I’ve come to revel in the look on people’s faces when I tell them I have ten siblings. Eyes pop to the size of paper plates. Jaws drop. The ridiculously dramatic, and all too seldomly used, double-take precedes a patronizing gasp. “Eleven kids? Really?” then, “All from the same mother?”. I shake my head, equally impressed, yeah. “All vaginally?” But, of course! She would never do it any other way. She’s amazing. She is. She was asked to join a study at Johns Hopkins. You see, our life long family doctor, Dr. McCarthy, had noticed by kid three that my mom had total control over the timing of the birth. She could, quite literally, hold the birthing for as long as she’d like. Hours. Days. And in one instance, weeks. (She was not ready for kid four. As it turned out, none of us were. A whole other story.) Anyway, Dr. McCarthy made that discovery when my mother went into labor with kid five while attending a double feature at the Biograph Theatre. Bringing Up Baby and Philadelphia Story played in tandem. She’s a sucker for Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn. Who isn’t, right? The opening credits rolled across the screen as her first labor pain swelled. She grabbed a handful of popcorn and crunched down on it to disguise the low, dull groan that escaped her. My grandmother, her mother, jumped in her seat, “Alice? Are you all right?” Of course she was. She nudged my grandmother, shushing her and pointing at the screen. The movie is beginning. For God’s sake, its Cary Grant, kindly shut it, mother. The labor pains would ebb and flow throughout the films. She’d, almost effortlessly, power through them with slow, steady, deep breathes followed by handfuls of Junior Mints, Milk Duds, Twizzlers, Dots and Sugar Babies. They saw both films in their entirety.

My grandmother, the sweet tooth (and my mother’s best friend), had her heart set on ice cream following the movie, and my mother did not want to disappoint, so off they went to Lockwood Castle. Her contractions were at about twelve minutes apart as the waiter put down the Castle’s famous Giant Killer, a twenty-four scoop sundae with caramel, hot fudge, marshmallow, cherries and topped with sparklers. It took them hours to finish, but somehow they managed to eat every Nilla Wafer, every nut topping, every single sprinkle… Like I said, she’s amazing. She got home, checked on kids one through four and crawled into bed with my dad. He was wiped out. My mother pulled on his arm, “Bob, Bob, how were they?” My father stirred, his eyes never opening, “Awful, just awful. Jesus, why did we have so many kids? I’ve never cleaned up so much puke and poop in my life. And the smell, gah, it’s embedded in my nose. I’m so tired, Ali. I don’t know how you do it.” He shifted again and then snored. My mother counted out her contractions. They were at an alarming seven minutes apart. She breathed deep, holding on to my father, glancing at his broad shoulders, smelling his fading English Leather cologne that he religiously wore, wanting to touch his wavy blue-black hair. God, he was so handsome. It always brought a smile to her face.

They had met at a basketball game. My mother had heard about this guy, this Rob Leahy guy, who everyone said looked like a blue-eyed Tony Curtis. A movie star. Apparently the girls fawned all over him. But, it was my mom that caught his eye. She was sitting on the opposite side of the gym with a handful of girlfriends. Never minding the basketball game, they had all zeroed in on my Dad in the bleachers. They waved. Flirted like idiot cheerleaders. He waved back. My mom waved. My Dad stood up. He smiled at her. He grabbed at his heart, pretending it was pounding out of his chest. She blushed insanely. She was teased by her girlfriends. She said she knew in that moment that she was going to marry him.

A few months later, right after my mother graduated from Immaculata High School, my parents drove over the Illinois border and into Indiana; at seventeen and eighteen, they eloped.

I can’t even conceive of being that age and willfully entering that kind of commitment. What’s wrong with them? There had to be something wrong with them. When the subject came up, we’d always ask, “What’s wrong with you two? So young. Too young.”, as if we weren’t satisfied with the fifty other times they explained themselves. And inevitably, someone would chime in with a, “Did you and dad just want to do it or something? That’s why you got married?” My mother would feign indignation over the question. Huffing and puffing, stalling her answer. But we could read right through her. It turned out they did like to do it. A lot. A whole lot. Jesus, it was Guinness World Records, a lot. Their lack of shame and increasing boldness through the years became embarrassing. The giggling behind a closed door, the ghosting us immediately after dinner, cocktail hour in my dad’s library became “do not disturb” time… It became so much a part of our routine that we would sit outside their room singing Afternoon Delight while they escaped to one of their “naps”.

The whole thing, the sex thing, was fairly uncharacteristic for their rather conservative nature. They were both raised Catholic, extremely Catholic. Sexual innuendo, brow raising talk and “dirty-birdie” language were simply off limit. It was never more apparent to me how much  swearing bothered my mother until we were watching Raging Bull at the Pickwick Theatre. Jake LMotta, “You fuck my wife?” My mother dropped her Charleston Chew and audibly gasped. “You fuck my wife?” She exhaled in protest. I was readied for her to storm out of the theatre at some point, especially following LaMotta’s phone call to Sal, “…You listening, your mother sucks fucking big fucking elephant dicks, you got that?” Her face soured. I seeped a nervous giggle. My eyes stayed on her waiting for a fist to fly up and wave at the screen or an eye-roll so exaggerated that she would peal out of her seat like a roller coaster flying off its tracks. But she didn’t. She suddenly looked very determined as if someone were challenging her. Despite the unloading of “fucks”, “shits” and “god damns” for the rest of the film, she barely even flinched. On the way out she declared the movie a masterpiece although she felt Scorsese could have been more creative with his sophomoric and crude words. She wouldn’t revoke his creative license just yet.

We weren’t allowed to formally date until we were sixteen. And, when it happened my parents were very upfront with advice as to why we should “play the field” and not to settle with the first person we fell for. “Life would be filled with possibility and having a constant partner with you at every turn would limit your experiences. Keep things loose. Keep your options open.” When taking into account the shocking level of fertility that my mother possessed, my siblings and I just figured my parents didn’t want any of us involved in an out-of-wedlock pregnancy. And, for the most part we took their advice… Everyone except my one brother, kid five. As soon as he turned sixteen he had a girl fixed at his side. They’d change from time to time. But they were constant. He didn’t go a day without a girlfriend. And, he definitely had a type. They were tallish. Thin. Bedroom-eyed. Or very possibly high. They all had feathered hair parted down the middle. They carried wide toothed combs in the back pocket of their Gloria Vanderbilt cut-offs. Honestly, I couldn’t tell any of them apart. There was nothing very distinguishing about any of them. Except, none of them talked. Not one. No hello. No goodbye. No, “Hi my name is…”. I never heard any of them say a single syllable. The only thing I heard was tonguing. The soft smacking of wet tongues and pressed lips as they explored each other’s mouths. My brother and his girlfriends made out for hours. It was embarrassing. A real turn off. Everyone who witnessed them seemed uncomfortable. You’d hear the inevitable’ “Eeewwww. Get a room!”, by an onlooker or neighbor. Kid five, in his signature muscle shirt, and his girlfriends always looked like they were the opening shot of an awful 80’s porn movie. She was on the hood of his car while he stood, straddled between her legs, ala Whitesnake. They’d grab at each other. Neck. Peck. Lick… Yick. So, yick! In my mind the camera would hold on them, until the director was too grossed out and he’d pan over to the next couple.

It wasn’t that I was just embarrassed by him, mostly I was worried people would mistake him for me. I felt that way a lot. I am kid six. Kid five and I looked far too much alike. People mistook us for each other all the time. Actually, all of the kids in my family look remarkably alike. Squinty eyes that disappear when you laugh, crooked mouths, angular features, thin to athletic body-types and various shades of dark auburn, copper, strawberry and red hair. The amount of strangers that approached me throughout my entire life asking if I was a Leahy was staggering. “Oh, my god, look at you, you’ve got to be a Leahy. I know your brother.” “Great. Fantastic. Here we go again.” I’d think to myself. Depending on which brother they were talking about had everything to do with my response. I usually stuck with, “Maybe I am. Who wants to know?” I always said it in the best Clint Eastwood voice that I could bring to the surface. I’d become tense, my body rigid, readying myself for the all-too-well-known sucker punch or an all out riot, then, “Your brother’s an asshole”. I’d ask, “You get beat up?” They’d usually challenge me with something like, “Did I say I got beat up?” We’d stare at each other. My eyes would squint, followed by a very pregnant Pinter pause, then… “Leahy? Don’t know them.”

For a good portion of my life I denied having any kind of relation to Leahy kid four, kid five and kid ten. It was needed. It was for safety reasons. It was self preservation; survival. They seemed to have left a long line of bodies in their path.

I became all too aware of the reputation they were creating for our family. Those Leahys are unhinged. They’re maniacal. The term sociopathic was tossed around a lot. People were actually afraid of us, of them. It was weird. I didn’t understand it. It’s true, we fought all the time. What family of eleven kids doesn’t? A body flying across the family room was not a big deal. A stabbing at the dinner table was to be expected. Waterboarding as entertainment isn’t quite as bad as people say. Yes, we all landed in the hospital at some time or another with stitches, concussions, torn ligaments and broken bones, but whose childhood doesn’t include a few screaming jaunts to the ER? Getting kicked in the head felt normal. A punch to the throat was like a sign of affection. Pushing someone down the stairs was the start of a new game. “Tag! You’re it!” Looking back it seemed to be more appeasement than conflict. It felt more competitive than something dastardly. I don’t know, maybe we’re less evolved than other families. The knee jerk reaction, the ability to slap back after being slapped felt like the proper response. And despite the Catholicism that was forced onto us, we never turned the other cheek. We sought immediate and timely revenge. It’s just who we are. It’s innate. It felt natural.

And it wasn’t limited to just the kids. We come from a long line of fighters. My maternal grandfather was a legendary figure on the streets of Old Town, Chicago. He, known back then as Wild Bill, was an epic bar room brawler. My grandmother said he was an awful husband, an awful father but everyone in the neighborhood clamored around him when they were out drinking. The stories that surrounded his name were both unnerving and intriguing. There was one in particular that has haunted me for years. It had something to do with a certain somebody and a bar patron losing an eye to an axe wielding madman.

My paternal grandfather was, quite possibly, the softest spoken man I’ve ever met; quite the contrast from Wild Bill. He smiled all the time. He was at ease. Laid back and uncomplicated. I did learn that he turned his hearing aid off whenever he was with company which kind of explains his unruffled and pleasant demeanor. One could only imagine my surprise when I found out that his past included years as a semi-pro boxer, a pugilist. He made a nice amount of money in the lightweight division during his short-lived career. He didn’t strike me as the type of person who needed to exercise demons from within, the boxing seemed more about skill and the sport than the working out of some inner conflicts. He was genuinely a nice person, technically a fighter, but really sweet. Because he was smitten with my grandmother, at her request, he promised to quit boxing once they were married. He was a man of his word.

My father was a scrapper. Handsome, fastidiously groomed, but a scrapper at his core. His suits were tailored to order, his shirts were monogramed, his shoes always gleaming and shined. He presented really well. It was his hands that gave him away. They were thick and rough and claw-like. They curled inward at the fingers like stainless steal meat hooks. They were incredibly strong. His grip was jaws-of-life remarkable. Kid seven and I actually watched in awe as he undid the lug nuts with his bare fingers while showing us how to change a flat tire.

No one messed around with my father. For some reason, most people must have innately picked up on the extreme duality of his personalities. He was gregarious, affable, an amazing story teller, witty, charming, had one liners that would make any comic envious, he laughed with his entire being, that was until anyone crossed him. Do not cross the man. Do not insult the man. Do not physically challenge the man; kid one through kid eleven have all seen what it leads to. He had a cruel streak that reared its head on more than a few occasions. And when I say cruel, I mean it was brutal. Physically. Mentally. Emotionally. He could be ruthless. It was, I think the summer of 1972, maybe 73, my mother and kid five through kid one had all climbed into my father’s prized white, convertible Coupe DeVille Cadillac on a Saturday afternoon as he decided we  were in dire need of ice cream sundaes. In these pre-seatbelt days we would cruise the streets with the top down, standing on the red leather back seat with our arms in the air, egging on my father to go faster. My mother, with kid eleven in her lap, reached over kid ten and tapped my father’s arm, “Rob, slow down. One of them might fall out of the car again.” He punched the gas and she squealed in both protest and delight adjusting the silk scarf that was protecting her freshly set hair-do. “Rob! You’re terrible!” Her laughter rose to a crescendo as my father pulled into a parking lot. My parents were laughing so hard that my father didn’t see this hulk-like man walking out in front of the car. The Caddy came to a very abrupt stop. Kid nine through kid five were flung back and forth, whiplashed, then landed in a pile on the back seat floor.

The man, an easy six foot three, a solid two hundred pounds eyed my father,“Watch where the fuck you’re going asshole.” He flipped my father off… In front of his wife and kids. You could see the rise of that cruel streak coursing through my father’s veins. Blood rose to his face. His eyes locked on the man in front of him. His upper lip curled. The car was immediately thrown into park, resulting in, yet, another jolt and toss of kid nine through kid five, my father was out of the car in a nano-second. Oh, no, here it comes. Thwack! Thwack! A right and a left; two punches is all it took to knock the guy out. As soon as he hit the pavement, my father turned to us in the car, “Ha!” His eyes lit up and twinkled. The smile on his face was enormous, genuine, he was so delighted. He threw his arms up over his head like a fighter who just won a title. He blurted, “Who’s ready for some ice cream?” and then laughed and laughed and laughed as he climbed back in the car. He backed up, then drove to the side of the man that was still lying in a heap on the pavement. He stopped. He saw the man’s eyes open. The man shook his head and grabbed at his swelling jaw. My dad waited for the man to look at him. When their eyes connected, my dad spit laughed. He was so joyous, over the moon happy. We all cheered and laughed at the wounded  man before pulling away to get our ice cream.

My mother was no saint either. She was absolutely the least aggressive of us all. She usually let things slide off her back. Violence wasn’t something she slipped into without a lot of provocation. But, when pushed, when, quite literally, slammed against the wall, look out. She had an array of tools that she used to take control of tumultuous situations. Wooden spoons. Hairbrushes. Hangers. Brooms. Belts. Whiffle ball bats. The vacuum. Rolls of wrapping paper. A giant pepper mill. Soup cans. The occasional framed picture. And one time a Pogo Stick. Whatever was handy. Whatever was within reach, she grabbed and she used it. But her secret weapon, the thing that always took us down were her Clogs. As soon as she’d reach down to free that Clog from her foot, we all learned to run like hell. Those things actually hurt. That hard, chunky wood beating on you was like a police baton crashing onto your bones. And, if you were quick enough to escape the beating she would torpedo those things at the back of your head. Damn. She had incredible aim. Nine times out of ten she could hit a moving target at fifty paces. She was so good that my father filmed her and then submitted the footage to Chicago Bears’ Coach, Mike Ditka, in hopes of getting her drafted as a second string quarterback.

But, her punishments were very short lived. You see, the boys grew fast. We were suddenly taller, quicker, and bolder than her. She’d lift a ladle to us, we’d grab it from her and threaten to hit her back. Roller pins, lamps, a guitar, vases were snatched from her hands. Once we disarmed her we’d push her back into the kitchen as she’d scream for kid eight and kid nine to come save her. Even the dreaded clog became obsolete. She’d reach for it, we’d knock her out of both shoes, wrestle her down, then raise her over are heads, parade her through the house and then toss her in, what we dubbed, the fires of hell. We’d actually dump her on the living room couch. We’d tie her with jump rope or twine or sheets, or pieces of kid’s clothing. She would be laughing so hard that she didn’t care that we just broke another window or drove my father’s Porsche into the garage wall or flushed her house keys down the toilet. We were making her laugh.  And that, to all of us, was bliss. It was magical. My mother had one of the best laughs I’ve ever heard. Her laugh was contagious. It was out of control. It was sweet and wonderful and extraordinary and unique and welcoming and irreplaceable… God, she was the best.

My parents had great laughs. Some of the most vivid memories I have, involve my parents folding in half, howling. I naturally got my ease to laugh from both of them. I’m not sure when laughing became such a big part of my identity. I was painfully shy as a child. I never talked in school. I was petrified when called on to read aloud in front of the class. My teachers suggested to my mother that I be held back claiming that I wasn’t developing on a social level and had trouble comprehending what I read.

“He’s sweet, but so quiet. I think it best to have him stay back.” That’s what Mrs. Burns, my first grade teacher, told my mother at a parent teacher conference. “Oh, no, he can’t be held back,” my mother stressed, “he’s got the other kids right behind him. Sharing the same grade as his younger brother would be far more devastating for him. No. We’ve got to push him through.” They eyed each other for a moment, then my mother asked, “He really doesn’t talk?”

“No.” my teacher reluctantly shook her head from side to side.

“He talks at home. A lot. I don’t get it.”

Mrs. Burns offered, “Well, now that I’m thinking about it, one morning, as he strolled by, I remember him saying that he liked the shade of lipstick I was wearing. So, there’s that. Like I said, he’s a sweet boy.”

I don’t remember that particular exchange with Mrs. Burns. I was told I could be charming. I suppose I was. I was very much an observer. Yeah. I probably did say it…

“We’ve got to give him a chance,” my mother pleaded. “Maybe he’s slow. With the number of kids we have that’s bound to happen, right? He’ll catch up. I promise you. I’ll talk to him. Things will change.”

Things did change. A few years down the road, one of my teacher’s asked that I accompany my mother to the parent/teacher conference. Apparently my laughing spurts had become disruptive. My father, who traveled during the week, had made himself exempt from all things school related. That wasn’t his thing. He didn’t have time to go to every kid’s parent/teacher, conference, somebody had to work in order to pay those teachers and for those conferences. My mom would stand in for both of them. He was more about the end result; the, in my case, dreaded report card. I was a very poor student. Maybe, like, a C minus at best. My father did like the fact that I got A’s in gym and art class. For whatever reason he saw that as potential and kind of left me to my own devices for the most part.

Ms. Francis, an intimidating six-foot two, ex-nun, who was painfully serious about mathematics, invited my mother and I into her classroom. I wasn’t a huge fan. She had a stuffy, know-it-all attitude that reminded me of Miss Hathaway from The Beverly Hillbillies and the build of Terry Bradshaw before retiring from the Pittsburgh Steelers. She was numbingly flat, uninteresting, dull. She couldn’t hold the interest of the class, so, we looked to each other to keep entertained. Spitballs were huge back then. And, we had perfected the size of the paper wad, the amount of spit needed and the ideal pen to launch that projectile across the room with the precision of a NASA take-off. As soon as Ms. Francis would turn toward the blackboard to present an equation we were working on, a handful of us would terrorize the classroom with spitballs. Kids ducked, jumped and dodged out of the path of these soaring pellets while trying to remain completely silent. That was the best part of the game. No one could make noise. Getting hit and being unable to express yourself out loud produced some of the best facial reactions I’ve ever seen. Eyes would slam shut, necks would crane and twists, shoulders would lift and jut, bodies would strain to get underneath a desk. And, that’s when I’d laugh. I couldn’t help it. It was knee jerk and uncontrollable. It took over my entire being. I’d roll in my seat and fall into the aisle… Until I’d be yanked up by my sideburn and tossed back into my seat.

“What’s so funny, Mr. Leahy?” Ms. Francis would cross her arms, stare at me, awaiting an answer. She never got one. I’d shrug my shoulders waiting for my laughter to deflate. It usually took just a couple moments, then we’d be back to the droning on of Ms. Francis at the blackboard. She was painful.

For whatever reason there were a few small chairs, student chairs, first graders’ chairs set across from Ms. Francis. She stretched out her arm, offering us to sit in the teeny-tiny seats.

“Here?”, my mother asked.

Ms. Francis nodded. My mother took a moment. She had gone to Catholic schools her entire life. She knew all too well about the obedience and strict code of conduct expected by the nuns over-seeing the grammar school classes. Nobody got out of line with the nuns. Or, in this case, ex-nuns. They would beat the living shit out of you if you tried. The smacking, pulling of hair, pinching and throwing of books… It’s as if I could see my mother reliving grade one through eight right in front of me. She shook a little. Her face twisted trying to keep her mouth from opening up and screaming in horror. Those nuns really did some emotional damage. They were notoriously mean as fuck.

“Right there.” Ms. Francis replied.

I sat down. I could feel the grin etching across my face as my mother looked at the chair. She began to lower herself, holding the back of the chair. It tipped. She stopped, looked at Ms. Francis’ stealy eyes, “This chair? Really?” Ms. Francis didn’t answer. Instead she smoothed out the rigid curls that made up her sideburns. They were precise, waxy and stiff. The curls had a habit of suddenly popping off, away from her skin. You could almost hear the accompanied springing sound, like a “BOING” ringing out as it happened.

My mother made another attempt to lower herself onto the chair. Her knees knocked as her shins slid apart creating an odd triangle with the ultra-shiny, linoleum floor. She pulled on the hemline of her dress that had hiked up around her thighs. Her eyes were growing wild as her ass neared the tiny wooden seat. “THUD”. She landed. The chair skidded a few inches back and my mother let out the loudest and quickest yelp I’ve ever heard.

Our eyes connected. It was not good thing. I began biting my lips. My face twisted. My shoulders started to tremble. My mother shut her eyes as if hit by a sudden headache. Her shoulders shook. Life in the that moment was utterly ridiculous. It was stupid. We were gleeful with our own idiocy. The sound of her ass hitting the chair and the crazy yap that escaped her lips played over and over in my mind. I once again looked at her. She wanted to laugh so badly. I knew it. I could feel it with my entire being. It was part of our connection. I was trying to stamp out every twitch and spasm I was having. I was doing really well until her fingers came up to her mouth and pressed her bloating lips. This time the noise she leaked could only be described as something like Louis Armstrong farting through his trumpet. It was so abrupt, explosive and thunderous that I felt it move off of her and into the room from a pace away. We absolutely lost it. We fell against each other in our fit. We couldn’t speak. We couldn’t stand or run or hide. We laughed and laughed and laughed until we heard Ms. Francis get up from her seat and move across the room.

“Well, I see where he gets it from,” she snapped as she stepped through the door. My mother and I remained in the classroom for a few minutes laughing then controlling ourselves laughing more, letting it go, laughing again, then laughing until we were completely exhausted.

We laughed a lot in my family. We laughed and we fought. They were two traits that would help me throughout my life. There was one other thing that I think really tied us to each other… It was our striking resemblance. And, more than anything it was the extreme whiteness of our skin. Our hue. Our pallor. Alabaster comes to mind. We were porcelain like. Creamy. Milky. Snowy. Bleached. We were the only kids in the pool that wore full head to toe body suits that shielded us from the sun. We walked on the shady side of the street. We played basketball, football and kick the can at dusk. We ran the streets under the light of the moon. We were, to a degree, a family of vampires; sans the pointy canines and thirst for blood. However, we did stop in our tracks, sizzle just a bit, and recoil when met by the glaring sun.

My parents were avid golfers. They did couples tournaments, played in leagues and took vacations that were centered on golfing. By the end of a season of golfing my mother seemed tan, or tan-ish, or Farmer’s tan-ish. The freckles on her arms melded together and gave her a light golden, bronze-like color. Her skin was beautiful. It seemed exotic to us. Why didn’t we get any of those melding freckles? Why were we so white and she got a little bit of glow? Life is so unfair. We wrote it off as her having lucky genetics. She was Irish and American Indian, born on a reservation in Poplar Montana, so, the Indian side must have introduced some sort of melanin to her. We were, sadly, plagued with my father’s Irish, freakishly ghostlike flesh. And as we got older it felt like a sentence from hell. My teen years landed in the late 70’s and early 80’s. During this very impressionable time slogans like “Sun in and Sun light and you’ll be blonder tonight.” “Bain de Soleil for the San Tropez tan” took over the airwaves. Coppertone, Bronztan and Tanfastic were every other printed advertisement in the most popular magazines. Everyone was rubbing Baby Oil and Crisco on themselves and sitting in the sun for hours in hopes of getting that sun-kissed look that was all the rage. We fell victims to the advertisers! Casualties of commerce! We wanted to fit in. Everyone, during that era, regardless of gender could totally relate to the Girl From Ipanema. And, one by one my siblings and I fell for it too. My mother said we needed to build our exposure to the sun. Take our time. Do it little by little, or we’d burn. Fifteen minutes here and there would help our skin develop the freckles needed for the look we wanted to accomplish. Well, fifteen minutes never really got any one of us anywhere close to the color we were hoping for. The fifteen minute thing was ditched as we slathered on Wesson Corn Oil and laid for hours in the sun.

Epson Salt baths and Solarcaine became our go to. We would alternate Noxema and Preparation H onto our red-hot, pulsing bodies. We burnt. We charred. We blistered… But, we were definitely not white anymore.

Back then I had no idea what I was actually doing to myself and my skin. I was captive to my own vanity. I was going for a look. I never realized that the exposure I brought on, that I welcomed and wanted, could come back to haunt me. In a way it did.

I got a dermatologist after living in Los Angeles for a few years. Because of the lifelong recklessness I exposed my skin to I became very aware of the damage done. I would scan every inch of my body looking for the slightest irregularity, red spot, discoloration or patch of dried skin. If found, I would call my dermatologist directly. I referred to him as Dr. Littlehands because his hands were so incredibly small. I marveled at their size. They were Ken-doll like. They were G.I. Joe with the Kung Fu grip. They were fascinating. He was masterful with the scalpel, perhaps the size of hands had something to do with that? I don’t know. As time went on I learned that I didn’t really care about his hand size, that was just a plus, what I did like about him was our shared obsession for blemishes. He scalpelled, froze and burned anything he deemed suspect. At the end of any given session I had anywhere from eight to  eighteen nicks or divots on my skin. He scoured my entire body, looking through a magnifier to get the clearest and closest look possible. As he did this I’d recall the amount of times I’d sat by a pool dripping in baby oil, the burns I’d gotten on vacations, the times I lied naked in a tanning booth. This was dermatology porn to him. He loved it. I could tell. He shuddered  and sweated during every confessional, promising me that he’d do whatever was possible to keep me safe. “It’s all about prevention and a good doctor. A damn good doctor.” he reminded me. Making sure I had set my next appointment.

I didn’t go to Dr. Littlehands when this red sore, blemish thingie popped up. We had an intimate relationship, to be sure, but this particular thing-a-ma-bop had to be dealt with someone who I had complete and total trust. Someone who pressed my junk while commanding me to turn my head and cough. Someone who tickled my prostate without expecting dinner and a drink. This thing appeared at the rim of my dickhead. It didn’t seem to be going anyway any time soon. I went to see Dr. Van Tassell. He could fix everything.

I waited in Dr. Van Tassell’s office listening to a woman, through the crepe-thin walls, drone on and on about her ailments, including a sudden onslaught of skin tags that have taken up residency in the rolls on her neck, her armpits and the “area down there” as she put it. I made a mental note to whisper, not to go into too much detail or talk in code when I explain the reason for the appointment.

Dr. Van Tassell entered. He is welcoming and energetic. He’s droll, dramatic and very intuitive. He may be the most approachable doctor I’ve ever known. I had my pants down as soon as I heard the door opening.

“What is this?” I showed him the red dot that consumed my mind for the last forty-eight hours. “It doesn’t seem like it’s going away.” He came in close for a better look.

“Is it herpes? I dated someone with herpes.” A sweat broke out across my forehead.”Don’t let it be herpes. God, no. Fuck. No. ”

Dr. Van Tassell pulled back. “It’s a patch of dried skin. You might want to be a little kinder to yourself or use a petroleum based lube.”

“Oh my god, really?”

“Yes. Do you want to talk about your chronic masterbating?” He added as he washed his hands.

“Ha. Ha. Very funny… Of course, I went right to penile cancer.”

“Of course you did!”

He took a thick medical book from his shelf and popped it open. He turned pages until he got to a picture of a rather mangled looking penis. “This is penile cancer.”

I cringed at the sight of the photos. “Good, god, no.”

“I don’t think you have to worry too much about penile cancer. You’re in great shape, you’re still young-ish.” He feigned a gasp, obvious commenting on my level of vanity. “If you were losing weight rapidly, or bleeding, or had inexplicable pain somewhere…”

“I do bleed every once in a while.” He waited for an explanation.“When I go to the bathroom.”

“Is it bright red? Or darker, maybe closer to black?”

“It’s bright red. And sometimes has a little bit of mucus to it.” I replied.

“Let’s do a quick digital.”

I dropped my pants as he put on a latex glove. I turned and braced myself when I saw him dipping his finger into a jar of petroleum jelly. He slid his finger inside. “Sweet baby Jesus,” my rectum automatically shrunk and tightened wanting to expel the intrusion.

“Only be a minute…” He was done. He peeled off the gloves and tossed them into the garbage. “You’re right. There’s a trace of blood there. I don’t feel anything unusual.”

He was at the sink again, washing his hands. “There’s a lot of reasons that you might be bleeding. It’s not that unusual. Do me a favor, for peace of mind, let’s get a colonoscopy done. Just so we can rule out certain things.”

He read the look on my face.

“I’m sure it’s nothing to worry about.”

I needed someone to drive me to and from the colonoscopy appointment. My friend Carla volunteered and showed up at my house at 6:30 in the morning. I usually don’t speak to anyone before ten a.m. I’m not a morning person, so it wasn’t very surprising that I didn’t notice she was driving with one hand slapped over her left eye until we got to the top of  Mulholland Drive.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you have your hand over your eye?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Her Jersey accent made the word “Oh” seem like it had two syllables to it. “I lost my contact. And I didn’t have another.” She didn’t even finish the sentence before she started laughing.

“No, Carla!” I couldn’t help myself as a rip of nervous laughter spilled out of me.

Carla is a notoriously bad driver. One night I watched her exit a parking spot on an extremely busy Melrose Avenue. Not only did she pull out in front of a car that was cruising up behind her, but then she quickly broke and did a u-turn that caused on-coming traffic to veer out of her way and the car behind her to slam on its brakes. Skidding tires. Honking. Middle fingers popped into the air. Jeering. More honking. Nothing phased her. She had no idea of the mayhem and near misses she just caused. My mouth was dropped as I watched her big bright, smiling eyes land on me, she waved and mouthed “bye” and continued down the street. A moment later, there was another round of honking and cursing. I turned seeing her car in the distance. Her brake lights pumped a few times, like she was sending out a message in Morse Code, then she sped off. Jesus, she’s an awful driver.

After white knuckling it through rides to the airport, to dinners, to a wedding in Santa Barbara I swore I would never let her drive me anywhere, but the pool of people available to pick me up at that insane hour of the morning then coming back to fetch me and take me home was limited. Being “stuck” with Carla is hardly the worst fate for anyone. She’s one of the best people I know. Delightful. Generous beyond definition. And despite her horrific driving skills, the rides always make laugh in the same way the rides at an amusement park does. So, there’s that.

I was on a gurney. My stomach was amazingly flat, sunk in. That prep you take before a colonoscopy might be one of the worst things I’ve ever endured, you quite literally shit for hours, but the result is very slimming; very LA. I’m wheeled away. I’m brought into a room that makes me think of a morgue. There’s cold, metal tables, portable medical trays, hoses, sinks, it’s sterile and intimidating. The GI talks me through the procedure before sending me off in a sweet twilight sleep.…

I’m shook awake. I’m groggy and distant. I hear someone saying my name over and over. My eyes are closed as I mumble a response. I’m shook again.  My eyes slide open. The GI is above me. My eyes shut again.

“I found a mass. I believe it’s cancer,” he said gently patting my shoulder.

My eyes opened. I watched him walk away. Everything was in slow motion and extremely fuzzy. I saw figures around me, but I couldn’t really make out any faces. Nothing was in focus. Where am I? Did he just say cancer? No. He couldn’t have. I can’t have cancer. My, god, I eat a salad almost every single day. I’m lifted and slid off the metal table and back onto the gurney. I’m carted into a recovery room. My mind is restless. I want to sit up but can’t at the moment. It’s taking me great effort to keep my eyes ajar with a remnants of the twilight still coursing through me. I’m trying to focus on the ceiling. I hear my GI’s voice again. He’s somewhere in the room. He’s on the phone. “Leahy. Yes. A mass… A biopsy…”

A mass. He just said it again. He found a mass. Cancer. Jesus. God. Gram. Gramma. She would never let this happen. Not now. Not yet.

The weeks preceding had been one big glorious bash after another. I had so much to celebrate. After ten years of busting my ass, I had finally landed a big fish. David Styne, quite possibly the best Lit agent in the business, signed me at ICM. He was pushing three of my scripts and setting up meetings with the likes of James L. Brooks, Imagine, New Line Cinema, Plan B, Lionsgate, Overbrook… Anyone I mentioned that I wanted to see, this guy could arrange it. Everything seemed so promising.

Carla was waiting for me in the foyer of the doctor’s office. She had a big grin and her hand placed over he left eye. “I couldn’t find a place with my replacement contacts. Guess we’re gonna have to do the one eyed ride home.” Again, “home” said in two syllables. I tried to smile and groaned a response.

She dropped her hand, slapping her thigh like a cheerleader. I couldn’t help but to think how cute she is. No one smiles more with their eyes than Carla. “Im kiddin’ you! I’m joking! I got it all taken care of!” She laughed as she opened the door and escorted me outside.

My stomach was distended from the procedure. Bloated. I was so uncomfortable. I just wanted to fart. I tried to concentrate on the conversation Carla and I were having, she was leaving that night for a visit to Philly. She was very excited about going home. She was telling me everything she wanted to do, then interrupted herself, “Lays, is everything okay? Why did they right down another appointment for you? Why are you going back to see him?”

“I’m not. He was talking about a follow-up with Dr. Van Tassell.”

“That didn’t sound like what they said. I thought they said you need another appointment for next week.” She was not backing down.

“Yeah, with Dr. Van Tassell.”

“Are you sure? You’re not lying about it?”

“I’m not lying. I swear.” The lie hung between us. She was following the car in front of her far too close and stepped on the brakes. We jolted forward and backward. The movement and pressure made me fart. Thank god! I felt a moment of relief. I wanted her to slam on the brakes a few more times.

I couldn’t tell Carla the truth. I didn’t want to saddle her with any of my baggage. She would have worried about me the entire time that she was gone. She’d learn the truth soon enough. She dropped me off. We hugged and said goodbye. I almost made it into my house when she yelled, “Lays, you sure everything is good?”

I forced a smile. “A few more big farts and I’ll feel fantastic!” I let myself into the house.

On Tuesday, July 22, 2008, my GI confirmed that I had cancer. A team of an Oncologist, a Radiologist and a surgeon were put together by my GI. I had scans, bloodwork, meet and greets, physicals, staging of the cancer and a port placed in my right bicep within a week. On Thursday, July 31, 2008 I had my first day of Chemo scheduled. My treatment was put together so quickly that I didn’t seem to have time to worry. I trusted every person I came into contact with; the doctors, the technicians, the nurses, everyone seemed more than capable for their job. And, at that point, it was still too weird and unreal to truly digest. Cancer, I never felt like it was a fit. That it was ever a part of me. It felt like a mistake. That someone dropped off this thing at the wrong address and I opened it up. It didn’t suit me.

My oncologist, Dr. Eli and his nurse, Lori, were making me comfortable in a big recliner. The needle was placed in my port, they were hanging the bags of Chemo on the IV pole. They were ready to go… My phone rang. I looked at the number, it was my agent, I had to take the call.

“Hey, man, how are you?”

“Good.” David was not a talker. He liked to get on the phone (when he had promising news) and off the phone as quickly as possible. Tiffany, his assistant, listened in and managed all his calls. She would work out any details of the conversation if needed.

“So, Susan Sarandon is in New Orleans reading your script and apparently she loves it. We’ll be talking to Tim Robbins about directing. Just wanted to let you know.”

“Ah, that would be awesome. Wow. Thank you.” I wanted to put him on speaker phone and have him say it again just so somebody else could hear the same thing.

“You doing okay? Everything good?”

I looked at the needle sticking out of my port, the chemo hanging in a bag above me, my oncologist smiling at me… “Could not be be—.”

He cuts me off, “Okay, talk soon,” and he hangs up.

“So excited for you!” Tiffany is still on the line. “I love Susan Sarandon. Any questions?”

“No. I’m good. I’m great. I’m fantastic.”

My oncologist presses a few keys on the chemo machine next to me. He gives me an enthusiastic “thumbs up.”

“Here we go.” I say to myself.

I wore a holster, strapped to my torso, that keeps the chemo pumping into my arm 24/7. It sounded like a Polaroid Instant Camera: very disc-like, like the opening beats of a Kraftwerk or Laurie Anderson song. You’d know that something scientific-y was being dispensed in five minute increments. That noise, that mechanical tinging, was certainly difficult to hide especially in one-on-one office interviews.

I had an appointment with Kim Roth at Imagine entertainment. They had sent me material that they were trying to develop as a vehicle for Eddie Murphy. It was a pull-at-the-heartstrings story through and through. Total Oscar bait. I woke up at 4 a.m. to ready myself for the 10 o’clock appointment. Because I needed to keep my holster of fun going and my port dry, I had to saran wrap and tape plastic bags over my port, then hang the holster outside the shower and keep my right arm elevated and out of the stream of water. The skill it took to wash my feet was remarkable, but, I did it.

I dressed in layers trying to muffle the sound the holster. I loosened the straps and was able to tuck it in at my back belt line. I added an undershirt, a button down, a vest and a blazer to squelch the sound. And because I kind knew when it would hit, my pIan was to speak up or laugh or shift in my seat at that very moment to mask the noise… Best laid plans, right? I get to my appointment and upon meeting Ms. Roth she comments on how well put together I look for a writer. I go in and pitch this lovely, based on a true story, about an elderly man who goes back to grammar school and learns to read with first and second graders and how it opens up an entirely new life for him. Or that’s what I think I pitched. I have no idea what was actually said because despite my attempt to cover the noise, I actually heard it each time then I heard myself get real loud or allow a stream of random laughter slip from my mouth even when it definitely wasn’t called for. Everything was a blur. Everything but that clicking and mechanical winding that seemed to clang like a church bell marking the passing of every five minutes. I was sweating and panicked by the end of the interview. I do remember her being really nice to me as she escorted me out. I’m sure she thought I was an absolute lunatic. I never heard from her. She told my agent that she loved the pitch but the project was already dead. Oh well.

I was scheduled for eight rounds of chemo and radiation before surgery. The first couple weeks went swimmingly. Aside from the toxic, burnt doll-hair smell coming off my skin from the lasered radiation, I was surprised at how well I withstood everything. The accumulative effect started to set in by the third and forth week. That’s when things started getting tricky. My body began to ache in places that I didn’t think could hurt. My mouth tasted like blood and iron. I was developing blisters all along my pelvis from the radiation treatments. I couldn’t urinate without screaming. The waves of nausea overwhelmed me. But, few things compared to the shock and sadness of losing my hair. I was fresh from the shower and ran a comb through my wavy mane, after a few strokes I noticed a surprising amount of hair clinging to the comb. It looked like some sort of exotic caterpillar. My heart stopped. I couldn’t believe what was happening. You hear about it. You’re warned about. You expect it to happen, but when it’s actually going down, you’re just not prepared. I fashioned what was left, what was still attached, into a much thinned out version of my look. Not bad. I don’t look that different. Nobody will notice. That delusion stayed with me for a few days. I was reminded of my condition every time I walked under the canned ceiling lights while seeing my reflection in the mirror at the end of the bedroom hallway. I could totally see the curve of my scalp. It looked ridiculous. It had all the makings of a really bad comb-over. I know, because I tried it. Thank god, I had the good sense to shave the rest of it off.

self potato

cutting off my hair