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TENDERHEARTED

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Abstract

This is a collection of non-fiction essays and one fictional short story that began with the idea of the psychological phenomenon of *undermothering* but eventually took shape around ways in which my coming of age was impacted by feelings of tenderheartedness and shame. The writing of this thesis serves as a personal attempt at recognizing the lifelong realities of my tenderheartedness and the resulting feelings of shame and isolation that have emerged from various periods and occurrences of life such as childhood, friendship, being parented, experiencing parenting, dating, suffering injury, guilt, fear, and selfishness. Among the goals of this collection, upon considering some of the difficulties of existence, is to find healing in the understanding of the inherent value and worthiness of one's own life.

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ON BEING KNOWN AND BEING RE-MADE

“If you are a parent, can you imagine being known only through your interactions with one of your children? There are so many more aspects to you, so many other parts of your life that deeply influence who you are as a parent.”

Jasmin Lee Cori – The Emotionally Absent Mother

This thesis is, first and foremost, about me and my experiences of growing up with feelings of tenderheartedness and shame. There is a selfishness to such an idea, but it is a necessary selfishness. While tenderheartedness and shame have likely become manifest in my life by various means, one which this thesis touches on perhaps most heavily is that which has come to be referred to as *undermothering*. Before briefly entering into a discussion of the thematic elements of tenderheartedness and shame, it would be an injustice to the woman who carried, birthed, raised, and continues to love and care for me to move forward with this thesis without providing some context to the psychological phenomenon of undermothering, to the woman who undermothered but is nonetheless my mother whom I love, to the ways in which I need and seek healing, and to how this thesis will serve as a portion of that healing. That is the purpose of this introduction. So, before anything else is said, it will be best to start by offering up what I understand it to mean to be undermothered.

It wasn't until the Spring of 2022 that, after a number of sessions in which stories that included my mom had been shared, I was first told by my counselor that I had been undermothered. At that time, I hadn't known exactly what he meant. But I somehow had a pretty good idea of it between the moment that I asked him and the moment that he answered. I

understood cognitively that there was an emotional rift between me and my mother, but I had not considered fully how my adult life is being affected by the way that I had been mothered.

“Undermothered” is a term used by psychologist, Jasmin Lee Cori, in her book, *The Emotionally Absent Mother*. In her book, she lays out the groundwork for what it means to be undermothered by first establishing who the “Good Mother” is and the various roles that she fills. She then defines the undermothered individual as someone who has “known few, if any, of these faces of the Good Mother” (Cori 42). I will not be exhaustive with these roles of the Good Mother; though, I feel as if they all apply to me. But it is worthwhile to touch on two that stick out the most: Mother as Mirror and Mother as Nurturer.

Beginning with Mother as Mirror, according to Cori, “A mother’s role in providing reflection is one of her most important. It is how children feel known and come to know themselves” (32). It is hugely important for children to be offered an accurate reflection of themselves from their mother. Otherwise, distorted mirroring from one’s mother can result in “conforming to what others believe about you, whether the message is that you’re a slow learner or a troublemaker” (Cori 33). Allow me to offer an example of distorted mirroring as I experienced it in my own childhood and the way in which I feel it affecting me now.

I am thinking of one time in particular when my distorted understanding of what I was proved to be confirmed in me. It was on a break from school as a young child that Mom, as she often did, had assigned me some homework to keep me busy. My assignment this time was to read a chapter book I had never heard of about some low-income children during Christmas. Simply put, I didn’t want to read it. It is important to understand that, when my parents weren’t around during the day, my older sister was in charge. I often revolted against this assigned hierarchy, and there was one day when I was feeling especially frustrated. I don’t remember the

specific cause of the frustration, but the effect was the pages of that little chapter book being torn from their binding into strips. Immediately upon doing this, I felt ashamed. There was no way to finish reading the book and no way to hide what I had done.

When my mom came home from work, I admitted everything to her. When she asked me why I did it, I sobbed as I told her a variation of what I had been told by her a number of times up to that point: “Because I’m a bad person.” My mom then looked at her son of maybe nine or ten and told him, “Yes, you are. You *are!* You’re a bad son.” She then had me tape up all the pages, finish reading the book, and then give her an oral report over it. Distorted mirroring aside, giving me a second chance to complete the task she gave me was a pretty good move. Regardless, I find I carry that shame of being confirmed both a bad son and a bad person with me wherever I go: *I forgot to wipe down that table at work because I’m a terrible employee. I left those dishes in the sink at home because I’m an irresponsible slob. I haven’t responded to that text from my mom because I’m a terrible, ungrateful son who only thinks of himself.* According to Cori, the child first learns who they are from their mother. It is when the child looks into the eyes of the mother that they first come to see themselves, to know themselves, to be affirmed in their emotions, and to *know* that they are known for who they truly are. It is that image that a child receives from their Mother as Mirror that they tend to keep with them. And when that image is distorted, it leads to an inaccurate knowledge of self, complete with guilt and shame. An example of distorted mirroring occurs in “Empty and Aching.”

Now, for Mother as Nurturer: “An essential aspect of the archetype of the Good Mother is to be nurturing...It doesn’t matter how many pronouncements Mother makes or how impeccable she is about physical care, if there isn’t a sense of real contact and caring, the child will not experience Mother as a source of nurturance” (Cori 30). Growing up, I received a lot of physical

nurturing from my mother. She was sure to breastfeed me, and I was constantly climbing on her as a toddler and sitting in her lap. I remember sleeping on her chest. Feeding me, clothing me, tending to me when I was sick, paying my way for any and every activity out there for a growing boy in America, attending practices and performances of those activities whenever the opportunity presented itself even if I didn't want her to out of childish embarrassment, reminding me to take my vitamins, to eat well, and never failing to check in on me to know how I've been doing financially – meeting the physical needs was never a sacrifice she wasn't willing to make. It's for this reason that, when I was in the first grade and told my parents at the dining table one evening that I felt depressed, she scolded me in a *How dare you!* sort of way, *when you have parents who feed and take care of you! You aren't even old enough to be depressed. Don't you know we work hard for you to be taken care of?* And my mom did work hard.

She was raised the middle child of seven in a lower-income household by a mother who was married to a man whom I understand to have been verbally abusive to his wife and children. For example, I've been told a story of when he told my mom's youngest sister that, upon her conception, the best of his sperm had been left on the sheets. A first-generation college student who completed her master's, my mother worked for the state as a WIC counselor and nutritionist just to make less money than my dad who didn't finish his undergraduate degree. She worked hard – for herself and for her children – but her work wasn't always recognized to the degree that her work warranted. She did what she expected of herself in order to achieve a better life for herself and her family than the one she was raised with. And oftentimes, what she expected of herself wasn't necessarily what she had envisioned or wanted *for* herself but what was envisioned and wanted *of* her.

I write in “Just Add Milk” how my mom has always said that she isn’t Suzy Homemaker – that ideal brand of Woman whose name graced the children’s houseware and appliance toys of the sixties and seventies. When she would say this – *I am not Suzy Homemaker!* – it was not in the tone of a feminist in riotous disapproval of societal expectations, but as simply a matter of fact. It isn’t that she refused to be Suzy Homemaker, but that she simply wasn’t, couldn’t be, and that she didn’t ever expect to be. That didn’t stop her from trying, though. And, like I said, she tried very hard to meet any physical need of mine and my sister’s that she could; although, her failure to be Suzy Homemaker, I believe, was one she readily admitted to but was also one that ate at her. An accepted defeat, as it seemed, but a defeat, nonetheless.

In one heated argument in my youth, I once told her that all she ever did for me was laundry. For years I apologized because of the guilt, but also because she kept bringing it up. I know that she has done so much for me and remains a source of support. But what I had meant by that statement was not that she lacked in offering any physical care and support, but that physical care and support was, for the most part, all that she offered. I lacked emotional support. My statement confirmed, in her, her failure to be Suzy Homemaker – or maybe that that was all she was (albeit an imperfect one) – just as she often confirmed in me my failure to be a good son.

I recently told my therapist that I was feeling guilty about making my mom such a focus in my thesis. He asked me if “those things” didn’t actually happen – if my mom didn’t actually ever place the responsibility of her feelings on me (an idea explored in “Just Add Milk”), if she didn’t actually tell me I had no right to feel depressed as a young child, if she didn’t actually instill fear into me (as in “My Natural State”). I told him that those things did happen but that I felt like she didn’t deserve something like me writing this all down to be preserved forever in an online database. He asked if a part of me felt like I was betraying her, and I told him that a part

of me did. Then he asked me, “How do you feel about that part that feels like you are betraying her?” My therapist had recently introduced me to a form of psychotherapy called Internal Family Systems (IFS) – an approach created by Dr. Richard C. Schwartz that distinguishes the Self from negative thoughts and emotions (anxiety, guilt, shame, betrayal) in such a way that the Self can recognize those parts – to see that those parts one would ordinarily choose to exile are actually emerging due to past trauma and are doing their best to protect the Self from future harm – and honor them and heal them. For example, an aspiring comedian may feel too anxious to step back on stage after having once been booed off years ago. But it is that anxious part of her that is protecting what Schwartz would call her “Self” from being hurt by putting herself out there again. When the anxious part that she tries to exile from her mind emerges, another part tries to send it away by self-medicating. Both the anxious and the self-medicating parts are undesired in the comedian, but she must first recognize those parts and honor the work they’ve done in her before she is able to heal them.

This is a branch of psychotherapy that I have only just started exploring with my therapist and am still growing to understand as I grow to understand myself. But it is a useful practice for me to recognize that the negative feelings I associate with my mom are not of my true Self but are, rather, only parts of me – parts that only seek to keep me safe, that can be changed, and that can be allowed to contribute to a healthy Internal Family System (an appropriate name). While this form of therapy helps one better relate to their inner thoughts and emotions, it also helps one better relate to other individuals – to internalize the truth that those who have wronged us also “have a Self, and our goal is to elicit [that Self], not to further burden them with our judgment” (Schwartz 46). Just as it is only parts of me that need healing, it is only parts of my mother (not her true Self) that brought out that need in me and that need healing themselves. In a similar way,

studying IFS has taught me that learning to honor my negative thoughts and emotions (anxiety, fear, guilt, etc.) as parts that want to protect me helps me also see my mother as simply a part of my external family system who also wants to protect me. So, when she told me that I was too young, too well supported, too lucky to have a mom like her to be depressed, it's possible that parts of her – parts that emerged from her own past trauma (likely from childhood, according to Schwartz) – were attempting to make both her Self and my Self feel secure, however ineffectively. I was not undermothered by some monstrous Under-Mother (and there is no mother or any person at all whose true Self is monstrous, according to Schwartz), but, rather, I experienced moments of undermothering from a woman whose negative thoughts and emotions which – while they resulted in harmful words and actions toward me – were only parts of my mother that were trying to protect her and, undoubtedly, me as well.

While it would be a lie to say we've had a perfect relationship, it would also be false to say that the past my mother and I share has completely ruined me; though, there are times that I think that. The truest thing I could say, and what is perhaps true for most people with imperfect mother figures in their lives (which is to say pretty much everyone), is that I need healing. I've been healing, and I will need healing even after writing this thesis; although, the writing is a perfectly fine way to contribute to that healing – a significant portion of which, according to Cori, “is stepping out of the limited story we replay about our mother and actually letting her emerge as a person” (247). The mothers that appear in my nonfiction writings and in my short fiction may have my own mother as their inspiration, but it is difficult to equate them to my mother as the person that she is exactly.

I consider the act of writing both fiction and non-fiction to be likened to that of the apostrophizing poet, per Jonathan Kramnick in his book, *Paper Minds: Literature and the*

Ecology of Consciousness. He writes, “The apostrophizing poet speaks to something that is just here and does so in the precise formal manner of that thing’s existence: he or she creates a poem that *is* the world it describes, that makes or joins up with or adds parts to an environment in which one might live” (84). Does nonfiction do the same? Or does a fictional character based on a real person do the same? By no means can I capture perfectly in my writing the woman who raised me. But I do understand, however, that whatever I include in my writing here is likely all a reader will know about my mother. This terrifies me. It terrifies me because, despite everything, I want to do her justice. I want to be fair to the woman she was, to the woman she is, and to the child she was – and to the parts of her childhood she may still be carrying around. I am terrified because I don’t know if I have accomplished that well in my writing – if I have simultaneously made a case for my own undermothering while still honoring the woman.

Now is a good time to bring in a short examination of the definition and role of shame in one’s life. Renowned author, Brené Brown, has defined shame in this way: “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection” (“Shame vs. Guilt”). Unlike guilt, which tells me I’ve done something wrong, shame tells me that I *am* somebody wrong – that my identity is *wrong*. There is no acceptance of what is wrong. When I am not accepted by my mother or by others, I see myself as wrong. But why this inevitable feeling of being wrong and not some feeling that maybe the other is wrong?

Toward the beginning of his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker considers the cause of the fear of death in children. In describing what he refers to as the “morbidly-minded” argument, Becker considers what happens when a child, whose needs are typically met simply by screaming or crying out, instead encounters parental obstacles: “When

the child experiences inevitable and real frustrations from his parents, he directs hate and destructive feelings toward them; and he has no way of knowing that malevolent feelings cannot be fulfilled by the same magic as were his other wishes. Psychoanalysts believe that this confusion is a main cause of guilt and helplessness in the child” (18). When a child has needs that are not met by his parents, or when the child is chastised for having needs to begin with (i.e. being scolded for feeling depressed), a possible message to the child is that it is wrong to have needs. Feeling depressed is distorted into being ungrateful, and the child, in his pain and confusion, becomes somebody wrong. Acknowledging the reality of shame in one’s own life is a good step toward healing, but remaining in that shame – failing to acknowledge and honor that part of one’s Self – is to potentially exercise unnecessary judgment and hostility toward the Self and toward others.

This is in accordance with what Brené Brown thinks of shame when she says, “In fact, I think shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure. I think the fear of disconnection can make us dangerous” (“Shame vs. Guilt”). Meeting a needy or even difficult child with responses of shame is not only destructive and fragmenting to the child and their knowledge of self, but it is a likely sign of the shame one holds against oneself – and or solutions to the problem, in those moments, could not be further out of reach. When shame is not only possessed but is thrown at others (a quality of my own actions depicted in “Dear Alice”), instead of healing, instead of progress and growth, egos are crushed, and there is only judgment.

While this thesis does deal with difficult encounters with others, a goal of my writing is to avoid judgment and, instead, to be true to my experience while preserving the dignity of those who find themselves here. In the interest of privacy, I have employed the use of pseudonyms in

“Dear Alice.” One of the major struggles while writing this is recognizing the likelihood of family members and close friends reading this work, and it is my hope that the pieces included will be approached with thoughtfulness and respect in their reading in the way that they have been attempted to be approached it in their writing. This thesis acknowledges the imperfections we all possess in an effort to understand the reasons for such blemishes and to turn toward necessary healing.

If anything, even if not perfect, this thesis is a healing practice of re-making and of being re-made. According to Kramnick, “Skilled practice not only makes something from the world, therefore, it also remakes the maker” (75). From the world – from my experiences with my own mother – I make something: my writing, these stories and essays. But in this process of writing – of making – I also re-make myself, as a kind of therapy – a readjusting of the parts of me in such a way that my Self (per Schwartz) emerges and can begin to lead. That is the sign of healing, according to IFS – to be at the point when it is no longer the negative parts that stand in the way of the Self, but when those parts are healed and the Self is able to lead them all as a system – complete and whole. It is in this way that the writing of this thesis exemplifies healing – healing as a kind of wholeness. The pieces in this thesis come from all different parts of me, but they are brought together here by my own doing in an effort to recognize them and understand the reason for their impact on my life.

Schwartz, in his *Introduction to Internal Family Systems*, asks his reader to perform a mental exercise of picturing a person from their life who has hurt them as if they are in a room, and the Self is outside the room looking in – as if through a window. According to Schwartz, the Self is curious, and he asks his reader to become curious about the person in the room who has hurt them, to be curious about why the person did what they did – “to see the situation from the

person's perspective and better understand [their] behavior" (53). For Schwartz, the goal of this mental practice is to understand "that you actually have a compassionate, confident essence that can spontaneously arise, even when you face someone you have shut out of your heart" (53). This is something a character, Mark, does briefly in the story, "Empty and Aching," and it is something I hope to accomplish overall in this thesis – to understand my situation from my mother's perspective; though, I confess to struggling with this exercise.

My re-made Self has new eyes, it sees my mother and the job of mothering in a new way – not in the way that mothering must be done, or in the way that a mother must be, but in the way mothering could be done or in the way a mother could be – and how I could be in response, through my making and being re-made.

Tenderhearted

Act I

*Hush now baby, baby, don't you cry.
Mama's gonna make all of your nightmares come true.
Mama's gonna put all of her fears into you.
Mama's gonna keep you right here under her wing.
She won't let you fly, but she might let you sing.
Mamma's gonna keep baby cosy and warm.*

– Pink Floyd; “Mother”

*In [children's] tortured interiors radiate complex symbols of many
inadmissible realities—terror of the world, the horror of one's own wishes,
the fear of vengeance by the parents, the disappearance of things,
one's lack of control over anything, really. It is too much for any animal to take,
but the child has to take it, and so he wakes up screaming with almost punctual regularity
during the period when his weak ego is in the process of consolidating things.*

– Ernest Becker; *The Denial of Death*

TENDERHEARTED

No lights were on that I can remember. No lights except, maybe, the one light in the hallway plugged into an outlet. The one that turned on at the slightest detection of movement. I remember, in times of boredom, attempting to sneak past that light by moving extra slow – like a ghost hesitant to go bump in the night – or slithering under it, inching myself forward by the force of my bare toes – my skinny frame somehow clearing the space between the carpet and the outlet. I felt the synthetic fibers of the floor and the satisfying scratchy sensation they would make on my cheek as I slid – the smell of something domestically foreign emerging from the carpet and joining me in my attempt of an imagined escape from nothing – eyeing the light yet and moving slowly on my belly like some spy or maybe some kind of critter that I couldn't define. Sometimes my torso would fully pass the light, and I would make it all the way until the upper end of my calves were even with the light. Then I would become impatient. Tired of being still I would slowly rise onto elbows like an upward-facing dog pose and, using the strength of my abs, pull my knees bent beneath me, at which point – after that gust of movement – the light would shine its knowing brilliance and I would be caught. There were other times that I would get completely past the light without it noticing me and I would feel almost disappointed – that the task had become too easy and I needed some challenge greater and more difficult, or like I wasn't worth catching or being found out.

In what I consider my earliest memory, the light wasn't the only thing that caught me. Anyway, I didn't care if it did. I was expecting it to – running from the living room into that hallway toward my bedroom. I wasn't thinking of the cold light but of the warm nurturer. I wanted my mom, craved my mom. I don't remember why. But I was three, and that must be reason enough. Pushing myself forward with my toes in a steady run that feels so fast to toddlers,

I ran through the hallway and called out to her in a drawn-out “Mom!” Bursting toward my bedroom door, the hallway light flashed like a spotlight from a watchtower to the sound of “Boo!” that leapt out from my mom whose form as a sudden apparition presented itself as something domestically foreign and horribly frightening – an object of love-turned-menace, and I lost my trust as I wailed and fell to the floor sobbing. I knew she felt bad because she wrapped me up in herself and apologized, but I didn’t want to believe her. It felt so good to cry – to sob and moan and scream.

I remember crying a lot as a child, and I never liked being forced away from my tears through laughter. My mom would let me cry, but it was never long before she would shower my face with rapid-fire kisses until I lost myself in laughter – pulled from my sadness – and she would stop and cutesy complain to me with tickling fingers, “You’ve worn out my puckering strength! You’ve worn out my puckering strength!” I loved wearing out what I understood as my mom’s “puck’rin string” but I hated the forced instant reversal of my feelings to something easier for a parent to deal with.

As a child, I was overly sensitive. I was sensitive to the point that I didn’t always understand whether someone was joking or insulting me. Emotions felt more intense to me – particularly sadness and loneliness. If I wasn’t included in a game, considered in a decision, or left alone for too long, I would feel sad and forgotten. My mom gave me a way to understand this phenomenon in myself. She called it *tenderhearted*. I internalized my identity as a tenderhearted person, and I understood it meant that tears and sadness were just going to be more common for me than they were for other kids. On orientation days in elementary school, my parents would be filling out papers and other things so my teachers could know more about me. I would always remind my mom to write down and inform them of my special condition.

My tenderheartedness sometimes made it hard for me to make friends in school. On the playground, young boys would get in groups and establish their pecking order. The case seemed to be that it would usually be me coming near last. But I had my close friends. In kindergarten, I made a friend named Ryan. Sleepovers at his place were a common occurrence, and it made my mom jealous when I told her I liked Ryan's mom's pancakes best. He and I played knights together outside, he introduced me to the *Lord of the Rings* franchise and video games, and we would later join each other in the medieval online world of RuneScape. We were best friends, and I believed we always would be.

Then, in the third grade, Ryan decided to branch out. He became friends with a wider group of people while I had been finding difficulty integrating myself with others. We were once standing in line to start walking down the hall as a class, and Ryan said to me that he wanted to move to California someday. I didn't know anything about California, and I told him I probably wouldn't move there. Then he told me he didn't like *The Lord of the Rings* anymore, and I was crushed.

The end of the school year came around, and it was decided that each student could write down on a piece of paper the name of a friend in their current class to remain in their class with them the following year – but only if the friend also wrote down their name. Ryan was in my class so, naturally, I wrote his name on my paper and handed it to my teacher. Once she had collected every student's paper, she began reading them aloud. When she got to Ryan's paper, she opened it up: "Landon!" I was distraught, but I tried to keep it together. The room was spinning, but I knew there was a small supply closet that connected our classroom with another one, and it had a sink in it. Against my will, I started to cry – that damn tenderheartedness! – and quickly got up and ran to the supply closet to wash my face and blow my nose that became

stopped-up from all my sobbing. I had lost trust in my friend, and my teacher decided to stop reading the slips of paper out loud.

I honestly couldn't tell you where my tenderheartedness came from. But even as an adult, I feel hyper-sensitive to things said by others. I become careful in my interactions – often too timid to speak in social settings – held back by a stutter and a fear that attachment to others could leave myself open to further turmoil. No longer running down the hallway, screaming out for love, I can't let myself be surprised again. I learn to censor my emotions so I'm not too much for the people I want to like me – so I'm easier to deal with. I'm hardly the type to put myself out there. I'm afraid that the person whose name I have written on my paper won't have me on theirs. I'm afraid to always embrace myself in front of others – afraid that, when desperate for connection with someone else, when asking to be cared for, loved, or nurtured, that just being me won't be reason enough.

WAKE-UP CALL

Upon waking up, my mouth opens – nearly along with my eyes – and sends out a cry from my bed, beyond my room, through the hall, and into the ears of you and Dad. A habituated practice since times before memory, these waking wails often do well to summon either of you to carry me, initially, and later walk me to a king-sized bed where my presence likely costs you both sleep. I spend many mornings in this bed. I'm sleeping on your chest, listening to the pumps and flows of your internal systems as I drift in and out of consciousness. Eventually, as I grow, this position becomes uncomfortable. I don't fit. I'm too heavy. You move me to the middle of the bed. This isn't bad, but I'm less likely to sleep now. I wriggle in my restlessness at the sound of your snoring. You learn to accept that my presence means you are done sleeping. We talk, and sing, and giggle. Poor Dad, with his back turned to us. On Sunday mornings you go get the paper and teach me to read. You point out the individual letters and help me sound them out: *Ada Evening News*. We turn to the funny pages, and you help me read the comics. They aren't always funny to me. We answer riddles, and we spot the difference.

At some point, you stop coming when I call. My volume rises and the calls increase in similitude to weeping. Where are you? Have you left? Am I the only one in this house? Am I silent? Dreaming? Lost? Screaming. Dad comes in to get me. He tells me I don't need to call. I can just come in. All that is needed is for my feet to travel down the hall, eyes to face the dark, ears to grasp the suffocating silence of the early morning, and head to find the pillow between my two parents who were tired of gathering up a young son too old to need to be responded to. I am afraid to do this. The dark is never there when you are. The silence is muted by the sound of your feet on the carpet. With you, the dark that lurks loses its power. Or I am in the presence of a greater one – a power that has now removed itself.

But I learn, as children do, to face the dark alone. Not having that power to walk me down the hall – meant as a way for me to know my own power and to also save you the steps – is a fear of absence that I learn to overcome. I slowly creep from my bed, creak open my door, and try not to look too long at the deep, recessive void of the living room, where the unknown watches and where the entrance to which must be slipped past on my way to the safety of your presence. Once my eyes perceive the doorway across the hall – the mouth of the cave – I swing my door wide and run. The swiftness of my feet is my only defense – the only way to ward off the evils that feel bolder when I’m alone. There are eyes on me as I make a quick go from my door, past the entrance to the living room, and down the hallway. Leaping into your bed and stirring you awake, our time together begins as it did before. Some days you ask if I can stay quiet and let you sleep a while longer. But I’m awake, and I stir. And you ask me if I wouldn’t rather just go watch TV? I don’t know how to use the remote. You walk with me to the living room and show me how. What channel is SpongeBob? You show me how to point the remote and punch in the number. You tell me other numbers to channels that have things I might like.

Soon enough, I trade our time together on Sunday mornings – the funny pages, games, and singing – for a screen that lights up the dark living room with morning cartoons and Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. I am pushed out of your bed like a womb – reborn into a state of awakened independence where your presence is no longer necessary for me to feel safe. I like watching TV. I like knowing how to use it as I learn to step into the kitchen and spoil my breakfast appetite with popcorn left over from our family’s typical Saturday routine of going to the movie theater. I don’t miss reading the paper with you, even when you walk through the living room and ask if I’d like to join you – the thick roll in your hand wrapped in a rubber band. Some days I do join you, but the couch is what I normally choose.

Maybe this is the natural progression of things. A mother can love her child without wanting to cater to their constant neediness, especially if there is a way to counter that neediness with an appeal to growing up. I learn to grow up when I need to. It isn't wrong that you encourage me to be self-sufficient. Especially when you still welcome me in your bed on Sunday mornings. But there are times I come in and you have already read through the paper – already read the comics, answered the riddle, and spotted the difference. You have learned to be independent too. Then, without warning, there comes a time when I leave your bed one Sunday morning and don't return. I no longer call out for you. The dark isn't anything anymore. Some days I wake up and get ready for school. Some mornings I avoid you. In the summers I start to wait until you are out of the house before I finally get up. Now our beds aren't even in the same house, or in the same city. This is no one's fault. This is just how it is. Growing up sends out its wake-up call to both of us. I've checked out, but I know my key still works. In case you ever need help with a riddle, with spotting the difference, or knowing what's so funny.

MY NATURAL STATE

From what I've learned, there are a number of ways in which I could fuck up my life, could have fucked up my life, and have already fucked up my life. Motherly words of caution buzz around my psyche and pester my inner monologue: *You better not get that girl you're dating who already has a kid pregnant and fuck up your life. You better get your knee taken care of before you turn twenty-six and are off your parents' health insurance or you'll be fucked the rest of your life. Make sure there is always someone with you in the locker room after junior high swim practice, or some pervert is going to butt fuck you when no one's around.* The last message was relayed to me in a Taco Mayo drive-thru, and I'll never forget it. I often found myself changing alone after swim practice, and I would warily eye any older man who walked by or went into a separate room to change.

In high school as a junior varsity soccer player my freshman year, the JV team and I played in a varsity tournament because one of the other high schools had dropped out. Our second game of the tournament was against the Wolves of Shawnee, Oklahoma. At some point during the game, and I don't remember how exactly it occurred, my knee was dislocated when a ball was passed between me and a Shawnee player who I imagine hitting me in the leg with his own; though, to tell the truth, I don't remember him ever being that close to me. What matters is that I went down and immediately realized what had happened. I was in shock and screamed out and then said softly and repeatedly to my coach who ran up and kneeled down beside this panicked child, "My knee's on the side of my leg, my knee's on the side of my leg, my knee..." He said he knows.

After that day, my mom was sure to remind me, "Since you've really *schnocked* up your knee," I'll never get to play soccer again, I'll never ski, how do I expect to play any other

sports, or run, or anything, “you’re fucked!” My high school self would do my best to reassure her in the form of getting in an argument with this woman to whom my injury seemed to be of personal offense.

I went to physical therapy, neglected my at-home exercises, returned to soccer the following year, and dislocated the same knee on the first day of practice – but not all the way out like the first time. I felt the pull of the tendons and ligaments, and I straightened my leg to keep it from going the full way, but it still meant, like Mom said, that I was fucked and wouldn’t be playing soccer anymore. Instead, I learned how to wrap ankles and became the team manager. Meanwhile, someone else at my school who dislocated his knee during a basketball game recovered quickly and later graduated early to play D-1 football. I didn’t return to physical therapy, but I was told by an orthopedic that I would need to get surgery if it happened again. It never did, so I never had surgery. And now I’m no longer below the age of twenty-six. I know I’m still fucked because I can tell that it wants to happen again any time I twist my leg in any marginally abnormal direction.

Now I think about how I might not ever be able to demonstrate how to field a ground ball to a son or daughter I don’t have yet, play basketball or soccer with them, or take my future family skiing. I think how I’ll never be the active dad who inspires his children with exciting vacations to scenically daring locations. Maybe I won’t even be able to help my future children move into their own future homes once they’ve reached the age because, while my age at that point wouldn’t necessarily impede me from moving large pieces of furniture, the state of a tired knee that never let me stand a chance wouldn’t allow me to. I’d have fucked up my life, and maybe I have. My mom is sure to let me know. When I was down and lying in the grass in the

middle of that soccer field, I was a high school freshman and afraid. I asked my coach who knew that my knee was on the side of my leg to hold my hand and he did.

WHERE THE DINING TABLE USED TO BE

You sit at the piano. A high schooler, in the part of the kitchen that might have had a dining table – that *did* before the fire, the one your dad didn't mean to cause. Looking at the space from the kitchen toward the window, where someone once would have seen a setup where meals were held, where bingo and game nights were hosted, where childhood friends and family used to be welcomed for birthdays or Sunday lunches, one would now see, instead, the obsolete desktop computer on the right wall with a pleather desk chair torn to shreds by the cat whose litterbox bisects the space with its sediment unswept throughout the area, the crusted scoop beneath the old electric keyboard of your childhood that sits, dusty, against the center wall and faces out the backyard window toward the birdfeeder in the shape of an empty porch swing, and then you at the piano on the left – sitting on the bench, hunched over with your head resting uncomfortably against the hard edge at the bottom of the music stand, left hand in your lap, and the other playing a lazy melody whispered like a daily prayer. It's the middle of some day outside of time – Saturday or the throes of summer break – your foot dead on the sustain, so single notes are mere drips in the drone and decay offered up to no deity that you can name. Then your mother approaches with her mother on speakerphone from miles away. She's never heard you play, and she asks you to. So you start with something safe – a simple enough pattern for your right hand with the melody on the upbeat with your right thumb keeping tempo on the down. After a few bars, your left hand comes in with a series of notes as a chord progression. It's a short recital. Nothing impressive, but that doesn't matter to her, who calls it an orchestra. She wants to hear you in person someday. Though, she never visits or sits where the dining table used to be but dies some years later. Now, there's still the desktop, the dingey keyboard, dead plants on the windowsill, and an empty bench before a piano whose keys are shut and out of tune.

Act II

DR. LVOV: (Upset) Nikolái Alexéyich, I've listened to you talk and talk, and I ... Excuse me, but I'm not going to pull any punches. Your tone of voice, the things you say—you are soulless and egotistical, you are a cold, heartless ... Someone very close to you is dying, dying because she's close to you, and you—you don't love her, you just put on this facade...

—Anton Chekhov; “Ivanov”

JUST ADD MILK

“Well, did you solve your sugar cookie issue?”

My mom asked me this while she, my dad, my girlfriend Megan, and I were sitting at dinner at a Santa Fe Cattle Company restaurant in Ada, Oklahoma on New Year’s Eve. A steakhouse known for allowing clientele to throw peanut shells on the floor is a fun novelty but isn’t the first place where Megan and I would normally choose for ourselves to eat. Even so, she and I, through various means of holiday magic, had recently come into \$75-worth of gift cards for the restaurant and wanted to use the funds to treat my parents to a night out.

On our way to the restaurant, I had asked Megan, “What do you want to bet that my parents will still try to pay for the meal?”

If there is anything I know about my parents, and especially my mom, it is that they are constantly worried about my financial stability. At the end of almost every visit we share, of every phone call, my mom asks how I’m doing with money. Treating me to a meal isn’t bothersome (especially as someone still working through school), and I would be lying if I said that it hurts my pride to receive a spare twenty from my mom as I’m walking toward my car to leave or hugging her goodbye. But I don’t like them thinking that I’m struggling. I’ve tended to be a stickler for cash – not enjoying putting down money unless it was necessary. But of course, having a girlfriend who is also a student and enjoys going out on occasion makes that more difficult, and I’ve learned to be less painfully frugal to the extent that I won’t mind spending the extra cash if it means finding some reprieve from a difficult week – but not to the extent that I wouldn’t think twice before treating my parents to a meal on New Year’s Eve without having a gift card for \$75.

Entering into young adulthood as a graduate student has taught me that life isn't cheap. So it makes sense that my mom, who also experienced life as a struggling graduate student, would want to help when she could. After all, how else is a mother supposed to tangibly nurture her child once they've become too old to breastfeed, too old to need someone to drive them places or cook things for them, or too old to any longer require emotional support? For my mom, financial support has seemed among the only support she's been likely to offer when I visit. Otherwise, it tends to be support that I need to offer her.

For example, Megan and I were once in the market for a dog and came down to Ada to meet a stray dog some friends of ours – a married couple – had come across. I told my parents we were coming – to prepare them in case they wanted to go out to eat somewhere. After we'd seen the dog and spent some time at our friends' house catching up, I told my parents we were available. Only now my mom no longer wanted to get together. I had to learn through my dad that it was because I hadn't come down primarily to see them but to see some friends and a dog, meaning my parents were (or rather, my mom was) just an afterthought. "Just think in the future how you can try to make your mom a priority in situations like this when you come down," my dad had said over the phone. It wasn't enough that I wanted to see my mom. I needed to want to see her in the way she wanted me to see her, and that was always a guess. Some days she'd be happy to see me just because, and other days she'd be like this – needing something extra. And even if we did get together, it was never predictable what mood she would be in.

All this to say, this New Year's Eve meal didn't go too well. I've repressed a number of the sideways comments that were offered by my mom over buttered rolls, steaks, and my Big 'A' Salmon Caesar Salad. I had pushed past the initial frustration that arose when Megan and I arrived earlier than my parents, when we had a confusing interaction with a hostess who didn't

understand that the Jim who made a reservation was the same Jim I was talking about, and when my parents finally arrived and my mom chose to sit in another part of the waiting area without saying hello to us. I had tried to keep the conversation in a jovial state despite the awkward complications between us (primarily my parents, as is typically the case) and the server who looked to be in her early college years and was navigating what looked to be a very busy shift to close out the year. My parents can be somewhat demanding at restaurants even when they don't mean to be, and my mom has a track record with waitstaff that could be said to be infamous at least between me and my sister, who hadn't made it down from her home in Tulsa for this meal. For example, at this meal, my parents were quick to ask if we'd be getting the usual complimentary dinner rolls after placing their drink orders. When the waitress returned with our drinks – understandably forgetting the lemon that my mom asked for in her water – she was reminded about the missing rolls and was asked about bringing not just one lemon, but an entire bowl of them. “Yes, I'm about to go get them,” she said, referring to the rolls, in a tone of forced, exasperated pleasure before stepping away to welcome a new table of guests. “And a bowl of lemons!” said my dad with a finger in the air.

“She must be new here,” my mom said of the server. “She acts like she has no idea what's going on.”

I replied, “I think she's just overwhelmed,” and added in after a beat, “by us.”

My parents are aging, and at the same time that my dad genuinely asked what I had said, my mom stated plainly, “I don't think so.”

“Poor girl,” I muttered as she walked by. She looked at our table when I said this, and I was worried she might have heard me and thought my comment derogatory and not out of sympathy due to the anxiety-inducing presence of my parents.

The last time I had seen my parents, I had just started work at a brewery where I live. My mom, for as long as I’ve known her, has been alcohol-averse, and my dad has had his own struggle with the stuff – a struggle which my mom selflessly sees to and assists with. So I could never expect her to show much interest in the industry, but it still hurts a little when, instead of asking how the job is treating me, I’m asked if I’m doing enough for them to keep me around. “They really like me,” I told her resolutely, although I was still convincing myself of that.

My mom changed the subject and, without looking at me, asked if I solved the issue I was having with my sugar cookies over Christmas – cookies some of which she had already eaten. Making and decorating sugar cookies was a Christmas tradition when my paternal grandparents were alive and were still living in their house in Ada – my dad’s childhood home. This particular year, I was feeling nostalgic and had wanted to carry on the tradition with Megan. I had wanted to use the original recipe my grandma had used while I was growing up, and I hadn’t realized during this time that most sugar cookies tend to be baked the same way. To get the O.G. recipe, I texted my Aunt Susan (sister to my father) and her daughter, Sarah (my cousin) – both of whom I knew to be the type to keep up with old recipes from my dad’s side of the family.

I would have asked my mom for the recipe, but if there is any way she has ever described herself to people it was, “I’m not Suzy Homemaker.” And this has largely been proven to be the truth. Generally, any time I have made a dessert with my mom, it has been from a box of Betty Crocker mix or something similar where all you need to do is add some milk, butter, or eggs. I

didn't know her to be the type to have old family recipes close at hand, and – unlike the way it was with my dad – we didn't have any major Christmas traditions with my grandma on her side. So, I easily resolved to ask my aunt and cousin for the sugar cookie recipe. And they delivered. Not long after I had texted them, my aunt responded with a picture of what I can only imagine being my grandma's handwriting on a recipe card that looked to be straight from the sixties. I couldn't wait to get started.

While making the cookies, Megan and I ran into an issue with the dough. It looked grainy and wasn't sticking together in any way that could be considered a cohesive ball ready to roll out and set cookie-cutters against. Wanting to let my mom be part of the process and obviously needing some guidance I believed she could offer, I called her and told her the situation.

“Well, who gave you the recipe, Avery?” she asked coldly over the phone.

“Susan gave it to me, but it's Grandma's recipe,” I said, as if in defense.

“Susan gave you the recipe, you can ask her for help. But it sounds like it needs milk or something.”

“The recipe doesn't call for milk,” I said.

“I don't know, Avery. Just ask Susan. You got the recipe from her. You can ask her.”

I replied quickly, “I just thought she would have it! But I wanted your help.”

“Just ask Susan, Avery,” she said, sounding defeated. “Bye-bye.”

It didn't make sense to me that she wasn't more willing to work through the issue with me, and I didn't understand why she had sounded upset over the phone. But I called Susan, and she and I decided that the best course of action was to add milk. The cookies turned out great,

Megan and I decorated them, and we took them with us to Ada on Christmas Eve. Seeing the cookies that night, my mom asked how we solved our issue. I told her, and then she later took a cookie Megan had decorated and wanted for herself to eat, took a bite, and asked accusingly if there was anise in the recipe – an ingredient I didn't care for and didn't believe Mom liked either.

“There's no anise,” I had told her.

“Tastes like there's anise.”

When my mother asked me again about the sugar cookies that night at Santa Fe Steakhouse, it took me a second to respond. I told her the story again of my phone call with Aunt Susan while she looked at me, unmoved.

“Well, it worked out then,” she said when I finished talking.

“Yeah,” I said. And after a beat, “Are you upset?”

Tilting her head to one side and raising her eyebrows over her glasses, she replied, “Well yeah, kind of!”

“Why?” I asked.

“Well,” she said, lowering her voice, “I want to say this without sounding like a b-i-t-c-h.” She spelled it, and I don't know why. Cussing has never been below her, but we were also in public with other full tables around us.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Avery...” she said, looking at me in that *I shouldn't have to tell you this* sort of way.

“What??”

“You got the recipe from your Aunt Susan, and I don’t know why you just didn’t go to her first!”

I explained, “Because I wanted your help.”

“No, Avery, that’s just not right! You don’t ask someone for help with a recipe when you got the recipe from someone else. It’s not right.” She scoffed, exasperated.

“What?” I asked, confused. “Is that even a rule? What difference does it make?”

“The difference is that you ask *Susan* for the recipe—”

“I knew she would have it!

“—and you write to your aunt and uncle twice when you’re in France, and you *never* write me!” And there it is.

I had kept a blog during my semester abroad in France while I was in undergrad. I had been into writing letters during this period of my life because it felt more intimate to me, and I had, in my blog, invited people who wanted to receive a letter from me to write me first so I would know who to write to. My Aunt Susan and Uncle Larry were among the handful who had written me, and I remember having exchanged maybe a couple letters with them when it was all said and done.

I was in France during the Spring semester, so had been there to receive Easter and birthday cards from my parents – always including money. When receiving things like this from my family, I would send them messages of thanks over WhatsApp, which was our primary means of communication during that time. It had never occurred to me to send my parents a letter since we were almost constantly in contact. But another layer to this is that, early on in my

time in France, my grandmother on my mom's side – with whom we had no concrete holiday traditions – died.

This was something I had been worried about prior to leaving that semester. I had watched as my dad's parents had declined to the point that I wasn't certain whether they would still be around when I got back. I had brought this concern up with my mom, but she insisted that, if something like that were to happen, I shouldn't feel pressure to come back. But it was a different story when it was her mother who died, understandably so; however, I advocated for not spending the thousands of dollars necessary to fly back only for a few days for the funeral. My parents would have covered the cost, but I hadn't thought that it would make sense to miss even a portion of this once-in-a-lifetime experience for a funeral which, as I've been told, was a shitshow among my grandmother's seven children. I was told that it was better I didn't see the way my mom was acting, but it wasn't as if it was a side to her that I hadn't seen already. I wasn't sure what my presence would have added, and I made the case to my dad that I could just write Mom a letter instead of coming down. In the end, I didn't come down. Nor did I write her a letter. When I messaged her, telling her I wasn't coming, my mom took it as a sign that I wasn't sympathizing with her and replied, "Anything I would say would land on deaf ears. I will never forget this."

Five years later at Santa Fe Steakhouse, despite my previous apologies, she hadn't forgotten. Nor, did it seem, had she forgiven. What else could I do? I was, and often still feel, responsible for my mom's emotions, but there is no taking the reins and steering to a streaming river of forgiveness a rabid horse incapable of stepping in or taking a drink. What I'm told, and am often told, however, by my dad and my older sister, is that it's better not to struggle. Because she's never going to change, never going to forgive, never going to apologize for holding

grudges or for sideways comments I try to repress. What I am told, though, is that I must let the things she does roll off me – that I must take extra steps to make her feel better, included, appreciated, or considered.

For the rest of the meal that New Year’s Eve, I sat and stared at my Big ‘A’ Salmon Caesar Salad that I suddenly no longer wanted. I shut down, hunched my shoulders, and only spoke when spoken to – in short responses – while wondering what the effect would be of throwing my glass of ice water in the face of the horse in front of me. Mom must have seen that I was upset because she started trying to overcompensate by poking fun at me. When Megan used her fork to take a bite of my salad, my mom noted, “Wow! It must be love!” as if she knew anything about it. “Avery never used to share his food! Did you, Avery?” I looked up at her, and she asked again. “*Did you?*”

I looked back down, mumbling something about never being able to leave things in the past, and my dad asked, “Megan, have you ever seen pictures of Avery when he was little? His mom always prayed for a little boy with glasses—”

“A little boy with glasses,” my mom inserted, nodding.

“—and that’s what she got!”

I never liked wearing glasses when I was little, and I thought the conversation was going to turn to a re-telling of the time when, while visiting someone’s new house, I had taken off my first ever pair of glasses at the age of maybe three and left them somewhere never to be seen again. This action of mine, taken before I had the mental capacity to consider it, is one that’s been forced to stay with me – *Such a shame we don’t have those sweet little glasses* – but fortunately wasn’t recounted this time.

“He was such a cute little boy in his glasses,” said my mom.

I turned to Megan, feeling a tenseness in my chest, “And you can obviously see I don’t wear glasses anymore.”

This would be the only positive thing my mom would say concerning me during this entire meal – a physical aspect of myself that has changed and is no longer true. But it’s the physical, tangible, practical things that my mom latches onto – the way I dress, my financial situation, my grades in high school, the physical needs that she’s met for me over the years. The mother’s milk, then weening, the feeding, the laundry, the Betty Crocker desserts. As a child, I would often help her make blueberry muffins from a dry mix. It wouldn’t look like much when we would empty the contents out into a bowl – a small heap of white powdery stuff and freeze-dried blueberries. Then, we would just add milk, mix, and the batter would be what we wanted it to be. It was a simple process and an efficient one. The batter would be divvied up into a muffin tin, popped into the oven, and I would have the duty of cleaning out the mixing bowl with a rubber scraper and my tongue. Even though my mom was never Suzy Homemaker, I cherish memories like that with her. The trouble came only when my mom seemed to treat motherhood as if it was like that muffin mix – something made from a pouch that only required adding milk, only required covering the check, and then it would all turn out.

When the check came to the table, I was beyond ready to leave, and I looked at Megan who had the three \$25 gift cards in her purse. My dad was holding the bill when Megan pulled out the cards and explained the situation – that we wanted to use the cards for their meal.

“Oh, no—no,” said my mom, who instructed my dad to get some money to give us so we could use it somewhere else. She lifted her purse from the floor and pulled out of it, in the form of her wallet, her breast from which for me to drink. I simply wasn’t having it.

“No!” I raised my voice but lowered it to explain that we were never going to use these gift cards, and that we chose to eat here specifically because we wanted to take them out and cover their meal. I wasn’t going to let this be another situation where things went wrong and Mom could just add milk to make them better. Covering the meal no longer felt like a kind, end-of-year gesture, but rather a point of pride.

“Well, fine,” said my mom, putting her purse back down – buttoning up her blouse. “That’s very nice of you.”

“Yes, very nice of you two,” said my dad. “But we’ll take care of the tip.”

I was angry and shivering as we settled up with our server. We were waiting for the receipt when my dad suggested we go ahead and leave, since we had somewhere else to be – at the home of two of our friends, where we would celebrate the New Year and stay the night. I easily agreed as I stood up and put on my coat. I left without saying anything more to my mom. But, as I passed behind him, said, “Bye, Dad” and squeezed his shoulder. Megan drove us away from the restaurant as I texted my concerns to my dad. Some moments later, he replied with some vague suggestions of things I could do to appease my mom like keeping her informed and including her in making decisions, but not before conceding, “She is hard to figure out.”

When visiting my sister, Amelia, at her Tulsa apartment a few weeks later, I told her what happened; though, she had already heard mom’s side of it over the phone. Amelia told me that, on Christmas, Mom had been crying because I didn’t ask her for the sugar cookie recipe.

“I tried to tell her it was because you knew Aunt Susan would have the recipe,” Amelia said. “But she wouldn’t listen. You know she never felt like much of a homemaker.”

“She texted me ‘Happy New Year,’ but I didn’t respond,” I said. “And she’s been texting me random things, like, a movie that she wants me to watch – which I responded to – and that she found a black Beanie Baby dog in my room. She also sent a video of a Scottish drumline that I haven’t responded to.” I was in drumline in high school and college. And Megan and I had just recently adopted a black dog, which explains the message about the Beanie Baby and the accompanying photo of her hand holding the little thing’s chin up, facing the camera.

“Do you ever just call her?” Amelia asked.

“No, but why should I when every interaction I have with her goes the same way?” I didn’t understand why I was defending myself, or why I was starting to feel guilty. As I sat on my sister’s carpet, I texted my mom a reply to the link to the drumline video. “Pretty impressive!”

Megan asked Amelia, “What is your relationship like with your mom?”

Amelia shrugged and said, “Oh, it’s fine. I call about once or twice a week just to talk to her, but you can’t let the things she says bother you. I’ve learned to let things roll off me.” Without looking at me she finished, “I just try harder.”

I admit there is more I could do – bigger steps I could take to show my mom that I want to make her feel like more of a priority, to let her know that I am interested in her and what she has to offer. That I’m interested not just in her, but in her mother as well. Another suggestion from my dad was, at the next appropriate opportunity to use a family recipe, to ask her for advice or for one of her mom’s recipes. It would be nice, even, to think of a way we could make

something of her mom's together – and, what's more, to make something of who we are as mother and son together, and this time from scratch.

PART OF THE FUN

When I was a child, I jumped onto my older sister's shoulders. I jumped into a pool. I jumped from the diving board. I didn't jump. I fell. From the diving board, I aimed before I fell. I aimed for my sister's shoulders beneath the water. At the deep end of the pool, I landed on her shoulders with my thighs. I fell and my legs were on her shoulders. I aimed and fell when she was still underwater. At the behest of a neighbor, I fell and she stayed underwater. At the deep end of my neighbor's pool, at the behest of the oldest neighbor-brother, I was a child and I aimed for my older sister's shoulders. I landed on her shoulders, and I didn't go underwater. She hadn't been above water since she jumped in. I was above water while she kicked below me. At the behest of my neighbor friend's oldest brother who was older than me and my sister, I fell onto her shoulders. I fell as a joke because the way he told me to do it seemed like it would be a joke. I would aim, fall on her shoulders, and then it would be funny. It would be a joke. She kicked below me. I sat on her shoulders like a game of underwater chicken, but she didn't hold me up. I aimed for her shoulders in the deep end, and it was a joke. She kicked below me, and I was scared. All of a sudden, I was scared and I waved my arms like someone treading water. I wasn't treading water. I was sitting on my older sister's shoulders. I fell, and it wasn't a joke anymore. I waved my arms until I fell backward, and up she came. Up she came, then up I came. Then I looked to see if she got the joke. I wiped away my eyes to see if she got it, but she was screaming and her shoulders carried her to the ladder. She was crying, and I was scared. *What will Mom say?* She said I could have drowned her, and I was scared. She wrapped her shoulders in her towel as she cried and yelled and left to go back home. *What will Mom say?* I was scared and looked at the three brothers. I was treading water, looking at my neighbors. The oldest, at whose behest I aimed and fell on my older sister's shoulders, was mad and told me he was joking.

DEAR ALICE,

The first thing I should probably say is sorry. Apart from that, it's hard to know what is appropriate. After thinking about it, all I can really think to offer is that which participants in messy breakups typically would: regret for the way things went. Some of it was out of our control. Some of it was my fault. In truth, I don't know if you ever intentionally did anything wrong. In truth, I may have just been selfish. In truth, I was selfish.

The most important thing I should be sorry for is for having felt that the way you parented your own four-year-old son was my responsibility. Of course, if things between us ever moved into marriage, it would have been. Not just my responsibility, but both of ours, shared. Ezra would no longer have only been yours but mine as well. His biological father who didn't think it necessary to take precautions when you were in high school was mistaken and chose a life apart from both you and your young, toddler boy. A fair amount of counseling has enlightened me of the fact that I felt like I could be a savior to you – to lift you from whatever ash heap I imagined you sitting in and to share the load of caring for your son. My counselor may be right about this, but the side of me that is more prone to personal shame tends to add that my real goal was simply to date a beautiful, porcelain, intelligent girl with short, dark hair and bangs – a politically progressive Taylor Swift fan (an aspect of your musical taste I thought I could live with but never really could) filled with an Oprah amount of joviality, generosity, and genuine care for other people and their interests, and, as it concerned you and me most intimately, had now taken the precaution to be fitted with an IUD. But when looking into our possible futures – or mine – I neglected the thought of parenting as sharing. I would see you struggle with Ezra during moments of misbehavior and feel completely isolated and unsure of what to do. All I could do was witness

the conflict while I feared that whatever way Ezra disobeyed or threw a fit in public was a poor reflection on me; though, I was never the one to bear the brunt of that humility. Not in the way that you were. Any time he screamed at a restaurant booth, stole food from someone else's plate, or plummeted himself to the ground in shrieking agitation (which was often), I was too embarrassed for myself to sympathize with your purely positive reinforcement style of parenting and left you to struggle with him alone.

In those moments, depending on mood and circumstance, I would either stand silent and reserved in a state of stiff dread, or I would – in a more comfortable atmosphere when we weren't with your family or in public – audibly sigh or even offer you some frustrated non-advice in the form of “You shouldn't let him do that...” or foolish suggestions. I felt his actions reflecting on me but felt it was your responsibility to discipline in the way I thought fit; and, though beside myself in those moments of contention, I would, in moments of privacy, sic on you my so-thought wise-beyond-my-non-parenting-years mind to let you know what I thought you were doing wrong and what could be done better. In the early months of our relationship, this would come as a series of soft-angled recommendations. Later on, less subtle. For example, I would feign patience in the car with you as we drove thirty or so minutes from your place out of town to Ada, where I lived, and away from Ezra who was staying the night with your parents and adopted siblings.

“I know it's important for Ezra to be able to feel his own feelings,” I would say, holding the steering wheel to the red Ford Edge your dad had let me borrow because my 2002 CR-V suffered a cracked engine head when I confused a lack of oil for a need for coolant, “but he needs to understand that he can't throw fits to get whatever he wants. At his age, my parents definitely would've spanked me.”

I thought back on the times I was reprimanded by my mom before family, friends, or in public for misbehaving or acting outside the lines of whatever the current context called for. I remembered being embarrassed enough in those young years to, instead of disobeying or participating further, sit quietly ashamed, and stay out of the way. Somehow I thought the way I was disciplined growing up was the only way. So much so that, when I was studying abroad and publishing a blog, I ended a special Mother's Day edition (a gift to my own mom) by telling my readers to thank their moms for spanking them. I could count on one hand the number of things I've done that are more cringe-worthy than that.

In the car, I'd continue my diatribe. "He ought to be humiliated – feel the shame he makes you feel reflected back on him," I would say half-analytically before looking over at you in the passenger seat with tears in your eyes that reflected the shame I was making you feel. I didn't believe you were a bad mom, but I made you believe you were. I believed your current system was failing. My resistance made the system worse. It created a schism of doubt in you, where fulfilling your duty as parent in the manner that made sense to you meant losing my respect and, what would perhaps prove most fatal, my love.

The first time I told you I loved you, I told you it was too early for me to say it but that I was going to anyway. We had spent the day in Oklahoma City – visiting the art museum, stealing kisses between exhibits, finding ourselves alone in a dark room before a wall onto which were projected black and white combinations of still and moving images where I hugged you from behind and we kissed hoping no one would walk in. Later in the day we made a stop at the bookstore and made out in your car for what was at least half an hour. It was late when we were pulling back into Ada – my hometown and the place where we were each working on our bachelor's. I didn't want to pull up to my car for me to get in and for you to pull out and make

the drive back to your home. I didn't want the night to already be over – this first official date of ours – so I asked, did you want to get a donut. The shop would be opening soon. You did, but we never left the car. I parked in the lot adjacent to the shop, and I was tired. So, I laid my head on your shoulder. When you leaned your seat back, my head slid to your breast and we stayed like that – you stroking my hair – until I eventually fell asleep. In future iterations of this story, you would never neglect to include the detail of my drooling on your boobs during that late-night nap of ours.

When I awoke, we no longer wanted a donut, and I wanted you to get home. Pulling up beside my car across the street from the coffee shop where I worked, I wondered if your parents would notice or mind that you were out so late. And what about Ezra? It wouldn't be until later that I would realize that Ezra would routinely spend at least two or three nights out of the week at your parents' place – a recurrence that added to the list of things I foolishly considered detrimental to your parenting. I believed your parents to be taking on a more consistent parenting role for Ezra than you did. They were caretakers, and you were the discipline that I didn't believe to be discipline enough. But all of that came later. In that moment, in your car, I told you I loved you, and we couldn't bring ourselves to separate until morning came and it really was time for you to go.

While dating you, I never had any claim over Ezra. It seemed that neither did you, and that's what bothered me. He seemed to have a sort of power over you that I can't explain – especially over his grandparents, and I wonder if children often possess such strength over their guardians. Ezra, as I remember him, was the kind of child whose strength was his cuteness, his vivacity, and the charm of his inability to correctly pronounce words. Learning to listen to Ezra was a bit like learning a new dialect of English, and, early on, I often needed you to translate for me. When he

spoke, the range of consonants in the alphabet was narrowed down to only a few. It seemed a miracle when he started to be able to correctly end words with “—ts” except for when words that ended in S would sound like the words that end like “—ts” but with an added glottal stop, so a “yes” from him would sound like “ye-ts”.

I remember moments of frustration between Ezra and one or some of your younger, adopted siblings (aunts and uncles just a few years older than he), his whiney plea for them to “Stop!” would come out like “Dop!” And, if ever he didn’t want to go somewhere, he would say, “I don’t dunt do doe.” Or, if he was coming, “I dummin’!” More complex thoughts, as you know, would require ears more finely attuned to Ezra’s language and attention closely paid to possible context clues. It would make me feel good in moments when, instead, it would be me playing translator for you. It was nice to feel like I was growing more familiar with him, learning to understand him. Knowing his language made me feel closer to him, and I loved the way he would say my name: “A-buhry”.

This was especially due to the way he and I shared a struggle with speech. As someone who’s grown up with a stutter, I talked with you a lot about how it feels for your own body to not let you be easily understood and what that feeling likely meant to your son. In extreme cases, like if we were with your family, and no one could intuit the meaning of Ezra’s speech – not even you, me, or your mom (Ezra’s “Ma”) who would spend a number of hours with him from day to day – he would scream and begin crying in frustration – the unfiltered existential dread that I, along with countless other people with sometimes debilitating speech impediments, learn to keep under the surface. His was released into the air with abandon. Situations like this were sometimes misfortunately comical and often drew subdued laughter from familiar witnesses, including me, but there is no telling what emotions were infecting Ezra then and that may, perhaps, be

metastasizing in him even today. Eventually, you and I would have conversations about whether to have him work with a speech therapist once he started school. These conversations felt very adult to me – like married parents’ conversations. We would listen to each other and empathize with each other’s concerns. Plus, this was among the few aspects of helping alongside you as a possible parent where I actually felt comfortable and, therefore, not threatened enough in my own insecurities to feel the need to put you and your methods down. I wish I had been mature enough for each of our conversations to have gone the way our conversations about speech therapy went. How is that coming along, anyway? I often wonder about his potential improvements – if I will ever have the pleasure to know what those are.

I remember the first time he tried to exercise strength over me. It was after dinner and he hadn’t eaten his food – a common issue as it would turn out to be. You were sitting with him as I stood at the sink and cleaned the dishes – a common chore for me as it would turn out to be. For whatever reason you needed to run the fifty yards over to your parents’ house from the FEMA-styled trailer home your parents had built for you in their backyard. You had told Ezra to stay seated and said to him, “I’m going to be right back. Avery is in charge while I’m gone. So, if you do anything, Avery will tell me about it.”

I’ve never had to assert dominance over a three-year-old before. Now, I wonder if anyone really has to, or if anyone who does is really just trying to make up for the lack of their own sense of personal glory. I also wonder if the people who think parents shouldn’t need to assert dominance over their child have ever experienced parenting. And, as I said, it was Ezra who tended to possess a dominance over the adults in the room, and I felt he often knew it. I’ve told my therapist the story about this night. According to him, your statement to Ezra as you left put me at a disadvantage. Your statement told Ezra that you and I were not equal authorities in that

moment. It didn't matter what I did or said – what I asked him to do. Your voice was the only one that mattered. Your statement told Ezra that you were the only one between the two of us who had authority over him, and now *that* authority had left and expected that I would somehow be “in charge” over a child who hardly knew me. I was new to your world and too anxious to be, however briefly, alone with your family to do whatever you needed done. So you went, and I struggled with your son.

As I continued the dishes, I could hear him giggling behind me and saying something to the effect that I, in fact, wasn't in charge. Sitting through dinner with him was tiresome enough and it was already getting late. It was past his bedtime (though he never really had one while I was around) – a situation we would routinely find ourselves in and meant less alone time for you and me – which generally meant he was either feeling devious or grumpy. He had been grumpy with you during dinner, so there was only one alternative when you left.

I informed him that yes, I was in charge for now, and that he needed to stay seated like his mom told him to. When I turned around to look at him, it was apparent he wasn't taking me seriously. Of course, he was testing me, like he tested everyone. But he needed to feel me out. He got up and ran to the opposite end of the house – forcing me to chase after him until I finally caught him and carried him under the armpits back to his seat. When you returned, I told you what happened, but nothing changed. This power struggle with your child was a pervasive issue throughout our relationship, which is no secret to you. But this moment and others like it do not fairly depict what the relationship between me and your son looked or felt like.

Interspersed among the myriad moments of frustration and struggle for power were moments of light and warmth. Mostly these moments caught me off guard, and for good reason. It wasn't often that I went out of my way to cultivate light and warmth with this boy whom I failed.

Sometimes it needed to be cast upon me with no sign or warning. One of these moments arrived when some literal light glowed from candles we lit when the power in your home went out one stormy evening. Worried about maintaining Ezra's sense of safety and hoping to God the darkness wouldn't lead to a cranky evening from him, I took the reins and had the idea of playing a game at the dining table with candles dispersed throughout the place. We huddled together in chairs, accomplishing some child's activity while taking on the challenge of keeping Ezra entertained. At one point, Ezra climbed in my lap at the table, and you and I looked at each other in delighted shock while the wood wick candle offered its crackling accompaniment to this time of delicate intimacy.

Sometimes it was when he and I were doing our own thing. Like helping him build a tower of Connect Four tokens on the floor in your parents' living room while others were sitting around on couches and recliners watching something on TV. Or holding his hand as we searched for his (or was it one of your brother's) missing sandal that was hidden, stuck in the muddy floor of a pond in Sulphur, Oklahoma. Or just sitting with him outside somewhere, joining him to play with his toys, asking him questions, and delighting in his unpredictable answers.

Or the time Ezra wanted to go on a walk with me around your parents' property. We went beyond the fence that enclosed the backyard where your house stood and into the beginnings of the cow pasture. We approached the sewer hole visible from your window. Ezra wanted to throw rocks into it, and we did. He was impressed by the big splashes made by the rocks I tossed.

Emboldened, he picked up larger rocks than the pebbles he started out with and made some big splashes of his own not more than a few feet into the body of water. When I encouraged him to move on to something less boisterous and odorous, he took my hand and we walked parallel to the backyard fence. Eventually we stopped at a flower that he said he wanted to pick for Mama. I

wish I had seen you as more than just Alice, more than just a woman I was sleeping with and told that I loved. I wish I had seen you as Mama to a child who needed guidance. I wanted to offer Ezra the guidance I thought he needed, but I didn't respect the guidance you were already offering him – one that I didn't understand and believed to be contradictory to what I thought was best. I knew you as a struggling mother to Ezra, but I never saw you as Ezra's Mama – the Mama that Ezra picked a small flower for and put in his pocket as we walked back to your house for him to hand it to you.

The relationship between me and Ezra could fairly be described as neurotic or bipolar. Some days we would be on a small road trip when he would flat-out say that he didn't like me, and I would let that ruin my day. Other times he would let me fly him around your small house like Super Man, and we would have dance parties in your living room. Some days I would get onto him for cheating at a game of Candy Land and he would make a mess of the board. Other times he and I would go out into your family's pasture and play in the small cattle trailers. I was miserable at playing in the cattle trailer. I had no imagination, so I would normally just stand there or follow Ezra's lead. Other times your younger siblings would join us, and they would take charge – giving each of us roles to play as. I had lost the creativity necessary for being a kid but kept the adolescent temperament. In any case, life with Ezra had potential, but it was impossible for me to make the good times worth enduring the bad. In that way, Alice, you are much stronger than me.

I had understood that there may have been a rivalry between me and Ezra for your love, for your attention. Any time you and I were laying together on the couch, he would inevitably squeeze his way between us and nearly force me off. He would let you read him bedtime stories, but he would lose focus with me, make noises, and relent against my attempts to keep him engaged. He

didn't like that we'd have time alone after he'd been put to bed. It would be late, and we would be trying to watch a show together when, every few minutes, we would hear his door creaking open and hear his little feet carrying him the short distance back to the living room to look at us and see what we were doing without him. A life with you was inseparable from a life with him, and that felt impossible.

There was one day when your mom had been watching Ezra while you and I were out somewhere. When we got back in the evening, your mom came over and told us about what she and Ezra had done that day. They had been cuddling together in a recliner when Ezra asked her, "Do Mama lub A-buhry more dan me?" She assured him, no, that you loved him very, very much. Then he asked, "Do A-buhry lub me?" She told him that I did. She asked him if he loved me, and she reported to you and me that he said he did. "Ye-ts." But why did it have to feel so impossible?

In our early twenties, we were both still children. Unlike you, I had the opportunity to experience the regular life of a college student without missing out on the freedom of youth because of having a human life to attend to. Unlike you, I distanced myself when things got hard. Unlike you, I was able to step away from your situation – stay home in Ada when I needed space while you still had the same responsibilities, the same headaches, the same hidden joys with your son that I only ever glimpsed at and never fully embraced. Then there came a time when neither of us was happy. Neither of us was who we wanted to be. We were fighting more often than loving, arguing more often than laughing, and a moment arrived when it felt like the only thing keeping us together was something similar to learned helplessness. If I didn't finish things, we'd probably still be together. I don't know if I would have ever started going to therapy like I did once we broke up. Or maybe I would have learned the necessary things about myself for our relationship

to improve. Maybe I would have grown into a better leader, supporter, partner, lover, and eventual stepfather. But there is no way to know. Just like I don't know how your life is now, or how Ezra's is. Just like how I don't know if I miss you or if my mind is falling subject to nostalgic illusion. But I do know that there are parts of you and our former life together that will forever stay with me, no matter who I'm with now or will be with in the future.

You'll never know that I can't help but think of you any time I fold a towel, anytime I see a patch of pampas grass. You'll never know that I can't look at a toilet without remembering when I learned how to fix yours – replacing parts I didn't know the names of. It felt good being able to explain it all, proving to you that I was worth keeping around. And you'll never know that every time I do dishes at my sink, I think of the sink in your house where I would stand after using my own key to let myself in and clean dishes – happy to perform the chore for you – while waiting to see through the kitchen window as you'd pull in from work, walk across the backyard to your porch while giving hellos to anyone outside – to John shooting hoops, Max and Blaine playing with Ezra, the small pack of dogs your family owned – before exiting the chaos and entering your home where I would welcome you, wrap an arm around your waist, and pull you into myself, holding you close, but still wondering if you were my home. I lived with you for the better part of a year. You gave me one of the drawers in your dresser, and I filled it. You started wearing my clothes, and everything became comfortable. But with that comfort came an unease within me that feared not necessarily being your husband but being Ezra's stepfather. Despite all my challenges to your authority, I doubted my own capabilities. I admit that I wasn't ready, but I admit that I was the only one with a choice.

This letter has to end sometime. Like our time together, it can't continue on forever. I started writing this to tell you I was sorry, and I am. But I keep writing because it feels like the only way

to stay in that life with you. Even though it was my choice to leave, and I think it was the right one. Dating you was the most exhausting time of my young life, and I would give anything to go back. Not to try again or make things better, but to never have interfered – to never have added to your exhaustion. It wasn't my job to save you. It wasn't my job to fix your life. All I wanted was to love you, and I was foolish enough to resent the strings that were attached – foolish to see them as strings. When Ezra and I had gotten back from our walk and he pulled the flower he picked for you from his pocket, the dainty thing was predictably distorted. But he didn't care, and you didn't care either. The flower you and Ezra share is not for me to critique. It's been in his pocket, it's been in your hand, but I've only ever seen it – looking from the outside, quick to judge it for its crooked frame instead of appreciating it simply as a flower. And for that, among so much else, I hope you can forgive me.

Impossibly yours,

Avery

Act III

*“Kathy, I’m lost,” I said, though I know she was sleeping.
“I’m empty and aching and I don’t know why.”*

– Simon & Garfunkel; “America”

*And here are trees and I know their gnarled surface, water and I feel its taste.
These scents of grass and stars at night, certain evenings
when the heart relaxes—how shall I negate this world
whose power and strength I feel? Yet all the knowledge on earth
will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine.*

– Albert Camus; “An Absurd Reasoning”

EMPTY AND ACHING

When I was in high school, my parents separated. I haven't thought about it in a while – not intentionally anyway – only in the ways in which the past jumps up briefly one instant and is gone the next. In those moments, it would stay but never very long. Like an elder distant relative to dinner, just for enough time to take up your resources, neglect the progress you've made – regarding whether the meal or your life – and leave you feeling guilty for not having done more, if not ashamed, or maybe embittered against their lack of grace or gratitude, and with an understanding that there will be no choice but to see them again someday and likely without much of anything resembling a warning. There is no choice but to love them because of the role they played in your becoming, but, for the same reason, there is no choice but to reel against that love that feels much too similar to something sinister. I relate to my past in this way – anxious and silent at the dining table.

I was seventeen when I was woken up by the hallway light outside my door one summer morning. It was early, probably four o'clock, and I saw my mom taking a load of clothes to be washed. This behavior wasn't unlike her. I recall many mornings like this when my door, which had been misfortunately installed, disallowing it from latching into the doorframe, would be ajar to permit the intrusion of any sight or sound that occurred beyond it. More often than not, it was my mom flicking on the hallway light. Other times it would be our dog nosing its way in, at which point I would get up, shut the door behind it, and use a shoe to keep the door closed in an effort to hold the love of the animal prisoner. It would never be long, though, before it went scratching to leave.

When my mother's slender frame passed with her load of clothes, I stood and shut out the light. I placed a shoe to keep it out, but I could still hear my mother as she scuffled throughout

the house. Her busyness made me anxious – like a kind of guilt – and I couldn't fall back asleep. At the sound of the washing machine door slamming, I heard the door to the bedroom that used to belong to my brother, Jackson, open at the opposite end of the hall, and my father, who had been sleeping in there the last few years, stepped out and walked down to the bathroom. I heard footsteps from the laundry room enter into the hallway as the bathroom door opened, and I heard my father say in a hushed voice, "So, you're going, then?" There wasn't an answer as the footsteps kept steady and carried off into the master bedroom. "Charlotte!" in a sharper whisper, and then a sigh.

The door to my room eased open and the hallway light stung my eyes. I offered a groan as if I was just waking up when my dad, a bigger man wearing only his boxers, stuck his head through.

"Hey, hotshot," he said. "You should probably get up."

"Ugh, why?"

"Looks like you might be going for a ride," he said.

That's how my father always talked to his children. Declarative statements came out as suggestions, and I've wondered if it was some effort on his part to provide an illusion of freedom. This was his way of getting his children to do things – make it seem like our choice when we knew it was really our mom's. I think that's why Jackson chose to enlist after high school – to have a choice, and to also feel what it was like to be disciplined by other men. Then, after he'd gone, among the rare signs of my brother's past in our house was his military headshot propped up on our mantel.

For me, I thought I could discipline myself. Senior year was coming up, and after graduating, I would be turning eighteen. I had only been driving for less than a year and, already, adulthood was winking at me like it knew something I didn't. In truth, all I knew at the time, in my bed, with my dad looking at me through the door as the hallway light filtered in around him, painting him like some holy martyr in the name of indifference, was that I was set to graduate top of my class and that my mom wanted me to be voted Best Dressed in the yearbook.

"People care what you look like," she would tell me. "You might not, but other people do. You can't just wear jeans and a t-shirt every day."

Lifting myself up in bed, I asked in my tired, teenage voice, "What time is she wanting to leave?"

"Not sure, pal," said my dad. "But can I go grab you some breakfast from somewhere?"

"Is any place even open right now?"

"Well, maybe McDon—"

"No, thank you."

"Okay, do you want me to make you something later?"

This took me by surprise. "What? No. No thanks. What would you even make?"

I couldn't remember the last time I saw my dad take care of breakfast. Dinner was mostly his forte – smoked ribs, crockpot roast, or burgers. In fact, organized breakfast was hardly ever a thing in our household except for major holidays, and it was normally Mom who prepared it, with one of the only exceptions being one Mother's Day when Jackson and I were little. We had helped Dad make cinnamon rolls from a can. He had made scrambled eggs, and then we put a

roll on one small plate and a helping of eggs on another (Mom didn't like her food touching) and put both plates on a wooden casserole carrier along with a small glass of orange juice and served breakfast in bed to our mom (sure to give her the often-coveted cinnamon roll from the middle of the pan because it didn't have a hard crust). Mom was lying on one side of the bed, and Jackson and I fought for the open spot next to her, telling her, "I spread the icing!" "Yeah, but I got to pop the can!" "And you screamed like a girl when it did!" "Did *not*!" I was eager to feel my mom's approval and to witness her satisfaction with the work I did to celebrate her.

"I see you two have mastered my recipe! You little chefs," Mom had said with delight. "Now, Jackson, stop fighting with your brother and scoot over," she said as she shifted toward the middle of the bed to allow room for me on the other side of her.

"And Daddy made the eggs," I said as I grunted and bounced over her legs and plopped down next to her. "Can I have breakfast in bed for my birthday?" Too excited, I must have bumped the casserole tray and the orange juice spilled, getting the bottoms of the plates wet, to which my mom said loudly, "Oh, fuck, Mark! Phil, go grab napkins." My dad left and returned with a roll of paper towels.

"Sorry!" I said as all joy abandoned my body.

"You can't have breakfast in bed because you'd spill everything," said Jackson.

"Nuh-uh!" I said, feeling ashamed while my mom mopped up the juice and left the sopping paper towel in the corner of the tray.

Mom took a bite of her eggs and said with a full mouth, "Phil, these eggs are too runny." My dad stood, leaning against the doorway, and responded, "Yours are always rubbery."

“Well,” she said, “these are too runny.”

“I’ll have ‘em!” said Jackson.

“No, no,” said my mom. “Phil, we can’t eat these. They’ll make us sick.” She grabbed the saucer holding her cinnamon roll and handed up the casserole tray to my dad who walked over, grabbed it, and said, “Oh, these eggs are perfect. They won’t make you sick.”

“Just look how wet they are! Throw them away.”

“I’m not going to throw them away! What else are you going to eat?”

“I have my cinnamon roll. And the eggs are already cold anyway.”

“They’re fine! But they’re getting colder the longer you wait to eat them.”

“I don’t give a shit! Get ‘em out of here – they’re runny.”

Her special breakfast was falling apart, and there was nothing I could do. Useless and ruined, I looked at each parent, over at Jackson, and then down at my legs. I felt hollow but with a tightness in my chest.

“Fine,” said my dad before turning to walk out with the eggs. “I’ll put them back on the stove to cook some more.” When he left, Jackson and I sat silently next to our mom who said she wasn’t hungry and offered up her cinnamon roll. I protested, saying it was for her, but Jackson eagerly accepted and took it.

“That’s not fair!” I said, tears filling my eyelids. “Mommy, I made those for you! And now Jackson gets the middle one?”

“Yeah,” said Jackson, “because I popped the can!”

I started sniffing as I slid off the bed and dragged my feet out through the house to the kitchen. I leaned my back against the sink opposite the stove and slowly sunk down to the linoleum floor, letting the edge of the counter travel the contours of my spine. As I did this, the pressure on my back provided a sense of relief until I landed, sitting with my knees pulled in under my chin, while I watched my dad from behind as he scooted Mom's eggs around the frying pan. Sitting there, misty-eyed, I decided not to wipe away the tears as they formed, obscuring my vision, and, instead, lived in the blur as I made out the form of my mom entering the kitchen and transporting the small plate that once held the cinnamon roll I had expected to be hers. Dad reached out his hand, as if for the plate. My mom tossed an accused "*What?*"

"For your eggs," said my dad. "They're ready."

"I'm not hungry," my mom said as she approached, passed her arm over my head, and let her plate clatter in the sink above me. "Mark," I heard her say sympathetically. "What's wrong? Don't you know there are more cinnamon rolls?"

I sat sniffing without looking up at her. My chin started quivering when I felt the need to say something, but she started walking away. As she passed by my dad, I wiped my eyes to see my mom place a hand on his shoulder as he continued facing the stove. When she touched him, he rolled his shoulder back, pushing her away before she could finish apologizing for getting frustrated. Even though I couldn't see his face, I could tell he was annoyed by his tepid offering of "Happy Mother's Day" as Mom went to leave the kitchen. I was annoyed, too, and didn't understand why she couldn't just be happy that we had tried. She *had been* happy, but we weren't perfect. I spilled the orange juice. So it didn't matter, and she wasn't happy anymore.

In a final effort, as she was walking away, my shoulders got tight and the pressure that had been in my chest rose with an urgency to my throat as I said in a warbled fright, “Happy Mother’s Day, Mommy!” My eyes started getting blurry again, but I quickly wiped everything away to see my mom, who turned around and walked back over to me. She crouched down, rested her fingers under my chin, and put her face close to mine, saying tenderly as she looked into my eyes, “Thanks for breakfast, baby.” She was grinning as we looked into each other, and her smiling face looked like a stranger’s. In the reflection of her pupils, I caught a quick look at my own frown and felt washed over in poisonous shame and anger. *Thanks for breakfast, baby.* And I began sobbing, remembering the clatter of her empty plate in the sink.

Since then, Mom never again had breakfast in bed. And, through the years, nothing had been said about that Mother’s Day morning. Though, Mom had, later that year, brought me breakfast in bed for my birthday. The same meal. She got angry at me when I had told her that the eggs were rubbery.

I offered no resistance when I got up and my mom told me we were leaving to see my grandma in Arkansas.

“Is Dad coming?” I asked, knowing the answer.

“No,” she said as she turned away.

“Why not?”

She didn’t respond.

“Well...how many days do I need to pack for?”

She called back in frustration without turning around, “I don’t know, Mark! Maybe a week.”

By six o’clock, I had my jeans and t-shirts packed along with my toiletries and the other usual things. I put together my backpack, including headphones, a notebook, and a copy of *A Farewell to Arms*, which was my summer reading for AP English.

Dad walked by my door and jokingly said I might double-check for underwear – something I had notoriously forgotten on trips. I looked at him and asked in a whisper why he wasn’t coming with us even though my gut had already given me an answer. Two days before, my mom confronted him about the charges on their credit card bill. She had told him that if he wanted to get drunk at night in his room then he should at least spare her the cost.

“Just use cash,” she had said. “I’m not paying for this shit!”

“We get cashback if we use the card.”

“No, we only get cashback at restaurants and grocery stores.”

The following day, before that morning, the house had been quiet. Mom took off work and watched Turner Classic Movies, Dad worked from home, and I sat in my room with nothing to do except read. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Frederic Henry had been meeting Catherine Barkley for the first time and was beginning to fall in love with her when I heard my mom talking on the phone, saying something about coming up tomorrow. So, in truth, I should have maybe expected it, but it was just one of those parts of the day that tends to hardly be noticed until hindsight brings you back to it.

That day, I remember having set down my book around lunchtime to scour the kitchen. Walking through the house and past the mantel where the space that once held Jackson's headshot had since become vacant, the living room was empty. A black and white movie I didn't know was running its course on the TV. When I turned the corner into the kitchen, I saw both my parents standing in separate parts of the room fixing something to eat: Dad, leaning against the counter by the sink, was spreading peanut butter on white bread, and Mom, with one hand on her hip and another on the handle of the microwave, was waiting for restaurant leftovers to finish heating up. They were silent, looking down, away from the other – a mutual state of passive grief that had developed once Jackson was gone. When the microwave beeped and Mom opened the door, she took out her plate and set it on the stove. Mechanically, she turned and reached over my dad's hands and his sandwich to grab the salt and pepper. There couldn't have been more than a foot of clearance between her hand and his – between her face and his – but the attention of one to the other could not have been paid any less.

They navigated our small kitchen together but asynchronously, fluidly but in no clear regard for the space taken up by the other. Or maybe it was only by mere repetition, the nature of avoiding each other having blazed a trail of cool desolation from heart to head and then finally stamped into memory on the muscular level. Without either of their acknowledgment, I turned and left without eating anything.

"Your mom thinks you and her need some time to yourselves," said my dad, leaning against my bedroom doorframe as I was zipping up my suitcase.

"Some time to *herself*."

“Maybe, but your grandma should be happy to see you.”

A weakness arose in me that kept me from telling him I wished he would come. I didn't feel like there was anything for me to fight for. Or, perhaps there was, but it wouldn't have done any good to create more conflict that morning than what I felt had already been stirring up in my mom. Hers was an anger that, earlier in my youth, I had rivaled against. Shouting matches in the living room about academic performances, comparisons to other guys in my grade or to Jackson, or being told how ungrateful I was for the things she did for me. Though no one ever won those fights, I only ever felt defeated. So I tried not fighting anymore.

I think a lot about that word, *defeated* – to be de-feat-ed in the sense that even the feats one has accomplished are stripped away, or that, when accumulated, small victories still amount to failure overall. In a way, it seemed my family had built its house on the sands of defeat. A faltering marriage, a hole where my brother had been, and the weathering of time, aging, and depression had posed serious questions against the foundation of my mother's life. She needed to get away – back to her home state – and the long drive there from central Oklahoma would be miserable if I started the day with an argument. But, of course, I knew it hardly mattered. It would be miserable anyway, and I envied my dad for not having to go.

My mom appeared in the door out of nowhere, gave me an expressionless look over the shoulder of my father, and asked, “Did you pack your summer reading? Other things you need for school?”

“Yes, other than my book, what would I—” and she immediately turned and disappeared. I gave a frustrated look of confusion to my dad, but he said it would be better just to go along. No sense talking back.

Jackson would've talked back. For sure, he would've. And he would've gotten away with it too. In any given situation, whatever the confrontation might be between him and my mom – however infrequently such confrontations occurred – Mom would always be the one to buckle under his pressure. When he was my age, I had seen Jackson wield a power over my mom that I don't believe I've ever possessed – or just power in general. I don't know what it was, but it was as if Jackson could do no wrong. He wasn't the big man on campus or anything during high school, but he was generally respected by his teachers, if not somewhat tolerated (at least as far as I could tell from the reports from parent-teacher conferences). I couldn't say much about the kinds of people he'd hung out with. He seemed to prefer the various foreign exchange students, but I'm sure he had other friends too.

Regardless, though, it wouldn't be uncommon for him to come home smelling of marijuana. Only once did Mom bring it up to him. I don't know what he said to her, but she stopped hounding him about it, and he still came home with the same smell on him. There was one year when we went to school in the same building. I was a freshman, and he was a senior. He had orchestrated the senior prank of borrowing the roost of chickens from his buddy's farm, tying balloons around their ankles, and letting them loose throughout the hallways during a break between classes.

When the bell rang, people stepped out shocked. Jocks tried to step on the balloons to pop them, and girls ran screaming when the frightened birds took flight in their direction to avoid the oncoming shoes. Nothing serious came of it except one chicken whose leg was broken, but Jackson and his farmer friend had still been sentenced to detention for the whole week starting the next Monday. When we got home, Mom had briefly scolded him before turning and berating me for not folding the towels in the dryer before going to school like she had told me to that

morning. When she said she didn't think that Kyle Matthews (who was at my tail in class ranking) disrespected his mother like I did, I had said that it's because he didn't have *her* as his mother before walking out and slamming my door just for it to bounce back without latching closed.

A few moments later I heard my mother talking to Jackson outside my room.

"Here, take this and get your brother out of the house. I don't know where your father could be, but I'm not hungry and I'm not making dinner. Your dad will probably just want a PB&J anyway."

Through the crack in the door, I saw Jackson pull out his wallet and put in a twenty.

"Thanks, Charlotte," said Jackson, sure to call her by her first name, before turning toward me. I stepped away as he opened my door. "C'mon, man," he said. "Let's grab a burger."

When we got outside, I said to him, "You haven't been calling her 'Mom' lately."

"Has she been a mom lately?" he asked resolutely.

"I don't know, she tries, I guess." We settled in his car and began to pull out. With his hand on the back of my chair and his body leaning and turned toward the back windshield he said, "Maybe she does." Just looking at him, you'd be forgiven for thinking Jackson played varsity sports. He appeared in good shape despite never working out, and he kept a relatively clean look with a coming-of-age beard that he kept fair care of and a head of hair that had that intentionally messy look. Now shifting into drive and going down the road, he said, "Remember when we made her breakfast on Mother's Day?"

"Yeah," I said.

“How she didn’t eat it?” He said, “I was pissed that you got the middle cinnamon roll.”

“Hold on, I didn’t get the cinnamon roll, you did! What are you talking about?”

“Did I?” he asked.

“Yeah, you did. Just took it. Like it wasn’t hers.”

“Hm...And she let me get away with that.”

“I mean, she gave it to you,” I said.

He gave another “Hm.”

The feelings from that morning revisited me in the passenger seat, and I asked my brother, “Why, though?”

He said, “Not sure, just been thinking about it. Wishing she did more.”

“What do you mean?”

“Shit, man, I don’t know. She’s on your case all the time, and here you are probably graduating at the top of your class. I didn’t even apply for college, and now my friends aren’t going to be here anymore.”

“That’s mom’s fault?”

“You’re defending her? I see how anxious she makes you.”

The car was silent for a moment, and then he chuckled. “Why don’t you smoke weed? You could use some weed.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Chill you out.”

“Thanks, but I’m fine. I’ll keep the brain cells.”

“Fuck,” said Jackson.

“Sorry,” I said.

“You’re just too good. You’re going places, but Charlotte’s taking you there.”

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think I was too good. Wouldn’t I still care about grades even if Mom didn’t berate me about them? And what did grades have to do with anything? I thought Jackson was a good guy. He stood up for himself. He didn’t want direction, but it seems to me now that’s what he needed – and what I had only too much of.

Jackson had never minded hanging out with me, and I appreciated that about him. When we’d gotten back, Mom was sitting eating from a bucket of ice cream and watching *Some Like It Hot*. Dad was stepping out of the kitchen with a jar of peanut butter when he looked over at us.

“Hey, look who it is!” he said. “Pretty slick with those chickens today, Jackson!”

“Don’t encourage him, Phil,” said my mom.

Dad looked back over at us and smiled. “Better choices in the future then, pal.”

I worried about my dad. When I had asked him earlier what he was going to do while we were gone, he said, “Oh, probably walk around the house naked.” He laughed, but I had wanted something else – something real. Something honest. Some admission of guilt with a plan of future improvement. But he was never honest with me about his hidden habits. The credit card

confrontation was the most openly his drinking had been talked about with me under the roof. My reaction to what he said must have given something away because he followed up with, “But really, this may be healthy for me. Hey, how about that breakfast?”

Dad came outside to see us off. As Mom was making a beeline for the driver’s-side door, he called out for her to have a safe drive. But she didn’t answer as she opened the door, slid in, and started the engine. He gave a tired smile and shook his head. I saw this as I walked toward him after loading the last of my things into the trunk of the car. I gave him a hug, and he told me goodbye, saying he’d miss me but without telling me he loved me. I didn’t tell him either. That had always seemed like something a parent had to say first. It had never occurred to me to initiate that sort of thing with him, so it just turned out that it never happened. Mom, however, was always good about saying it first. I guess I would believe her on a cognitive level, but I would have a hard time convincing myself of the affective truth in that statement. How might life have gone if I had? If I had believed and invested myself in such a sentiment? If I’d been strong enough to carry the promise of love for those who hadn’t taught me how? Mom and I pulled out of the driveway without saying anything to each other.

We pulled into the McDonald’s drive-thru, and my mom asked me what I wanted.

“I’m not hungry,” I said.

“Your dad feed you?”

“Yeah, an omelet.”

She said nothing more until we got to the drive-thru speaker, where she ordered herself the ultimate breakfast meal – the one with pancakes, scrambled eggs, and sausage. When she was

handed her food, she pulled into an empty parking spot and ate silently while I kept my face turned away, counting the cars.

We had been on the road for some time, and the passenger window felt cool against my forehead as a slow, overcast sky gave way to light rain. My eyes were closed, and I listened to the precipitated taps against the glass – passively willing a cadence from the ambient, haphazard raindrops and sporadic bumps of a rural highway. The sonic blend made little rhythmic sense, but it eased my spirit. As soon as I had thought I'd settled on a time signature the way I learned to in high school band class, the pattern would diverge and the search for meaning would resume. When it came to making sense of the faltering state of my family, trying to turn the rain and the road into a drumline seemed a simpler task at the time. Eventually, though, I fell into a lulled, happy acceptance of whatever sound might come and would accept it as simply another drop, or bump – a tap of the drum – to add to the hum of the engine as the car made its run from Oklahoma to Arkansas.

Every so often, I would open my eyes, note the passing landscape, and imagine that I was sitting still – that the trees were the ones screaming past me, toward my home, and that someday I would return and find them, and all their leafy tendrils, stuffed into my room, playing with the toys from my childhood that I hadn't touched in years and could never bring myself to go through and donate. I pictured the bigger trees, like parents, getting onto the smaller ones for messing with things that weren't theirs. The same way the trees in *The Wizard of Oz* got onto Dorothy for picking their apples. I remember watching that movie for the first time with my mom on a day that I was home from school sick. It was on TCM, and Mom had made me a can of Campbell's. I started to think about Jackson's question about Mom being a mom. She *had*

been a mom. She took care of me, would tuck me in at night, give me kisses. But that was when I was little, and it's hard for me to say exactly when that all gave way to conflict and distance.

Barring a quick stop at the store to grab some snacks for the road, the drive had been mostly quiet for about the first forty-five minutes or so. I had been so deep in my head that I didn't realize my mom was trying to get my attention.

"Mark! Don't you know, I'm talking to you?" she asked.

Flinching, I sat up straight, rubbed my eyes, and looked out through the windshield to the approaching yellow dashes in the road.

"Sorry," I said. "What's up?"

"Hand me that sack behind your seat."

I turned around in my seat to look and saw that there were several bags behind me: my suitcase, my backpack, tied up plastic sacks with shoes in them, paper sacks with a gluttonous amount of snacks, a sack of paper towels, and totes filled with random items from my mom's office. It all seemed like overkill for what I had anticipated to only be a few days or a week. I didn't want to believe it could be any longer than that.

"What sack?" I asked.

"Don't be a smart-ass. Hand me that sack!"

Beginning to feel frustrated I said, "I mean *which* sack."

She gave a sharp sigh. "Ugh," she said. "I'll get it."

She reached back, pushing my hands away as I had been making guesses at which sack it might actually be that she wanted. I protested the aggressive contact. “Mom, you’re driving! Let me get it!”

She was already searching blindly for a sack that seemed to be stuffed deep between the passenger seat and the back seat, so I turned forward to keep an extra pair of eyes on the road – mentally preparing myself in case my mom lost focus and I needed to take quick control of the wheel (something she had always told me never to do).

With her arm at a weird angle, she finally pulled out the stuffed, double-bagged, plastic sack of CDs and threw it in my lap.

“Here. Find Simon and Garfunkel.”

Despite living in the age of Bluetooth, CDs continued to be mainstays on family road trips. Regardless of how many were brought along, the lineup was generally the same and had been for ages, per the preferences of my mother. This particular sack of discs, like commitment, bore a heavy weight, and some jewel cases leaked from the top due to the violent landing on my lap and clattered to the floorboard.

Before giving me much time to do so, my mom asked, “Do you see it?”

“I’m looking.”

“I need something I can sing to.”

I pilfered through the sack without much luck. The sack was full and difficult to navigate, but I decided against taking each CD out of the sack in an effort to avoid the chaos of slipping and sliding plastic squares that were somehow all digitized with artists I didn’t quite resonate

with – those before my time. Most of them were greatest hits compilations, and the Simon and Garfunkel disc was no exception, which I eventually found among the few laying around my feet.

“The Sound of Silence” trickled in through the speakers. I liked this one, but I wasn’t ready to accept it over the silence that had been my own earlier in the drive – when the sound was unforced, organic, and meditated on. It frustrated me that people needed constant stimulation. If death is the end of consumption, divorce is the end of starvation. But I always had a hard time knowing what it was my mother hungered for. When she started singing along with the lyrics, I decided that nothing could ever be pure or sacred.

“I remember when that song came out,” said my mom as it ended and transitioned to the next track. “I was just a girl.”

Too often she would say things like this, whether about movies or music, and I didn’t understand why. Part of me felt like she was trying to impress me, but she never looked for any response from me. So I didn’t ever say anything. I struggled to picture my mother as a child. Her life never seemed applicable to mine, at least not the portion of it that occurred before I came along. Peering from the corner of my eye at her in the driver’s seat, I didn’t see a woman with hopes for herself, whose marriage was crumbling, whose eldest son was gone, whose life – after all she’d done – didn’t go the way she was anticipating. All I saw was a woman taking me away from my comfort for the sake of her own.

“It was one of the only records we had, and Mom would put it on the record player while we cleaned up around the house,” she said. “Or when she was cooking. Those were simpler times.”

I looked over at her and saw she was looking out the windshield with a face of reflection and longing. It annoyed me. Then she started singing again, and I wanted to distract myself. I reached for my backpack, pulled out my headphones and Hemingway, and I started to read. I chose something ambient to listen to and turned up the volume, but Simon, Garfunkel, and my mom still made their way through. The amount of drinking all the characters did began to bother me, so I clapped the book closed, took off my headphones, and let out a sigh.

My mom, still in her state of blissful reflection, noticed and asked, “What is it?”

“Nothing.”

A moment passed and I asked, “What are we doing?”

“Going to see your grandma.”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because I’m exhausted by your father.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Then why am I here?”

“Because, Mark! Your grandma hasn’t seen you in ages! Now, the Lord could take any of us at any time. But your grandma is getting older, and she deserves to see you. She’s in that house all by herself with *no one*. Her husband was a mean man – a *mean* man – and, now your father, he’s a good dad, but he is *not* a husband! But now all her babies are gone, and she hardly sees anyone with little opportunity to see her grandbabies. Now, you – and you are *just* like your father! – you can think about yourself all you want, go through life all namby-pamby with not a

bone in your body, expecting everything to just go your way but still not even caring when they don't. But you're in for a rude awakening in this life, Mark. And now your brother chooses to go off to another country and kill himself, and—"

"He wasn't planning on dying, Mom!"

"Oh, the world is such a scary place. And I worry for you. But your brother was so strong, and I don't know where he got that from. It certainly wasn't from your father's genes, and I'm sorry, Mark, but you inherited everything from your father. But I just can't handle this on my own! Your father never brings up your brother. We never talk about him, and I'm left just – just... And he hasn't even kissed me in over a year. We haven't had sex in ages, and I worry for you, Mark! You need to test your testosterone as you get older because no girl is going to stay with you if you aren't willing to really *love* her! But maybe you don't like girls, and maybe your dad doesn't like girls – I don't know! I don't *know* anything about that man. I haven't learned any more about that man since after we started dating, but I never wanted – never wanted in my life to ever be reliant on a man. And now he goes and starts drinking, and – and I'm just finished! I'm *finished*! Now we're going to see your grandma and spend some time with her."

"Is that why you brought all your stuff from work? You aren't just taking time off?"

"Your grandma needs us, Mark!"

"But we're not going for her, we're going for you."

"Yes, because I need time."

"How much time? You're leaving Dad, aren't you?" There was a tenseness in my shoulders, air caught in my chest, and I felt myself start to shake.

“I don’t know, Mark, I—”

“Are we even going back? What about my things? My friends? School? I only packed for a week!”

“Then keep up with laundry! Or we can get your more clothes up here somewhere. And Arkansas has a great education system. I talked to the school up there – they’re reading the same book you are this summer.”

“That’s not the point! Mom, leave Dad if you want, but leave me out of this! You don’t even like me!”

“Mark, I’m fighting to give you something better! Get a grip. You’re going to be eighteen soon! For Christ’s sake, be a man! Grow up!”

“You’re just giving up, and I’m the one suffering for it!”

“*Shut up!*” she screamed.

I was shivering, and the white noise from the road grew and took up space, overpowering the fluid, vocal harmonies of “The Only Living Boy In New York.” I looked down and saw Hemingway’s portrait facing up at me from the back cover of the book, smiling and looking to the side – beyond the frame of the photo – as if saying to someone else in the room, “Get a load of this kid.”

I turned and looked out the passenger window and realized that, if I were to be going the opposite direction, toward home, the trees I had seen would be returning. I would never find them in my room, but I’d hoped, if I ever returned, my dad could tell me what it was like to find new life in our empty home on his own.

It wasn't long after we'd crossed the Arkansas border that my mom remarked how much more beautiful the countryside was here than it was in Oklahoma. "Just look at those hills, and that green grass," she said.

I noticed and quietly, though with hesitation, agreed. "They're nice," I half mumbled just loud enough for myself to hear as the sky, now clear of rain, was transitioning into an orange and violet haze of evening.

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'They're nice.'"

She let out a sigh that bled into her saying, "I know this isn't easy for you, but do me a favor and perk up. Your grandma's having dinner ready for us when we get there, even though I told her not to, and you're not going to make her think, with your attitude, that you aren't happy to see her. That woman deserves appreciation."

To get to my grandma's, we needed to cross an underwater bridge through a small creek in the middle of a winding dirt road surrounded by trees. My grandma lived in an old home with a screened-in front porch deep in the Arkansas countryside, and I never knew how close the nearest neighboring house was. When we pulled up the gravel driveway, Grandma was already coming down the steps from the porch. We parked, and she approached the driver's side window, welcoming us and telling us the chicken was still roasting in the oven.

"Oh, Mom, you didn't have to go through all that!" said my mom before turning her head around to give me a scolding look. "Mark, don't just sit there! Get out and give your grandma a hug!" The courtesy of distant family greetings was not lost on me, and it wasn't as if I wasn't going to say 'Hello.' I did as I was told, but I was in no mood to be social.

After Mom and I carried in the first load of things, she sat down at the kitchen table and told me to get the rest by myself. After a few more trips back and forth between the house and the car, moving everything into the house by myself made me feel useful. But I was replaying the argument from the drive in my head, and, with the final load, I could sense that shaky feeling that I'd had earlier returning – the tightness in my chest and rapid heartbeat. I needed to sit down and try to relax. I delivered the last of our things and, as I was about to sit down on the couch in the den, my mom called out to me, that my grandma had been going through so much, and that I needed to come set the table.

At dinner, I kept quiet and bounced my leg while I ate my roasted chicken leg – beginning by holding it but then, after being told by my mom to have better table manners, began attempting to cut the meat off with a fork and knife as the bone slipped around the plate. My mom saw and rolled her eyes.

“Quit being a smart-ass, just hold it.”

I finished my plate and sat there silently with my chin resting on my hands doubled up into a fist with my elbows on the table while Mom filled my grandma in.

“Mark was supposed to bring all his essentials, but I’ll probably be going back down in the next couple of weeks to grab whatever else he needs.”

My grandma looked at me. “It’s a small school that’s here, Mark. It’ll be easy to make friends. What do you think, Charlotte?”

“All of his grades should transfer,” said my mom, “so he’ll probably still graduate at the top. He and I need to go buy him some new clothes though, to get him at least looking like something.”

“I’m already something,” I mumbled through my teeth.

“Yes, but you need to be presentable. It’s time to start wearing big boy clothes.”

“You don’t have to say it like that.”

“Speak up.”

I picked my chin up off my fists. “I said, ‘You don’t—’”

“I know what you said, just speak up.”

“He’s a handsome boy,” said my grandma.

After we ate, I went out and turned on the porch light to do some more reading. I had gotten to the part when Frederick escapes from the carabinieri by jumping into a river when I decided I wanted to go for a walk. It was dark, but there was a flashlight on the porch, and Mom and Grandma were inside watching *Rebel Without a Cause*. From where I was sitting, I could see, through the window, my mother seated in a recliner. A quilt that I understood to have been made by my grandmother was pulled up to her chin. Her socked feet stuck out from the bottom of the blanket, and they fluttered playfully at the ankles like a child first learning to swim. She was smiling. The eyes beneath her hair that I noticed sprouting some gray were red and soft, and the corners of them crinkled with bittersweet delight. She was back in the house she grew up in and with the woman who raised her. I sat on the porch, and for the first time that day, I saw the woman who was my mother.

I sat and watched her for a few more moments. Then, standing up for my walk to the creek, I grabbed my book to take with me despite the dark – maybe in the event I decided to sit by the creek and read some more with the flashlight. I stepped off the porch and my shoes made

some crunches in the gravel as I made my way from the driveway to the dirt road. The night was warm, and several stars had begun to reveal themselves from behind the thin, dissipating clouds and through the trees which were localized along the edges of the road. I had Simon and Garfunkel's "America" stuck in my head – the lines depicting a partnered, wandering soul amidst other wandering souls on a Greyhound amidst a vast eternity of other wandering souls – and I began to believe in the narrator's feelings of being lost – that I shared in his emptiness and his aching, and I hummed it to myself, shining my flashlight ahead of me. But unlike the man in the song, I knew the source of my hollow disposition. I was a child parented by children. I didn't know what it was like to be a man, and now here I was – uprooted, moved to a different state, and untethered from anything I'd known. I didn't know the woman who drove me here to Arkansas – not in the way I was perhaps meant to or the way she had probably wanted me to when she first had me. But I could never know anything about that – the true goals and plans my parents had at the outset for themselves or for me. Whatever they might have been, this must not have been it. Who I am now must not have been it, either. Jackson created his own goals, and now he was gone. His independence led to his death on foreign soil, and maybe I had a reason to be terrified of the world – out here in Arkansas, enclosed in the dark of the woods with just a beam of light before my feet. I jumped when an armadillo scurried across the road and burrowed itself beneath a layer of fallen sticks. I didn't normally make this trek to the creek on my own, or at night.

When I made it to the water, I found a rock along the stream, took my shoes off, and let my feet rise and fall with the steady current as I pulled out Hemingway and started where I had left off. The courage of a man to return to a woman, after trauma, injury, desertion, and cognac. I realized that I didn't know anything of courage. I was isolated in this world, and there was no

one coming for me. I believed my dad loved me, though he never told me – though he just let Mom take me away. But I was almost an adult, so shouldn't I be fine without support? I was Mom's ragdoll – made into what she wanted but somehow still not at all what she wanted. But what about what I wanted? I had no idea what that was, or who I was. The words became blurry on the page. My eyes were heavy with tears, and I began shaking and became dizzy. Pressure entered my chest, my breaths were short, and a weakness came over my arms as I held the flashlight above the pages. The summer wind flowed with the stream and rustled the leaves. An owl called in the distance, and it was time to leave.

I slid down from the rock and landed on a wide slab at the floor of the creek. It was mossy and slick. My knees wobbled, and I couldn't find any sense of orientation as my sight continued to lose focus. I began to lean when I reached my hand out to stabilize myself against the rock I'd been sitting on, but my feet slipped, and I fell onto my side into the running water, which was brisk and livened me up as I choked on a deep breath. I had dropped everything. Coughing, I immediately turned to a sitting position and saw my light still shining beneath the water. Pulling it out, I pointed it in front of me to see my book floating away some yards ahead. The light hit the back cover, and I froze as I saw Hemingway, with his clever smile, deserting me with his eyes looking down beyond the stream.

Act IV

*Doodle told them it was I who had taught him to walk,
so everyone wanted to hug me, and I began to cry.
"What are you crying for?" asked Daddy, but I couldn't answer.
They did not know that I did it for myself, that pride,
whose slave I was, spoke to me louder than all their voices, and that
Doodle walked only because I was ashamed of having a crippled brother*

....

*I began to weep, and the tear-blurred vision in red before me looked
very familiar. "Doodle!" I screamed above the pounding storm and threw my
body to the earth above his. For a long time, it seemed forever, I lay there
crying, sheltering my fallen scarlet ibis from the heresy of rain.*

– James Hurst; “The Scarlet Ibis”

HOW TO HOLD YOU

I wish I could remember seeing you for the first time when Mom and Dad got back from the hospital. I have no memory of seeing you, small, helpless, bundled under a thin, baby blue hat, nor of looking to Mom for a chance to hold you and being denied because I was still too small to really know how. Having, in fact, never held you, or seen you, or known you, I still feel a sinking in my chest such as that which accompanies the weight of missed chances. When I think of you, I'm reminded of "The Scarlet Ibis," which I read my freshman year of high school. In truth, I hadn't thought of you much at all until reading that story, but the behavior of that broken bird's brother scorched the tender part of my heart that had neglected you. If I had ever held you up, or taught you to walk, would it have been for the sake of my own selfishness? My absence from your life, if you could call it that, is a void deep inside of me – like that of a child abandoning his younger brother in times of need, then thinking back, years later, on what might have been a chance at purpose with a boy in need of companionship, or simply a presence. It's a regret that I shouldn't have but that I have, nonetheless. Because I didn't leave, and you didn't have a say.

We hardly say anything about you in the family we could have shared – at least not without a pause, or a hush. I remember the first attempt to bring you up without remorse was Christmas morning a couple years ago. Dad bought Mom a necklace with some charms, including a small pair of angel wings and your stone. That's the day I found out what they did with you when you *weren't*. Up until then, I had only known that Mom and Dad came home with no one. I don't think I understood at that time. Our sister, Amelia (she thinks about you too), was probably six then. So had I been three? Or four? How old would you be now, had you been allowed a birthday? How might we have grown or bonded together?

There is no recollection of driving you around town for snow cones on a summer day, or of picking you up from school – showing you my favorite songs over the car stereo or hearing about the girl you’ve been crushing on. Never did I stand up for you in front of older guys who thought their size in junior high to be something more profound than whatever was missing from their heads. Or might my stutter have undermined my confidence, as it does now, and left me silent and you writhing in front of small-town bullies? Would you be stronger than me? How I long to clasp hands and pull you up from the dirt – your developing muscles working in balance with mine – or put my arm around your shoulder after some juvenile disappointment as we walk back to nowhere in particular – or wherever you’d have in mind. I wish I could remember being embarrassed by you. Or prideful. Or jealous. Or resentful that you succeeded where, in your place, I had failed. What wisdom could I have given you? Or taken away? No longer the baby, would I have been forgotten? Or would I have cared at all, knowing I hadn’t been – at least not by you?

At the Health Department, where Mom worked as a WIC Nutritionist and served as a consultant to women through the early stages of motherhood, she counseled them on whether to breastfeed or use formula. She taught mothers how to get stubborn newborns to latch. Following your absence, she would be at home resting warm washcloths on her breasts – easing the release of what was meant for you. During grade school, the bus would routinely drop me off at her office. I remember looking at the diagram of the fetus timeline on her wall, tracing along the monthly frames, and asking her at what point you had died. The emotional fortitude of her to even answer! I looked at the cartoon rendering and hated that pink, ropey thing that took you away. I didn’t know you, but I missed you. “Why did it do that to him?” I would ask her, never quite understanding the answer. Never understanding what sort of evil possessed that umbilical

cord to wrap its way around your throat like a boa – woman’s body against herself, fighting the growth – and left you vacuum-sealed, to later be sliced open for the taming of mystery, reeking of formaldehyde – students exposing and prodding your organs-never-vital – and, as I imagine – or, as it haunts me – left in a bin. Is it a hard truth that, like you, I will be landfill too?

I had never thought about what Mom and Dad chose to do with you until that Christmas morning. Amelia was in Tulsa with her boyfriend, so I sat solo and silent while our mother, distraught at her gift, frantically busied herself with laundry. “We didn’t even bury him!” she accused our father, tears consuming her, as she paced the house, delivering towels to bathrooms. “We never bought him a headstone!” Dad sat next to me and quietly explained what I had never known. I was twenty-three, and I had never been told.

There was something in Mom’s refusal of the necklace that questioned why you hadn’t been given any concern before, so what was the good in starting now? If there was any sympathy, it needed to have been there then *and* now, not just this one time after a quarter of a non-lifetime that might have been filled with sympathies of its own. You’ve never been angry. You haven’t felt passion. It’s criminal that your heart has never been broken. You’ve never felt your soul crushed beyond repair only to later find it mended and made somehow stronger. You’ve never known joy in the midst of sorrow, or the significance of being lost, or been caught in the rain. You’ve never thrust your fists in the air or made guesses about God; though, I’m sure, now, you don’t need to. What color is your hair?

I have not an image of what our family was like with you in it – what *family* would be to me now. Would we have lived in a bigger house? Would we be poorer? Would another child have been the last financial or marital straw? Or is it your absence that holds a weight over us all – or over our parents most of all? Are you the reason our mom, when I was maybe six or seven,

berated our dad for not having the bravery to try again? What would courage and strength mean to me if you were here? Would family road trips have been just as unbearable? I have no memory with you, side-by-side, picking out slushy flavors together at a Tulsa QuikTrip on our way to see our grandma in Arkansas. Do you see her now?

Moments with you that I only imagine remembering are an eternity of moments that never happened. There are times when I will be in a moment and will imagine what it would be like with you present in the room, and then the moment passes but I still remember you there – though, of course, you weren't. How those anti-memories must plague the heart and mind of our mother. Where is the justice for a human being who never was – or for a mother? That holiday morning, I sat at the dining table, where gifts were opened, and I imagined you pulled apart – red, bloody, a nothing, a somebody that might have been, for me, an opportunity to be something – to learn what it means to lead or be looked up to. I want to be a hero to you – the amniotic ibis, whose shell was smashed – fallen from some great height and out of the minds of other little birds desperate for life. Did Amelia and I grow up with such a quality of life as it was only because you weren't here? She was always the one who drove me around.

She stood up for me, she was an icon to me, she was jealous of me, she was protective of me, she felt responsible for me, she let me confide in her, she cared for me, she yelled at me, she fought with me, and what a privilege for her! What a privilege to have struggled so much, to have been so embarrassed, to have loved, and to now have a friend in her younger brother! My soul aches for such a chance. Instead, I remain fixed – still unequipped to know how to hold you. I look to God, but he isn't letting you down any time soon, nor will he. Why wasn't I trusted? Might I have ruined you? How can I hold you? Shelter me from this life. Kneel down and lift me up from this dirt, out and through celestial fissures – my decaying muscles in this grave of a

body in balance with you. Wrap your arm around me, Joey, and let's walk wherever you have in mind.

TIME, TURMOIL, OR NATURAL ORBIT

Something about me that probably isn't so different from any number of people raised in Oklahoma is that I was raised in the Southern Baptist Church. My parents took me and my sister to church any time services were offered: Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and Wednesday evenings. I loved church for all the reasons little kids raised in the church do – Sunday school lessons, vacation Bible school, potlucks, automatic friends. Both my mom and dad volunteered to take on various leadership roles in the church, and I felt like that gave me some sort of celebrity status among the other kids. They taught Sunday school and led activities during Awana – a program on Wednesday nights that encouraged children to memorize Bible verses.

The church I grew up in was fairly traditional. All that meant to me was that Sundays had their own sense of routine, and knowing what to expect made going in every week a comforting experience that I tended to look forward to. This was even the case when it came to “big church” – the main Sunday service where we sang out of hymnals and had meet-and-greet time. Walking all around the huge sanctuary that had three long aisles of pews, I felt at home placing my tiny kid hand in the hands of all the adults I knew. Just like everything else, this portion of the service had its own routine. I would start with the general congregation and work my way up to the front. I learned from my parents how to control my grip – firm for men, gentle for women, and tender for the elderly. I knew the names of a lot of very old people in my church, but I don't know them anymore. After finishing with the congregation, I would run up the steps to the stage and hug Pastor Ray, putting my cheek against the waist of his scratchy tweed jacket. Then I would shake the hand of the music minister and pay a visit to all the choir members in their loft, going through every row, hugging my Sunday School teachers – past and present – who also sang. Then, back down the steps, to the pew near the front on stage-right where my family sat

every week. Sunday mornings during worship we would pull out our hymnals and sing three songs. Then it would be time for me and the rest of the kids to leave for our lesson (crafts, games, stories) while the adults were stuck with just a lot of talking.

It's funny, thinking back, how much there was about church that I didn't understand – or rather, how much that made its own sort of sense to me. Once, in Sunday school, everyone in my class sat in a row of chairs before our teacher, Miss Barbara. She told us that Jesus saved us. When we died, we would go to Heaven and get to be with him. Upon hearing this, I got so excited and exclaimed, "I can't wait to die!" It was confusing to me why this earned some questioning looks from the other children around me, including my sister.

Whenever I found myself in the sanctuary with nothing to do, I would pick up one of the two kinds of books in the pews. Sometimes it would be a Bible and other times a hymnal. Before learning how to read, it was always a guess which one it would be. The hymnal made the least sense to me, but it was also the most interesting. This was because of all the weird rectangular boxes I saw adorned with bizarre signs and symbols. I knew all the little dots meant something, but I imagined them like tiny soldiers running around on the page. How full the page was with notes determined the state of the battle. The fewer the notes, the easier time the soldiers were having. I liked the pages with a lot of notes on them because it looked like the little round soldiers had more weapons and flags, and they were all closer together – obviously meaning that the battle was getting intense.

Because I couldn't read, I learned the songs in church not by learning the words on the page but by memorizing the words as they sounded without grasping their meaning fully, or accurately. This presented some curious impressions of Jesus in my mind. For example, one hymn, "Victory in Jesus," contains lyrics saying that Jesus *sought me and bought me with his*

redeeming love. Knowing nothing of the past-tense form of the verb, *search*, the word, *sought*, sounded a lot like the word, *shot*, like the past-tense form of the verb, *shoot*, like Jesus pulled out a gun and just let me have it before handing a wad of dough to someone who I could only imagine being my parents and finally making off with me to the land of salvation.

Another portion in the same song was equally head-scratching: *He plunged me to victory*. In the melody, there is a particular emphasis on the word *plunged* which evoked, in me, an image of being plunged with a weapon like a knife. I knew Jesus desperately wanted us to join him in Heaven, but why did his methods need to be so violent? In truth, I wasn't troubled by the imagery. In my mind, it all seemed necessary.

There was one Sunday when we were told to open our books to a song called "Because He Lives." I had probably sung it before, but my reading was improving at this time so it would be no problem following the hymnal. Before the piano and organ started playing the intro, my mom leaned down next to me. She leaned down and told me, when I was born, in the hospital room, they sang this song. I don't know if I was in the room or taken somewhere else, but there is a possibility that "Because He Lives" was the first song I ever heard. There in that hospital room where my mother gave birth to me, where her mother was the first person to hold me, where my father cut my umbilical cord, and where I-don't-know-how-many of my family members were, they sang a song about how *God sent his son*, how *they called him Jesus*, and why life was worth the living just *because he lived*. Next to my mom, standing in the pew, the song played, the words were sung, and I understood the *he* who lived to be me. In that hospital room those years prior, it *was* me. Why else would they have sung it? I had undergone my own birth, and I lived! I didn't think I was Jesus, but I understood at that moment that life, for my mom, was worth living because I lived.

She showed this to me well. I remember one instance when I was little, and my parents were volunteering in the church nursery. We arrived early, as was necessary to ensure my parents were there before any babies and toddlers arrived with their parents. I vividly recall sitting in my mother's lap as she sat in a rocking chair – climbing on her, smelling her shirt, tickling her, her tickling me, making each other laugh, until she wanted me to calm down. She held and rocked me while singing a song that was common to me and is likely common to a number of us: *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. You make me happy when skies are gray. You'll never know, dear, how much I love you. Please don't take my sunshine away.* I believed every word of that song, even the last line that I predictably misinterpreted.

The whole song is addressed to the child – to the sunshine. That is, until that final line of the chorus: *Please don't take my sunshine away.* It's a plea to the universe, to the sky, to circumstances to not take away the child – to not remove that source of the singer's happiness. But, to the child – or at least to me – the plea sometimes sounded as if for me. The whole song was addressed to me, so why not the last line? I was the sunshine being asked not to take my mom's sunshine away – not to remove the happiness I gave her, and my mother was pleading with me not to make her sad. I didn't want to.

Singing "Because He Lives," I stood there, looking at the hymnal that my dad was holding for me to see, and I tried to sing the words as they came, but I eventually couldn't. *Because he lives, I can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because I know he holds the future, and life is worth the living just because he lives.* I saw myself in that *he* who held the future, who made the life of my mother worth living, and I felt a weight slowly overcome me until my eyes became blurry and I started to cry. I pictured my family in the hospital room. I pictured all the wrong things I'd ever done, all the times I'd made my mom yell

at me. All the times when fear was not gone but absolutely present. I wondered about the future I held, but I couldn't picture it. All I knew was that I deserved no praise, so instead, I felt guilt. All I needed to do was live, and that would make my mom happy. But I knew that, in my short life, I hadn't lived perfectly, and that crushed me.

In my first moments of life when that song was being sung, the worn-out woman on the bed believed her life worth the living. After all, it was easy. I hadn't done anything yet to make life misery for her, nor her for me. I wasn't Jesus, but I held the responsibility for her salvation. I held the power to take her sunshine away, and I knew that there were times when I had. From that day on, I would go into church scared – worried that this week might be when we sing “Because He Lives” again. And every time we did, I cried without fail. There were times when I was able to hide my tears, but there were other times when I wasn't. If caught crying in these moments, my parents were sympathetic.

My dad once saw and let out a chuckled *aww* that sounded more like *ohh* before asking, “What's wrong?” What were suppressed tears turned into a full sob, and I couldn't get myself to answer. My mom reminded him of what they did when I was born, so he understood. My mom told me she loved me. I believed that she did. I believed I made her happy. But I believed I just as well could slip below her horizon, or be lost behind her overcast skies, and I could fail at living to make her life worth it.

Something curious about the sun, though, is that it doesn't move. If the natural sun is not present with the Earth, it is no fault of the sun. The Earth is the one that has moved, but even that motion – that created distance – isn't necessarily the choice of either entity. Sometimes they're just apart. Sometimes the sun is too much or not enough. Sometimes the Earth loses sight of the sunshine and submits itself to clouds and storms. But regardless of time, turmoil, or natural orbit,

the two bodies are still connected by the invisible pull of one on the other. Like so much else, I didn't understand this as a child. But I know it now. I am still my mom's sunshine. I know I am. Because I live – simply because I live – and that must be reason enough.

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