I sense the sunlight behind my eyelids, a hazy filter of orange. I turn over on my side, the inflatable mattress squeaking under my weight. I know it’s no use. This is it. I’m awake for the day. But it’s okay, because this is my first morning of vacation in California, and I’m eager to make the most of it. I get up and peek out the window. Nothing but sunshine and palm trees. Funny to think that yesterday I was scraping the ice off my windshield on a frigid ten-degree day in New Hampshire.

I shuffle into my friends’ kitchen with the popcorn ceilings and the ceramic bowl filled with freshly picked lemons from the lemon tree. The house is silent except for the sound of squawks and chirps from birds I’ve never heard before. I check the coffee maker, my feet sticking to the linoleum, but realize that some gracious café elf has already prepped it for me. I smile to myself. They know me too well.

I grab a Vermont coffee mug adorned with pine trees and moose—an ironic reminder of home—and pour myself a cup of the black stuff. With a splash of almondmilk and the ding ding ding ding of a shiny spoon, I’m ready to begin my morning journey.

I shove my book under my arm, grab my mug, open the rusty metal front door, and step outside on the porch. The sky still has traces of sunrise—wispy streaks of purple, pink, and orange—and the air is still a bit cool from the night. It reminds me of a warm spring day back home in New England, and suddenly I’m thinking of tulips in every color, kids riding bikes, streets coming to life. I take a big gulp of coffee and try to read, but I find myself getting lost in memories. Climbing trees. Softball with mom. Picking wildflowers and weeds. I give up, put the book down, and
close my eyes with my coffee clutched in my lap. I stretch out and breathe in the warmth, letting the sun give me comforting goosebumps. Remember this morning. You are happy.

When I turned 20, my body suddenly decided it would awake itself in tune with the sunrise every morning—even on weekends. For many mornings, I tried to will myself to sleep longer, concentrating on sleepy things like sitting in front of a fire or lying in the grass. Without much luck, I soon accepted my fate. Mornings meant I would have a hot cup of dark roast coffee cradled in my hands and the quiet and stillness of the dawn all to myself, when I could let my mind roam free—before it became mired with the routine and flurry of the day. On these mornings, my mind is an orchestra of meditative thoughts. I often have my greatest epiphanies and creative musings in the morning after a fitful night of sleep and torturous dreams. I dissect things. I make sense of them. I take things in. I write these things down.

It’s the night that scares me.

I’ve had two recurring dreams since I was a teenager. In one, I’m in my childhood home, and someone, or something, is trying to break in and kill me. I run through the house boarding up windows, locking doors, shoving furniture in front of anything that can be opened. And then, I hide and wait. I usually wake just as they’re breaking into the house.

In the other dream, I drive down a dirt road to a place that feels foreign, yet familiar. There is a tall, rusty tower that seems to stretch into the clouds, and I decide to climb it. I stand at the top of the tower, the wind whipping through my hair. I feel sad as I look down at the water below me. And then … I jump. Just before I hit the water, right before I wake, I see alligators, or shallow water, or rocks. Both dreams have left me whimpering in the dark and gasping for breath. Both dreams have caused panic attacks during the light of the afternoon.

I’m also terrified of the dark. I play flashlight tag with the lights
in my house before I go to bed so I’m never left in the darkness—turn on the hall light, turn on the bedroom light, turn off the hall light, turn on the night light, turn off the bedroom light. I hate sleeping alone. When my husband Steve is away, I lie in bed all night and pick up on every low sound, convincing myself that someone is trying to break into our home. Some nights I have terrible insomnia because of racing thoughts that whirl around and around. At night, my mind warps itself into a being that I don’t recognize. So, I look forward to the morning.

I’ve traveled to England and Italy and Ireland, to Canada, and throughout New England, to Florida and California, to friends’ homes, to family’s homes, and moved to different homes. My day has always started relatively the same: I wake up before others, drink my coffee, and welcome the quiet with my thoughts.

I often don’t remember major details from places I’ve traveled or conversations I’ve had. But I remember my mornings. It was a grey spring morning—patches of snow littered the ground, but I was eager to escape the indoors—when I sat at a picnic table smoking a cigarette, writing a poem about my abusive alcoholic father. I found myself lost in thoughts I hadn’t visited in a long time: when he showed me how to build a fire, how to fish, how to put up a tent, how to be strong. As I flicked ashes into my empty sunflower coffee cup, it was in this moment that I realized, I wasn’t angry with him anymore. It was a cool, earthy autumn morning in Vermont—my favorite kind of morning—when I sat outside with my hot mug, comforting in my cold hands, watching the watercolor leaves fall. That air, that crisp natural Vermont air, was what made me finally feel at home nestled in those Green Mountains. It was Christmas morning in my hometown in western Massachusetts when I sat marveling at the magical gift Santa had left us overnight—a white Christmas—when my mother joined me on the couch with silvery tears in her eyes. She told me all the things she had been waiting to tell me: that my dad was a mean drunk,
but he was that way because his dad was murdered, and that he left, not because of me, but because of him. “I love you more than anyone on this planet,” she told me, stroking my curly head. “And he does too.” It was an unseasonably cool July morning in Vermont when I wrote down everything I could possibly remember about my great grandmother after my mother called to tell me she had passed in the night. I took an entire page just to describe her grey blue eyes and the way she cooed in her West Virginia accent.

There’s something about morning light that is more pure than afternoon light. While I’m not religious, there’s something inherently mystical about it. I remember one morning in Vermont when the fog was so thick, I couldn’t see the house across the street or the mountains in the distance, and the sun was just a dull glow. But then, the fog broke. Blinding light stretched through the haze in beautiful streaks, leaving long shadows from the trees. I sat on my porch with my coffee, feeling lucky to witness such beauty while most of the world was still sleeping.