

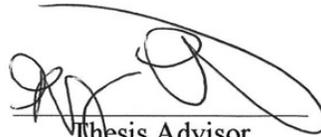
Versions of My Mother: Essays

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature, concentrated in Creative Writing at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Fall 2018

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Essays by

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Orange Tree

Somewhere in the Orlando airport's archives there's footage of Michael and me standing on each side of my mother. Her hunched body towered over us, as if a pillar supporting the world from falling in. Surrounded by the bare white tiled floors of baggage claim, we stared at the empty carousel in dismay. I looked up at my mother for an answer, a solution, but she kept looking at the carousel, getting lost in its metal.

An elderly woman, whose spine made me readjust my posture, stood beside us. Her multicolored button-down t-shirt and baggy khaki pants reminded me of my grandmother, Betty Kornstedt—the woman who adopted and raised my mother. Like the woman in the airport, Betty's back hunched over, and in elderly fashion, wore black or tan, leather Velcro sneakers. In small, half-steps, she walked to the carousel to grab the last remaining bag, a cream-colored hard-case with four wheels, the last remaining bag from our flight. I wondered if and when her husband had died. If she ever had one. And who she was flying to.

*

We followed my mother to a small office beside the empty carousel marked *Unclaimed* and *Lost Luggage*. I browsed through the lost travel bags like aisles in a convenient store while my mother talked to the clerk inside the office, visible through the glass doors. Although, I couldn't hear anything, after a while I saw my mother give her exhausted weight onto the counter in an act of defeat, and then, as if a frustrated pulse surged through her, she stood tall and walked out.

Next, she dragged us to the rental car counter in the airport where she argued with the counter-person over which car was available. She signed some papers, then let out a tiresome breath and slapped her hand on the keys that laid on the counter. "Okay-dokey," she said to us, forcing out what enthusiasm she had left. "Let's go find our car."

The drive from Orlando to Ft. Lauderdale, where our luggage had been sent, is about three and a half hours. I read most of the way. Ignore the situation. My mother's firm grip on the wheel, grabbing onto what control she has left. The awful country music my brother flipped through on the radio and him telling my mother it was all going to be okay.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said. "We'll get through this."

At fourteen, he had learned to restore my mother's faith in herself. A responsibility he saw fit due to him being the eldest child in a fatherless household. It was really the culmination from my parents' divorce. My mother started working full-time. She opened her own interior design business, a retail store in the next town over. When our schedules aligned wrongly, I'd come home from school to an empty house. And on the worst days, I'd forget my keys, or the garage door code wouldn't work. I'd be locked

out and forced to kick in the basement window to let myself in. Other times I'd sit in the back yard, do homework, and wait for whoever was next to come home.

My mother hated this. When I told her what had happened that night when she came home from work, she bursted into tears, exclaiming how much of a terrible mother she was.

*

On the way to Ft. Lauderdale, I ignored the passing marsh, the palm trees, the swamp heat, the fact that we were headed in the opposite direction from where we wanted to go. I ended up falling asleep. When I woke up, we were passed the half way point. My mother was on the phone with someone, disagreeing over something I didn't want to understand. I saw my mother stripped of her natural surroundings—her design store stacked with furnishing samples and wallpaper books, her telephone that never stopped ringing and a sweating Diet Coke on a clunky desk. For a living, she manipulated rooms with lights and furniture and color schemes. Space for people to live in luxury, a state of comfort that didn't exist here on a hot road heading to an airport.

To my surprise, we pulled off at the next exit, hung a left, then merged back onto the highway in the opposite direction. "They're sending our luggage back to Orlando," my mother said. She flipped the turn signal on and lowered the pedal to the floor, owning control of the vehicle for the next hour and a half.

*

After we got our luggage, we headed north to Saint Augustine where my mother's birthmother lives. Her name is Leslie Poe and it turns out my mother has three half-siblings. Which means I have two uncles and an aunt that I'm related to by blood. Jack,

Jeff, and Kelly, who I wouldn't form relationships with until ten years after this trip. It turned out that my uncles and aunt were more like me than I realized. Unlike my mother's adopted family in New Jersey, the Poe clan gathered weekly to drink and cook, see live music in town. They talked about films and music with intellect. I shared Kelly's liberal ideals, how not take things too seriously, and how we both were easily frustrated by our mothers. I understood the competitive, brotherly dynamic between Jeff and Jack. I took to Leslie's intellect about art and music, politics, more than Betty (mom-mom) Kornstedt's Catholicism, a religion I've never felt drawn to. I found out that being related by blood to someone carries more weight than I had realized.

When we arrived in Saint Augustine, my mother had been on the phone with Leslie, who we were going to stay with, but when we pulled into Leslie's driveway, she hung up the phone and told us to stay in the car. Michael was in the passenger seat playing with the a/c controls, turning knobs and adjusting vents. In the seat behind him I rummaged through a plastic bag with a new t-shirt, because the one I was wearing began to stink.

"Let me get some of this air," I said to Michael. "What do you think they're talking about, anyway?"

"Who the hell knows," he said, and continued to look out the window.

I wondered if they were figuring how to introduce us to Leslie. For some reason, I couldn't help but think of how bad it could go. What if we didn't like her? We if we were inclined to tell her that our *real* grandmother is in New Jersey and has grey-black hair, not dyed-blond, and that our mom-mom was there from the beginning. Where were she all this time? It scared me to have these thoughts. It's probably good that I never found

what would happen that day. I never went inside the house and Leslie never came out. It wasn't until later when I met Leslie and learned the complex dynamic between her and my mother. A dynamic that is deemed complex because of how closely similar their personalities are.

Her dyed-blond hair matches my mother's. Her home in Saint Augustine is like one of those designer Show Houses my mother designed rooms for. Leslie's house has a nautical theme throughout, especially in the bathroom. In a frame shaped like a ship's steering wheel are pictures of my brother and me I hadn't known existed; pictures my mother must have sent her during their early correspondence days. The same nautical theme is present in my bedroom back home in New Jersey. The wallpaper is symmetrically scattered in sailboats and steering wheels and anchors. After spending a full day with the two of them I realized that the more they talk to each other, the higher their voices got, as if whoever can get the loudest wins dominance and respect, a feat that got old quick.

*

Coming down here to meet my mother's birthmother had me thinking about my mother's birthfather, Skip. I could guess that the only thing giving my mother a feeling of unworthiness was her adopted parents' lack of good parenting. But my mother confided in me when I was older that part of her feeling this way has to do with Skip, who fully knew of Leslie's pregnancy, and later the adoption, but had nothing to do with either. For a long time, I thought his absence was a good thing. However, Skip and my mother reconnected briefly shortly after my birth. I remember meeting him once not long before our trip to Florida. I remember he was tall and fat and bald, but what gave me the

impression that he was not going to be an important figure in my life was that in a fleeting moment, he was gone. Gone before I could tell you the details of his face other than that he had a mustache. Gone before I could figure out what traits I'd acquired from him.

The only form of connection I've had with Skip is our friend status on Facebook. He used to message me once in a while, ask how everything was going, to which I never or hardly ever responded. Maybe I felt bitter the way things worked out. Maybe I thought he should be reaching out to my mother instead of me. Since high school, I have not heard from him. My mother requested I block him from all social media after he said something cruel to her, like how sensitive she is or something.

*

In the front yard of Leslie's house there was an orange tree. It's blanketed by the shadow of some pines that stand in-between Leslie's house and her neighbor's. Oranges bigger than my fist dangled off the tree like summer ornaments. I thought about stepping out into the heat to pluck one, but before I could lift my arm for the door handle my mother rushed out of the house. Her eyes fell downward on the cement, cheeks flushed and fat, wet with tears, her hair drooped beside her face, sticking to her damp forehead.

"What are we doing, Mom?" I asked. But she didn't say anything, and this made me want to drill her again, but Michael turned around and shushed me before I could get another word out.

"Why are we leaving?" he asked in a whisper.

She put the car in reverse and twisted her torso toward the backseat. Her eyes focused on the road behind us. The car maneuvered into the street and I felt the brakes

catch the wheels. We moved forward, passed Leslie's home, the orange tree, and just like that we were gone. I wasn't sure if I would ever get to know Leslie, but I realized I was more upset about leaving the orange tree without getting to pluck one of its juicy, vibrant fruits, something to eat on the way home, wherever that was going to be.

I found out later that an orange can be a symbol for love and luck, success and prosperity, things that we found little of here. But we did have those things back in Jersey. We retreated home to our other family. The one we grew up with. With the people who raised us, who have loved us no matter if we sought out our blood relatives or disagreed over something petty and small.

There was a feeling that I would never understand what happened inside Leslie's house that day. I knew better than to ask. Until one day, as an adult, I did ask my mother what had happened. All that she could say was that, "Leslie was being a bitch."

*

So once again we were on the road, silent, and headed towards Orlando to find a flight home. I thought about Skip and Leslie and how they let my mother go, that it seemed they didn't want her back, and how fragile family can be. My mother reached her hand on Michael's shoulder, and then on my knee. She grabbed it until it hurt, but I remember letting her do it anyway.

Tell me you were abused as a child. Tell me someone touched you in a place he shouldn't have. Where was it? Where did he touch you? Who abused you? Was it that kid Vinny down the street? Was it his older brother? What was his name? Tell me what happened. You can talk to me. I am your mother. You can tell me anything.

Was it on a day like today? It was summer, I know it. You kids always were roaming the neighborhood unsupervised. You liked to go up Wimbledon Road and jump your bikes on those dirt ramps. I know it. I drove by a couple of times just to check them out, to see if you were there. But you weren't. You were at that boy Carmen's house. The one with all the toys scattered across the front yard. Not in a good way either. It didn't look like anyone lived there. Like it was abandoned. That's where you were. I found out because I saw Timmy riding his skateboard down Wimbledon that day. I asked if he saw you and he said he did see you. He said you were riding scooters with Carmen and Billy and that you were headed to Carmen's house.

My Father Plays Guitar

I remember I was bent over the side of my bed with the waistband of my shorts wrapped around my ankles. The carpet made lines in my knees, and I could hear the sandpaper sound of my father's belt pulled from the loops of his jean shorts. "Do you know why you're being spanked?" he asked. I didn't. My older brother Michael said, "It was Matthew," and before I knew what was happening, I was pulled by my ear into the bedroom. I'm not sure if it was as intense as it sounds. Maybe I'm chalking it up for dramatic effect. Maybe it really was a severe situation. I'm leaving out my screaming mother, demanding my father to stop. It seemed to make it worse though. All that more dramatic. Still, this doesn't keep me from telling my father I love him.

*

My father has several guitars dangling in the corner of his living room of his one-bedroom condo. The place is filled with modern, brown furniture—leftover from my parents' divorce—and the gray/brown color palette is reminiscent of the archetypal cowboy—the man with no name in a spaghetti-Western who can move from town to

town. Who doesn't abide the law. Whose morals can change from one moment to the next.

But, a picture of a very different man, stricken with morals, sits on a book shelf in the condo. It's a portrait of my father in his New Jersey State Police uniform. The seriousness of his blank, brown-eyed stare is as if someone had said something funny, but the joke blew right over his shiny, bald head. His shaven face is as smooth as the buffed Sergeant's badge on his lapel. This is the image I have of my father spanking me, when my father was a different person; when he chose a career that made sense to him at the time due to his drill-sergeant of a father, whose picture stands upright on the coffee table that shows his white hair flowing to the back of his head. His tan skin is scarred from all those years working in a shipping yard and the abuse he had endured from my great-grandfather, an act that carried over into my father's upbringing, and then slightly into my mine.

The twang of my father's acoustic reverberates off the apartment walls into a whirlwind of inconsistent tempo. My father's rendition of "If I Were A Carpenter" is interrupted by the wrong chords, and him saying, "Oh wait. It's a C, not a G." Nevertheless, he continues to be a regular at the open mic night at Saxby's café across the street. I can imagine him on their small stage opposite the espresso machine wearing a straw cowboy hat, whitewashed jeans that taper his leather boots, and the one-size-too-small Johnny Cash t-shirt.

When he screws up "If I Were A Carpenter," I think it's because he's playing for me, even though my own guitar-playing isn't nearly as good as his. There must be something about being a father that makes you think you've got something to prove to

your son. Maybe it could be the meaning of the song that resonates with him. Like he's asking me that if he were one thing, and not the other, would I love him anyway?

I can see him doing the same thing for his father. Messing up on something he's passionate about. Worried that his father wouldn't appreciate it if it weren't done well. I'm not sure if Albert Maffei Sr. (my Pop-Pop) ever went to my father's football games in college, or if he would have gone to Saxby's and watch him play guitar. But I know for sure my father's parents did the best they could, whether or not he was succeeding in school, if he was on track to graduate college. I wonder how other Italian-American parents were raising their kids in the sixties and seventies.

In Camden, New Jersey, when my father wasn't pushing Leo's Yum Yum ice cream in the summer, he roamed the city streets, smoked cigarettes in alleys, coughing up what his lungs couldn't handle yet; he played Beatles songs in his friend's garage, and later, in the summer of '69, attempted to sneak out the window of his bedroom to go to Woodstock to see Jimi play, but when his father caught him, according to the way my father tells it, Pop-Pop Maffei grabbed my father by the belt and pulled him back into the house and whipped his ass for it.

*

A part of me wants to tell my father to shut up and listen for once. I want to yell. I want to raise my voice now after being told for so many years not to. If he's playing the guitar, or interrupting a story I'm telling, I want to say, "Be quiet! Listen to me!" But the fact that he's not conscious of what he does, and that I can see his good intentions, make me fold and allow him to continue. Because for the longest time my father was reserved. He offered nothing to converse about other than his interest in football and lacrosse.

I should lay it all on him—how emasculating it was when he screamed at me during my lacrosse games when I was ten years old. “Get the lead out of your ass, Matthew!” he would say on the coaches’ sideline. During one game when I missed a shot, dropped a ball, fell on the ground during a scrap, he yelled that I wasn’t his son. He was on the parent’s sideline then. His masculine acts of aggressive dissatisfaction took a toll on me. My love of a sport regressed to the point of wanting to quit, but I didn’t have the nerve to because of an urge to keep him satisfied.

In junior high, I wore his spankings proudly. I judged other kids who misbehaved, saying, “If any of them had been spanked as a child, [etc.],” but the intensity of these spankings I endured, no child should experience. Not with Albert’s body builder physique in a wife-beater, his mafia-esque, intimidating brown eyes standing over a helpless child in their own bedroom, where space is sacred, a sanctuary

*

But as quickly as these moments happened, my father transformed into another person. A goofball. He made us laugh with impressions of Robert DeNiro in *Goodfellas*, and Jim Carrey in *In Living Color*. He showed us films like the Beatles’ *A Hard Day’s Night*, where for weeks afterwards we mastered our own impressions of their Liverpool accents. I realize now that throughout my childhood, my father seemed to be at odds with his police mentality—doubled down by his machismo, unsophisticated upbringing, led by an uncommunicative father—and his guitar-playing, Beatle-loving, comedic instincts.

Now, my father finishes the song on a drawn-out strum of a G chord and gives me a half of a smile, one I’ve seen before despite the Bell’s Palsy, and laughs off the mistakes. “Yo Bud,” he says, shrugging it off, “Still a work in progress.” He calls me

Bud and Pal because it makes him appear to be cool, hip, down with the lingo or something like that. Later, though, I'll think it's more of an unconscious act wrapped in guilt. A way to overcompensate for his father's brutal, impersonal parenting, and his own.

I can almost see myself forty years into the future, basking in the life of a bachelor, tuning my day to the creative impulse I happen to wake up with. Finally, I say. Free to do whatever the hell I want. Following in my father's footsteps.

Regardless of the decisions I make now, regardless of the decisions my father made, he still gives me hope that whatever happens today, tomorrow is there to make up for it. To me, my father redefined what a sixty-something person can do, what they are capable of, and how they still have time to differentiate their present self from their past. Today, him and my mother remain friends. They get along so well that people bet on them getting back together. My father, the entertainer, never ceases to make my mother laugh. And never will he quit validating her as an amazing woman. He's better at communicating. He's empathetic when we need him to be. He is and always will be there for us.

My father's path tells me it's okay to make mistakes. That failure is something we need to do to evolve into better people, granted we push ourselves to do so. But his story tells me that in order to be happy, I need to take care of myself. I need to be selfish. To gratify my needs first before I fall into a path I can't get out of, unless I want to be a single sixty-something who prides himself on being the Clint Eastwood, western archetype. Which I don't.

Today, my father wears a thick, gray beard he's grown out to hide his half-sunken face from the Bell's Palsy that's recently hit him. He no longer lets his temper get the best of him. He talks quietly and is careful with what he says. He tells me he loves me every chance he gets.

To me, my father exemplifies a product of circumstance, and if we make just enough effort, we can change into a better person, a better father, or a better son. And maybe music has something to do with that.

So I drove there. Yes. I did. Can you believe it? No? Me neither, actually. You know I avoided that part of the neighborhood. It was like skid row. And to believe that it was just one block from our house. You remember the house, don't you? We put an addition on it. We had that beautiful backyard with a pool. God, that pool was so nice. Don't you miss those days? I miss those days. Don't you have such fond memories of that house? Nothing happened to you in that house did it? Oh no, there was something that happened, wasn't there? What happened, Matthew? Tell me, please. I am your mother. You can tell me anything.

Oh boy, and that shed. That was such a great little shed. Remember painting it with your brother? Remember the sign? Pop-pop Kornstedt made such a cool sign for it. He called it “Michael’s Place” because Michael would spend hours on end there. He’d imagine it was a fort and you both would play cops and robbers around it. Don’t you remember? My God, you do remember. You remember something happened in that shed, don’t you? You remember it all and you don’t want to talk about it. You can talk about it with me, Matthew. You know you can.

So, You Like The Beatles?

The sun came in through the double window overlooking our backyard and beat hard on my back and neck. I had to wipe the sweat away with something but there was nothing here except for a bunch of loose papers scattered across the desk. One of them on top read in big, bold letters centered at the top, **DIVORCE AGREEMENT**. I stood from the leather chair, grabbed my Gatorade and went downstairs into the living room where I turned on the television after biting into a plum I'd grabbed from the fruit bowl in the kitchen.

Re-runs of *Even Stevens* played in front of me, but I wasn't registering a single frame. I turned the TV off and headed upstairs into my room. I grabbed my iPod, attached my earbuds and put on the album, *Beatles for Sale*, their fourth album that includes "I'll Follow the Sun" and "Eight Days a Week." And then coming in at one of the last songs of the album, "I Don't Want to Spoil the Party," a lesser known Beatles songs, on an even lesser known album. The song, mostly written by John Lennon, is about a guy who thinks going to a party isn't worth it if the girl he loves isn't there. "There's no fun in what I do if she's not there," he sings. By his disappointment of her not showing up, he thinks he'll be sad and ruin the party for the rest.

I used to sing Beatles songs on the bus to and from school. From their early “Love Me Do”-type songs to their more abstract, “I Am the Walrus”—I’d sing in unison with John and Paul, George, and sometimes Ringo. With my headphones on, I thought myself invincible from anyone on that bus. I was singing what I loved, and I wanted people to hear it too. Now *this* is music, I’d say.

*

In the early days, The Beatles were a five-piece folk-jazz group formed by John Lennon, who later wanted Paul McCartney to join after being impressed by his guitar playing and singing. Paul introduced John to George Harrison who, much to John’s chagrin, was a few years younger than the two of them. But When George played them his rendition of “Raunchy” by Duane Eddy, at age fourteen, he was accepted into the band. Soon after, Ringo Starr, who had been in a popular band in Liverpool called Rory Storm and the Hurricanes, quit the band to join The Beatles.

By the time *Beatles for Sale* released, John Lennon had become the most personal in his songwriting. Songs like “No Reply,” “I’m A Loser,” and “I Don’t Want to Spoil the Party,” reveal the singer to be self-effacing and not the macho Teddy Boy who donned black leather and quaffed Elvis hair as a teenager. The first time I heard these songs was around the time of my parents’ divorce. I had just bought *Beatles For Sale* in the form of a CD at an FYE store at the Moorestown Mall in New Jersey. On the album cover, the fab four stares directly into the camera. They’re wearing black coats against an autumn backdrop. Their faces are serious, unlike their previous album covers where the fab four show their Liverpool teeth through full-fledged smiles.

*

After finding the divorce paperwork on the office desk in our house I wasn't sure how to react. I retreated to my room and put on that album. It was part escapism, part finding relief in the meaning of the lyrics. John sings about being betrayed by the girl he loves in "No Reply," being someone he doesn't appear to be in "I'm a Loser," and spoiling a party in "IDWTSP." The melancholia of these songs paired with the harmonies of John and Paul's voice creates in me a safe space I can inhabit for thirty-three minutes, the album's runtime. I imagine myself in the stories they sing to me. I'm the guy looking out the window who sees his girlfriend with another man. I'm the loser who is not what he appears to be. I rock out to their version of Chuck Berry's "Rock and Roll Music," invigorating my love for the genre. "It's got a backbeat, you can't lose it!" Lennon sings.

Still, while the album played through my earphones, all I could think about was what was going to happen when my parents officially, physically separated. Would they ask which of them I wanted to live with? Would it be worse not to be given a choice? Then something happened. Paul McCartney's "I'll Follow the Sun" played. The warm, acoustic guitars plucking together is a new sound for this album. Paul began to sing, "One day, you look to see I've gone/But tomorrow may rain, so I'll follow the sun." The lyrics shimmered with hope in their selfishness. Self-love. Whereas John's songs fall into despair over heartbreak, Paul's told me that I needed to walk my own line. "One day, you'll know I was the one/But tomorrow may rain so I'll follow the sun." Looking back on these lyrics now, I understand that he's talking about a partnership he needs to get out of. He needs to do what's best. But for me then, on my twin bed, sinking into despair, Paul's inspired me.

*

In the year 2000, The Beatles released a compilation album titled *I*, which consisted of virtually every number one hit the band achieved in the UK and the United States. This was my first Beatles album. It had songs from their first hit, “Love Me Do,” to “I Feel Fine,” “Yellow Submarine,” Eleanor Rigby,” and “The Long and Winding Road.” The latter three, however, had less of an impact on my life, as of yet. But songs like “We Can Work It Out” and “Help” were something of a milestone of my childhood.

In seventh grade I experienced my first heartbreak. Her name was Laura and she broke up with me the day before summer break. We’d gone steady for the entirety of the school year. She had the biggest brown eyes I had ever seen. Little brown freckles dotted her round nose and across her cheek bones. Her tongue was the first tongue I had experienced. Our first French kiss happened in a filled parking lot during a high school football game. My older brother was at war in the gridiron while I was getting hard at the taste of my girlfriend’s bubble gum lips, how slimy they were on mine, how juicy her tongue felt in my mouth. I remember pulling away because it was so overwhelming, I had to take a breath. When we parted, I saw her eyes open slowly. They stared into mine and I saw them shift downwards toward my lips. We kissed again and again until we realized we should get back to the stadium to watch the football game with our friends.

When she broke up with me that sunny day, where the yellow school buses lined up in front the school, I watched her walk to her bus and get on without the slightest hesitation. I walked up the steps of my bus and took a seat by the window. I did what I always did and pulled out my iPod to listen to The Beatles. “We Can Work It Out” was the song I played. Maybe I shouldn’t have listened to this one right away, after a breakup, because at that point it was too late; there was nothing to work out. She ended what could

have been a beautiful thing. Nevertheless, I sang along. “Think of what you're saying/You can get it wrong and still you think that it's alright.”

I was getting back the confidence in myself. It was like hearing “I’ll Follow the Sun” for the first time. The Beatles’ lyrics picked me back up and affirmed my worthiness. They told me I didn’t need anyone but myself. “Think of what *I’m* saying,” I sang along, aggressively, “We can work it out and get it straight or say goodnight.”

*

In high school, I felt as if I graduated from The Beatles’ early pop songs like “We Can Work It Out,” and graduated into their more abstract, psychedelic songs like “Love You To” and “Tomorrow Never Knows,” “Within You Without You,” and risqué songs like “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown),” about an affair. At the same time, I was separating myself from my parents’ divorce.

I began smoking marijuana regularly. I got caught up in the social world of high school. As a freshman, I looked up to the juniors and seniors, who always seemed to be talking about interesting new music and films, who smoked weed, played sports, and partied at someone’s house whose parents didn’t care. These notions—or no, romanticized ideas, of who I wanted to become was the root of my urges to get high, to be cool.

I remember getting stoned for the first time in someone’s Jeep. A guy two grades above me. The intense feeling of excitement and wonder and joy pulsed through my brain as quickly as I blew out the puff of smoke. It was like everything intensified in such a way that reality became more real than I could have ever realized. Things in life that I could handle before, all of a sudden, became anxiety inducing. Smoking weed is

supposed to relax you. It's supposed to chill you out and make you carefree. Take the edge off. But for me, it put on more edge than I ever wanted.

I remember my mother came to pick me up that night. A few of my friends asked if I could give them a ride home. Sitting in the car with my mother and my non-high friends became one of the worst car rides of my life. My mother kept asking why we were being so weird. Looking back now I'm sure that she smelled marijuana on my clothes, after all, the Jeep's windows were closed when all four of us smoked from the bong that was passed around, hot-boxing the car like an oven. I remember when I opened the back door of the jeep, a big cloud of smoke came out with me and disappeared into the air.

It was then that my mother became suspicious of what I was up to. She knew I was getting high. She blamed it on herself and the divorce, which I never copped to. Maybe it was. Maybe it was just something high school kids did. Maybe it was my love for sixties rock music, when weed and rock and roll were synonymous.

*

In the beginning of junior year, after I got my license, I decided I could wake up an hour early before school, meet with two friends and get high together like I was some functioning stoner out of a Seth Rogan movie. It became tradition to meet at a specific location in the woods and pass a bowl around the three of us, then drive to the school just in time for homeroom where I would sit uncomfortably as the unknown strand of weed surged through my nerves and made them stand on end. It was like everyone stared at me as if they were all in on it. I was high, and my eyes were bloodshot, half-closed, and it felt like I walked different, like I could feel my arms dangling stiff beside my body. I had

to remind myself to sway them, to act casual by shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans. It was the first time I felt my insecurities revealed themselves and I hadn't any control of them.

I never thought of myself as an anxious person. I could walk through the hallways of school and say hello to everyone I passed. Not because I was outgoing or trying to be, but because I knew them, and they seemed to like me.

My friends and I gathered in the fields deep within the woods of our neighborhoods and smoked until our lungs have had it, until each one of us coughed our way into peak high, where the stars had never been noticeable until these moments, and the stillness of the woods was as present as the car we leaned against; deer trotted out from the trees and grazed in the moonlight, making us freeze and ponder our existence in a world full of wildlife. We realized then that the tribulations our families willed upon us didn't have to drag us down with them. Out here we lost ourselves in the universe we float through, how grandiose it is and how small we are. How humbling it was to take a beat from our routines of football practice, homework, family, and think about our role as humans in this world; we could smell our futures in the breeze that came out of the pines.

We got back in the car, and I remember having a feeling like I could grasp my existence in the world. An epiphany of who I was, my role, like a therapist dissecting everything, my parents, my friends, all of our dynamics in this web of relationships. I put on a song by The Beatles. "Within You, Without You." George Harrison's hypnotic ode to a higher consciousness. We sat and let the song consume us. We giggled at the lyrics. The ideas of "wall[s] of illusions" and "the space between us all." Life flowing on between us all.

The Beatles were my portal into different ideas like the one expressed in George's song. What kept me loving The Beatles more everyday was that I could live through their experiences. George's experience from a pop star to a student of Hinduism became my experience. I learned what they did about religion, spirituality, the music industry through their success and faults at EMI and Apple Records. But the band also kept me grounded. They kept me true to who I am, while letting me evolve at the same time.

Maggie! We got Maggie at that house. Remember Maggie? She was our dog. The cutest little Bichon. Aww, remember she just slept on that pink blanket we had. She slept all day long on that blanket. Such a tired puppy. But then she wasn't so tired anymore.

Remember she ran out of the house that morning when there was two feet of snow on the ground. You could hardly see her because she blended right in with the snow. You were trying to catch the bus to school when she got out. I remember how red your face got.

Everyone on the bus watching you and Michael trying to grab Maggie. She was always running away wasn't she. I guess I don't really remember walking her that much. She just needed to go, didn't she? I mean get the ants out of her pants.

Razor Love

When I walk into Alchemy, an acupuncture clinic and tea room in North Asheville, I walk a thin line bordering rigid professionalism and casual looseness. It could be the immediate smell of broth and ghee, the wall of jars filled with dried herbs, that make me feel like I've stepped into an unnatural habitat. My casual looseness has to do with my girlfriend, Liza, behind the counter. She's studying Chinese medicine and has worked at Alchemy since we've started dating three years ago.

I should say I'm no stranger to Chinese medicine—one can't be when their girlfriend is in school for it. I've gotten acupuncture here a few times. But since Liza started practicing on the public at her school's student clinic, I've become one of her returning patients. I've seen her for anxiety, allergies, back pain, chest pain, depression. Her needles—her treatments—have healed me physically and mentally.

Behind the counter, Liza wears black jeans and a loose button-down that is protected by a turmeric-stained apron. Her hair's been cut short to her shoulders and her black bangs sway to the side. Ashley has suggested making Liza a co-owner. This is something we've talked about: how owning Alchemy, a business whose mission statement involves healing people on a physical and mental level, a place that adds

growth to a community Liza supports, is something she would very much be interested in. Alchemy's location and Liza's Acupuncture licensure, both exclusive to North Carolina, would then solidify her in Asheville.

Liza joins me where I am in the tea room, puts her hand on my shoulder and asks how the milkshake was. I tell her it was perfect. She lowers her head to me and puckers her lips asking for a kiss. The sweat on her upper lip gives mine a layer of wetness and I exaggerate just how sweaty she is from being in the kitchen all day.

*

A few months ago, I tell Liza I'm thinking of moving to New York. And that even if I don't go to New York, I'll be leaving Asheville in a year after I graduate from school, either driving across the country to live with my brother in Seattle or heading north to Philadelphia to live with a friend to make films.

We're lying in bed one morning when I tell her. She shifts away from me as if my touch on her feels dirty. A disease she has manifested.

"I thought you wanted to settle here," she says.

"I thought I did too," I said.

And maybe I still want to. But not now. Not while there's still hope inside that drives me to take risks, where risk and failure can be one in the same, where at twenty-six risks are still affordable.

She gets out of bed because our two dogs, red and white heelers, begin to bark at us and whine. "I have to get ready for school," she says.

“I’ll feed the pups,” I say. But the dogs follow her down the hall. I stay in bed a little longer because maybe creating space between us in this moment is the best thing for her. Let her process without me looming over her shoulder as if needing something from her.

It’s not long before I get up, but the dogs are already eating. They’re eating anxiously in their metal bowls, fiercely scarfing down their breakfast as if it is the last time they’ll be eating together (I would eventually give Maple back to a foster home). I think maybe they hear Liza sobbing in the shower and maybe they can differentiate which drops come from the shower and which are Liza’s tears.

Liza cries the whole morning through. While she puts her clothes on. While she picks them out of her closet. While she dries her hair and she brushes her teeth. I’m not sure if holding her, hugging her, or just standing by, would make it better or worse. I try to do these things, carefully, but she doesn’t want any of it. When she walks out the door of the house, I follow her, saying how sorry I am. She gets in the car and shuts the door in front of me. The tears pour down her bloodshot face, and her mouth widens in the worst way as she puts the car in reverse. Later that day she texts me, “We need to take space.”

*

I met Liza seven years ago. She came to my house one night with some friends my roommate had invited over. This is what she tells me, anyway. I was stoned. My eyes too heavy. Sunken into the couch. I probably didn’t say a word. But later, we ran into each other at a music festival on the beach. Weed internalizes me. Alcohol doesn’t. We danced and sang songs around a bonfire into the morning hours.

After getting up with her at parties and hardly talking, but kissing the whole night through, we decided to go on a proper daytime date. Because we were in Wilmington, and because we were both going through a phase, we smoked some weed before our breakfast date. Her pale, natural face was unlike every other girl I had met in college. We exchanged a few words, but nothing like the conversations we'll have three years later after I messaged her on social media. We had been living on opposite sides of the state and I hadn't spoken to her since that first date. I said I regretted not pursuing her seriously back then. Even though we hardly talked to one another, there was an immediate connection. There was chemistry. Moments of silence between us felt comfortable.

We wrote letters to each other about what we were up to now, how we were finally finding our footing in life—what we were both doing felt right. She told me she had just begun Acupuncture school and I told her that I was back on track to get my BA. I told her I wouldn't be coming to Asheville anytime soon, that I hardly had reason to. But then my friend from New Jersey planned a trip to Cherokee to see his father and had invited me along. I learned how close Cherokee was to Asheville and I planned to meet up Liza then.

She took me to a coffee shop, then to a park along the river. We laid a blanket down and her dog Junie, a white mixed cattle dog, sat beside us. Steam rose above our coffee and swirled its caramel aroma between us. I can't recall specifics of what was said. I remember talking about religion, if God was a figure in her life. "Maybe not a God,"

she said, “but definitely a higher power.” Looking back now it seems our conversations led themselves into typical first date territory.

“What do you like to do outside of work?”

“Do you have any favorite books or movies?”

“What kind of music are you listening to?”

“Did you vote?”

*

In three years, we created a life together. We designed a home with furniture we found at the Goodwill and Habitat for Humanity. I accepted her dog, Junie, as my own. We even adopted another dog, a squirmy red cattle dog we named Maple. We explored the Blue Ridge Mountains. She brought me to waterfalls and waterholes, hikes where at the top would be a 360-degree view of the surrounding mountains, and sometimes the city skyline. A city that felt like home. We took trips to Florida to see my family and drove to New York to get our dose of a big city. On Thursday nights we cooked dinner with Liza’s parents. We walked to their house in our neighborhood and then, after dinner, we walked to one of Asheville’s brewery’s. We felt Liza’s sister’s heart break when her boyfriend left her, and we learned to accept him again after they got back together. Her sister’s dogs play with ours. We take them in the woods so they can roam and so we can escape our work grind.

Liza introduced me to her friends who greeted me with hugs and who held space for me to speak. We hung out at our houses and cooked dinner and drank craft beer. We went out to dance parties and, in the mornings, we went to our neighborhood coffee shop and drank Americanos.

We talked about baby names. Girl names were always easier to choose than boys. We liked Maeve, Margueax, Cleo, Sofia. At the time, I imagined us sharing stories from work, although hers would be vague because of confidentiality. I would tell her tales of the coffee shop—rants, really—about ungrateful customers, a line that never ends, the different music choices of my co-workers. But hopefully I would be writing for the local paper, or busy rehearsing lines for a film or a play, maybe I'd be spending days off writing something of my own. Maybe Liza would be successful enough at Alchemy to open her own business and I would work part time and pursue my creativity while the kids are at school. Maybe things would be hunky-dory, after all.

One summer, a few of our friends got married. We had three weddings to attend between May and July. We drove back to Wilmington, where we met, and watched her old roommate get hitched in the morning within the lush greenery of Airlie Gardens, a preserved public garden in Wrightsville Beach. A southern accented priest officiated and spoke of God's role in the marriage and afterwards we drank Bloody Marys and mimosas and ate chicken and waffles. At another wedding, Liza's boss married her now wife at a brewery and was catered by the best barbeque in town.

We talked about our would-be wedding. We'd have a party in our future house in our perfectly landscaped backyard that would be fenced in for our dogs. We'd have twenty or thirty people come. There would be no priest. No talk about God, but maybe the universe and something about the compatibility of her Libra and my Cancer sign.

*

A few weeks after we took space from each other, waiting for friends to come over. I had rescinded on my plan to leave. The reality of leaving her was so real, I thought I couldn't do it. How could I attempt a life as an artist without her there with me, giving me the confidence to decide to that in the first place?

So I decided to stay, and things went back to normal. We had candles lit, lights dimmed, a playlist of alt-rock and hip-hop sounded through a speaker. My mother called me that afternoon to tell me she was thinking of moving back to New York from Florida. "I'm so unhappy here, Matt," she said. "But I have a good job right now." Her friend in the city had an apartment available—the same one my mother lived in a few years ago—the same one her friend kicked her out of, so her daughter could live there. But now it's available and she offered it to my mother again.

She wanted me to come with her. She wanted the best for me. She wanted me to be in New York, the publishing mecca where I could find a proper job, a career, to succeed in the field I studied in school. Settling in Asheville at twenty-six would be a waste of my youth. "I would love to see you in New York," she told me. She would love to see me strive for something better than the small money I would make here.

After the conversation with my mother, I fell victim to a state of mind preoccupied by the future. My body was moving, but my face was still, my thoughts were stuck on a year from now. It didn't take long for Liza to see that I was somewhere else, figuring out something in my mind. Maybe it was the same playlist she always put on with the same songs we've heard a thousand times that made me realize the lack of evolution from two years ago to now. Why was I feeling sick of hearing this? Why

wasn't she? Because for a while I didn't mind it. I liked learning new songs from her, but it seemed she hardly took any of my songs and added them to her playlist.

Maybe it's not just New York I'm yearning for. Maybe it's Liza I'm outgrowing. I think I need someone who I can share my passion with, other than nature and music and having a dependable sensibility. Her incessant dependence, the small baby voice she uses, her confidence that falls incredibly short when she's around her family. Upon realizing that her capacity for healing only goes so far. When I bring up New York again, her soul collapses. She retreats to the front porch. I join her, forcing us to have a conversation neither of us want to have.

In this moment, I think of our recent trip to New York. How the city swallows anyone who enters it. How the subways take you from uptown to midtown to downtown and into Brooklyn or Harlem or Queens. How you're joined by hundreds of people at once, and when you walk up into the streets, you're joined by thousands, all of whom come from all over the world. How everyday new people move there. How every day you see firsthand the trends walking on the streets. How you either keep up with them, or choose to ignore them. How exciting it is to walk by a celebrity or a billionaire and how tangible it is you feel like you can reach that status yourself. When I come back to Asheville I feel my own ambition diminish into the small streets I walk on. My guard is lowered and I'm back to being uncomfortably content. I feel myself slip into the same habits. Maybe it comes from being surrounded by the same people, all doing the same things. The small art events, film screenings, the local artists, the local this and local that. I'm realizing that locality in art is limiting. I want to experience things on a global level. I don't know what exactly that entails, but I know it exists just from walking those streets

in New York. Walking by people speaking several different languages, all on the same block.

My mother does have a point about being too young to settle in one small town with a girl who became my first serious girlfriend in my adult life. There is something about that that makes me want to roam free for a while.

*

Here's an Experience: New York City, 2006, my middle school takes us up from South Jersey. We're dropped off at W 42nd on 8th Avenue. Madame Tussauds Museum is just around the corner. The morning fog floats above us hovering through the tallest buildings I have even seen. Our history teacher, Mr. Rudman, leads a single file line of seventh graders up 42nd street and across an intersecting avenue. He could be the double for George Costanza, with his short bow legs and stocky frame. He sounds like Jerry Seinfeld with a nasal voice caused by his large nose in which his wire-rimmed glasses sit upon.

To give you a better sense of Mr. Rudman, during school in his classroom, he plants himself at the front on a stool in front of pull-down map. Everyday it's a collared shirt that is loose around his gut but tight around his biceps, just enough to intimidate his students; that, and the "Colonel Rudman" sign that hangs above the door, proof of his military past.

In New York City, he's sporting the usual outfit: khaki pants, brown leather shoes, an olive-green polo. But seeing him in unfamiliar territory gives me anxiety. This man does not belong in this city. And then, Mr. Rudman comes inches away from being

run over by a yellow cab at the crosswalk. “Hey!” he says. “I’m walkin’ here!” and slaps his hand down on the hood of the cab.

New York City had become a place where you could become someone different. Someone better, even. That you could change from a middle school history teacher in the southern farmlands of New Jersey—one who is slow to reach for the chalk—into a fiery, fearless man at the crosswalk beneath the infinite reach of steel buildings that overlook millions of people from across the globe. Just a step off the Greyhound would do it.

For my mother, it was her white Land Rover that brought her into the city. Maybe it was the people she met through her interior design field. Maybe it was her best friend who offered to rent out one of her apartments to my mother. Maybe it was the stagnated feeling of being in south Jersey that pushed her towards the big city. She had done all she could for her two children. We were in high school and college. We were jaded and in our own routines with our girlfriends and our sports. My mother was ready to begin anew. My father moved back into our four-bedroom house, and she moved into a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan. That was the deal.

My mother lived a fairly luxurious life in the city. For a while, she worked at a ritzy furnishing store where a famous actor would pop in every so often. Her apartment was uptown just off Central Park south. She went to bars in Chelsea and the Upper East Side. She went out to extravagant dinners with wealthy, Wall Street men and government men donned in suit and ties. At this time of my mother’s life, it was the happiest I had seen her. But there was a constant guilt she threw at me when I saw her. “Did I abandon you?” she asked. “Are you upset with me?” The honest truth was, “No.” In fact, I was

incredibly happy for her. She was thriving in a big city that chews people up and spits them back to where they came from.

Maybe that's what I wanted for myself. After the middle-school trip, I remember thinking, "That's where I want to move. I want to walk those city blocks when I'm older." I wanted to make something of myself, and walking those blocks proved that you did. I saw my mother's experience in the city and the luxury of it all. The fine dining. Front row at Broadway musicals. Rooftop bars facing the Chrysler Building. Seeing actors exit backstage and walk off into the city, the same city my mother resided in.

*

One of the things an acupuncturist does is create movement in your body. They help circulate the qi. The life-energy. They use needles to activate points along the meridian systems, vertical channels, to move life-energy through areas in your body such as your heart, liver, kidneys, small and large intestine, arms and legs, and your stomach, to name a few. This is the briefest overview I am capable of explaining, but the point is, moving to a major city like Manhattan is what my body needs to circulate energy.

There might only be so much Liza can do to keep the energy in my body moving. Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) can only get me so far as an artist. There are still so many cultures to experience, so much failure to endure in order to evolve.

Failure that runs out here in Asheville.

Was it about your father and me? Tell me Matthew. What do you remember? Did the divorce have any effect on you? Do you remember him sleeping on the couch a lot? Because you know he wanted to do that. He said it was better for his back. In fact, he slept on the floor a lot of the time. Must have gotten use to those hard bunks at the police academy. He was like a drill sergeant in that house, wasn't he? What was it he said to you boys at night? Oh yeah! "Ten toes up! Lights Out!" That really scared you guys back then. I remember the looks on your faces when he said it. Your big brown eyes shot out of your head and you ran into your room and cuddled into your bed. I miss you at that age. Do you remember being that age? Do you have fond memories from your childhood? I hope you do. They were some really good times. Nothing happened to you did it? Nothing I should know about?

Home Videos

Silent and wide-eyed. I am cool and distant. I am taken by the hand and am told what to do. I am two. I am clumsy. At my birthday party I am looked at with telescopic eyes from my mother, and the camera lens my father holds. I am eclipsed by my brother's attention-driven antics and his friends who are four years older.

My father zooms into a close-up of my mother, then to me. Her yellow bangs fall halfway down her forehead and her make-up hasn't been applied today, making her look as though I'm seeing her for the first time. She's got on an off-white one-piece and tells my father not to film her. As for me, I'm wearing a neon-green tank top and a matching bathing suit, my hair cut short, military-style. I'm content where I am in her arms—my hand grasps her pale shoulder, and there's a concerned look on my face as I turn to watch the kids in the pool. Michael is on the diving board yelling out for our father to film him. He springs into the air, opens his mouth and squeezes his eyes closed. I point to him and I don't say anything. My mother turns and walks me away from the pool, and as we move further away from the camera, I look into the lens. My father zooms in on me and I smile and bring my hands to my face in a game of peek-a-boo.

*

My girlfriend's nephew Arlo is two years old and ever since I've known him, he's worn a brown and yellow beaded necklace that stylizes his baby body. I find hilarious his fascination with fizzy water, not flat water, and his crave for coffee, but it's really his interest in the cup we use, a can, glass, bottle, ceramic mug. One time I was drinking beer out of a bottle when he asked if it was "bizzy" water. He demanded me to give him some.

"I want that," he said.

I told him he couldn't have any.

"Why not, Matt?" he said.

I told him it was a grown-up drink, to which he said comprehensively, "Oh."

Arlo's parents keep him active by bringing him outdoors into the woods for hikes, trails for bike rides, lakes, and anything else the Smokey Mountains offer for recreation. They feed him well. Arlo demands for more broccoli and kale and carrots. Foods that I would leave wilting on my plate for hours before my mother finally let me have dessert.

When Liza and I visit Arlo at his parent's house we always receive a loud hello from him. Every time I hear him say, "Hey, Matt!" from the floor where he's playing with his toy truck, I can feel the chemicals in my brain release and the blood flow into my heart that makes it melt; I guess this is something all parents feels when they receive love and recognition from their child. But this feels more than that. I'm not his family at all.

*

There's footage from the mid-90s of my mother and me in our first house. There's a red carpeted living room with a tube tv in the corner and a blue couch facing a La-Z-Boy. Here comes a kickball from the couch where my mother sits.

"Give it here," she says.

I scrunch my face, give her a menacing look and throw it as hard as I can. She catches it in her stomach and tells me what a good throw it was. I run in a circle and smile, blush, then jump onto the blue chair to wait for her to throw it back.

“Come stand down here,” she says. I shake my head and smile. I’m not going anywhere. She throws it to me and it bounces off my belly and I buckle with laughs. My father pans back and forth from me to my mother. Her dirty-blond hair is in a pony tail and she’s wearing thin sweatpants and a baggy t-shirt.

“Get the ball, Matthew,” she says. I shake my head in defiance. The ball is beside the chair next to a basket that’s overflowing with curled magazines. I stand up on the chair, the fat in my legs hold me sturdy, and I swing my arms back and flail them forward thrusting myself into the air. I spin my body around and land on my hands and knees and giggle as I pick myself up.

*

In a long close up of my face from my mother holding the camera, I attempt to doggy paddle, and my mother is repeating from behind the camera not to drink the water. “Albert, watch him,” she says. I lift my chin and smile. I’m wearing a red one-piece bathing suit with a floaty at my waist. I like the attention. My brother isn’t around which makes me the star.

Now there’s a toy speedboat my father resurfaces with, saved it from sinking, and pours the water out and positions it right side up in front of me. I grab onto it and hit the boat relentlessly to figure out how it works. Then, the boat is pulling me along and I look up to see my father. I’m holding onto it as he gives me ride around the pool. His body is thick with black hairs. But then there’s his young, smooth face. He laughs. And then I

laugh. My mother zooms in too close to grasp the baby fat in my cheeks. “Don’t drink the water, Matthew,” she says.

*

In the next scene my father is standing beside group of kids, where Michael is in the center, and they are clawing their way to him to see what the fuss is about. “It’s a super-soaker!” He yells and throws the wrapping paper aside. “Let me see, Mike” my mother says. She’s filming and zooms in on my brother’s big smile.

Michael thanks whoever in a small voice, inaudible from where I’m sitting halfway across the yard at several picnic tables, lined together, covered in white paper and birthday hats and small balloons. I’m alone, talking to myself or someone who isn’t there, and fiddling with the paper plates in front of me. My mother zooms closer to get a good look at my face, which is blank, indifferent because there aren’t any thoughts coming through or maybe I’m confused or just thinking about what my fingers are doing. Whatever it is, I am okay with it. I think I like being away from the action.

There’s an immediate cut in the film. Everyone is in the kitchen now. My father is behind the camera, taking on as little responsibility as possible during these family functions. He documents with the camera, which he is good at. Throughout this particular birthday party, in other videos, he takes part in the pie throwing contest, volunteers himself to be the target. He smokes a cigar in between pies. My mother directs the other characters, especially me, who wanders aimlessly without a particular comprehensive notion of what is happening, other than that there are people here for something.

Now we are at the kitchen table and I’m sitting in a high chair with its own table attached to it. A cake is in front of me and sitting beside me is my brother and our cousin

Kevin and Nicole, there are other kids around the table I don't recognize. Decorated on the cake is a green power ranger and a candle in the shape of the number 6.

*

When Arlo tells me he rides a "big-boy bike," at first, I'm surprised by his enthusiasm to talk to me. At two years old, I would never had talked to someone so maturely, let alone be riding my bike without training wheels. His older brother, Bridger, has an aggressive energy that matches my brother's when he was Bridger's age. Despite Bridger's energy being the primary attention in the first years of Arlo's life, Arlo, instead of balancing his brother's energy with a silent calmness, he seems to match the energy of his brother too. But it's a different kind of energy. Instead of exerting himself physically, Arlo uses his voice. He takes in what we say, listens intently, and responds in a loud raspy proclaim. "It's my birfday today!" he says through a Facetime call.

"How old are you, Arlo?"

He pauses and looks off camera to his mother. "I want you to tell them," he demands to his mom.

"Can you count on your fingers?" his mother says.

She holds up his hand and one by one she closes his finger until there is three left standing. "You're three," she says.

"I'm three!" he says into the camera and smiles and bites his lower lip.

*

Like every other kid at the end of summers, my mother took me to Target to buy school supplies. I remember getting giddy at the sight of infinite pens and pencils to choose from. I always picked out the coolest, most slick mechanical pencil I could I find,

and I loved finding which size lead to buy for it. There was the aisle of notebooks in a variety of colors. The Trapper Keepers got me excited to be organized. I had my mother buy me a planner because I was going to write down all of my assignments. I wanted to use a tab system in each trapper-keeper to file my tests, quizzes, and notes. Every year meant a new backpack, because somehow the one from the year before had been too used to show up on my first day of school. My new bag had to have all the pockets; Two in the front and several inside. Also, how could I forget a pencil case to hold all of my writing utensils and erasers and a pencil sharpener.

With all of my new supplies, I entered each classroom that first week excited. But every year I my notebooks went unfilled and unorganized. My planner went the whole year empty except for the first week. I regressed from the excited A+ striving boy to an average C student. School became those parties my parents threw for us. Too many people I didn't know. Too much to look at to be able to focus on one thing. I escaped this stimulus overload and hid within the thoughts in my mind.

Every year up until college it was like this. I was frustrated with the work, the students even. It was like I wanted to be somewhere else. Home. I wanted to be back in the neighborhood. I wanted to be on the streets, skateboarding, riding my bike, with my neighbors, who all went to different schools. I didn't want to challenge my mind. I wanted to challenge my body. Push it to the limit. I wanted to build the biggest dirt ramp to see how far and high I could get on my bike. I wanted to master a kickflip on my skateboard. Build a tree house in the woods across from my house. I couldn't wait to get home, where I'd meet up with my brother and we would finally get to continue whatever

film project we were shooting. We choreographed fight scenes, imitated scenes from *Mission: Impossible*.

Every year since those times, I never settled in the present, unless I was doing something I loved.

*

In a memory, there's a yellow shag carpet in the basement. My brother is on his knees next to a toy blowing out fake butterflies. They fluff into the air above us and I'm standing with a catching net, waving at them as the butterflies gather in the mesh. The camera moves closer to my face that exaggerates my flabbergast expressions. I bite my lower lip and then open my mouth when I catch one in my net. "You got 'em!" Michael says. "Look Matt, there's more over here." He stands up now and grabs his own catching net. He starts to swat at the flies, taking control of who's catching what.

In a few years I'm nine years old and I sneak crawl down the stairs into this basement. The lights will be off, and the flicker of dull images will emit from a television in the corner room. My brother and two of his friends will be watching a movie. Each of them will have their girlfriend beside them. The carpet mashes itself in between my fingers as I crawl toward the room, so I'm not seen. There's a window in the wall that looks into the next room. I slowly rise, and I catch glimpses of heads tilted towards each other, moving in an odd way, and I hear the suction of lips and cheeks emit from the heads. I quickly come back to the carpet and hold in my giggle. I cover my mouth with my hand. I feel an odd sense of excitement about what is going on in the other room.

Well, there was that time Michael got bit by dog. You were there for that. I didn't see it. At that Tony's house. Filthy. I remember you rode your bike home sobbing. I couldn't even make out what you were saying. Was that it? Was that what happened to you? You know, there are worse things to happen to children. Seeing a big Rottweiler bite your brother on the mouth isn't the worst of them. Boy that must have been traumatic though. I mean his bottom lip was dangling off his mouth. I remember how much blood there was when I went to pick him up. That was scary.

Are you sure nothing happened to you? Nothing I need to know about? You can tell me. I am your mother. You can tell me anything.

Hunky Dory

It's the smell of soy sauce in a veggie stir-fry that comes out of the kitchen—that, and the unwavering anxiousness that comes out in sweat on Liza's lip. Her black tank top is damp on her back. She dodges her worry about her parents, who are going through a rough patch in their relationship. They're taking space from each other. She's heard it all a thousand times from her adoring mother, that she's unhappy in her marriage. Feels trapped. Stagnant. Stuck. Judged by her husband and her kids because she wants to explore the world with or without their father.

Her hope shines again when she brings up my parents, divorcees, but now really good friends. People tell me this is rare with divorced people. But, beneath the surface of which people outside of the family see, there is leftover spite and guilt and anger, pain, drama. I tell Liza this. That it took years aplenty for my parents to settle their differences, their past actions. That they were without contact for a long time before they realized how inevitable it was for them to speak again. I tell Liza that maybe this is what her parents need. That they might have to do the same thing. That her family's hunky-dory dinner parties—where Liza's mother is the director and the glue—and how it won't be the same without her.

“But it gets easier,” I tell her as I mix the veggies.

She nods and shifts her eyes downward.

Cooking dinner with Liza, cooking for her, embodies the hunky-doriness that I rarely saw in my parents. When they were together, my dad worked long days and even longer nights when he got promoted. I knew that there are a multitude of reasons why my father fell short of pleasing my mother. One, she is a hard woman to please. And I know why my mother married him in the first place. The history of both their upbringings; and how they got together, feels serendipitous and tragic all the same. But that’s for another time.

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The phrase honky-dory is one I like to use often. It usually slips right out. My subconscious in full effect. A Freudian slip because it’s something my mother says.

I usually phrase it in the negative, like, “Not everything was all honky-dory,” a statement here referring to my parents, of course. But something irks me when I use this phrase, because, I think, it’s the way my mother would say it. Like slapping me in the face with reality, she would say that life isn’t always honky dory. Every time it slips out from my lips, it affirms the impression she’s had on me. It reveals that I have deep within me part of my mother’s diction and outlook on the world. It opens me up and resurfaces parts of myself I have tried to suppress. Parts of myself that gets frustrated at simple tasks. My uncoordinated body. My laziness. My need to constantly please people that don’t deserve pleasing.

I tried to imagine, as a teenager and then young adult, that I could reinvent myself. In part, doing this included suffocating myself in my social life. Spending all of my time at a friend's house skateboarding, filming movies, playing basketball, etc.

I enjoyed experiencing the lives my friends led in their households where their parents were fun and involved, together. I observed their family dynamic, their six-o'clock dinners, beach vacations, the father's childlike humor, the mother's playful reactions. But it was more than this. It was the neighborhoods they lived in. The activities we created for ourselves—the jackass stunts, the roller hockey, the short films, playing 'jailbreak in the backyards of their neighbors' houses. I wasn't only getting away from my quiet single parent home, I was involving myself in a community of kids, all of us vacationing from our lives, be it the football field or the living room, and all the while feeling creative, free.

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My house sat in a row of homes along a busy street, at an intersection where a double-red flashing light hung above a four way stop. There was nothing fun about it, except for the backyard lacrosse goal, an acre of woods to play paintball (which gets expensive), and the Wawa up the street—which, actually isn't fun at all unless you really had nothing going for you, then you'd go there to smoke cigarettes and loiter there with the trashcans against the building.

"There's more to do at my friend's house," I told my mother. She'd asked me why I wouldn't have them over here. Again and again I'd tell her, "It's where everyone else goes. I'm not the only one not having people over." Still, she convinced herself

otherwise. That I was embarrassed or ashamed to have them over because of the divorce. Our broken household. Like they cared about that anyway.

The fact is, my friends gladly hosted. Besides, with my father moved out and living a few towns over in a two bedroom condo, and my mother working full time, my house didn't fit the mold of a teenager's ideal fun zone (not yet), where the parents bought pizza and wings for NFL games, where they didn't care about making a mess, because their houses weren't furnished with thousands of dollars-worth of antique furniture, where they spent their money instead on things like above-ground pools and cemented basketball courts, and where bikes were aplenty—accumulated from over the years because they hadn't moved homes since they were kids, and then there was the neighborhoods they lived in, especially one with full basketball court and a tennis court.

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My mother's doubt and guilt spread like a sickness. "Are you sure it's not about the divorce? Did something happen to you that you aren't telling me?" And I start to believe her after a while. It feels natural that I would. To feel bad about the things that have happened in my life, even after I've accepted them. At first, I was upset. But I've always felt adaptable. Like when we moved towns and school districts when I was a kid. It was the first big change in my life. I went from going to Catholic school to public school. A neighborhood to, well, not a neighborhood. I continued to play sports during every season, and I stayed with my dad every Wednesday and every other weekend. And you know what? It was actually great. I bonded with my parents, individually. Because they had their own houses to themselves, I got see who they really were. It's like once my

dad moved out, my mother's happy-go-lucky personality bled out—that, and her depression.

I do wonder if things would have been different if my parents stayed together. I wonder if my father had been around if I would have brought my friends over more, or if my parents' dynamic would have been too awkwardly tense that I would have my friends over less than I already did.

I have small, one-second memories of what it was like when my father still lived with us, when him and my mother were around each other. She was always serious. And he was trying to lighten the mood. It makes sense that he's an actor now. He entertained us with voices he'd seen on TV. Characters made up by Jim Carrey or someone like that. Robert DeNiro impressions at every meal. "Delicious, delicious." I can look back now and realize my mother was holding everything in the best she could. She was unhappy, and I was laughing at the man who made her unhappy. The man who didn't try. Who didn't love her hard enough. The way she needed to be loved. With presents and surprises, with everyday affection. With hugs and kisses from a man with some damn agency. Who made things happen. Who did things for her. Who planned. He was none of it. He was hard. He was brutal. He was unaware.

I tell her again and again that none of that affected me. But how could she remove the hundreds of memories of us as kids so innocently blind of what was happening, all while thinking to herself of the many ways, the outcomes, of how'd we end up because of her choice to get a lawyer and file a divorce. How could she get rid of the memory of telling me, at eleven years old, that she and my father were separating, but to use that ugly word she hates so much, *divorce*. The sound of my innocence sobbed out and the

obscene visual of her child's tears running down his pink soft cheeks knowing that she is the cause of it. And my pleading words, begging for her not to do it. "But why," I kept saying. "I just want to be normal."

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That's really all I wanted. I wanted a big home in one of the neighborhoods my friends lived in. I wanted a big grassy back yard with a pool. I wanted an open front yard that looked out at a sunny street. I wanted my friends to roll up unannounced on their bikes. I even wanted to be able to be mad at them for that. I wanted my parents to have holiday parties. I wanted my dad to want to put the Christmas lights up on the porch. I wanted him to care as much as my mother did. I wanted him to be like the Leskys, whose house always smelled like a Christmas tree, where Mr. Lesky seemed to wear the same kitschy, patterned sweater and always had a game on the television, where Mrs. Lesky was always in the kitchen sitting at the table reading the paper. I wanted for my parents a boring suburban life.

I rode my bike through these neighborhoods looking for houses that were for sale. When I found the right one, I'd sit on my bike by the curb and look at the house and imagine our life there. I chose a window that would be mine on the second floor. I looked at the front door like I had walked through it a thousand times. I imagined my bike, our skis, and tennis rackets hanging on the walls of the garage that my dad would keep clean. I saw a backyard where our lacrosse goal would go. I saw myself helping my dad build a fence in the front yard, so our dog Maggie could run freely. I saw it in one breath, then rode home to tell my mom about it.

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Back in the kitchen, where Liza leans against the counter, dipping plantain chips in hummus, I think of how she lived a very normal life. Her parents stayed together, for one. She lived in a big house with a big yard in a quiet neighborhood. Her dad went to work, and her mom stayed home. He became a very typical absent father—typical meaning from what I know about the Sixties era stereotype, one that I associate with my parents' fathers, both of whom were uncommunicative, and incapable of tender expression. He literally was absent for a year, when he was diagnosed with cancer. Liza and her two sisters stayed with friends and relatives for a whole year, maybe more, while her parents sought after the best treatment in the country, which ended up being in Seattle. A few doctors there were experimenting with innovative surgeries, the kind that so happened to be successful. He was cured, and the family was back together again, but I don't think much changed. He went back to work and continued to not take interest in what was happening in Liza's life. At least, the things she cared about.

It turns out, Liza's upbringing was less normal than mine. Her father battled cancer. She was homeschooled for a few years. She lived at her cousins for a whole year. She has two older sisters, one of which briefly became a professional mountain biker. She had to/has to deal with an alcoholic father. And she briefly became anorexic while in college. Right now, as we cook this dinner, this is the most normal we've ever been. Liza maintains a healthy diet and exercises daily. We have just enough distance from our families. I come home at the same time every day. We watch an episode of TV on most nights. We read to each other. We go to the movies. To the same bars. Hang out with the same people. Talk about the same things with our relatives. Repeat and repeat and repeat.

I've gotten to a place where I've always wanted to be. In a relationship. An ideal one. I found someone I felt comfortable to be myself around. To be a fool. A comedian. The best I could've asked for. My history with relationships—romantic ones—has an ebb and flow to it. Since I started thinking about girls as a kid, I sought after them like the world was ending. Every school year since the fourth grade I've had a girlfriend. The first, Taylor Donahue, I kissed on school grounds after twelfth period before the buses arrived. Actually, she kissed me. She had the whole school talking about it that day, leading up to the one-second smooch. At first it was my close friends, but then people I didn't even know were coming up to me, telling me, "Taylor wants to kiss you after school." We dated that summer, smooched at the private pool, looked into each other's eyes like we were in love. I don't remember a single conversation I had with her. Maybe we talked about movies or something like that. Actually, it was The Beatles.

The next year I dated Daria and the year after that it was Laura, then Jessica, then Rachel, Jenn, Alexa, Meredith, and so on. Middle school relationships consist of looking at each other, awkwardly reluctant conversations, and goodbye kisses before and after each class. But they get better over time, with each failed relationship you hope to learn from your mistakes. In high school, they get more complex with more responsibility. Freshman year I talked on the phone to my girlfriend, Kristy. We had just started dating. I couldn't tell you what we talked about. But it was slow-moving with a lot of silences in between.

I dated Jenn my senior year. She was my rock. She was the first person I felt comfortable with where I could truly be myself. Someone I could make a fool of myself in front of and feel okay with that. Who laughed at me, and with me. We dated for a year.

We shared the best and worst things about ourselves. I got close with her family and she got close with mine. Jenn was my first real partner. The first relationship that had depth. Heart. Passion. And eventually led to the worst heartbreak ever. We broke up after graduation and I moved south for college. I didn't date for six years after that, until I met Liza.

After years of looking for an ideal partner—a search that lends itself to my parent's failed marriage—I found the one I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with. I found the one who I saw fit to be the mother of my children. The one to tell me when my shit stank. Who told me to get off my ass. To be active. To be conscious of what kind of life we lead, of the decisions we make as consumers in a fucked-up world. We created our own world. We had everything we ever needed. But, for me, something was missing.

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I could have had that house in the neighborhood. The one with the big yard and the garage. The fence for our dogs. But I yearned for something different. I'm still figuring out what exactly that is. A life on the road, perhaps. Overseas with nothing but a bag and a camera. Maybe it's Hollywood. New York City. Maybe it's a year in Shanghai, Nigeria, France, or Australia. Maybe it's right back here in North Carolina. Maybe all I need is looking me right in the eye. In this kitchen. It's this dish we're about to eat. I won't know until I leave it all behind.