

## Southern Hospitality

By Daniel Metroka

“Taylor Swift or Beyoncé?” I ask. Sunlight floods the Starbucks window and pools on the tabletop between Bryan and me, the rings of condensation from our coffee cups glistening. The sweet chill of my caramel Frappuccino is a blissful counter to the sticky Alabama heat. Fall semester began last week, but the weather won’t feel like fall for another month at least.

“Objectively Beyoncé,” Bryan answers, “but personally Taylor Swift.”

“Questionable taste,” I say, “but at least you’re not stupid.”

This is our second date, and going well. Scouting the new Tinder possibilities at the beginning of each school year has become my annual tradition, and in three years Bryan is my best match by far. He’s cute, redheaded with green eyes and glasses. On our first date last week, we talked mainly about school, since it was the first week of classes. He’s studying architecture while I’m an English major. Today, we’ve talked more about our interests, music especially. He loves old school country while I prefer R&B and Hip Hop. Despite the varying interests, I like that he can hold a conversation, which is more than I can say for most guys I’ve dated.

The only downside of the date so far has been the two young men a few tables down, who I've noticed glaring at us. If Bryan was alone, they probably wouldn't guess he was gay; he's dressed in a plain gray T-shirt and jeans. I haven't figured out yet if simplicity is his style or if he's trying to send the message "I am not like other gay guys." I, however, am clearly "like other gay guys," with my red nail polish, dangly earrings, crop top and short shorts. The dirty looks from the guys across the room send shivers of shame up my skin, with a bit of fear mixed in.

My conversation with Bryan shifts to our homes. He's from Atlanta, and I'm from the tiny town of Chunky, Mississippi.

"I wish I lived in a city," I say. "To blend in with the crowds."

"It's nice," he replies, "until you have to deal with the traffic."

To me, being stuck in traffic sounds better than being trapped in a small town. Chunky is a town of barely four hundred people, a cluster of houses located between a Christmas tree farm and a canoe rental shack, with an old trailer for a town hall. The river, sharing the town's name, is probably the only reason the town is even marked on maps. Other than boating, life doesn't happen in Chunky. Interstate 20 is the artery of real existence: twelve minutes to Newton for Wal-Mart, twenty to Meridian for Chick-Fil-A, an hour to Jackson for Target.

I could've gone anywhere for college, but I chose proximity to my mom over proximity to Democrats. I might not feel comfortable at University of Alabama, but at least I feel rooted. The South has a way of sticking to you like humidity, the swampy earth sucking you up by your boots and trapping you. Maybe you need to quit it cold turkey, like my best friend Mariah, who goes to Haverford College in Pennsylvania. Once a semester, she takes a one-dollar bus ride to New York for a backrow seat at a Broadway show.

The North isn't quite the progressive utopia she imagined it to be, though. "It's funny, Nick," she told me, "at home no one talks about racial issues, or if they do, they're just spewing racism. In college, everyone talks about racial issues, but they act as if they know them better than I do. Either way, I'm being talked over by white men."

I suppose Mariah should have known better. This is 2019, and any illusions from ten years ago of a more tolerant nation have been thoroughly shattered by the orange idiot in the White House and his crazed supporters. I bet my current Starbucks neighbors are among said category. Their hateful presence fills the room like smoke.

The discussion of our homes transitions into discussing our families. Bryan's demeanor becomes sadder when he tells me his family is very religious. Southern Baptist. I ask if he's out to them. He's not.

A kernel of hope shrivels inside me. How deep does his religious conditioning run? I don't know if I could date someone who felt like he was sinning while with me. I want to be someone's Garden of Eden, not their forbidden fruit. "Are you going to tell them?" I ask.

"I don't know," Bryan says. "I didn't even come out to any of my high school friends. There weren't many dating options, so I didn't see the point."

"Surely there were some other gay guys at school? You lived in a big city, after all."

"There were a few," Bryan says, "but I kind of avoided them. I guess I was scared to be associated."

I should have remembered from Mariah's experience that location doesn't make it any easier to be marginalized. "So am I the first guy you've ever gone on a date with?" I ask.

"Yeah," Bryan says, sounding embarrassed and looking ashamed.

The idea of being his first boyfriend is overwhelming. Would I be his first kiss too?

Would I take his virginity?

“What made you decide to branch out now?” I ask.

“I thought college could be a kind of fresh start,” Bryan says. “Maybe, away from home, I could finally start being true to myself.”

The conversation lulls, and I focus on sipping my drink. In my periphery, I catch the homophobic guys across the room glancing our way and snickering. Once again, I try to ignore the shame they invoke, but it still rakes my insides like a parasite.

“Is your family religious?” Bryan asks.

“Not until I came out,” I answer. Since I was little, I’ve just lived with my mom. She’s a hardworking, practical woman who never said the word *God* until I said the word *gay*. Over the years, she’s grown used to my identity, but not quite comfortable with it. I don’t know how she would react if I had a serious boyfriend. My few relationships have been short-lived, so I’ve never had the chance to find out.

“They’re more accepting now, but still on the fence,” I say, trying to sound dismissive, so we can backtrack to a lighter topic. I don’t want this date to end on a depressing note.

“Sometimes it feels like I’m the only one with super-religious parents,” Bryan says.

“Good to know I’m not alone.” Funny he’d feel that way, living in the South. Maybe he meant the only gay person, not person general, but if that’s the case, he must not be very aware of the state of the world, of how many homeless gay kids there are.

“Homophobes are still everywhere,” I say, trying not to look at the ones across the room.

“That much isn’t going to change.”

“I guess so,” Bryan says. “Sometimes all I want is to be a normal guy, you know?”

So he *is* still in the “I’m not like other gay guys” phase, and the religious guilt has lingered. If I were to be his first kiss, would he even enjoy it? I don’t want to battle with his shame for his attention. I sip at my coffee again, although I’m reaching the dregs. The sound of slurping echoing inside my plastic cup fills the awkward silence. The noise would be funny if I didn’t feel so deflated.

After a minute, Bryan asks. “How are you so confident?”

Which translates to, “how did you get to looking like a stereotype?” What can I say to that? That I hardened my heart in ninth grade to anyone’s opinion. That I went through high school with my back against lockers and called it “not letting the bullies get to me.” That I go through college with my back against mattresses and call it “embracing my sexuality.” That even in my armor of crop tops and nail polish, a bigoted sneer from a stranger can still sneak through and stick in my soul like shrapnel.

“I guess I just decided to love myself enough to not care what other people think,” I say. The words taste sour. Loving oneself is the most bullshit argument I’ve ever heard. Anyone who really loved themselves wouldn’t waste their breath saying such a phrase.

“I guess it’ll take me a while to get there,” Bryan says, twirling his straw around.

“It will,” I say. “But you’ll get there.” Could I be the one to help him get there? Maybe I should be more patient. I don’t want to throw away a possible relationship because I’m afraid of Bryan’s baggage. Maybe taking on baggage is what real relationships are about.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of chair legs scraping the floor. The guys from the neighboring table are heading for the door. As they pass our table, one of them mutters something about “faggots,” and the other laughs. My stomach clenches with embarrassment and

fear, and I stare at the table until I hear the door close. My coffee cup creases with a pop and I realize I've been gripping it tightly.

I take a few steady breaths, trying to calm my heartrate, and say, "They really should take their business to Chick Fil-A. Their worldview might be better received there."

Bryan doesn't answer. His face resembles a blown-out lightbulb. I'm sure mine doesn't look much better. My attempts at lightening the situation feel feeble even to me. So much for loving myself. After an awkward pause, I realize the date has lost momentum, and ask Bryan if he wants to leave off for today. He agrees, seeming relieved. I feel hollow with regret as we leave the Starbucks and walk around to the side parking lot where we both parked by CVS. We linger on the sidewalk by CVS's ice chest. What do you say to someone after an incident like that, I wonder? I consider apologizing, but why should I say sorry for the behavior of others?

"I'd like to do this again sometime," I finally say. I'm a little afraid as I await his response, worried that the incident might deter him from me. Suddenly, I don't want him to slip through my fingers. Maybe I'm just stubborn, and don't want to let the bigots win, but I like Bryan, and even if he has some emotional growth to do before we get serious, I want to try to make things work.

At my offer, some light returns to Bryan's face and he says, "I would like that."

"Great," I say. Relief flows through me, followed with a little giddiness. I can't remember the last time I felt excited about a new relationship, or if I ever have.

"So," Bryan says, a smile creeping onto his face, "I guess I'll see you later, then."

"Yeah," I say, feeling myself grin in return. "I'll see you..."

I'm cut off by an explosion of pain as something hits me in the side of the head. I stagger backward, blinking rapidly, my skull reverberating with the impact. In my blurred vision I see

something—a rock? —on the ground, and the men from Starbucks emerge from behind the CVS. Fear seizes me. Bryan turns to run, but one guy grabs him and throws him to the sidewalk. The other grabs me and pins me to the ice chest. His angry face swims an inch away from me.

Then his fist connects. Again. Again. My blurry vision fractures like a shattering window. I hear Bryan screaming for help, but I'm too shocked to do the same. Now the guy is slamming me repeatedly against the ice chest, the impact ripping through my body. The world tilts and I collapse onto the concrete. A boot collides with my ribs, stomach, over and over. Orbs of light and shadow swell in my vision. All I hear are Bryan's screams.

The agony consumes me. I'm going to die. God, please make it stop.

I don't know how long they keep at it, but eventually they leave us lying on the now-bloody sidewalk. I can't move, can barely think. Sirens blare and pulsing blue and red dilate above me. Arms reach for me. No, don't touch me. Oh God, don't let them hurt me. I scream, but it doesn't reach my lips. I flail, but it doesn't reach my limbs. I can do nothing. I'm hoisted onto a stretcher and rolled into a gaping maw of light and sound. Everything hurts.

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My brief hospital stay is a sterilized, fluorescent blur, and then I'm at home with my mom. Chunky is an hour and a half from Tuscaloosa, and Mom drove like hell to get to me. She's barely left my side since. I don't like being in my hometown, but the familiarity glazes my senses, creating a welcome numbness. There's a primal sort of comfort to being near your mother during crisis. I think her presence is the only thing keeping me together while my mind crumbles in its effort to process what happened.

After a few quiet days, I describe the attack to my mom. She's heard the details from the police and nurses, but I want her to hear them from me, too. The experience is easier to relive

than I expected. When I've finished, she enfolds me in a careful embrace on the couch in our living room. I'm an emotionless husk, and she weeps silently as she holds me, absently stroking my hair. I absorb the warmth and security of her presence, pretending I'm a child who scraped himself falling from a tree. I pretend hard enough to believe it, and the dangers of the world recede.

After a while, just as I've begun to feel safe, Mom says, "Oh, Nick. You've got to be more careful."

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The only time I ever went to church was when Mom and I visited my grandmother in Canton when I was in middle school. Gramma attended a tiny Catholic church called Holy Child Jesus. The parishioners were exuberant and friendly, and the mass might have been tolerable, but that same weekend, Holy Child had a visiting priest from California who was there on mission work. Father Richard somebody, informally called Father Dick. I still laugh at the irony.

I remember the beginning of his homily vividly. He began with, "Morning y'all, it's good to be here. They aren't kidding when they talk about southern hospitality. I've never felt more welcome." That was met with a tide of appreciative hoots. When the wave of applause and cheers receded, Father Dick continued, "Seriously, though, it's good to be back in the South. Southern values are American values, and American values are Christian values. I currently reside in a state that seems to have forgotten such values, a state that permits the sin of same-sex marriage."

In the din of reactions from the congregation, I fixated on two people. One was the woman next to me in the pew, who muttered a fervent "amen." The second was my grandmother, who nodded solemnly, her eyes conveying genuine dismay for California's sin.



After seeing her reaction, I had one of those movie moments where the sound cuts off and the camera goes fuzzy. The feeling lasted the rest of the mass, as the sermon replayed in my head and shame festered in me. I had figured out my sexuality a few months prior, and I already knew it would not be accepted at school. Now I realized it might not even be accepted by those closest to me. I didn't know how Mom felt yet, but I'd seen Gramma's view, and that was enough. Father Dick said he had never felt more welcome that day, but I had never felt more alone.

The next day, Mom and I sat on our wraparound porch, swaying on the swing bench, drinking lemonade. The whole drive home, I couldn't stop wondering what she thought about the homily. Beneath the comfort of the lemonade and swinging, I was tense and afraid.

"Mom," I said, "what did you think of the sermon yesterday?"

I'd never shown any interest in religion, so Mom looked confused. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I'm gay," I said, forcing the words out before I could second guess.

From her expression, I had my answer before she spoke.

"God doesn't make people gay, Nick," she said.

Thus began a several-year saga of tug-of-war, both externally with Mom and inside myself, as I fought to equate the woman who never attended church with the woman who was suddenly concerned with faith, to reconcile the woman I'd made pillow forts and s'mores with to the woman who was now so distant, to balance my love for my mom with the need to be myself. The internal struggle reached its climax as I grappled with college decisions, eventually choosing Alabama because, despite the need to get away, I was afraid to be on my own.

Now, I sit on the porch again, watching the gold and pink sunrise over green, stately Southern trees, with a cold cup of coffee gripped in my hands. I haven't slept well. My bruises ache when I lie in bed, and my brain betrays me with memories of blood and concrete.

I thought Mom had changed her views over the years, and maybe she has, but "You've got to be more careful" replays in my head, cutting just as deep as "God doesn't make people gay." Is she even capable of change? Is the world? If my bruises, inside and out, are any indication, the answer must be no. Hopelessness constricts me, squeezing out a sob that makes my battered ribs ignite in protest.

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After a week of recovery at home, I return to school. I feel like I'm watching life happen through a window. The headlines have been all over T.V. and Twitter. "Two gay students attacked on University of Alabama campus." "Possible homophobic assault at Alabama college, perpetrators unidentified." My few college friends treat me with frustrating caution. I appreciate their concern, but I'd rather carry on with life as if nothing happened, so I choose not to share anything about the ordeal. Some strangers on campus offer me their sympathies, but the condolences crowd me like the humid August heat, and I try my best to avoid them. Everyone will forget in another week. I wish I was everyone.

I loosely keep track of the conversations on Twitter. Most of the comments leave my brain as soon as I've seen them, but one sticks. "You know, whoever they are, they're probably still in the closet and hate themselves, so they take it out on other people." That all homophobes are secretly gay is an old narrative, and it's always seemed to me like another excuse to deflect the blame from straight men for their bad behavior. I delete Twitter from my phone.

I haven't seen or heard from Bryan since the day at Starbucks. I look for him on campus but don't find him. Nobody in my classes seems to know him, although when I mention his name some people comment, "That's one of the... guys from the headlines." Yes, I think, one of the faggots from the headlines.

I work with police to identify my attackers, but I'm more concerned with finding Bryan. I message him every day but receive no response. I wonder if he blames me for the attack, since if I hadn't been dressed so explicitly gay, we wouldn't have been jumped. My mother's voice is a relentless echo: "You've got to be more careful."

Halfway through the week, loneliness abruptly overwhelms me, so I call Mariah. She avoids social media because of her anxiety, so she won't have seen any news about the attack.

Usually, small talk wouldn't be necessary, but Mariah didn't come home this summer, so I stumble through preliminary catching up while I try to find the right words. Hey Mariah, I got beaten up last week. Hey girl, so yeah some crazy shit went down the other day. Oh, did I mention I'm the victim of a hate crime? Victim, God I hate that word. But if the shoe fits, right?

Mariah detects something's off when she asks for my opinion on box braids and I respond with little enthusiasm. Usually, I'm far more intrigued by the process of her hair decisions.

"What's wrong?" The question almost sounds like an accusation.

"Do you ever wish you didn't inhabit a body?" I ask. "That you could just exist as a concept without being perceived?" It's an absurd question to ask a black woman, but I've always liked to preface my personal problems with existential dilemmas. Somehow, it feels easier to tackle my issues from a zoomed-out perspective.

“Nick, what’s wrong?” The question is an accusation for sure now. She knows my tactics too well.

I give up and tell her. We’re silent while Mariah considers her response. She’s never been one to waste words, which is one of my favorite things about her. Finally, she tells me she’s sorry and asks if I need her to come down. I almost say yes, but Mariah has built a life for herself in Pennsylvania. I have no one to blame for my problems but me, for not leaving the South when I had the chance.

“I’ll be okay,” I say. “I just needed someone to talk to.”

“I’m a phone call away if you need me,” she says, sounding on the verge of tears. I thank her and hang up before she starts to cry. I have enough tears in my life already. I’d rather live vicariously through her happiness.

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The reason for Bryan’s silence occurs to me during a class, when I remember he had not yet come out to his parents. The epiphany is an avalanche across my uphill path of mental recovery. Did they find out his secret from him or the headlines? I wonder if they’re keeping him from speaking to me or refusing to help in the investigation so they can move on, pretend nothing happened, that their son was never outed.

Mom calls every day to check on me. How are you feeling, sweetie? Fine, Mom. It’s hard to stay mad at her when I hear the concern in her voice. I imagine the calls between Bryan and his mom. Have you repented now, sweetie? Have you learned your lesson? I didn’t know much about his parents, but my impression was that they were far more devout than my mom. I imagine Bryan deleting Tinder, wearing his simple jeans and T-shirts more deliberately than ever. I am not like other gay guys, he thinks. I am not gay at all.

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Two weeks after the attack, the perpetrators, two brothers, are identified and arrested. Their social medias are plastered with pro-Trump propaganda. Their names are Tyler and Jack Ross. I wish I never had to learn that. To give those fists and sneering faces names means they exist beyond the Starbucks parking lot. They could be sitting next to me in class.

As the trial nears, Bryan texts me. Excitement and concern flood me as I open the message. It's a lengthy paragraph, and the gist is that he lied to his parents, told them we weren't on a date, that the attackers' assumption was false, and the reports misjudged. He goes on to implore that I keep up the secret in my testimony, that I explain I was offering to be a mentor to him in his freshman year and there was nothing romantic happening. He ends by saying, "This thing has caused so much damage, and I don't think I could bear it if it caused more. But like I said, it's totally up to you."

I read the message several times to fully process it. At first, Bryan's request seems silly and a little pathetic. Oh, Bryan, I think, there's no getting out of this. The police already know it was a hate crime, you're coming out whether you like it or not. Then I reconsider. The police know the attackers assumed we were gay, but I don't think I ever mentioned the word "date" in my report. Maybe Bryan's lie is feasible.

Now fury rises like steam inside me. The fucking audacity. I've been worried sick about him, and this is how he treats me? "But like I said, it's totally up to you," he said. What kind of a choice is that? He's got a lot of nerve, a lot of fucking nerve.

I imagine the trial, Bryan claiming to be straight. The judge, a fat, bald old Republican, turns to me and asks, "What were your intentions when meeting with Bryan?" My handsome

lawyer stands, like in some T.V. show, and shouts, “Nick’s not the one on trial here!” But I’ve always been the one on trial.

If I’m on trial, then Bryan is, too. He doesn’t get to hide in his Atlanta traffic anymore. He needs to know what it’s like to stand out, because when you’re gay in Chunky, Mississippi, everybody knows no matter if you’re wearing basketball shorts or a dress.

I pick up my phone to tell him as much, but my anger dies as I type. I know I won’t be able to look at his face, see the evidence of what we suffered together, and feel this same desire to tear him apart. I backspace whatever hateful words I’d typed and send a simple, “Of course, Bryan, no problem.” I wait for the inner peace that’s supposed to result from traversing the high road. Instead, I feel only fatigue, and a bitter undercurrent of betrayal.

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The trial passes, the Ross brothers are locked up. Still charged with a hate crime, although I help fabricate the misunderstanding that Bryan and I weren’t on a date. There’s no speculation about my intentions, at least not in any official capacity. Bryan’s parents look at me skeptically, and their tight-lipped, cold-eyed judgment is more terrifying than anything. My mom looks nervous, but sympathetic as well. She knows how much it’s taking out of me to lie on Bryan’s behalf. Maybe I can reach a better understanding with her after this. The thought is a dull silver lining. If Mom hasn’t changed after so many years, why should I expect her to now?

In the trial’s wake, I reflect on the idea of justice, on whether seeing the perpetrators punished feels rewarding, on whether retribution is necessary for society to function. Viewing myself through the lens of larger issues as usual. Maybe that’s my attempt to feel connected to others, to compensate for the loneliness. Just another fragile armor.

Halfway through semester, as a late October chill finally pierces the veil of humid heat, Bryan texts me again. I had tried not to think about him, because the associated feelings were too complicated, and I wanted to move on. Something rips open though at the sight of his name on my screen. I should have deleted his number. He should have deleted mine.

He's been thinking of me, and wants to meet up. He's wondering if he did the wrong thing by keeping his secret. He's asking for another chance. As with his last message before the trial, my instinctive reaction is anger. After all this time, he wants to come crawling back for forgiveness. What kind of fool does he take me for?

But once again, the anger diminishes quickly, leaving hollowness behind. I want to forgive him, because maybe of all people, he would understand me, might peel the layers of armor away and soothe that lonely ache. Shared trauma is always a spark for romance in the movies, right?

A mixture of longing and betrayal stews inside me. Bryan neglected me when I needed him most, and I've spent too long expecting people to change. I can't carry him out of his self-loathing, because he won't be able to carry me in return. I try to banish the longing, but it remains, bruising me. I look up at the previous text message, where he said, "This thing has caused so much damage, and I don't think I could bear it if it caused more." What a cruel joke, that out of everyone, he's hurt me the most, and will keep doing so if I let him. With new determination, I delete the message and his number, because Mom was right. I need to be more careful.

## Alcohol and Catholicism

By Daniel Metroka

Matthew sat at one of the gas station's two tiny booths, crushed between Megan and the window, eating a cold chocolate doughnut. Soda stains seemed to coat the entire store, from the gray-tiled floors to the silver doughnut shelves to the greasy middle-aged man behind the counter. A faint trace of cigarette smoke clung to the air like dirt under fingernails. Matthew tried not to imagine the state of the restrooms. At least the view from the window was nice, if a bit smudgy: beyond the gas pumps, a light blanket of midmorning mist hung over the rolling, woody terrain of West Virginia. Whether to call the landscape hilly or mountainous, Matthew could never decide.

“Shame about the coal mine being closed,” his dad said from across the sticky table.

Oh yes, Matthew thought, it was really a shame they wouldn't get to tour an abandoned coal mine. Their cross-country road trips were always a peculiar medley of Americana. Some trips they returned home with magnets or postcards from Niagara Falls or Mount Rushmore, others they returned with an ornament from the Smoky Bear Museum or a log cabin village in



Fargo. The big tourist stops were mostly thanks to his mom's planning, while the obscurities were all discovered by his dad hunting through the World Atlas.

"At least we'll make it to your parents' sooner, now," his mom said.

"Yeah, I guess that's a good thing," his dad replied.

Was it? Matthew wondered. That was the question that had been on his mind for the past week ever since his cousin, Anthony, had drunk-texted him during finals week. "Let me tell you a bit about alcoholism, and how it runs in our family," Anthony had said. He told Matthew about his drinking problem, which he was currently battling in A.A., and then recounted their grandfather's addiction, which had wreaked horrors on Matthew's father, Gramma and Aunt Cathie.

"Nobody wanted to go to that dumb coal mine, anyway," Megan said.

"Check the attitude," their dad snapped. A glare from their mom ended the argument before it could begin. Matthew was inclined to side with Megan, although knowing what he did now about his father's childhood, it was hard to be angry with him. He thought about how frightening it was that an abuse victim could be your closest friend or family member and you might never know.

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They put gas in the Camry and went to the restroom (as expected, the conditions were horrid) and then got back on the road. The mist was beginning to dissipate but the sky was still trapped in a thick silver-white that foretold snow. In summer, the trees on this route were a vibrant green, but since this was a Christmas trip everything was bleak and bare. Matthew hoped the sky would deliver on its promise of snow so they'd have better scenery, although snow would probably slow them down.

They passed the first hour of the trip mainly in silence, since it was still early in the day, and everyone was shaking free the haze of sleep. Matthew watched the bleak tree-covered hills pass by in his window, his thoughts drifting back to his text conversation with Anthony.

“There’s two diseases in our family, you see,” Anthony had said, albeit with several spelling errors. “Alcoholism and Catholicism.”

Matthew almost laughed thinking back on the comment now. The pairing seemed so stereotypically Irish, which comprised most of the DNA on his father’s side. The problem with alcohol was obvious, but Matthew had been confused by the accusation of Catholicism. When he asked about it, Anthony told him, “Alcohol’s what made Grampa beat them. Catholicism is what made them stay.”

Despite attending mass every week, Matthew’s parents had never enforced religion. For Matthew, both alcohol and Catholicism were minor life features reserved for the weekend.

In his periphery he studied his dad in the driver’s seat. How many of his father’s life decisions, Matthew wondered, had been influenced by what he experienced as a child? What was he feeling now as he drove toward the home of his youth? Matthew hated to imagine his dad suffering. Matthew considered his family the most important people in his life. He was shy and awkward around his peers, but being with family was easy. He loved them fiercely, and wanted to help his dad, but doubted there was help he could provide.

“Let’s have some Christmas music,” his mom said, as if sensing a tension emerge in the silence. Glad for the distraction from his thoughts, Matthew agreed. His mom turned on the car’s Bluetooth. Matthew and Megan played Mariah Carey on repeat, belting the lyrics, until their parents demanded Bing Crosby. Later, everyone compromised on Michael Bublé. Then, like in a cheesy Christmas T.V. special, their singing summoned the first of the snowflakes from the sky.

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The snow was falling in abundance by the time they neared the town of Farmville. Fortunately, the snow stayed off the roads, but it provided the exact scenery Matthew had been hoping for, a greeting card cover captured in the Camry windows: generous dustings of white atop the bald tree boughs, fenceposts, tin cattle-barn roofs and the gravestones of Virginia's many roadside cemeteries. Matthew felt as if the essence of Christmas had been given form before him.

He also felt, as he always did in Virginia, a distinct aura of history. Virginia was filled with historical sites, a spawning ground for presidential estates and a checkerboard of battlefields. Matthew had always loved touring historical sites with his family and figured that was a main influence on his decision to become a history major. Age had made him realize the history he enjoyed was imperfect, though, since people in these Appalachian valleys seemed to have warped notions of which side won on the Civil War battlefields.

As the Camry wended among blocks of colonial houses, Matthew thought about how his family history, too, was one of contradictions, and now as he neared the house that should have invoked childlike joy, he could only feel dread.

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They pulled up in front of Gramma and Grampa's house around 3 P.M. Tendrils of ivy crawled up the two-story brick facade. A Christmas wreath hung on the bright red door, and the hedges in the yard were strung with lights, mostly obscured now by a thickening layer of snow. Matthew braced himself for the cold, which bombarded him as soon as he opened the car door, cutting through his skin like an assault of papercuts. God, Matthew was already tired of winter, despite having spent all the scorching summer praying for it back home in Texas.

He and his family grabbed a load of luggage and trudged carefully along the slippery stone path up to the front door. His dad rang the doorbell, and everyone huddled together on the porch as they waited. And waited. Matthew saw a slight shadow of worry cross his father's face, an almost imperceptible narrowing of eyes and pursing of lips, but just as he was about to ring the bell again, the door opened, and Gramma greeted them.

Gramma had been old for as long as Matthew had been alive, but seeing her now, she *looked* old. Her warm smile did not spread quite as wide as it used to, and the wrinkles seemed etched deeper in her face. She had stopped dying her short, curly hair, so now it was steel gray with shots of white, like the clouds of the snow-laden sky. She still walked confidently forward to embrace everybody, but Matthew noticed a slight falter to her step.

Even her voice seemed older as she greeted everyone. The next few moments were a jumble of quick hugs, fleeting kisses on cheeks, and an awkward shuffle of luggage through the door. Once everybody was finally inside and the door was closed, the first thing Matthew noticed was the blast of the heater, and he felt a rush of gratitude as the electric warmth spread through him.

The next thing he noticed was the blare of the T.V., which was set at the stratospheric volume used by the very old and very young. He turned left in the hardwood-floored entryway and entered the living room, where Grampa sat in a recliner beneath a mound of blankets, a glass of beer on the end table next to him. If Gramma looked old, Grampa looked half-dead, his face hollow and haggard, unshaved, his eyes a little glazed as he turned toward Matthew and his family. It was impossible for Matthew to imagine this skeleton of a man beating anyone.

“Hi Grampa,” he said.

A haze of confusion in Grampa's eyes was the only response. Maybe he hadn't heard?  
Matthew tried again, louder.

"Oh, hi Matthew," Grampa said with a self-deprecating laugh. Everyone else laughed in response. Why am I laughing, Matthew wondered? I should hate him.

"Be ready to yell all night, if you want to get his attention," Anthony said, emerging from the kitchen. Over the years, he'd cut his mop of curly red hair incrementally closer to his head, making him look more mature, but his wide grin still gave him a degree of boyishness. Anthony had only attended Christmas gatherings the past two years. The tradition had always been for Matthew and his family to spend Christmas with the grandparents in Farmville, then spend New Year's with Anthony's family in Baltimore. Aunt Cathie had never let Anthony visit his grandparents, and never visited herself. Matthew supposed he had always been aware of a hidden history, but hadn't thought much of it; even if he had, abuse would never have crossed his mind.

Anthony walked over and embraced Matthew. Megan jumped in for the next hug, looking happier than she had all day. Matthew realized she hadn't bothered to greet Grampa. He had already wondered if Megan knew the family history, and now he was certain she did. Megan and Anthony had always been closer, being the same age. Matthew tried to ignore the sting of betrayal, the youngest sibling's yearning for inclusion. As the family settled in, Matthew's mom heading into the kitchen to help Gramma finish dinner and his dad hunting the house for things to fix, Matthew wondered if everyone had been holding out on him, protecting him because he was the youngest, not wanting to tarnish his image of his grandparents or his memory of previous holidays.

He went back outside with Anthony and Megan to bring in the rest of the luggage. As soon as the front door was closed, he asked Anthony, "Does Megan know too?" And don't try to play dumb, he added silently. You know very well what I mean.

"You told him?" Megan asked. So, I *was* being kept in the dark, Matthew thought.

"I was drunk," Anthony admitted. "But we were going to tell him soon anyway."

The assurance that he would have soon been given access to the family secrets meant little to Matthew. The confused assortment of feelings he'd had since learning the truth were coalescing into anger, like the snowflakes freezing on the pavement before him. He figured hating one's grandfather was cruel, but the idea of breaking bread and laughing with Grampa felt worse than despising him.

As they pulled the remainder of the luggage from the trunk, Matthew said with forced lightness, "Thank you for telling me. Even though my childhood memories feel like lies now."

"In A.A. they've taught me about second chances," Anthony said. "That's why I've been visiting Gramma and Grampa more. I have to believe everyone deserves forgiveness."

Matthew wasn't sure if he agreed with that belief, but he tried to grasp for some silver lining to salvage the holiday mood. "Maybe it was more the alcohol than him," he said. "People aren't themselves when they're drunk."

"Men don't need alcohol to do bad things," Megan said, slamming the trunk shut emphatically. "They're fully capable of that on their own."

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At 6:00, Gramma announced dinner was ready. For Grampa, standing was a process. Matthew watched as Grampa peeled his heavy blanket away from him, then gripped the arms of his chair to pull himself forward, his movements snaillike. Sick satisfaction raked a claw through

Matthew's mind. Look at you, old man, he thought, you can't even stand by yourself. Look how it feels to be powerless. Still, Matthew couldn't help but feel pity along with the malice. He hated the pity more.

"Do you need help?" Anthony asked as Grampa perched unmoving on the edge of the chair. God, why was Anthony being so damned pleasant?

"I'm fine," Grampa said. Matthew wasn't surprised by the response. Grampa was too proud to ask for help. The stubborn bastard.

When they were all seated beneath the dim glow of the old-fashioned chandelier, they linked hands around the table for grace. Matthew let the steady cadence of the traditional Catholic meal prayer soothe him as he admired the spread of food before him. Atop the snowy tablecloth, with holly-patterned stitching on the border, was a platter of turkey, bowl of mashed potatoes, pot of green beans, basket of butter rolls, and a tray of bright orange sweet potatoes swimming in cinnamon sugar drizzle. The drinks were poured in glasses painted with snowflakes and Christmas trees. Matthew was only nineteen, but his parents let him have wine. He noticed that Anthony, in his quest toward sobriety, had opted for water. Grampa had not been so wise. Noticing Grampa's glass of beer erased any peace Matthew had found from the prayer.

The meal began with a long, contented silence as everyone dug into their food. Matthew drained a glass of wine within the first few minutes, hoping to soften the rock of anger that was lodged in his chest, and poured himself another. When conversation began to flow, Matthew participated little, focusing on his meal and finishing his second glass of wine. As he reached for the bottle again, his mom glared at him from across the table and asked, "A third?" Matthew assured her he'd be fine. She seemed unconvinced, but didn't stop him.

Gramma, seeming livelier now with some food in her, asked Anthony and Megan about their semesters at college. Matthew knew their replies were tightly abbreviated; there were some things inappropriate for a grandmother's dinner table that would be discussed among the cousins into the early morning. Matthew was finishing his third glass of wine when Gramma turned her attention to him. He was already feeling a buzz. Shit, what had he been thinking? How embarrassing, to be drunk in front of one's grandmother. It was sort of funny, though. Everything was funny. He tried not to randomly burst out laughing as he recounted his first semester to Gramma, reminding her he was a history major and wanted to be a teacher.

Grampa, who had been quiet the whole meal, responded before Gramma could. "You won't make any money off of that," he said.

Tension threaded through the room, as if a rope connecting them all had suddenly gone taut; Matthew could feel it even as he struggled not to laugh.

"Matthew's pursuing what he loves, honey," Gramma said. "Don't fault him for that."

"It's not up to me how you spend your money," Grampa said, addressing his son. "I would never waste mine paying for an arts education."

"I'm aware," Matthew's dad said. "Thanks for your input." He looked like he was struggling to rein in his temper so as not to mar the festivities. But Matthew was tired of the pretense. If Dad won't defend himself, he thought, I will.

"I don't care what you think, Grampa," he said. He was aware of speaking, aware of having decided to speak, but in his addled state he could not find the will to give a shit.

The rope of tension threading through the room tautened further. "Matthew, you're drunk," Anthony warned.



“I know,” Matthew said, too loudly. “I don’t care. And I don’t care what Grampa thinks. Why should I care what an *abuser* thinks?”

The rope snapped, and shocked silence fell. The accusation vibrated through the dining room like bells in a cathedral, and indignation emerged at various times on everyone’s faces as a wave of implication traveled around the table.

“Matthew,” Gramma said, her thin voice ripping into the silence, “what are you talking about?” She seemed old and frail again, but Matthew couldn’t muster any sympathy.

“So we’re all going to just sit here and pretend everything’s fine?” he demanded.

“Matthew, you’re drunk!” his mom said. “Go upstairs!”

“I don’t want to go upstairs,” Matthew said. He had detonated a bomb, there was no going back. The alcohol hadn’t added to his anger, but it gave him permission to release it. He pointed across the table at Grampa. “I want to hear what he has to say for himself!”

Rage contorted Grampa’s weathered face as he turned to his son and asked, “What kind of lies have you been telling your children?”

Again, Matthew watched internal struggle cross his father’s face. He wondered how many times over the years his dad had turned the other cheek to a snide remark from Grampa to maintain the peace, burying resentment deep. He felt stupid for not noticing.

“I haven’t told them anything,” Matthew’s dad said, measuring each word. “But if they’ve filled in some blanks themselves, I can’t blame them.”

“What fucking blanks?” Grampa shouted. “What fucking blanks need to be filled in?”

“Honey!” Gramma cried. “Don’t swear at the table! It’s Christmas!”

“I don’t care!” Grampa said. “I’m not going to let people fling accusations at me!”

“And I’m not going to let you insult my children!” Matthew’s dad yelled, the buried anger bursting free.

“You, ungrateful little shit,” Grampa said. “You’re just like your sister.” He stood abruptly, as if to lash out at. He hadn’t moved an inch before he fell and hit the floor with a resounding thud. Stunned silence filled the room again. The echo of bone against hardwood hummed in the air, but only for a second, because Matthew finally lost control and laughed.

Once he started, he couldn’t stop. He wasn’t laughing at anything, but at everything. Amid his laughter he heard concerned inquiries and a moaned response as if from underwater. Then his mom’s commanding voice wrenched him to the surface. “Anthony, help your uncle get Grampa to the car. Megan, take Matthew upstairs.”

Was Grampa going to the hospital? Served him right. Was he going to die? Should I feel bad or good about that, Matthew wondered? Megan’s fingernails cut into his arm as she dragged him from his seat and ushered him upstairs. Matthew staggered and braced a hand on the wall, where faded family photographs hung parallel to the staircase. Matthew saw his father as a child, but without the bruises from Grampa’s fists. Christmas lights were strung along the bannister, the multicolored bulbs throwing a kaleidoscope across the family’s smiling, lying faces.

The steps creaked beneath them, and Matthew tripped on the last one. He laughed, and Megan implored him to shut the fuck up. It was freezing upstairs; the heaters weren’t on since Gramma and Grampa could no longer climb the steps. It was the kind of cold that began in the bones, not the skin, and as it spread through Matthew it sobered him. Megan led him to the guest bedroom they always shared and spent half a minute wrestling with the doorknob—everything was broken in this house. Matthew laughed at her, but it was a short, mirthless thing. Nothing felt very funny anymore as realization settled over him.

“I’m sorry, Megan,” he said. Maybe he was still drunk, because he kept repeating the apology.

“Please just shut the fuck up,” she said.

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Matthew lay on the futon in the guest bedroom, dozing, waking and falling back asleep on repeat. At 10:00, he awoke and felt fully sober. A tiny needle hangover pierced his skull, and this throat felt dry. I should’ve eaten more before I drank, he thought. He stared at the chipping, cream-colored paint on the wall as he came fully to his senses, then turned to see Megan on her bed across the room, studying him, her expression inscrutable.

“How is everyone?” he asked.

“They’re still at the ER,” Megan said. “Gramma’s pretending everything’s fine. Mom thinks you ruined Christmas. Anthony wishes he hadn’t told you. Dad hasn’t said much.”

Fear constricted Matthew’s chest as he asked, “And Grampa?”

“Severe bruising. No broken bones. But any damage at that age is dangerous.”

Relief flooded Matthew. “At least it could have been worse,” he said. His anger was gone, but he didn’t feel horrible about what he’d said to Grampa. He was too tired to feel anything.

“You really fucked up,” Megan said.

“I know,” Matthew said.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner.”

“I know.”

A pause, then Megan said, “Is it bad that I wish he’d been hurt more? Is it bad that I wish he’d fall and kill himself?”

Instead of feeling repulsed by the question, Matthew felt relieved. Megan was everything he wasn't. She was smart, popular, outgoing, funny. Everyone knew she was going to be successful and make a difference in the world. Matthew had looked up to her his whole life, and always felt smaller by comparison. To hear her admit such a terrible thought alleviated the pressure of meeting her standards, made him feel less small.

"I don't think it's bad," he answered. "Do you believe Anthony's crap about forgiveness?"

"Anthony doesn't believe Anthony's crap about forgiveness," Megan said.

Matthew laughed. It was comforting to have Megan with him. She told him to get some sleep. She would wait up for the family, as they had once waited for Santa Claus on Christmas Eve. Matthew was grateful; he doubted anyone would want to talk to him, or if they did it would be a conversation he wasn't ready for. Better to postpone judgment until morning.

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He woke to sunlight streaming through the blinds, striping the hardwood floor, dust motes dancing in the gold-white beams. He feared to leave the security of the futon, to face the consequences of his outburst. Megan, dressed in red sweater and black slacks, came into the room and informed him they were attending mass as usual. Matthew peeled himself off the futon and dressed, feeling more like he was dressing for a trial than for worship.

When he came downstairs, everyone but Grampa was gathered in the sitting room, silent. Presents were laid beneath the Christmas tree, but invoked no excitement. The tree, its tinsel wrappings glistening softly in the sunlight from the window, watched over the scene like a pillar of judgment.

"Where's Grampa?" Matthew asked, tipping the quiet on its side.

“He’s going to rest,” Gramma said. “Anthony’s staying to watch him.” Her tone did not seem strained at all, and Matthew wondered how long she had practiced concealing her feelings, covering her inner wounds like she applied foundation over her bruises.

“I’m sorry for last night,” Matthew said.

“Let’s not talk about it now,” his mom said, standing. “Let’s just go.”

As they filed out of the house, Matthew glanced back at Anthony, who avoided his gaze. Matthew felt as if he’d let his cousin down somehow, but didn’t know why. Anthony must feel even guiltier than I do, Matthew thought, since in a way he was responsible for the holiday going to shit. We all do stupid things when we’re drunk, Anthony, Matthew wanted to say. Maybe we need to stop taking it personally.

The drive to the church was short, but felt infinite. Farmville’s pastel houses and the redbrick campus of Longwood University were dusted in yesterday’s snow, resembling a gingerbread village, the azure sky a sheer backdrop. Silence filled the car.

Saint Theresa’s was a small stone church on a hill. Matthew had attended mass there every Christmas of his life, and it looked the same as always: slender artificial Christmas trees with yellow lights framing the altar, morning light setting the stained-glass windows aglow. The parishioners greeted Matthew and his family warmly, and for a moment all stress melted in the soft familiarity.

As Matthew sat down, though, he thought of how Anthony had blamed Catholicism for their family’s strife. He guessed the homily today would include mention of the Holy Family, applaud the perfection of their example, and suddenly Matthew could not bear to be in the sanctuary. Resentment seeped into his sense of comfort, and he felt as he had while arriving in town, the bitterness of tradition being tainted.

He glanced down the pew at his father, who participated in the mass with a normal amount of reverence, yet had a strain to his expression that only someone close to him would catch. With Anthony's accusation in mind, Matthew wondered if his father forced himself to forgive Grampa because mercy was what the Church taught. Matthew ached for his dad's silent suffering, and his bitterness multiplied. He thought mercy as a choice was beautiful, but mercy as an obligation felt sick and destructive, like the virtue was being corrupted.

Where was the lesson then, Matthew wondered? What was the answer if not to forgive? He tried to parse the readings and the homily for clues, but couldn't focus. He kept looking at his dad, wondering if he was mad about last night. Despite his doubts about mercy, Matthew needed it for himself, for bringing his father's buried trauma to the surface without warning or permission.

None of this shit would have happened if they had told me, though, he thought. Once the thought formed, it could not be ignored. Matthew wondered if his anger came more from feeling betrayed by his family than from knowing Grampa's actions. Since he was so far removed from the occurrence of abuse, he could only hate the idea of it. The greater pain lay in his alienation; he had always felt close to his family, and not having known such a massive thing about his father made him question how strong their bond really was.

Matthew was drawn from his thoughts when the priest announced the sign of peace. Tension knotted his stomach as he turned to hug his family. Each embrace felt weighted with a message. Megan's said, "I know what you're feeling; we're in this together." Gramma's said, "I love you; we don't have to talk about." His mom's said, "I love you; we'll talk about it later." The knot in Matthew's stomach loosened with each hug.

As he hugged his father, they did not meet eyes, but held each other longer than necessary. Matthew couldn't discern a clear message, but he could feel the need to say something, anything, churning under both their skins.

"I'm sorry," Matthew said. It was grossly inadequate, but still a relief.

"Me too," his dad replied. The apologies forecasted future conversations, but Matthew's dread unknotted. The sign of peace hadn't answered any questions; he still didn't know how to forgive Grampa, or if he even should, or if he agreed with the Church. However, he had been assured his actions wouldn't break his family's bond. He also realized, as they lined up for communion, that his father had ascended from a tortured youth to give Matthew and Megan the opposite: a childhood they could remember fondly rather than feel haunted by. He had helped create a family built on love, and Matthew was grateful. As the mass concluded, he sang his favorite Christmas hymns with passion and indulged in the temporary peace.