

1. This Story Is Not a Mystery

This story is not a mystery. It's a puzzle. A bunch of oddly cut slices of cardboard, jumbled together in an unmarked box. How do you solve a puzzle? You dump the pieces on a table, spread them around in a way that makes sense (or seems to), and then, one by one, you start putting it all together. That's when the trouble starts.

There's a lot of pieces and nothing is what it seems, not when you're holding just one. How do you know which way is up? Is that the blue of the *sea* or the blue of the *sky*? To see the connections, you have to put them in order. Piece by piece. Moment by moment. It's true for puzzles and—that summer—it was true for me, too.

If you're still following this lame puzzle metaphor, you may be wondering, What sort of pieces am I talking about? In this particular puzzle-slash-story, they would go something like this:

1. Fathers
2. Illness
3. Lies

4. Love
5. Money*
6. Murder
7. Music
8. Secrets
9. Sex
10. Sleep

That's the top ten in alphabetical order (which is not to say the alphabet is going to help; it's merely convenient). Why the asterisk beside *Money*? Because even though I might be tempted to say number nine is the most important piece of all, it's not. The most important thing in this story is life's *other* major trip-up. Money. That summer, it ruled my life (and ruined it).

Which brings me to the worst problem of all. Unlike a puzzle, life doesn't come in a neat little box. There's no picture you can look at to tell you where you're headed. Sometimes, you don't even know you're doing a puzzle at all. Not until it's too late.