

Introduction

While writing the three pieces in this thesis, I wanted to focus on relationships in my family. Whether that be a relationship between me and one other family member, such as the stories “My Compass” and “High Hopes,” or my observations of a relationship and what I can take away from it like in “Over a Box of Truffles.” Other themes that appear throughout the stories is growing up or coming of age. “My Compass” is focused around me as teenager, who is transitioning to a more adult life through the guidance of my dad. In “High Hopes” I try to come to terms with my younger sister being an adult, and “Over a Box of Truffles” has me discovering, throughout many years of my life, what love is, or how complex it is. Another theme that comes out is a sense of trust. Can I trust in love, in my sister, in myself?

In revising “Over a Box of Truffles” and “My Compass” I had to bring out the physicality of my parents, make them alive on the page not just through their thoughts and sayings, but through describing their movements and how they looked. The introduction in “Over a Box of Truffles” was revised from mentioning my dad hated business trips in the first sentence to going straight in medias res of him buying an engagement ring for my mom. What was also tricky about this piece was adding in a child’s definition, or understanding, of divorce. I went from projecting Disney princess couples onto real adult couples, before I decided to scrap that and have my mom give a definition through dialogue.

When I first wrote “My Compass,” I wrote what I thought was four interesting moments in my experience as a driver. Half of the moments was with my dad first teaching me how to drive, but the other moments didn’t mention him at all. I then revised the story to focus on the relationship between me and my dad and our car related excursions throughout the whole piece.

However, the relationship could be explored deeper, and I added strands of going off to school and how my dad's job effected my life growing up.

“High Hopes” can still use some more work, but it is the one piece that has gone through the most changes. It was originally written in a braided format discussing two different concert experiences but with the same band. I saw the band in the northern part and southern part of the U.S., and I wanted to write about cultural differences, but the story ended up not going anywhere. I then revised it to focus on me and my sister, since we both went to these concerts together, but the braided format was no longer working. It eventually ended up being a straight narrative taking place at one concert with a couple of flashbacks to the other.

Before and during the writing process of these pieces I drew inspiration from other stories I have read. The panel structure and topic of Kim Barnes' “Work” is what gave me the idea to write a four-part story talking about my experiences driving car. Barnes titled each of her sections, which I didn't do, but I liked how in each section she talked about a different work experience. I've also read a couple of Jo Ann Beard stories, and I like how she incorporates and describes the action of her characters in her pieces. I don't have as much, and as long, descriptions as she does, but I tried to put my descriptions in specific place like Beard's so that they don't feel random. At a more micro level, I've picked up on Lucy Grealy's differing descriptive verb aspects that occur in the same sentence. For example, in “Autobiography of a Face” she writes, “Not sure if my brain was shrinking or swelling, I squinted around the room...” The verbs are still in the same tense but are in different aspects, and that is something I've noticed in my stories.

I would love to get “Over a Box of Truffles” and “My Compass” published before I graduate in May. I'll continue to work on “High Hopes,” and write other pieces, after I graduate

to stay on top of my writing skills as I take a year off from school. I plan on going back to school to get a master's in library sciences to become a librarian or curator. I hope that alongside my future career goals, I can continue to write and publish creative nonfiction short stories.

Over a Box of Truffles

By Sami Simpson

Thomas Simpson and his coworker walked under the large concrete awning of Barmakian Brothers, a jewelry store in Nashua, New Hampshire. They opened the wooden double doors and continued straight up one of the two carpeted staircases to the second floor where the diamonds were kept. All the while, his coworker was telling him how he'd picked a ring for his wife. As the two strolled along the plush red carpeting, a store employee approached them, and Tom told the balding man in the grey suit his intentions. The worker went off, saying he'd return.

As the man brought back some diamonds in a black velvet display box, he said, "You'll know the one when you see it."

Almost as soon as the man said it, a diamond stuck out more than all the rest. A round solitaire cut with a brilliance and depth that never seemed to end. Next, Tom chose a simple gold band, which gave the piece of jewelry that classic engagement ring look.

“Melissa is going to be one lucky gal, Tom,” his colleague said.

Tom paid for the ring, and after a departing handshake as a sign of thanks, he and his coworker left. The ring would be shipped to his office in Texas.

It was 1996 and Tom and his girlfriend, Melissa Clark, had been living in Irving, Texas, together for the past year, but both grew up in New England. When Tom was told to go to New Hampshire for a business trip, he took it as an opportunity to get her the perfect ring.

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A couple of weeks later, Tom and Melissa went down to San Antonio for a weeklong vacation. The weather was hot and humid, as it usually is in August, but for two New Englanders the heat not only liquified the ice cream and colorful shaved ice of consumers walking past them, but also made them feel as if their skin was melting off. Still, the couple enjoyed their time, partially in thanks to the breathable fabrics of t-shirts and cargo shorts. They saw the Alamo, one of hottest places in town as no shadow from another building could be cast on the historical site. The couple also took a boat tour around the city along the San Antonio River, where they saw a tiled mosaic of San Antonio’s cultural history in red, green, blue, and yellow on the side of the Lila Cockrell Theatre. And every day they walked through the sandstone colored buildings, along the cracked pavement, and down concrete steps with Spanish-style metal handrails to go to the Riverwalk. All the while their sweaty palms were clasped together.

The San Antonio River passed through an area of shops and restaurants where cicadas created their own rattle rhythms, sweet spices and cooked meats of Tex-Mex food floated along the gentle breeze, and restaurant workers called out to passersby to get them to come to their restaurant with a promise of frozen margaritas and air conditioning. As they strolled along the

Riverwalk, Tom couldn't help but think, "I can't believe we're here, but the ring isn't!" His frustration was rising like the color on Melissa's face—he could tell the heat was getting to her. Apparently, his office suite number hadn't been on the address when the engagement ring was sent to Texas, so when the mailman got the package, he'd had it shipped all the way back to New Hampshire. As they walked along the mixture of concrete and stone walkways and bridges, shaded by trees, Tom spotted a vendor selling jewelry. Melissa needed air conditioning, so she slipped her hand from his and headed to the nearest shop while Tom looked for a ring.

The ring was a technicality, which was why he was buying another one. He picked a ring that the vendor said was made of Indian stone. It looked like a brown stone ring, but when he held it up to the light, like he would to her at dinner, there was a slight tinge of red. It was worth ten bucks, so he figured why not, and got it.

Later that night, they went back to their hotel, Sheraton Gunter, and dined in the five-star restaurant on the first floor. The tables had white linen tablecloths, delicate white china with gold trimming, and glass stemware. Yes, this was a perfect restaurant for a proposal.

As they sat down for dinner, Melissa, with all her inability to keep a secret, said, "I know why you brought me here."

All excitement deflated from Tom as he reached for the menu, and a string of curse words went through his head. This momentous occasion was ruined forever.

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I've always felt my parents' engagement story was a minor tragedy. There was no ring, my mom found out through the wife of my dad's coworker, who was with my dad when he bought the ring, and later on when my mom went to get the engagement photos from Fox Photos, the

workers said that the film had been exposed. It seemed as if the universe was saying, “Don’t get married!”

Thank goodness they did, otherwise I wouldn’t be living in this world. Still, they fought while I was growing up. My mom’s face would turn red, and she would bang pots and cabinets as she emptied the dishwasher in anger while she yelled at my dad from the supposedly cheery yellow painted walls of the kitchen, which looked more like a sickly yellow color in the fluorescent lighting. My dad would be in the kitchen, as red faced as she, making himself a dirty martini. He would signal that he was done fighting by leaving the kitchen and walking ten feet down the hall into the master bedroom, but that wouldn’t stop my mom from continuing her screams.

My parents’ voices hit all the high pitches that made me cry, and my sister and I would watch from the living room, sitting next to each other on the stained white carpet. We would be silent, and my small hands tried to stop the flow of tears that dripped from my face and onto the floor. I would worry that my mom would break a ceramic dish or glass, and I’d try to understand the argument within the stream of curses. All the while I hoped that the skirmish would soon be over. The deafening thunder ceased, and the hanging storm clouds swirled towards the horizon as quickly as they came, leaving the sky bright and sunny as before.

When I was a kid, I’d overhear my mom saying over the phone or to my dad that so-and-so are getting a divorce. As an elementary schooler, I considered her a walking dictionary, and asked her what divorce meant. Her response, as she was snacking on Cheetos, was that divorce is when a married couple decide to break up, to end their marriage.

“But why would they break up?” I asked, standing at the foot of her bed, my arms rolling up my shirt in a nervous fidget.

“Because they don’t love each other anymore.”

Whenever I saw my parents argue, I saw no love, only anger— an emotion that I was taught meant no good. So, whenever I saw my parents fight, I was always worried that that fight might be the last. When each fight ended I would go hug my dad with a heated face and a snotty nose, and ask if everything was okay, hoping to be assured that their marriage was okay.

Today, I believe that my parents defy anything that goes against them. I may have seen some of their bad times, but I’ve seen them holding hands as they walk together. Their arms swinging in time to their steps as it gets darker outside towards an autumn night. My mom reaching for my dad for a hug and a kiss in the middle of mashing potatoes. My dad blasting Elton John over the stereo system, playing “Rocket Man” and “Crocodile Rock,” his hands beating an invisible drum set, before finally settling on “Can You Feel the Love Tonight,” my parents’ wedding song. For the most part, they have been happily married for twenty-two years, and a year ago I learned my parents’ engagement tale didn’t end in the restaurant.

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All throughout dinner, Tom didn’t know what to think. Well, he sort of did: screw his coworker! Other than that, his brain was numb. His arms hung loose in shock at his sides. After dinner, the couple went for a walk on the Riverwalk, passing colorful umbrellas and concrete walls with tile mosaics of the river itself. The silent San Antonio River had a calming effect despite the heat, and the two found a chocolate store where they bought a box of truffles.

They started to eat the truffles in their hotel room while Melissa was changing into different clothes, when they both heard a noise. The hotel was supposedly haunted by 1920s flapper ghosts and a murder victim of the mid 1960s, according to the front desk clerk. Tom got up to check the source of the noise— the bathroom. It was a whining sound that was hard to place

in the white-tiled room, but a gurgle from the sink indicated that the source was the plumbing. He closed the bathroom door, and they stopped hearing the annoying sound. It was a simple fix.

He looked at Melissa, who had changed out of her green button up dress, and into shorts and a t-shirt, sprawled on the white fluffy comforter surrounded by the room's gold yellow wallpaper. She was still eating the truffles on the bed, when he said, "I don't think I ever did what I'd intended for this trip." His hands searched his pocket, took out the Indian stone ring, and proposed to her in their hotel room over a box of truffles.

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Today, the divorce rate is at fifty percent, and I swear I always hear that some couple is getting divorced, whether it's celebrity couples, my mom's high school or college friends, or one of my aunts. I'm worried that if I get married, I might get divorced, even if I don't want to. I have close friends whose parents are divorced, but I've learned from their experiences that divorce is sometimes necessary to have a happy life. Not all relationships are meant to work out, and that's okay.

After hearing the true ending of my parents' engagement night, I thought it was a minor miracle. Despite not having the engagement ring, and the secret being blown, my dad still proposed to her. I always thought the story ended in anger with no proposal, only a less enthusiastic agreement at the restaurant. Instead, he saw her eating truffles on the bed, and realized that a proposal doesn't have to be perfect. And from that I learned a marriage shouldn't be either. I think that old saying is true, persistence is key, especially in a relationship. My dad didn't give up that day in San Antonio, and despite all their faults my parents haven't given up on each other. They still get annoyed with each other from time, what couple doesn't? But over the years they grew to understand each other better than years before. I hope to find that same

persistence and growth in love that my parents both have. Like the noise in their hotel room, some moments in life have a simple fix. And some stories literally have a sweet ending.

My Compass

By Sami Simpson

The computers at the DMV in Lewisville, Texas, crashed when I got my learner's permit. After I took my test on an off-white, early 2000s desktop computer, despite it being 2013, the PC the DMV worker was using turned off, and stopped the sixteen-dollar payment I needed to make in order to get my permit. My dad and I stood and waited at the counter in the beige floor to ceiling room as the lady tried to get the computer to turn back on. My dad's freckled arms were crossed over his chest, and he rocked back and forth on his grey Reeboks. I could tell he wanted to leave. We stayed thirty minutes past closing, when the computer started to work again, and the transaction was complete.

My dad was driving the 2007 white Jeep Compass from the DMV back to our home in Flower Mound when we spotted an empty parking lot. It was a Friday evening in October, so all of the teachers were gone from Forest Vista Elementary School. It wasn't my old elementary school, which was two miles down the street past our house, but the buildings had the same

beige bricks. The sun was still shining, casting an orange light around the darkening shadows when my dad parked the car and we switched seats. I was excited and a little bit nervous as I gripped the grey squishy steering wheel and put the car into drive. I circled the parking lot and sang random explanations of excitement: “Oh my gosh! I’m driving!” for roughly fifteen minutes. The last time I’d “driven” a car was when I was eight. My dad had let me steer his black 1999 Jeep Wrangler on the church grounds of St. Nicks, our former place of worship. I pressed the gas pedal, but the Wrangler would only go ten miles per hour. Apparently, Daddy had set the Wrangler to four-wheel drive low in first gear, so there was no need for gas as the car slowly moved on its own.

“Want to drive us home?” my dad asked, bringing me back to the present. It was starting to get dark out, and I knew I didn’t want to do night driving just yet. I was hesitant to drive home out of the safety of the empty parking lot, despite home being under a mile and a half down the street, and the speed limit thirty-five. I must have showed my hesitation on my face because my dad encouraged me to do it. But this was the beginning of my freedom. In the words of my dad’s favorite TV show, Star Trek, this was my time to boldly go where I hadn’t gone before. Well, in the driver’s seat of a car at least.

And I did, but I drove up on the right-hand curb and clipped a purple crepe myrtle with the car’s radio antenna not ten feet from leaving the parking lot. My dad wasn’t too pleased, he pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance, and I bet he had a slight regret for deciding I could drive home, but I knew that he knew I’d just started learning to drive. It would take time, but he’d teach me to brake, to change lanes, and to parallel park. He’d guide me on where to go.

The exact date I took my driver's test was August 15th, 2017. I had put the date in my iPhone's calendar two months before, anxiously counting down the days to this test. It was a hot sunny day with barely a cloud in sight as my dad and I waited outside the Hurst DMV, which was a forty minute drive south from FloMo. This DMV was the closest one to my house that wasn't fully booked. I could feel my face burning, probably red from not only the heat, but also my nerves. I needed to get my license *today* because I had to move back to Stillwater, Oklahoma, tomorrow, and while I'd survived my freshman year of college without a car and a license, having them would make my life easier.

I'd waited this long to take my test because my dad—my driving instructor— was gone half the time for work. Since I'd gotten my learner's permit four years before, my dad had gotten a job at Yamaha, and he worked in Georgia two weeks a month. When I was little, he'd go on business trips, some of them only lasting three days, but I'd still run crying to my mom. She'd pat my back and let me rub my snotty nose on her shoulder, trying to calm me down as I wailed about missing him and wanting him home. Sometimes we'd call him on the phone, and my crying would slowly cease as I talked to him— to know how he was doing, to make sure he was as safe as he would be at home. As I got older, I stopped crying whenever he left, and accepted that having a job and all its demands were a part of life. But even as a college student, I still missed him. Whether it was me away at college, or him gone for work while I visited home.

It was my dad who encouraged me to go to OSU. In high school, I debated going to a community college. It would save my family money and it would be close to home. But I loved the idea of going to Oklahoma State, I liked the friendly students and the beautiful campus. My only drawback was that it was four hours away from home. My dad pushed me to go. He said it was ultimately up to me to decide, but he said leaving would be good life experience— to learn

how the world works on my own. And besides, if I ever needed to hear from him, I could call him on his cell phone.

After waiting outside for twenty minutes, we were eventually led inside where I talked to a blue-shirted DMV worker and gave her the necessary paperwork to get my license. She pointed to the right and told us to bring the car around the building that way in order to follow the signs for the driving test line. I was the first in line with a couple of more cars coming up behind me. Another DMV lady signaled me and two of the cars behind me to pull forward under an awning that had a pebbledash plaster surface where she started the inspection of all the cars.

My dad had made sure the Compass was in working order, but I could feel my heart wanting to escape its skeleton cage, afraid that something was going to go wrong. But nothing did, and the lady with the clipboard moved to the next car, which had difficulties— the back-center brake light wasn't working. I watched the owner of that vehicle in my rearview mirror bang on it to try to get it to work before he and his daughter had to drive away.

Oh, I just wanted to get this over with! I was bouncing my leg up and down, and tapping my fingers on the steering wheel or my still leg. My dad talked to me through the open passenger window, hands in his cargo short pockets, saying, "I trust your driving more than your mother's." I responded with a short nervous laugh. I wished he could be in the car with me. He backed away as the driving test administrator walked up, having finished the inspection of the third car. She looked rattled, and she told me that some mom had yelled at her for failing her daughter's test earlier in the day, before she explained the route we were going to take.

I hoped that my driving would be a better experience as I gripped the steering wheel tight, my knuckles turning white, and I slowly started to drive forward. First item to check off was parallel parking; then driving backwards; driving out of the parking lot and onto an actual

road; turning right at an intersection, which was made easier for me as the light was green; lastly, driving through a quiet neighborhood with a bunch of stop signs.

I pulled back up to the DMV where the lady handed me a copy of my scoring sheet and said, “Congratulations, you passed your test! The only comment I have is that I didn’t see you look left when you took a right at the intersection. Even though the light was green, you still want to look in case someone doesn’t follow the rules.” I didn’t see any cars coming when I went through the intersection; however, I only used my peripheral vision, which isn’t always to be trusted. I looked at the sheet— only three marks down in observation.

My dad got in the car, and I squealed with excitement and told him that I passed. I handed him the sheet, which he took his glasses off to read.

“Marked down in observation?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I replied, “but it’s only three points.” He put his glasses back on and curled the sheet into the cup holder.

“Sami,” he said, sounding slightly exasperated. “The most important thing in driving is observation.”

I told him I would get better, partially ignoring his guidance because this was an occasion to celebrate. I was taking a step closer into the adult world! The ability to drive on one’s own— total freedom. But I knew he was still trying to teach me, was still trying to point me in the right direction as I drove the Compass north.

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It was 2am on a December night, and I was on a thirty-minute drive home from a friend’s house. I was back in Texas over the month-long winter break, hanging out mostly with my family since I’d missed them over the fall semester. I had the heater cranked up as well as the stereo, with all

of my iTunes music played on shuffle. The loud music and the thudding of the bass helped me to stay awake. I could feel the car shake with the music, much like my house when Daddy would crank the volume so high while listening to AC/DC that the stereo would overheat and turn off.

Now that I had my driver's license, it was much easier for me to come home. My dad would call me, and ask for the dates of next break so he could schedule his time for Texas while I was there. I could tell whenever we talked on the phone that he missed me, especially when he was in Texas. He has a small case of empty nest syndrome, despite my sister still living at home.

I took a left onto 2499, the main stretch of road that would lead me back home, and while the black and white sign said: Speed Limit 45, I was going fifty-five. I tended to go about five miles over the speed limit, but I wanted to get home— I was tired— and there weren't any other cars out on the road. Plus, most people went ten miles over on this road during the day time anyway.

I took a quick glance up through the sun roof in My Compass, which had become this car's name due to me calling it "my Compass" every time I talked about the decade-old crossover, and I saw what appeared to be a cloudy sky since the stars and moon were nowhere to be seen. There was no light except for my headlights, but the closer I got home the more stoplights popped up, and the letters on the business buildings glowed.

After I passed through The Shops of Highland Village, the darkness returned, but only briefly. The next song that played on the stereo was slow, so I took a one second glance to look at my phone to press the button to change the song. When my eyes darted back up to the road, I caught a police car out of the corner of them. I realized that in the split second I'd taken to look at my phone, I'd sped past a parked black Flower Mound Police SUV. I looked in my rearview mirror and saw the headlights following me before the flashy red and blue ones turned on.

Curse words rolled off my tongue, and my neck started to tingle with nerves. I'd never been pulled over before. I instinctively turned my head towards the passenger seat, where my dad would sit. I wanted to ask him what to do, to get his opinion, to get his guidance, but he wasn't there. And I couldn't call him. Oh man, was he going to be pissed. I had a five second debate in my head about where I should pull over. Should I drive into that parking lot? But there was nobody on the road. Surely, I could just move closer to the right of the road. I decided to do that, and parked on the side of the road— there were two other lanes for drivers to use if they pass by. I rolled the window down and placed both hands on the steering wheel. I had learned this from a PSA video back in high school about what to do when you get pulled over. When the policeman walked up to My Compass, I gave him a smile and a hello that might've sounded a bit too bright for the middle of the night.

He asked me where I was going, and I replied that I was on my way home from a friend's house in Denton. He asked me if I had been drinking, and I replied cheerily that I had not been— my smile was now cemented to my face. He told me I was going eleven miles over the speed limit, and I replied that I was sorry. He asked me for my license and car insurance. I gave him my license, but I struggled to find the insurance card in the glove box.

“Do you own the vehicle, ma'am?” he asked, his breath came out in a visible puff.

“No,” I replied. “My dad does— Thomas Simpson.” I felt like a kid saying that, or at least a high school teenager with no responsibilities. I was an adult! I had responsibilities! Just maybe not as much as others. Crap, I couldn't afford a car, and for me that put me in the category of a high school teenager who couldn't afford anything. I felt embarrassed and stopped searching through the pile of papers.

He asked me what the insurance company was, and I told him before he went back to his car; probably able to look it up on whatever computer he had in there. I shuffled through the papers again as I waited, and I finally found the insurance paper.

But the paper didn't matter. He came back, handed me my license and said, "Well, I'm going to let you off with a warning, all right, miss? You have a good night."

I thanked him, and hoped he had a good night as well. I rolled up the window, and drove home, where my dad was miraculously awake—he never stays up when I'm out late. He sat on the tan and brown striped couch, eyes half closed as I told him the story of my detainment, feeling guilty and relieved now that I'd spoken. He wasn't mad, but he had this look on his face that read, "I hope you learned your lesson." He told me I was lucky, and hugged me goodnight. From that point on I was careful to watch for cops, and to check my speed.

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It's six-fifteen on a Texas July morning of 2018, and I wish I had time to go to Starbucks, but I would be pushing the time limit to get my dad to DFW International Airport by six forty-five. We walk out of the house to My Compass, and the rising energy in the air makes the back of my neck tingle. The sky is cloudy, purple, and threatens rain, and I know it's going to make the summer heat feel worse.

I feel a twinge of sadness— I always do when my dad has to leave for work— as I drive out of our neighborhood, down Forest Vista, a right onto Morris, which eventually becomes Gerault, and over a small overpass onto 2499 which feeds into highway 121. A couple of minutes after passing the Grapevine Mills Mall, where I work during the summer, I cross an invisible line where the rain suddenly envelops the car in a wave of water, and pea-sized hail pings off the car. I turn the windshield wiper knob to the highest setting it can go, but the waving

plastic sticks are useless. I can't see anything except lighting flashes, and red tail lights becoming brighter as drivers brake.

"Daddy, what should I do?" I ask, my voice quavering. "Should I pull over?" I see cars parked on the side of the road, and I wonder if I should do the same. That would be the safest and easiest thing to do. I glance over at him— he looks tired, and not the least bit concerned, even as his right hand loosely grips the handle next to his head.

"Do what you want, Sambo. You're the driver." He yawns. "But you're almost there, I recommend to just keep driving." I can hear it in his tone that he trusts me, that he knows I'm capable of driving blind. So I keep driving, my knuckles turning white as I grip the steering wheel, and we make it to the airport, where the weather lightens up a bit, but I know that I'll have to drive back into the hectic weather after I drop him off. I pull up to the curb in terminal E, and we hug and kiss goodbye. I watch him jog inside the airport to avoid getting wet as much as possible, his leather laptop bag clutched to his side. I've seen this scene many times— his back to me as he leaves, and I stay behind. Now that I'm in college, our roles have reversed a bit. He stands in the driveway as I drive off to school. It sucks to leave the ones you love, but life is like that sometimes.

I've always looked to my dad for guidance, and I still do. When I put the car into gear, take my foot off the brake, and head back into the storm, I'm not nervous like I was before. He's still trying to teach me one more thing. He sees that I am capable of doing things on my own, a quality that he wants me to recognize in myself. To drive confidently in the direction I choose. His confidence in me gives me courage. So, I don't stop on the side of the road to wait out the waterfall of rain. I face the struggle head on. Even though I can't see, I still know where I'm going.

High Hopes

By Sami Simpson

I'm running on six hours of sleep and excitement as I sit on a wooden bench at the Wellington train stop between my cousin Jennie, and my sister Julia. We're heading to the Panic! at the Disco concert in the Boston Garden, hence my excitement— this will be the second time I would get to see this band in concert. The first time was two years ago in Dallas during the summer of 2016. Now it's 2018, and I am thrilled to see the band again. I elbow my sister and ask if she's enthusiastic as I am. In a middle of a yawn she replies with a *yes*.

I nudge her again, this time with my shoulder, and tell her to wake up.

She says that she will, and leans on me, using my shoulder as a pillow. She didn't get a lot of sleep last night either. The weather also doesn't help. The cloudy skies make it seem darker than it should be at five o'clock on a summer evening.

Even our clothes darken the mood. Well, besides Jennie, who is wearing a bright pink tank top with matching Converse, the opposite of Julia's and my black Panic! at the Disco shirts,

Julia's wearing the last tour shirt the band went on two years ago, which depicts Brendon Urie, the lead singer and last member of the original group, in a red suit jacket on the front with the tour dates in blue and yellow lettering on the back. I have the same one, but I'm not wearing it. Instead, I'm wearing a shirt that has the *Death of a Bachelor* album cover on it.

To break the tired silence, I ask my cousin which train we'll be taking. She points to a large map to her left which contain the red, blue, green, and orange rail lines, and says we'll be getting on the orange line. Our stop is North Station. This information doesn't help me much as I stare at the map— too many lines and too many words.

I fidget with my James Avery ring as I look around the platform, making sure there are no signs of trouble. I'm only older than Julia by two years, but as the older sibling, I've been told to look out for her since I can remember. Whether it be at plastic playgrounds as kids or high school dances as teenagers. Now that she'll be joining me at Oklahoma State University in August, my parents, namely my mom, have been telling me this more often than usual. You'll take care of your sister, right? You'll make sure she doesn't get into trouble? I've always answered with a yeah, duh, why wouldn't I help her. I'm thrilled she decided to join me at OSU. I've missed her the past two years I've been at college. But she's eighteen now, a legal adult. I shouldn't treat her like a kid who has no clue what they're doing, and therefore, need guidance. I want her to be safe and successful in college, but I don't want to be her third parent, and I know she doesn't want me to.

The silver train with an orange line of paint pulls up to the platform with a screech, and we get on and find seats between poles of nickel colored handrails. I look over at Julia, and notice a stray curl sticking out from the back of her head. We both try to fix it, but her curly hair is as stubborn as her personality.

Julia and I discovered Panic! on YouTube years ago, randomly going through recommended videos from past searches. My musical discoveries on the website didn't last long, but Julia continued to search, and it was in her new music collections that she decided she wanted to be in a band. I want to support her dreams, her ideal future, but it's hard when there's no evidence to be seen. She tells me she wants to be the lead singer, to write music and help people, but she's taken no voice lessons, and has never been in choir. She's only played the violin for the past seven years. I tell her this, but she ignores me, ignores the facts. How am I supposed to take her future seriously?

After the fifteen-minute train ride, we arrive in Boston where we eat dinner in a restaurant that brews its own beer. Fully energized, we meet up with Jennie's college buddies outside of the Garden and head in together. We walk through an L-shaped tunnel before passing through the security gates and up a couple flights of stairs. I hook my arm around Julia's, making sure neither of us gets lost. Our priority is to check out the merch, since we have time before Panic! comes on, but that also happens to be everybody else's priority as well, since the lines to buy the fifty-dollar t-shirts are long.

All six of us look at the shirts, and none of them jump out at us. None of them gave us the thought, "I gotta have it!" So, we walk down the curved hallway to find our seats. Along the way, I see a girl dressed up as a nun, which is funny and I question at first, but then I remember it's the Pray for the Wicked tour. As usual, people are wearing varying shades of black, but I also see some wear the LGBT rainbow flag around their neck like a cape. I love it— they're like cheerful superheroes in a sea of darkness.

We find our seats and sit down to watch the opening acts. Before the show even begins, I'm already comparing the difference between the concert from two years ago and now. This

time we're inside. With air conditioning! The Panic! at the Disco concert in Dallas was outdoors in June.

The Texas summer heat was oppressively sticky, as if the air was made of hot maple syrup, and the temperature zapped me of my energy to where I wanted to lie down on the pavement and melt into the surface. But it was my first concert, and I would not let the weather kill me off that quickly. I was determined to have a fun time, especially since I'd be starting my freshman year at college in a couple of months. I wanted to spend as much time with Julia as possible.

We'd been inseparable for most of our lives, we did almost everything together. As kids we played with Barbie dolls and pretended to be mermaids in our swimming pool. I was always the bossy one making up the rules. From elementary to high school, we did homework on the brown striped couches in the family room, where we told jokes and laugh so loud and so much that Mom yelled at us to go to different rooms to do our work. No matter how old we got, we made up songs and dance on the kitchen's old wood flooring as we waited for food to heat up in the microwave. I would miss her so much in Oklahoma. I wondered what I would do without her. I wondered what she would do without me.

Well, next month she'll be joining me at OSU, so we won't be missing each other. But I still wonder where her life is going to lead. Julia will be majoring in music industry. I think it's great she wants to get a college education, but if her life goal is to be in a band, does she really need it? If she wants to be a successful musician, then she needs to spend as much time as possible working on her music.

After the last opening act, I see the stagehands set up for the main reason everybody is here, and they tear off the black cloth that was covering the large screens which make up the

backdrop of the stage. The screens flash to life, and on it is a ten-minute countdown to Panic! at the Disco. The crowd screams, and we all wait in anticipation.

I turn to Julia and gesture towards the arena. “Is this what you want? Screaming fans and playing in large stadiums?” I say with a smile on my face, trying to see how far she wants to go in a band, if she’s willing to commit.

She tells me yes, but that there’s more to it than that. I don’t ask her how there’s more to being in a band. Instead, I stare at the white numbers ticking down for several seconds before telling her that it’s going to take a lot of time and effort to be as successful as Panic! at the Disco. She doesn’t respond, her lips go into a pout, and I know she’s done talking about this. We’ve had conversations like this before. She knows it’s difficult to break into the music industry. She knows that the odds are more than likely stacked up against her. I know she hates it when I tell her these things. I know I need to trust her in her decisions, but I don’t want her high hopes to be crushed by reality.

Timer’s up, and the lights go down. Portions of the stage start to rise as our screams climb with it. The drummer climbs onto the raised platform, and the bass and guitarist walk onstage. Brendon is nowhere to be found until a spotlight hits the stage, and as the brass instruments blast their tunes, he jumps up through the ground like a piece of toast in a toaster. Colorful streamers fly into the air as he starts to sing “(Fuck a) Silver Lining,” and I’m so excited I forget my worries about Julia’s future.

We dance and sing to all the songs the band plays. We know every line of verse and instrument rift. The colorful lasers and lights are almost blinding, but I can’t take my eyes away from the stage, until I notice Julia fidgeting with her silver owl necklace— one of her signs for

discomfort. I bombard her with questions, asking if she's okay, if she needs to sit down. We've stood for over an hour now. Does she need water? Because I'll get her water.

At the Dallas concert, almost halfway into the band's set, I turned toward my sister who stopped dancing to the songs. Her face was like a wet tomato—entirely red with a sweat mustache forming on her upper lip and trickling down her temples. I asked her if she was okay, and her response was no. Trying not to be like the exclamation in the band we were watching, I told her sit down and that I'd get her water.

The high pitches of synthesizers that mark the beginning of "Girls/Girls/Boys" started playing as I squeezed my way past the row of sweaty bodies. The back of my neck started to tingle with worry. What if she got sick? Should I call Mom first? And then 911? Maybe the other way around? I've cheered Julia up with a silly face or sound, but I've never made her feel physically better. That was always Mom's job.

I found a nearby vendor, who was selling water bottles for ten dollars each! But I bought one anyways, and head back to Julia, hoping she hasn't died from a heat stroke. I found her standing (I knew she wouldn't listen to me), and I told her to sit down as I opened the water bottle. We sat through a couple of songs, damning the Texas heat, and I asked her how she was feeling. Better, she said, but not the best. She stood up, her face a little less red, and I knew she was going to stand the rest of the night. No matter what happened, she was determined to have a fun time. That determination, or stubbornness, made me realize she's stronger than I gave her credit for.

As if she can read my mind, Julia drops her necklace and tells me she's fine. We're not outside and dying of heat like the Dallas concert. She offers me a smile, saying she only needs a break from dancing. She doesn't want me to worry about her.

The familiar sounds of high-pitched synthesizers from “Girls/Girls/Boys” starts to play, and as quickly as the song began, people turn on their phone lights, and put what appears to be colored tissue paper over the glow. My mind starts to scramble, and I say over the music, “Do we have any tissue paper?” I ask this more towards Julia, or Jennie if she could hear me, but a lady sitting in front of me answers my question.

She hands me a plastic bag full of red pieces of tissue paper. I take a piece and pass the bag down to the rest of our group. I turn my phone light on high and wave my arm in the air with the rest of audience. The flashy lights and lasers coming from the stage go out for only a few seconds, but it was long enough to see the rainbow sea floating amidst the darkness. That small moment made me feel the love, compassion, strength and hope coming from everybody in that arena. And I realize this is what Julia wants to do, this is how she wants to help people. Making connections between strangers, creating memories to cherish and hold on to, offering light in dark times— all through music.

I wrap an arm around Julia’s shoulders, and give her a squeeze. She does the same to me. The concert continues for another hour, and the very last song ends with a shower of gold confetti so shiny it’s almost blinding. All the doubts I have about her future, her well-being, her dreams, leave as the paper stars swirl around us to say goodbye. I link my arm with hers as we exit the stadium. No matter how big her aspirations are, I’ll support her. Because I’ve been there for her for as long as I can remember.

