participated in 4H, and took business classes. She studied economics in college, but graduated college thinking she would like to be a teacher. My mom’s brother, Uncle Mike, introduced them. Uncle Mike went to the seminary with my dad; he worked with him on the farm in the summers. Mom moved to St. Louis to be in the same city as my dad, working night shifts as a secretary at a hospital. My dad asked my mother to marry him on the banks of the
Mississippi River. They were married at twenty-six-years-old, the week before my dad began working at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church in Lincoln, Kansas, a town with fewer than two thousand people.

When my family tells stories from our months in Siberia in our family history we set the story by saying, “In Novo,” referring to Novosibirsk, a city on the Eastern side of the Ural Mountains. We did not truly live in Novo; we lived in a smaller city outside Novo called Akademgorodok. Surrounded by birch and pine, we lived for four months while my parents and two other couples immersed themselves in Russian language in order to prepare for mission work they were planning to do elsewhere in Russia, my sister played with a nanny and two other little American girls and I went to detskij sad (kindergarten). We arrived in the fall of 1993, before the first snow, before the Siberian winter kicked in, before the birch trees mixed with the snow we walked in every day.

We arrived in Novosibirsk by plane from St. Petersburg in September of 1993 with the mission group my parents were a part of who had come to Akademgorodok for language training. There were leaves on the ground and still falling from the trees. I remember trailing behind Mom and Dad on the way home from the restaurant we often ate at while we lived there. The leaves were orange, so orange and red. It is my first memory of the fall, and the sky was grey, as it would be for much of our stay in Akademgorodok. I have clung to this memory for years because I wish it were a picture, but also because it means something to me to have known Siberia without snow, to experience it in a state other than what most people imagine it to be. I was four; my sister Louisa was one.
Akademgorodok (translated into English as “Academy Town”) was a city built in the 1950s as a center for Soviet educators and minds. During the Soviet era they came to work and develop new technology on the Siberian landscape, trading work and research for access to goods and services rather than raises in salary. The city worked off a compensation system that fell in the early 1990s with the fall of Communism, leaving many great scientific minds in poverty. However, it managed to remain a place for education and innovation after the fall of Communism, particularly after IBM stepped in and began funding research. There were stores, restaurants (the group of missionaries and language students we belonged to frequented one in the lobby of a hotel), hotels and playgrounds (iron rod wings and spider jungle gyms). The roads curved and wound through the different forests of trees. White façade and Soviet style buildings greeted our group when we came.

The politics were unstable in 1993. Before leaving the United States, no one had spoken about the politics of the fallen Soviet Union in orientation; the Missions group was sending people because the borders had opened under Gorbachev, even before the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. As my mother remembers it, there was an election in the fall of 1993 while we were there. One of the candidates, Vladimir Zhiranovsky, was called a fascist by most Russians, and Louisa’s nanny in Novosibirsk often spoke about what a fanatic he was, though he continued to play a part in politics for quite a while. Really, the problems began earlier in 1992 with the great economic changes President Yeltsin was making. The parliament and Vice President Alexander Rotsky opposed him on many of the policy changes, causing tension among the people and government officials. Finally, the parliament speaker and Yeltsin agreed on a compromise that would give the president emergency powers until a referendum was held in April of 1993 that would begin the remaking of Russia’s constitution, and also allow the
parliament to nominate their own prime minister and gave them power over some of the
president’s appointments to government positions. However, the tension continued into early
1993; discrepancy over the language used for the referendum continued to cause disagreements
between the president and the parliament.

On our flight over from St. Petersburg in September, my mother pulled down her tray
table and fell asleep with her arms crossed over the tray. She did not drink the tea they served us
or move the entire flight. Dad sat with Louisa and I while she slept. We were sitting in three seats
in the front, and one of the American women from the mission group who had come with us
whispered to someone behind us that Dad should get the father of the year award for taking care
of the kids while Mom slept. Dad told her after we had landed and disembarked. It was a non-
issue for him; to them it was the difference between deciding to be a team when they got
married, or drawing such stiff lines in familial relations that there was no communication. They
were a team. Siberia was not the place for old stereotypes; it was no longer left to mothers to be
the childcare provider and fathers to be the breadwinners. Siberia was a test, a place where I
imagine my thirty-something parents learned about themselves and each other. It revolutionized
what it meant to be a team. It was a different kind of survival in the face of the revolutionizing of
a country, political change, foreign language, and lack of resources.

Our group of missionaries was shown to their apartments and stores by Elvira, a woman
from the language institute they would be attending. The apartments were typical post-
communist style. The refrigerators were in the hallway, cockroaches in the kitchen, if the roaches
left off the ants would pick up, the furniture was rickety, miss-matched and so on. By the time we
got to our building Mom had a good idea of what to expect (bugs, lack of furniture, no dishes
and so on); she was just thankful that there were beds. In retrospect, and even at the time, my
parents knew they were lucky. Our three-bedroom apartment had plenty of shelves, two beds, a kitchen with a fridge in it instead of in the hallway. There was almost nothing in the apartment except the slightly updated large pieces of furniture and a dried-up old rag wadded in the sink in our kitchen that had a stove but no oven (a conundrum for a four-year-old who did not understand why anyone would make one without the other). Mom used the dried-up old rag from the sink that first night. We did not have anything else.

After putting Louisa to bed on the couch (where she would sleep for a part of the night before realizing she was in the living room and waddle into Mom and Dad’s room) and me to sleep in the other bedroom, Mom and Dad went to bed themselves. Dad slept immediately. His response to emotional turmoil was to escape in the land of sleep. The more difficult a problem was, the more naps he would attempt to take throughout the day. Eventually my mother would catch him. After the first night in Novo, Dad had his own way of dealing with the stress. He would close the bathroom door and sit with a cassette layer listening to Credence Clearwater Revival to escape for a couple of minutes. Mom on the other hand, could not sleep the first night having slept on the plane. She pulled out one of the two books that they had brought along. It was a Russian language textbook. There was no room for any other books in the suitcases. Their tutor was delighted the next day to learn that Mom had begun studying already on their first night. My mother just wanted something, anything to keep her from lying in bed with her thoughts and uncertainty about this move.

Each family was only allowed so many suitcases to begin with and had to ship the rest over later. We packed more clothes, personal items (small Christmas decorations, some books), and consumer items like detergent or shampoo that no one was sure they would be able to find in Siberia. Our family carefully packed several boxes of Tide to use during our stay. (My parents
had had premonitions about the lack of goods to buy in the Russia in the early 90s.) When the shipment arrived there were conspicuous holes where the boxes of detergent had been at one point. This was a common occurrence even after we moved from Akademgorodok—hard-to-come-by items like peanut butter not carefully hidden were often missing when the packages arrived.

Our mission group was made up of six adults and four small children: four children all under the age of six, and six adults with all kinds of concerns. One couple had two adult children back home in Kansas, where one was still attending college: their greatest concern was getting touch with their kids via phone. The other couple with young children had cockroaches in every part of their apartment, not just the kitchen. They would crawl down the drapes and into the closets. For my mother specifically, her greatest concern was how to keep two young kids clean. They had only brought two weeks’ worth of diapers for Louisa and several cloth ones. I would come home from detskij sad covered in mud if it had rained, and we had no washing machine.

During the first week we were outside the restaurant-hotel in a group waiting for Elvira, our guide to come back out. I was chasing Louisa around puddles (one of the joys of being four is that playing games with siblings remains the same wherever you are). She slipped in the mud and fell completely soaking the pink coat they had bought for her right before we left. Mom was distraught. We still had not figured out how to do laundry, and the pressure was too much. She stood over me, scolding me for ruining my sister’s coat, not being careful and on and on, until at last my father came over, leaned towards her ear and said, “Buck up.” It was the kind of “buck up” that was meant to call attention to the fact that each of the American families was struggling, that all of us were in this together, that Louisa’s pink coat was a symbol of the stress that they battled through every day just to feed their families and have clean clothes.
The Sunday after we first arrived that my mother was lying catatonic on the bed in their room, worrying. The doorbell rang. We were in the former Soviet Union and the idea of answering the doorbell so quickly seems odd to me now, but in the United States, one answers the doorbell when it rings, so my father did. Rota Griebe, an elderly American woman, lived in a lovely apartment in the same building, and was there to invite our family to attend a church service with her husband and herself in the apartment of Phil and Sara, another young couple who would later turn out to be good friends of my parents during our stay. My mother heard the doorbell and heard Rota talking with Dad, but did not move. Five minutes later my father appeared in the doorbell holding two things: diaper wipes and diapers in the size and style of the tiny supply that they had brought with them for the first several weeks. It appeared that Rota and her husband were living in an apartment recently vacated by a couple with a five-month baby. They had also left a high chair, baby food and a very, very large supply of disposable diapers. The Griebes wanted us to have them to use for Louisa.

After the first week that my parents settled into a routine. My sister would crawl up on one of their chests and say in a low voice, “EEEEEEAAAAAT.” And she would repeat it until they stirred. They would get up, put her in the high chair with some baby food and make hot cereal for the rest of us. There were two options: manka (cream of wheat) or grechka (barley). I hated the thick skin of the manka that would solidify on the top of the cereal as it cooled. I would scrape it off only to reveal steaming, white cereal beneath it, kept warm by the skin and still too hot to eat. Grechka meant a coating of sugar that could be stirred into the cereal and consumed easily in its little clusters of oats. (My father took the other side; cream of wheat seemed natural, grechka made him feel like a horse.) While we ate Mom and Dad would take turns showering (or bathing) and trying to get Louisa and me dressed for the day. Generally Dad would take me to
the apartment where *detskij sad* was held every day while Mom waited for Louisa’s nanny, Tanya—a fine, dark haired woman who spoke beautiful English and gave Louisa fruit-based baby food. Then my parents would meet up at the institute where they studied every day.

They had two different tutors, Alyona and Rosa. Alyona was a younger tutor who drilled them in grammar. She was reserved and took the grammar lessons very seriously. Rosa was a little older, animated with blonde hair and glasses. She tried to work with the group on conversation. Practical uses of the language were her focus—things like numbers and food items. Buying food was the main concern. (Our first morning, we’d awakened to no food in the house, no breakfast to be had, until Elvira appeared to take the adults shopping.) *Grechka* and *hleb* (bread) were some of the first two words they learned. Being able to say numbers, to understand how much things cost and how to pronounce the words they read on signs were among the biggest problems. So they drilled.

After two hours of studying they would break for tea and cookies. Another hour later they would walk down to the restaurant in the hotel and eat lunch before breaking in the early afternoon. After lessons, they would trek out from the hotel to do some shopping as part of their language practice, but also for survival. Mom would come home and drill with Tanya, Louisa’s nanny, going over and over numbers and phrases in Russian so that she could feed her kids. For Mom it was all about making the next day easier. At some point Mom would come to *detskij sad* to pick me up. My teacher, Alyona would speak in Russian since a majority of the small class were Russian children, but it seemed most of the lessons were understandable to us American girls in the class. By the afternoon the group of seven or eight kids who attended would be sitting around crunching on cookies or bread snacks. Mom and one of the other American parents would come to the door, wait for us to pull on our coats and boots, and we three American girls—
myself and two sisters Jessie and Danica—would trail after our parents out the door. During the first week of classes, the parents came to the door to find the three of us girls munching on long, thin bread-sticks that were lightly sweetened. They were about a foot long, a centimeter in diameter and crunchy. We would grab several at a time and crunch them in our mouths during tea. When Mom asked what they were, Alyona the teacher solemnly replied, “Solomki. Buy them. Your children love them.”

Mom would stop to shop on the way home from detski sad. There was always something to buy. The glass counters that were above the top of my head blocked the customers from the unperturbed women who guarded the shelves of food or goods. Generally a counter protected a line of shelves housing one or two goods, rather than a variety. We would stand in line, me in my fogged-over glasses, and wait to reach the begrudging lady. Mom would ask a question, receive a tart answer, ask another and receive a small ticket with the item and price written on it. I would trail her across the snow-covered floor to the checkout counter. They were usually wooden booths with a longer line of persons waiting to pay. The woman sitting at the register would take the tickets from each of the counters a customer had visited, add them up, and mumble a sum. I think that was the hardest part, understanding what it was that we were supposed to pay. I would stand on my tiptoes and try to look over the wooden counter at the lady in her box. She would hand Mom back yet another ticket, this one stating she had paid. It was back to the lines. We would wait in the same lines at the counters. I would peer through glass, sweating in the uncontrollable heat of the building. Eventually we would reach the front, Mom would hand the ticket without at word (the one part of the transaction process that required almost no speech) and receive back the loaf bread or whatever it was that she had purchased and the lady would punch the ticket onto a stand.
Sometimes we would buy from vendors. Generally vegetables were purchased out of the back of grey trucks where they would throw cabbages at buyers from inside the covered bed. Cookies, on the other hand, came from babushki (grandmothers) on the streets. We would buy prianiki—a dry, chocolate lump of a cookie—in sacks to carry home. By the time we left Akademgorodok I could eat four during the ten minute walk home. But I made shopping for my mother difficult. She would agonize for several minutes about what she wanted, how much she wanted and then finally how to say all of that in Russian while standing by the door of a store before even daring to approach the end of the line. However, when I would go with her after detskiy sad I would not let her get away with it. As soon as Mom stopped in the door to ponder her purchase I would drag her by the hand, saying in English, “Come ON, Mom, get in line.” My impatience was not impeded by language barriers and already at four I was a big fan of the point-and-receive method. When she would continue to dawdle at the entrance I would say again, looking up at her through glasses that became foggy again every time the door opened, “Everyone is getting ahead of us.”

There were two ways home from the store. The first was a long walk by the street. It curved with the orange glow of streetlamps and was dark and cold looking. The second was through the birch forest behind our building on a path. At four, being afraid of the dark still, I preferred the cold, but orange glow of the long way home. We rarely went this way; the trek through the birch forest was faster. Only when it snowed and the sky was cloudy so that the pink of the city lights reflected off the clouds and snow was it light enough for me to be comfortable shuffling home through the trees.

Once home, in the two bedrooms and living room, Louisa and I would sit in the skaf (a wardrobe with doors) in the living room and flip through books or I would chase her around the
apartment. Mom and Dad would continue the all-day task of laundry while making stir-fry for dinner (cabbage, carrots, and potatoes we could find, meat was harder to buy, though eventually we began buying hamburger meat from the restaurant). The bathtub was filled with warmish water. Phil and Sara gave us some laundry detergent to be mixed in. This would sink to the bottom of the bath and stay there. Mom would stir the clothes around in the tub, pulling out my mud-stained pants and Dad’s tea-stained shirts to scrub at with a bar of Dial soap and a toothbrush. She would stand at the sink in the bathroom holding the clothes in one hand, the toothbrush in the other, her brown hair in her face while she scrubbed at the stains that caused her so much grief. Then together she and Dad would rinse the clothes in a new set of bath water. Eventually Dad would take them and ring out the water. I used to watch him from the hallway, while he stood by the bathtub, taking the clothes and ringing them into knots with what seemed impossible strength. Every time I was sure he would not be able to turn a shirt one more time, he would squeeze just a little more water from the white cloth before shaking it out and hanging it up above the bath.

At night my parents would put me to bed in the single in my room. I never spent any time in my room except for at night. Nothing happened in there, and all that was there was my bed, the shelves with our clothes and the door to the balcony. I had imagined when people spoke of the balcony that it was a statue, surrounded by tiles that hung off the side of the building. This seemed illogical, for there was no support system to hold it up and surely the tiles crumbled. When it snowed, Dad took me out onto the balcony to show me the snow-covered forest and I understood it was a porch typical of Soviet style apartment buildings.

They would put Louisa down their bed, so that they could stay up and talk and study in the living room. When they got ready to sleep themselves, they would pick her up and put her on
the couch with a pillow and a blanket. She would wake in the middle of the night in the living room confused. The emptiness of the large room made everything seem cold, and the darkness made it strange. She would grab her pillow, crawl off the couch and storm angrily into Mom and Dad’s room in her little onesie. She would demand entrance into their bed, and the day would start again. But truthfully, Lou did not demand in words because she didn’t speak.

Everyday my mother would put her hand on the knob and say to herself, “God hates a coward,” and leave. But things like Louisa’s lack of words were among some of the months’ larger stresses. Lou was one and half. She often grunted or squealed with delight rather than speaking or attempting new words as someone her age would normally do. She and still behaved like children though. On a day in October, I was playing with Louisa in the one of the cabinets under the counters in the kitchen. The cabinets furnished some of the most fun we had, simply opening and closing the doors was entertaining. She was standing in her pajamas outside the door eyes furrowed with a look of concern, while I hid in the cabinet, already ready for school. We were playing peek-a-boo. I would open the doors and shout, and she would jump back, scared, and then laugh, her hands over her little mouth. Finally, I opened the door too quickly and slammed the handle into her mouth. Instead of laughing she let out a squeal of pain, followed by a cry. She was picked up, Dad telling me that I was responsible for the wellbeing of my baby sister and I should be more careful with her. Mom sat with her at the house, Lou’s upper lip gushing blood, while Dad packed me up into my purple coat and boots and took me to detskij sad. It was my first lesson in what it meant to be the oldest and playing a responsible role as a part of the team.

Tanya came as usual and took Louisa and Mom to the hospital. Mom sat in the hallway holding Louisa while Tanya left to talk with the doctors. When Tanya reappeared she told Mom
that the doctors knew that Lou needed stitches but did not want to do them until her stomach was empty. After the bleeding had slowed somewhat, they left the hospital for home, returning later. The doctors put Lou under to put in one stitch. There were women in the back of the room, sorting files on another bed while Mom and Tanya watched. When Louisa woke, Tanya scooped her up and cuddled her in her drowsiness and Mom watched. Perhaps my mother thought it was nice to know someone cared about her family in this strange place. Being a part of touching people’s lives was why we were there; Lou was touching Tanya’s. They were given an antibiotic ointment that left green marks on Louisa’s skin as long as it was there. “All of our medicine is green,” Tanya told Mom. “It is to show that it is there and when it is gone.” When I came home from school Louisa was happy as a lark, but I felt incredible guilt at the sight of the piece of black yarn that hung out of her upper lip. Tanya took her back when it was time to remove the yarn, but the scar that it left was in the shape of an “x” on her upper lip. My parents neither paid for nor were charged anything for the stitch or the hospital visit.

The Russian word for “scar” and “footstep” suggest the same meaning; they both connect to the idea of an imprint. It marks that something has passed by on that spot or that point in time. Later, Lou would joke about the scar being an “x marks the spot” for where her husband should kiss. And many years later Dad would buy her a Vitamin E stick to decrease the scar’s presence. The faded imprint of the “x” on her upper lip is a memento of the time in Novo; it sits like many of the scars she would collect over the years as a record of where she has been, on her face with the same blue eyes and furrowed brows she used to look at me with when we were little. For us the scars are like the layers of the archaeological record of our lives. Her scar from the cabinet-incident is one of her first. It connects to the imprint in her memory of being tiny and trying to turn on the water faucet, or being chased by me around our various apartments. It unpacks the
history that goes with the artifact. Trying to make the scars fade does not change the fact that the imprint has been made; these stories are the stories of a generation whose world continues to shrink.

In October of 1993, the politic tensions reached such a degree that a demonstration resulted in the Russian military killing people in the streets, making it one of the deadliest political incidents in Russia since 1917. President Yeltsin spent most of the year clearing the way to gain political power and control over Russia’s government, attacking parliament as he went. In September, Yeltsin chose to dissolve the legislature claiming that the language of the April referendum allowed him to do so, despite its direct contradiction of the constitution. The parliament retaliated by impeaching Yeltsin and placing Vice President Rotsky in office. On October 3, demonstrators urged on by the new leadership in parliament broke into the mayor’s offices and attempted to take Moscow’s TV tower. Yeltsin, still in control of Russia’s military, ordered them to storm the Supreme Soviet building resulting in the arrest of several government leaders. Many thought that Yeltsin had been too forceful in his response to the protests and unrest, but everyone knew what was going on, and there was little the government could hide politically at the time. It just made the place and time seem as unsettled as it probably already felt for my parents. They were told that if they had to leave the country, arrangements would be made for them to travel to Vladivostok and fly out from there to the West coast of the United States, but the politics stabilized and we did not leave.

When the snow came, the cold came. Rosa the tutor was concerned for Mom’s ears, concerned she would become quite ill loaned her a fur hat. Later, Elvira took them on a trip to a department store in Novosibirsk. It was a short ride by bus, and then they rode the metro in the city to the store (something I did several times with the детский сад to get to a concert hall). It was
there that they could buy sheets and things that they could not find in Akademgorodok. On one trip into the city the group purchased concert tickets to *Swan Lake*, but on this particular trip after the snow they were there to buy fur hats for the winter. Real fur—mink, rabbit, fox. We would see women and men sitting in the restaurant at the bar with the flaps of their fur hats undone and hanging on the sides of their ears. Dad picked out a dark brown, mink-fur hat, with the flaps tied over the top. Mom finally found a fox-fur hat, a giant poof-ball from which no heat would escape in the sub-zero temperatures. The mink was coarse and stringy, but the white fox fur was soft and could be petted into a direction.

Once the snow came, it came for good. It covered the birch trees and the pine. It coated the streets and sidewalks. It sparkled, and dusted our coats. After the first big snow, Mom and the other parents stopped by *детский сад* pick us girls up and asked, “So how long does the snow last?” Being from the Midwest where snow melts and then comes again this seemed reasonable to ask. My tutor, Alyona (different from the grammar tutor my parents had), looked at them for a minute before drawling in her Russian accent, “To my mind it will be the winter.” And it was.

One weekend the adults took a trip out to a traditional Russian village to visit a museum and eat food. Dad took video while they were out there (Mom stayed home with Lou and me). At one point in the video the snow goes on for miles, trees scattered about, but the snow just went on and on until it reached the sunset. To me it meant purple snow-pants to go with the purple coat. It meant cold and hiking up my dress to put on the pants. But it also meant Christmas.

Christmas was the fast approaching end of our time in Siberia. Christmas was caroling, a nativity scene my parents had carefully packed, and small parcels of presents wrapped in white, butcher paper because that was all there was for my parents to purchase. It was around Christmas time that my *детский сад* class did a project involving primary colors. Alyona sat at the front of her
one-room apartment holding a painted sheet. This lesson appears to have been particularly comprehensible despite being taught in Russian probably because it involved colors that could be seen. She would take some red paint and mix it with the blue on the page to make purple. The blue and yellow made green. The yellow and red made orange, and the red and white made pink. We were going to shape and paint tiny clay pigs with curly-q tails. We were supposed to paint them pink, like hers. I remember sitting on the floor, holding my pig, mixing colors on a board. I was most interested in purple, but pigs are not purple. I painted my pig red first. I would brush over the white clay, expecting it to be pinker than it was. I mixed the blue with the red, making it more blue than red, and spread the deep purple in splotches over the pig. Eventually Alyona came to me and helped me paint the underside of the pig so that I did not get the paint everywhere. I kept the pig in a box, and still have it. Its ear has broken off, but it still has the tail and all of its legs.

The families in our language training began preparing to leave for Moscow or St. Petersburg around Christmas time. It was around this time that Alyona began teaching us to sing what Mom calls the “hedgehog song.” Over the years it became apparent that Russians used a lot of forest or woodland animals in the stories and children’s songs. Hedgehogs were a favorite. We sang the song at the music hall in Novo. I wore a green dress with red flowers and a red turtleneck and tights. I played the tambourine and all I can remember from the event is that the curtains around the stage were a cream or off-white color. Later we sang the song at a Christmas event. Except that the Russians did not really celebrate Christmas. In the early 1990s, Christmas was still a strictly religious holiday coming slowly back as the Orthodox Church rebuilt itself. Secularly they celebrated New Year’s Eve as they had in Soviet times when there was no religion. There was a tree and Ded Moroz (Russian Father Frost) and his helper Snegurochka.
(Snowflake, she was his granddaughter). They were dressed up at the small celebration, carrying around a large bag. Mom and Dad brought Louisa and it was one of her few memories of living in Siberia. After the kids sang we were each given a small white plastic bag with toys. Louisa remembers wishing she could have such a present, but after watching for a while she discovered that everyone who had one was older than she. It appears her silence was just a cover for her small active mind.

For Christmas itself, the group of Americans came to our apartment to sing together and eat something. Once most people had left we stayed up to open presents. Dad and Mom had bought me a train set. The pieces were fairly large and the track was a small circle, but it was exciting for a four-year-old. I do not recall if I played with it a whole lot since we moved right after New Year’s, but it seemed grand at the time, mostly because Dad was so thrilled by it. Louisa received a Fisher-Price toy that someone had packed in the shipment. It had pictures with shapes and colors that asked you to find the correct shape and color. I would press the correct answers for her and she would smile as she pressed her ear to the sound box. When it would ask a question, but there was no response she would stare at the microphone waiting expectantly until I would press the right answer for her. She would laugh and let out a little squeal. I think it pleased Mom to see such a reaction out of her. I do not know where either of those presents are, but sometimes I wish I could unearth them and touch them just to remember what it was like, to stare at them and see what they mean.

New Year’s Eve quickly followed. There was a dinner at the restaurant with *pelmeni* (the Russian equivalent of meat ravioli) and the thick plum juice we often ordered. I always drank it too quickly and they never gave refills. New Year’s Eve itself was spent with Phil and Sara in our apartment. We had pizza together and played Uno. At some point after Louisa went to bed, I ran
to the bathroom. I was wearing my blue onesie pajamas with the feet, and had to unzip the whole outfit to use the bathroom. It was a Russian-style restroom where the toilet is in a separate room from the bathtub and sink, so I rushed into the closet-sized room, unzipped my pajamas, flung around to sit down and shut the door, hurrying because I was worried I would miss something exciting. It was only after I had already started peeing that I realized I was in pain and screamed out in agony. I had squished my right thumb in the hinges of the bathroom door when I reached out to close it. My dad came running, opened the door and scooped me up. They changed me into a white nightgown, put me on the coffee table and Sara ran downstairs to her apartment for some chocolate. They told me that if I was quiet and let Phil fix my thumb I could have the chocolate. I remember thinking that I was not such a child that I needed candy, but I wanted Phil to fix it anyway. They all knew I would lose the nail, but they put the green ointment on the cut on the side of my finger and wrapped the cracked nail in gauze. I got my chocolate; I got to stay up until midnight and gave my mother a kiss.

By the time we were ready to leave Akademgorodok in January of 1994, the layers of snow had built up in the forests and along the roads. Layers and layers with the imprints of our footsteps hidden under fresh snow. Fifteen years after we left, my mother sealed her fox-fur hat into an airtight bag and placed in a box in our garage. My Dad purchased Credence Clearwater Revival online, and keeps his hat on the top shelf of our hall closet. My sister still has the scar on her lip. My thumb is still mutated slightly so that children stare at it on the train sometimes, and I keep the glasses and the ceramic pig of that four-year-old little girl in a brown paper bag in a trunk. Those are the ways we remember. It is how my family connects history to who we are; it is how we count time as passed.
Several days after the thumb-incident, just before our family left Siberia for St. Petersburg, Phil changed the dressing. My nail was black, and I would not look at it when he sat me on the coffee table again. My right thumb had been smashed so that it was slightly taller than my left, and the nail grew back triangular in shape, inhibited by the newly acquired habit of chewing my nails I began just after leaving Siberia. It was how I learned to tell right from left after we moved into our new apartment. It is how I remember every day that we lived there. It is my imprint.